

Tasting Sustainability: The Mediterranean Diet as a Cultural and Tourism Asset in the EUSAIR Food, Identity and Sustainability

Leveraging the Mediterranean Diet in Adriatic-Ionian Agritourism

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Foreword

Contrary to popular opinion, the Mediterranean Diet is not just based around food. It embodies a specific kind of lifestyle, and a way of life that is integral to local culture and the history of the Mediterranean region. As the world faces multiple challenges, from climate change, overtourism, and rural depopulation, it is increasingly important to look at the Mediterranean Diet as a concept, and a framework to develop sustainable and community-centred tourism.

This study is designed to be both an analytical overview, as well as to provide a basis for future cooperation and policy development around the Mediterranean Diet in the Adriatic-Ionian region. Therefore, as the future of the Mediterranean Diet will be shaped by its legacy, it is important to view it as a „resource“ and a „living heritage“ that has the potential for developing a more sustainable, authentic, inclusive and resilient future for regional tourism and local communities across EUSAIR.

This study would not have been possible without the invaluable expertise and support from numerous stakeholders and EUSAIR community members. We wish to thank all the stakeholders and members of the EUSAIR Thematic Steering Group 4 for Sustainable Tourism for their interest and contributions in conceptualising the Mediterranean Diet as a cultural and tourism asset in the EUSAIR food, identity and sustainability. Their knowledge, dedication and willingness to cooperate were instrumental in developing the analytical framework and policy recommendations in this study.

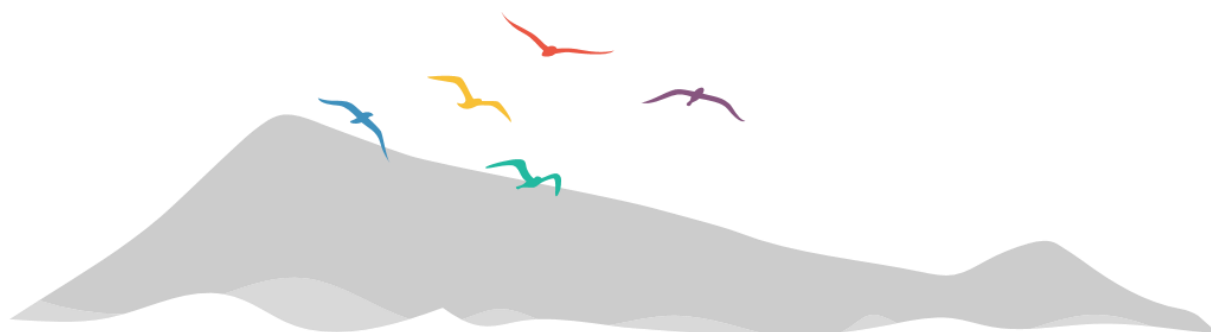


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1. Executive summary

1

The Mediterranean Diet is more than a model of diet. It acts as a living cultural system that integrates food, geography, traditional knowledge, biodiversity, communities, and social activities found throughout the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR). It was granted the title of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010, by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), due to its importance as an identity basis for the inhabitants of the Adriatic-Ionian region (EUSAIR) (UNESCO, 2013). It was first inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010 by the original countries of Greece, Italy, Morocco, and Spain, and later extended in 2013 to include Cyprus, Croatia, and Portugal (UNESCO, 2013; Moro, 2016).

The Mediterranean Diet signifies a way of life that follows seasonality, values togetherness, is sustainable, and shares knowledge through generations. In today's environment in which global challenges such as climate change, overtourism, rural depopulation and pressure on local food systems continue to grow, the Mediterranean Diet can be explored as a model to develop more sustainable, resilient, and experience-driven tourism practices. The primary scope of the Mediterranean Diet concept, and the geographical analysis in reference to the Mediterranean Diet and its use as a tool for tourism development in this case, includes the 10 EUSAIR countries: Croatia, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and San Marino.

The analysis shows that the Mediterranean Diet is fully aligned with the relevant policy, strategic and legislative framework on the global level, the level of the European Union, and on the national level of the EUSAIR countries. Moreover, it is specifically important to the EUSAIR strategic framework: the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR Strategy), Thematic Steering Group 4 (TSG4) for Sustainable Tourism within the EUSAIR Strategy, and the EUSAIR Action Plan 2025.

The Mediterranean Diet can retain the authenticity as a resource of tourism only if practices and communities which support it are protected. It is necessary to preserve the concept of „living heritage“, as opposed to merely marketing food from the Mediterranean. It is very important for sustainable development of tourism in the EUSAIR region, as well as for creating tourism demand and added value for the local communities. It was found that numerous systems naturally support the integration of the Mediterranean Diet in tourism, such as organic agriculture, short supply chains, farm-to-table models, Geographical Indications, tourism value chains, innovation, circular economy, fishing, and transnational collaboration. They should be further used in the function of valorisation of the Mediterranean Diet in the context of tourism.

However, the research also showed that there are also inadequate systems that should be further strengthened, in order to be able to functionally support the protection of the concept of the Mediterranean Diet. Such are governance models, relevant thematic education systems, integration of actors into value chains, support systems for strengthening short supply chains, institutional and funding support system, and more. These are especially impactful on the Mediterranean Diet system in non-EU countries in the EUSAIR region, which are not as systemically developed as their neighbouring EU



countries of the EUSAIR. Fortunately, numerous good practice examples were identified, which can serve as the learning platform for knowledge transfer and innovation facilitation.

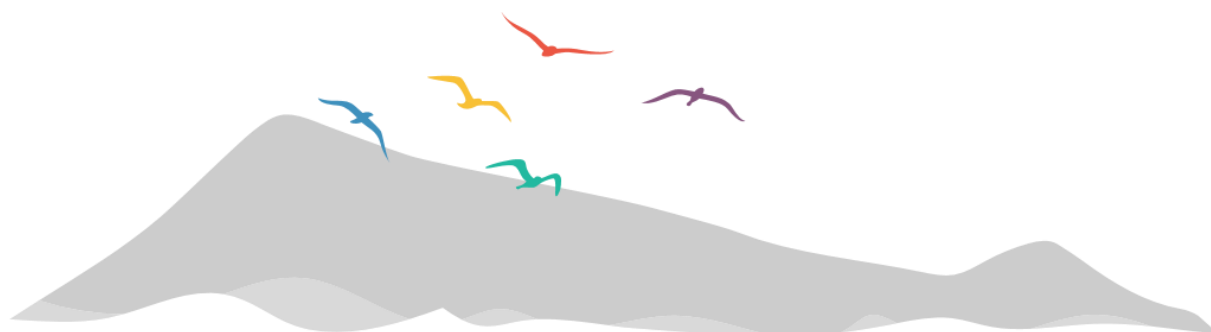
A number of common challenges were identified, that are preventing the Mediterranean Diet from reaching its full potential as a basis for the development of tourism in the EUSAIR, such as:

- Fragmentation of institutional and governance structures
- Insufficient cross-sectoral coordination
- Weak coordination of agriculture and tourism policy
- Inconsistent levels of institutional and operational capacity
- Rural depopulation
- Employment issues
- Increased risks of climate change
- Insufficient education infrastructure
- Increasing risks of excessive commercialisation and loss of authenticity associated with the marketing of Mediterranean cultural heritage without sufficient interpretation, community involvement, or consideration of sustainability over the long term.

The findings indicate that, in order to achieve sustainable development of the Mediterranean Diet tourism in EUSAIR, priority and strategic efforts must be focused on the following:

- Strengthening macroregional cooperation
- Supporting local producers and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)
- Investment in education and skills development
- Improving digitalisation and creating smart tourism ecosystems
- Developing integrated, culturally and environmentally sustainable destination management models
- Empowering local communities (in particular women and youth, farmers, artisans, small family businesses and others) to be key stakeholders in the preservation and transmission of Mediterranean cultural heritage.

Ultimately, it is important to understand the Mediterranean Diet not just as a historical legacy, but a key strategic resource for the development of the Mediterranean and EUSAIR region. The value of the Mediterranean Diet lays in its ability to interconnect and tell a story of culture, sustainability, identity, health and local communities. If approached properly and collectively through regional cooperation, long term policy and institutional support, and active participation by local communities, the Mediterranean Diet can become one of the key foundations for creating a more resilient, inclusive, authentic and sustainable tourism model across EUSAIR.



2. Introduction and contextual framework: The Mediterranean Diet - A UNESCO intangible cultural heritage

3

The Mediterranean Diet (MD) was granted the title of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010, by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), due to its importance as an identity basis for the inhabitants of the Adriatic-Ionian region (EURAIR) (UNESCO, 2013). It was first inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010 by the original countries of Greece, Italy, Morocco, and Spain, and later extended in 2013 to include Cyprus, Croatia, and Portugal (UNESCO, 2013; Moro, 2016).

The Mediterranean Diet includes all the activities related to food and drink in a culturally significant way. This includes all the necessary activities involved, from producing food through harvesting, fishing, keeping animals, preserving and processing, cooking and particularly, sharing and eating food. In essence, it assigns cultural legitimacy to the practice of eating within the MD, which had been associated with healthy living and lifestyles for centuries (UNESCO 2013; Moro, 2016).

The cultural identity of the MD is illustrated in the fact that UNESCO has recognised that the social and friendly aspect of eating with others, known as the conviviality of Mediterranean foodways, is foundational for the cultural identity and the continuity of communities throughout the Mediterranean region. Thus, the MD is not intended just as a diet. It is rather a social institution. In this case, the social aspect of the MD renders the MD as an authentic source of tourism.

The inscription on its own does not protect a recipe book – it protects a living heritage complex comprised of cultivation, harvesting, preparation, conservation, rituals, festivities, and shared meals. This difference is very important because the Mediterranean Diet's value for tourism resides in the protection of practices and relationships, as opposed to being reduced to a static culinary name.

Therefore, today, the Mediterranean Diet represents far more than a simple food pattern - it is the combined socio-cultural system of the Mediterranean where gastronomy is only one of a number of components that comprise the Mediterranean Diet. In addition to gastronomy, the Mediterranean incorporates the path from landscape to the table, incorporating also the knowledge, skills, and traditions of its people/cultures. Ultimately, it is a „living heritage“, recreated daily, felt and experienced, by all individuals of all ages. The primary scope of the MD concept, and the geographical analysis in reference to the MD and its use as a tool for tourism development in this case, includes the 10 countries of the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR): Croatia, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and San Marino.

Figure 1. Map of EUSAIR countries



Map of EUSAIR Countries



4

Besides being a specific diet, lifestyle, and heritage, the MD is also an instrument for creating a sustainable Adriatic-Ionian Region through integrating agriculture, culture, health, and tourism into a unique and sustainable regional development model (European Commission, 2014; EUSAIR, n.d.-a). In doing so, the MD will play an important role in the realization of the goals set in the Fourth Pillar of the EUSAIR Strategy, by assisting the region to become a leader in sustainable tourism as well as mitigating the seasonality of the region.

In today's globalized economy, driven by continued economic growth and diversification, the MD serves as a major driver of sustainable regional development through the connection of the primary agricultural sector with the tertiary tourism sector. The MD is critical in working toward the realization of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to responsible production and consumption, action taken to combat climate change, protecting the environment, and sustainable development of cities and communities (United Nations, 2015).

There are many issues facing the Adriatic-Ionian area, including the challenge of seasonality, unevenly developed areas within the region, and a need for an urgent ecological transition. The integration of the MD into tourism offers a comprehensive, holistic approach to support public health, conserve biodiversity, and improve the resiliency of the economy. As an instrument to promote culture,



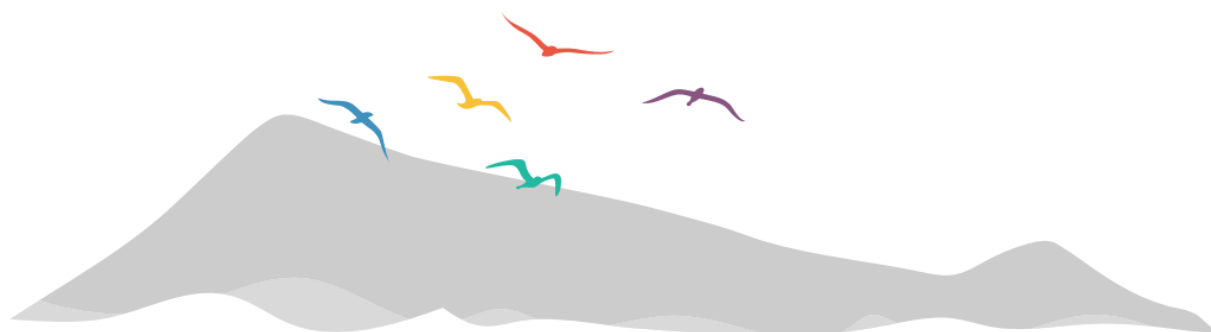
agriculture, and tourism, the MD can effectively help build a brand for the region that communicates excellence, authenticity, and sustainability.

Figure 2. The concept of the Mediterranean Diet



The strategic integration of EUSAIR and TSG4 priorities indicates that the MD is a focal point of the macro-regional identity. It provides a common language for cooperation and collaboration amongst the countries of the Adriatic and Ionian area. The legal frameworks afforded by the EU, from the Common Agricultural Policy, Geographical Indications protection, Organic Action Plan, to the Transition Pathway for Tourism provide the „scaffolding“ necessary to transform this cultural heritage into a sustainable economic engine (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, n.d.-b; European Commission, n.d.-e; European Commission, 2022a). These legal frameworks also ensure that the „authenticity“ of the Mediterranean experience is legally protected.

However, optimal integration will depend on coordinated governance processes. The „polycrisis“ context we face (climate change, demographic change, economic upheaval), calls for an evidence-led and unified policy response. As we witness from Slovenia’s tourism adaptation and Italy’s agricultural processes, climate change impacts are already felt, and alternative models of production and consumption that are resilient and have a lower impact on the planet, need to occur (Turnšek et al., 2024; Pulighe et al., 2024). The focus of the Mediterranean Diet on locality, seasonality, and biodiversity in food systems positions it well within this new dynamic.



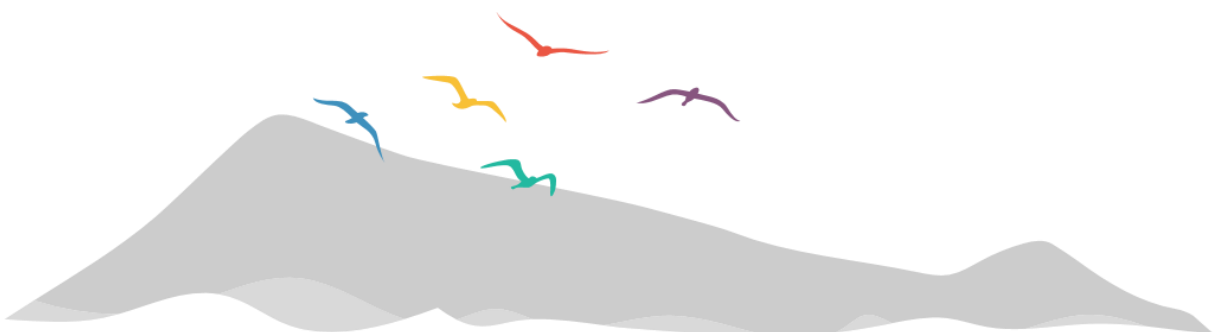
In conclusion, the Adriatic-Ionian region has a unique opportunity to lead sustainable tourism through a strategy that places the Mediterranean Diet at the very forefront of development. This requires continued investment in human capital, education, creating synergies through digitalisation of the agrifood value chain, and strict adherence to EU quality standards. This will enable EUSAIR countries to protect their intangible heritage, support their rural communities, and provide a world-class tourism experience that is valuable for the visitor and sustainable for the environment. Conclusively, the Mediterranean Diet can be considered not just a legacy of our past, but a strategic pathway toward a resilient and thriving future for the Adriatic and Ionian region (UNESCO, 2013; European Commission, n.d.-b).

Figure 3. Analytical and methodological approach



The goal of the study is to present the Mediterranean diet not only as a model of diet, but also as a cultural and social practice that embodies the values of sustainability, local community, intergenerational knowledge, and social connectedness. The approach was multidisciplinary - it connects the fields of sustainable tourism, cultural heritage, gastronomy, agriculture, and regional development.

The methodology combines policy analysis, comparative analysis, mapping of initiatives, and case studies of best practices, with the aim of formulating concrete recommendations for the development of sustainable gastronomic tourism in the EUSAIR region. This comparative approach allows the study to identify patterns, challenges, transferable good practices, and opportunities for macroregional development and cooperation across different EUSAIR contexts and levels of institutional development.



3. Policy and strategic foundations

The policy and strategic framework is the key to enabling or disabling the development of sustainable Mediterranean Diet tourism. For this reason, the first step in identifying the key pillars of the Mediterranean Diet and its enabling factors is to identify the policy and strategic environment in which it operates. Therefore, this chapter aims to shed light on this environment and to assess the extent to which it fosters the Mediterranean Diet concept and tourism.

The first aim is to dive into the strategic context and its relevance and alignment with the EUSAIR Strategy and TSG4 Priorities. After this follows the examination of the strategic framework of the Mediterranean Diet, sustainable tourism, and cultural heritage on the global level, the level of the European Union, and the national level of EUSAIR countries, including the horizontal cooperation framework. A very important aspect of this context is also the legislative framework for the tourism and agricultural sector at the level of the European Union, which provides the foundational framework for supporting the integration of the Mediterranean Diet within the social and economic interactions of the Adriatic-Ionian region (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, n.d.-c).

3.1. Strategic relevance and alignment with the EUSAIR strategic framework

The EUSAIR strategic framework consists of three key pillars:

- The EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR Strategy)
- The Thematic Steering Group 4 (TSG4) for Sustainable Tourism and Cultural Heritage within the EUSAIR Strategy
- The EUSAIR Action Plan 2025.

At the heart of this framework is the creation of synergies that transcend national borders, where the MD establishes a natural link unifying the heterogeneous space of the Adriatic and Ionian basins. This alignment is explicitly detailed in the European Commission's report on „Unlocking Comparative Advantages through the Mediterranean Diet via the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region“ (European Commission, 2025b).

The successful implementation of the EUSAIR Strategy and EUSAIR Action Plan 2025, as well as the Interreg ADRION and Euro-MED program, should continue to support cross-border cooperation (European Commission, 2025a; Interreg ADRION Programme, n.d.; Interreg Euro-MED Programme, n.d.). Continued investments in human capital, education, digitalisation, and compliance with ecological standards will be critical. As previously introduced, the MD is more than a legacy - it provides a pathway to a respected and traditional way of life in contemporary and challenging conditions, while giving prosperity for future generations and a living reminder of the unique nature and identity of the Adriatic-



Ionian region in a globalised world. Quality of work and employee satisfaction will remain integral to the long-term sustainability of any of these models.

The EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR Strategy) is a macro-regional framework aimed at promoting economic and social prosperity through cooperation between EU Member States and non-EU countries (European Commission, 2014). It was jointly developed by the Commission and the countries of the Adriatic-Ionian Region: EU Member States (Croatia, Greece, Italy, Slovenia) and EU candidate countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia), and San Marino. The Strategy is consisted of five pillars:

- Pillar 1 – Blue Sustainable Economy
- Pillar 2 – Connecting the Region
- Pillar 3 – Environmental Quality
- Pillar 4 – Sustainable Tourism
- Pillar 5 – Improved Social Cohesion (European Commission, 2014).

Figure 4. Pillars of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region



Pillar 4 – Sustainable Tourism - is critical for driving jobs and economic growth through its primary objective of diversification and improvement of quality and innovation in tourism products. Primarily, Pillar 4 focuses on three thematic areas:

- „Facilitating digital and green transition of the tourism and cultural heritage offer“



- „Preparing for the future: knowledge, skills and management“
- „Greening of tourism products and services“.

As niche forms of tourism, such as gastronomic and rural tourism, attract visitors with high spending and reduce pressure on coastal cities during peak summer months, the MD's objectives align directly with these priorities (EUSAIR, n.d.-a).

In wider terms, in the Adriatic-Ionian region, the MD provides a competitive advantage that differentiates the region within the global tourism market. Widespread economic convergence will occur once regions can leverage their comparative advantages against each other. The MD can enable the region to establish a resilient and sustainable tourism ecosystem – it can foster and curate the creative use of its unique intangible heritage, which is fully aligned not just with the EUSAIR Strategy, but also with the EUSAIR Action Plan 2025 (European Commission, 2025a).

Within this framework, the **Thematic Steering Group of Pillar 4 – Sustainable Tourism (TSG4)** under the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), is responsible for developing sustainable and thematic tourist routes and enhancing the management of cultural heritage (EUSAIR, n.d.-b). The MD is a living heritage resource that can be leveraged to create cross-border itineraries around olive groves, vineyards, and local markets. TSG4 has stressed the importance of innovation and digitalization in delivering heritage, whereby visitors will benefit from a technology-enhanced experience of the MD while still experiencing the authenticity of the MD. The recommendation from the European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage suggests utilizing cultural heritage resources for sustainable regional development (European Commission, 2022b). To this end, one of TSG4 main goals is to strengthen human capital (EUSAIR, n.d.-b) through increasing the quality of jobs within the tourism and agribusiness sectors. To achieve this, it is essential that young professionals who are pursuing meaningful careers supporting tradition and sustainability are engaged through education and training on how to share the Mediterranean Diet with people around the world, including through participation in the UNESCO Mediterranean Diet Initiative (UNESCO, n.d.a.).

Moreover, the **Revised EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region Action Plan (new EUSAIR Action Plan 2025)** facilitates green transition strategies – it provides targets for creating an integrated tourism product through incorporation of cultural and natural resources (European Commission, 2025a). A holistic approach to sustainable development must include education, nutrition and lifelong learning. To maintain the authenticity of the tourism product, it is critical to invest in education about the Mediterranean Diet and traditional culinary skills. This approach is supported by the UNESCO How to Cook Up Nutrition Education (2025) report, which highlights that traditional diets support educational initiatives (UNESCO, 2025). This alignment of policy offers a unique opportunity for EUSAIR to develop, strengthen, and promote Mediterranean Diet tourism as a tourism sector flagship, rather than as a stand-alone cultural theme.

Together with the establishment of the “Greening of Tourism Services and Products” theme for the new EUSAIR Action Plan 2025 (EUSAIR, 2025) within Pillar 4, the Action Plan states that “Promotion of the Mediterranean Diet and Local Organic Products” is an EUSAIR-level activity under the new sustainable tourism theme and thus formally commits EUSAIR to integrating MD and organic agriculture into sustainable tourism product development. This mandated integration represents a major



institutional accomplishment that creates the conditions necessary for the type of collaborative product development and policy alignment that is essential for sustainable MD-based tourism development.

Integrating the Mediterranean Diet into regional development also requires the establishment of short supply chains by having farmers supply stores and restaurants directly in the region whenever possible. This combined effort will reduce the carbon footprint related to transportation of food, while also allowing that spending in restaurants or grocery stores remains in the community. All of the above initiatives are also consistent with the European Commission's Transition Pathway for Tourism and the European Agenda for Tourism 2030, which promote a green and digital transition of the tourism ecosystem (European Commission, 2022a; Council of the European Union, 2022).

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3.2. Strategic framework of the Mediterranean Diet, sustainable tourism, and cultural heritage in EUSAIR countries

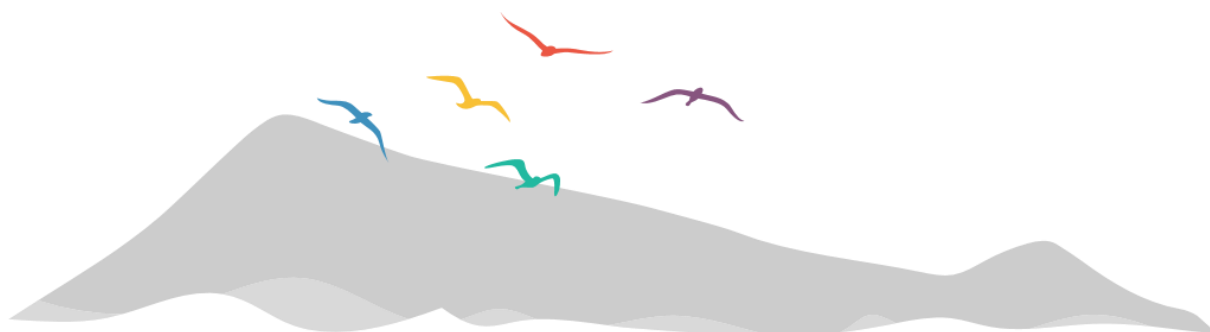
The strategic framework for the Mediterranean Diet in EUSAIR is characterized by a multi-level governance system that incorporates policies on the global level, level of the European Union, as well as the level of each EUSAIR country (European Commission, 2014; European Commission, 2025a). This relationship allows for the MD to be protected as a cultural asset while simultaneously functioning as a key driver for sustainable agrifood systems and high-quality tourism (UNESCO, 2013; FAO, n.d.-c).

3.2.1. Global framework – key policies, institutions and initiatives

Globally, the inclusion of the Mediterranean Diet on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity has significantly advanced its visibility (UNESCO, 2013). This resulted in the development of key policies and strategy that emphasize the need of sustainable development of tourism, which also influences the perspective of the Mediterranean Diet.

The overarching and comprehensive global development framework is the United Nations **Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development**, and 17 **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**. Especially relevant in this case are the following SDGs:

- **SDG 2:** End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- **SDG 3:** Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- **SDG 8:** Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
- **SDG 12:** Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- **SDG 14:** Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development



- **SDG 15:** Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.

Figure 5. Alignment of the Mediterranean Diet with the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)



Besides this, there is an important **Global Code of Ethics for Tourism – GCET** developed by the World Tourism Organization, as it is the fundamental framework for responsible and sustainable tourism. Following this, the UNWTO's global initiative „**One Planet Sustainable Tourism Programme**“ aims to accelerate sustainable consumption and production (SCP) in tourism policies and practices. Additionally, the **Global Nutrition Strategy**, developed by the World Health Organisation, provides evidence-informed guidance based on robust scientific and ethical frameworks.

In addition to providing settings for the preparation and consumption of food, key institutions in the area of tourism, and related aspects such as the Mediterranean Diet, make a significant contribution to the valorisation, protection and promotion of the Mediterranean Diet:

- **Global United Nations organisations:**
 - **The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)**, a specialized agency dedicated to strengthening international cooperation in the fields of education, science, culture, and information.



- **The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)**, a specialized agency of the United Nations that leads international efforts to defeat hunger
- **The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)**, the United Nations' leading global authority on the environment, driving transformational change on the triple planetary crisis: the crisis of climate change, the crisis of nature, land and biodiversity loss, and the crisis of pollution and waste
- **The World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism; UNWTO)**, the United Nations specialized agency for responsible, sustainable, and universally accessible tourism, consisted of with 160 Member States, six (6) Associate Members and over 500 Affiliate Members
- **Other economic and developmental organisations:**
 - **The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)**, an international forum and knowledge hub for data, analysis and best practices in public policy, consisted of 38 Member countries from around the world, from North America and South America to Europe and Asia-Pacific
 - **World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC)**, the only global body representing the travel and tourism private sector and its industries
 - **The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)**, a non-governmental organisation working to conserve and protect cultural heritage sites around the world, and the only worldwide NGO dedicated to applying scientific techniques, theories and methodology to the conservation of both tangible and intangible elements of cultural heritage places.
- **Regional (Mediterranean) organisations:**
 - **The International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM)**, a Mediterranean intergovernmental organization composed of 13 member states (Albania, Algeria, Egypt, Spain, France, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia and Turkey)
 - **The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)**, an intergovernmental institution bringing together the European Union Member States and 16 countries from the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean to promote dialogue and cooperation
- **Specialised organisations:**
 - **The Mediterranean Diet Foundation (MDF; FDM)**, created in 1996 by the Association for the Development of the Mediterranean Diet to highlight the fundamental value of the Mediterranean Diet and its products for Spanish food and industry
 - **International Foundation of Mediterranean Diet (IFMeD)**, created in 2014 as a pole of multi-disciplinary knowledge and expertise internationally recognized for the revalorization of the Mediterranean Diet
 - **Slow Food International**, a global movement of local groups and activists united by the common goal of ensuring everyone has access to good, clean and fair food, founded in Italy in 1986.

For example, many of the UNESCO initiatives, such as the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) - Cities of Gastronomy initiative, encourage cities to use their culinary heritage as a driver for urban



renewal and social cohesion (UNESCO, n.d.-b). An emphasis is placed on commensality, or eating together, as an important social activity that builds relationships within communities.

Then, the International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM) has examined Mediterranean culture's food and diet sustainability, along with other sustainability guidelines, and views the Mediterranean Diet as an entity that holds many traditions with food, local knowledge, seasonality, diversity, and community identity being intertwined (CIHEAM, n.d.-a).

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) believes the Mediterranean diet is a successful example of a sustainable agrifood system and supports this by providing reports about the way consumers eat in the Mediterranean and how the Mediterranean diet can help to provide a better world through healthy and sustainable future toward food systems (FAO, n.d.-a; FAO, n.d.-b; FAO, n.d.-c).

Also, global reports by the UN Tourism (UNWTO) about food tourism and their World Forum on Gastronomy Tourism demonstrate how food is a key motivator for travel, which is an opportunity for countries in EUSAIR to export their cultural identity through tourism (UN Tourism, 2017; UNWTO, n.d.).

Through their activities, programs, and initiatives, all these organisations collectively safeguard, support, and promote the Mediterranean diet as a cultural heritage, a sustainable food system, a foundation of healthy living, and a key resource for sustainable tourism.

3.2.2. Strategic framework at the level of the European Union

The development of MD-based sustainable tourism products in EUSAIR is completely in line with related EU policy frameworks. This is very important because it creates significant opportunities for synergy and co-financing that have not yet been fully exploited.

Specifically, the European Union has a very sharp strategic focus on the overall sustainable development, including in the area of tourism, and consequently, of the Mediterranean Diet. This strategic framework, the EU tourism policy, is fragmented, but integrated, and it can be segmented into several thematic areas.

Besides the EUSAIR strategic framework, the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR Strategy), Thematic Steering Group 4 (TSG4) for Sustainable Tourism, and the EUSAIR Action Plan 2025, the key and overarching European Union policy is **the European Green Deal**. It aims to provide policy-level guidance on sustainable development, from climate to environment, tourism, and food.

Secondly, the key strategic framework of the European Union focused on tourism includes the future **EU Strategy for Sustainable Tourism** as a general framework for the development of sustainable, resilient, and digital tourism, and **Transition Pathway for Tourism** as an operative document that specifies specific steps for green and digital transition in tourism, both of which require the tourism sector to be more circular and environmentally responsible (Council of the European Union, 2022; European Commission, 2022a). Namely, the Transition Pathway for Tourism, created with stakeholders



from across the EU, identifies the green and digital transitions as the key drivers for the future of the sector (European Commission, 2022a). For the EUSAIR region, this may mean a transition from "sun and sea" mass tourism to more diverse and culture-based models. The Mediterranean Diet sits at the center of this transition (UNESCO, 2013). **The European Agenda for Tourism 2030** is the newest EU policy framework which defines priorities for tourism, such as sustainability, digitalisation, resilience and skills.

Furthermore, tourism plays an essential role in promoting cultural diversity (European Commission, n.d.-c), so the framework for the development of culture and valorisation of the cultural heritage is intertwined with tourism, especially the Mediterranean Diet. Namely, the **European Framework for Action on Cultural Heritage** provides the policy foundation for protecting and promoting intangible assets, including the Mediterranean Diet, as an asset for social cohesion and regional identity (European Commission, 2022b). It has called for an integrated approach to heritage that takes into account both social and economic dimensions of heritage (European Commission, 2022b). In connection to the Mediterranean Diet, since it is an intangible heritage, it will need unique protection that focuses on "practices" and "people," rather than simply being viewed as "objects" (UNESCO, 2013). Additionally, the Cultural Heritage Forum (an informal Commission expert group and a platform for consultation and exchanging ideas and best practices), as well as the European Capitals of Culture (ECOC) initiative, are additional opportunities for promoting the Mediterranean Diet (European Commission, n.d.-c) and supporting cultural diversity in tourism.

In the domain of food specifically, the **Farm to Fork Strategy** is the strategic framework for the development and financial facilitation of agriculture and rural areas. Farm to Fork Strategy and the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2020) emphasise sustainable food systems, organic agriculture, sustainable consumption patterns, and reduced environmental impact. The European Green Deal, through its Farm to Fork Strategy, explicitly connects sustainable food systems with territorial development and calls for the valorisation of local and traditional food products as a component of sustainable food economies (European Commission, 2020). Conclusively, the European Green Deal, including its Farm to Fork Strategy, is a regulatory basis to aid in transitioning to healthier and sustainable food systems (European Commission, 2020).

For regional development, the **Cohesion Policy** and **Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3)** represent key pillars for financing projects in the area of tourism, gastronomy and consequent local development, as well as for guiding regions toward (smart) specialisation in specific or niche areas such as eno-gastro tourism, and more.

Tourism in the Adriatic and Ionian region is very sensitive to environmental change. In Slovenia, for example, the tourism sector must respond to the impacts of climate change that include less snow coverage in winter and higher temperatures in summer, negatively affecting water-related tourism and even cultural tourism (Turnšek et al., 2024). The MD provides a way to diversify the tourism product and lessen dependence on weather conditions to include more cultural and gastronomical experiences year-round. By enhancing the "lifestyle" element of the MD, countries in the EUSAIR could create new opportunities with the potential to lengthen the tourist season and generate impulses for visitors to travel further inland and to the rural extent, decreasing the burden on coastal cultural tourism areas, which are now becoming widely overrun. For this reason, other thematic policies also indirectly contribute to the



development of tourism and Mediterranean Diet, such as **EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030**, the **Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy**, and more.

Furthermore, the intersection of health, demography, and tourism is emerging as a key policy area. As the population of Europe ages, the market for "wellness" and "silver tourism" is growing. The MD is scientifically assessed to promote healthy aging, and reduce chronic diseases, making it a powerful investment in positive demography and health policy (Age-It, 2024). Policies that measure and mitigate frailty could fit into tourism offerings where the MD can be the nutrition basis for "restorative" travel (Boccuzzo et al., 2025). The mutual incentives of public health and tourism policy allow countries in the EUSAIR to reach a high spending, health conscious demographic of visitors, while also improving the health and wellbeing of their own aging populations. This governance for sustainability needs a multi-level approach, which includes robust legal structures at the EU and national level in support of local plans (Canfora et al., 2025).

The Mediterranean Diet provides a roadmap to link all of these policies together by offering a low-impact diet supporting local biodiversity and rural communities. Sustainable food systems in the Mediterranean region need stronger ties between agriculture, territorial development, the environment and local economies that depend on tourism-based services (CIHEAM, n.d.-b). The MD acts as "the glue" that enables areas to reduce their impact on the environment and enhance their resilience against economic shocks through integrated approaches to regional policy-making.

3.2.3. *Relevant strategic framework on the national level of EUSAIR countries*

Each EUSAIR country has integrated the MD and sustainable tourism into its national development goals:

- **Croatia:** The National Development Strategy 2030 and Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy 2030 focus on authenticity and linking "blue and green" sectors. This is supported by the National Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development until 2027, the Agriculture Strategy 2030, and the National Plan for the Development of Culture and Media 2023–2027 (Government of Croatia, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2023, n.d.). Croatia's Smart Specialisation Strategy until 2029 additionally supports innovation-led territorial development through stronger connections between sustainable tourism, food systems, bioeconomy, and regional value chains (Government of Croatia, 2022b).
- **Greece:** The National Tourism Strategy and the Greek Rural Development Programme (CAP) prioritize the promotion of PDO/PGI products (Government of Greece, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).
- **Italy:** The Strategic Tourism Plan 2023–2027 (Piano Strategico del Turismo) and the National Strategy for Sustainable Development (SNSvS) emphasize enogastronomy and the Italian CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027 (Government of Italy, 2023a, 2023b, n.d.).
- **Slovenia:** The Slovenian Tourism Strategy 2022–2028 and Smart Specialisation Strategy (S4) position the country as a boutique green destination (Government of Slovenia, 2022a, 2022b).
- **Albania:** The National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development 2019–2023 and the Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development focus on agritourism (Government of Albania, 2019, n.d.).



- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Employs its Tourism Development Strategy and Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy to integrate local traditions (Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).
- **Montenegro:** The Tourism Development Strategy to 2025 and Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy focus on rural diversification (Government of Montenegro, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).
- **North Macedonia:** The National Tourism Strategy and National Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development emphasize the connection between culture and economy (Government of North Macedonia, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).
- **Serbia:** The Tourism Development Strategy 2016–2025 and Agriculture and Rural Development Strategy promote gastronomic heritage (Government of Serbia, 2016, n.d.).
- **San Marino:** The Tourism Development Strategy and Cultural Heritage Strategy preserve their unique micro-state foodways (Government of San Marino, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

3.2.4. Horizontal cooperation framework

Tourism is viewed as part of a larger ecosystem of agriculture and culture. As such, the MD helps areas maintain an ecological footprint while enhancing economic resiliency. Ultimately, there are various specific financial programmes that provide support to cultural, innovation and territorial cohesion projects, especially in regard to the Mediterranean Diet.

For example, this cooperation framework has enabled utilizing digital tools to provide an opportunity to manage the flow of visitors, provide tourist information regarding the cultural significance of the Mediterranean Diet, increase educational programs to assist workers in the tourism industry to increase awareness of how they can maintain the integrity of their MD through authenticity, and reduce the commodification of traditional foodways as per their communities intentions, resulting from using traditional food ways as a commodity.

The key stones of this framework are the **Creative Europe Programme, Digital Europe Programme, European Heritage Label, NextGenerationEU, Interreg IPA ADRION Programme, European Territorial Cooperation Programme - Interreg Euro-MED programme** (Interreg ADRION Programme, n.d.; Interreg Euro-MED Programme, n.d.; Union for the Mediterranean, n.d.-a).

Programmes that are focused on the Mediterranean Diet concept the most are the Interreg IPA ADRION Programme, Interreg EURO Mediterranean (EURO MED) Programme, and the Euro-MED Heritage Program.

The Interreg IPA ADRION Programme is a European transnational program that is essential in providing financial support to cross-border projects that support innovation in the food and tourism sectors (Interreg ADRION Programme, n.d.). Many of these projects centre around the digitalisation of wine and olive oil routes, while also enhancing the visibility of the MD in international markets.



Figure 6. Horizontal cooperation framework for the Mediterranean Diet



The Interreg EURO Mediterranean (EURO MED) Programme, an intergovernmental cooperation programme in Europe, aims at creating a sustainable economy in the Mediterranean region through its objectives of "Innovative Sustainable Economy" and "Living Heritage" (Interreg EURO MED Programme, n.d.). Through these initiatives, research institutions, SMEs, and local authorities can collaborate together to create ways of measuring the effects of tourism on the MD. This ensures that tourism development does not compromise the resources, cultural or natural, upon which it is built, while also addressing the need for job quality in the sector. Ultimately, these programmes foster the creation of regional clusters that support small-scale producers and tourism operators.



3.3. Strategic and legislative framework for the agricultural sector at the level of the European Union

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Besides the previously demonstrated strategic frameworks, effective integration of the MD into the development policies of the Adriatic-Ionian region fully requires a solid foundation in EU legislation (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, n.d.-c) that regulates food production, defines standards for cultural heritage protection, and governs sustainable tourism management (European Commission, 2022b). It is the synergy between agricultural and tourism policies that is essential for creating local added value.

Accordingly, the legislative setting of the European Union provides the foundational framework for supporting the integration of the Mediterranean Diet within the social and economic interactions of the Adriatic-Ionian region (European Commission, 2023; European Commission, n.d.-c). This legislative framework is complex, developed from the interactions between agricultural policies, environmental policies, and tourism policies that intend to support a sustainable and resilient economy at the macro-regional level. Effective governance of these sectors requires a considerable degree of intergovernmental coordination, particularly during times of "polycrisis", when legal, political, and financial considerations converge to disrupt traditional forms of policy-making. For the EUSAIR countries, compliance with EU law is more than a condition of membership or candidate status, but rather a strategic approach to provide a safeguard for territorial identity and sustainable development (European Commission, 2014).

More specifically, the current EU legislative period contemplates a transition towards a circular and green economy, as defined in the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2020). In this context, agriculture and tourism are not regarded as category silos, but interdependent principles in a value-chain approach. The legal framework in the agriculture and tourism sectors aims at ensuring that food production and tourism services support natural resources and public health. An interconnected space is critical for the EUSAIR region, in which the Mediterranean Diet provides a cultural and ecological link between territory and the visitor experience.

Conclusively, agriculture and organic farming are intrinsically linked to the principles of the Mediterranean Diet, which advocate for natural and minimally processed foods, which makes organic farming a fundamental aspect of the sustainability profile of the Mediterranean Diet.

Again, the key and overarching European Union policy for this sector is the **European Green Deal**. As part of the European Green Deal, the **Farm to Fork Strategy** is the strategic framework for the development and financial facilitation of agriculture and rural areas. It will also provide support for the legal structure surrounding the Mediterranean Diet (MD) (European Commission, 2020). The strategy calls for a shift towards a fair, healthy, and environmentally sustainable food system. This closely aligns with the principles of the MD: high consumption of plant-based foods and low environmental impact.

Additionally, the **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)** for the 2023–2027 period is a fundamental shift in how the EU supports rural territory (European Commission, 2023). It focuses on implementing actions, and financing, supporting small farms and prioritizing quality over quantity (European



Commission, 2023). More specifically, it fosters sustainable agriculture by creating funding programs to encourage eco-schemes, rural development initiatives, and support short supply chains. All of these programs directly apply to developing tourism products based on the MD tourism (European Commission, 2021b). It provides support for environmental protection, rural growth, knowledge transfer, and local value chains (European Commission, 2023).

Additionally, LEADER/CLLD (Links Between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy / Community-Led Local Development) is a mandatory instrument under the Common Agricultural Policy and is implemented through Local Action Groups (LAGs). The CLLD approach is still optional, but it has proven especially useful in fisheries communities, where it is implemented through FLAGs. The LEADER/CLLD methodology, together with the experience of LAGs and Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs), provides practical ways to implement, test, and further develop the EUSAIR macro-regional objectives at the local level. Projects funded through LEADER and CLLD are usually smaller in financial terms, but they create strong added value. They are based on real local needs and participatory planning, which makes their results more likely to last in the long term. At the same time, networking between LAGs and FLAGs gradually builds a critical mass of complementary initiatives. Together, these initiatives create shared value across a wider area.

Moreover, by advancing the New Delivery Model (NDM), the cornerstone of the CAP, the CAP provides member states with the flexibility to develop the form of intervention that best meets responsive challenges and priorities in line with EU policies. In the case of the Adriatic-Ionian region, flexibility is important to sustain the region's traditional farming systems that define the Mediterranean Diet. The CAP embodies a focus on "Green Architecture", which provides the financial and legal basis for eco-schemes and agri-environmental-climate measures (AECM) in support of biodiversity and soil health - both ingredients to authentic Mediterranean food products.

Within this context, the MD is supported through **EU Quality Schemes**, which include the following, related specifically to the elements encompassed in the MD concept:

- **Geographical Indications (GI)**, which establish intellectual property rights for specific product especially linked to the area of production, and consisting of:
 - **Protected Designation of Origin (PDO)** (food and wine)
 - **Protected Geographical Indication (PGI)** (food and wine)
 - **Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG)** (food and agricultural products) (European Commission, n.d.-b).

GI ensure that only products originating in the designated area and produced according to traditional restrictions can carry the GI, acting to protect local producers from improper competition, "food piracy," or unspecified originating products. Such legal protection is important to the economic resiliency of the Italian agricultural system, which faces myriad threats affecting yield and income from climate change, for example, viticulture and dairy in areas such as the Valdarno region (Pulighe et al., 2024). Protection of the "territorial brand" enables EUSAIR countries to charge premium pricing on the world market, and to signal value for quality to tourists.

The products from these schemes, as recorded in the database of eAmbrosia, guarantee the protection of traditional food products, such as select types of cheese, wine and olive oil (European Commission,



n.d.-a). These product designations for the aforementioned products are utilized extensively by the tourism industry as marketing tools, ensuring modern travellers that the product is authentic and meets the demand for transparency as well as a "real" experience. In this way, they contribute to the economic sustainability of rural communities within the EUSAIR region and to the competitiveness of the region as a whole. In EUSAIR, the use of these EU quality systems is not just a matter of agricultural policy - it is also about creating a "gastronomic narrative" that will draw high-value tourists who are interested in authentic and healthy foods.

Specifically for organic agriculture, the key EU legal framework for organic production is the **EU Regulation on organic production and labelling of organic products (Regulation (EU) 2018/848)**. It contains an extensive and stringent legal framework governing all levels of the organic supply chain, from seed selection to labelling and inspection (European Union, 2018). The regulation is intended to ensure fair play for farmers, to avoid fraud to consumers, and above all, to maintain consumer trust in the organic logo. For EUSAIR countries, these standards represent a minimum baseline to demonstrate their desire to be a leader in sustainable agrifood systems.

The EU Action Plan for the development of organic production (EU Organic Action Plan) sets an ambitious benchmark, that by 2030, at least 25% of agricultural land in the EU should be under organic farming (European Commission, n.d.-e; European Commission, n.d.-d). The Organic Action Plan promotes organic goods demand and fortifies their respective supply chain, providing for environmental stewardship and climate resilience (European Commission, n.d.-e). It is based on three axis: increasing the demand for organic food products, increasing the supply of organic products, and enhancing the sustainability of organic production. Conclusively, the EU Organic Action Plan (European Commission, 2021) provides an even stronger focus on the Mediterranean Diet, local organic products, and locally produced foods within sustainable, rural, and cultural tourism.

These two frameworks, the EU Regulation on organic production and labelling of organic products (Regulation (EU) 2018/848), and the EU Organic Action Plan, provide the foundational baseline for organic farming. However, since organic farming relates to tourism, and specifically the Mediterranean Diet, it is also closely related to all EU frameworks previously mentioned, of both tourism and the Mediterranean Diet.



4. The Mediterranean Diet as a resource for sustainable tourism

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The Mediterranean Diet is a tool for the development of sustainable tourism at the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region. This is not only in the sense of being a narrow prescription for nutrition, but also because it embodies a holistic approach to territory and culture, where food practices, agricultural land, biodiversity, social customs, indigenous knowledge, hospitality, and identity are mutually reinforcing.

The MD is used by the European Union as a model for sustainable living and the cultural renewal of Europe (European Commission, 2025b). It is this definition of MD that is the basis for MD's significance to tourism. When tourists come to a destination, they do not simply eat meals - they also experience the stories behind the food, its production site, its seasonal harvest calendar, its farmland landscape, and ways of coming together (or "conviviality") that help form the understanding of a place and its identity.

The Mediterranean Diet can facilitate a shift from volume-based, seasonal, and coastal-focused tourism to more even, lighter, and community-utilised forms of tourism. However, this benefit will not happen automatically, as it is contingent upon credible governance, short and transparent value chains, preservation of living cultural heritage, education, and the capacity to link agriculture, tourism, and culture via institutional processes rather than isolated promotions.

To understand the context and phenomenon of the Mediterranean Diet completely, there are several areas that need to be analysed in depth. For this reason, the function, role, and influence of the Mediterranean Diet in tourism, culture, heritage, identity, and authenticity have been analysed through the lens of the UNESCO inscription, organic agriculture, and potential for sustainable tourism.



4.1. The Mediterranean Diet in the function of tourism

The following analysis will demonstrate how the function of the Mediterranean Diet in tourism is based not only on its context and implications of the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage, but also on its relationship with cultural heritage and tourism. These elements influence its impact on shaping the tourism demand and contributing to destination identity, branding and shaping authenticity, branding and destination identity in EUSAIR countries.

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4.1.1. *The Mediterranean Diet – the context and implications of the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage*

The inscription of the Mediterranean Diet on the UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity constitutes the single most consequential institutional act for the MD's tourism valorisation. The recognition of EUSAIR by UNESCO has three different purposes for tourism.

One purpose is to be a credible international framework for naming destinations in tourism. Furthermore, Croatia, Greece, and Italy are all part of the Mediterranean Diet UNESCO recognition and therefore receive credibility when identifying their products in the context of the broader Adriatic-Ionian region.

Another purpose is to create opportunities for transforming food heritage into educational tourism experiences (cooking schools, guided market visits, olive oil tastings, biodiversity walks, farm stays, and community meals).

Finally, another purpose for UNESCO's recognition of food heritage is to support the development of heritage-based ecosystems in inland, island and peripheral areas of the Adriatic-Ionian region that are usually not part of mainstream tourism. EUSAIR has also been developed with the understanding that the Mediterranean Diet, locally produced organic and conventionally produced foods and beverages, are the first and second foundations for the development of sustainable tourism and socioeconomic development in this region (European Commission, 2025a).

The UNESCO designation has influenced practical outcomes for how destinations are created, throughout the EUSAIR area and beyond. Croatian coastal towns, Cilento, Soria and Koroni have built tourism narratives that directly link to their MD community status, where tourism is focused on these communities. The Interreg Euro-MED funded the MD-NET project (2018-2022) to give operational effect to the UNESCO designation via the establishment of a „Mediterranean Diet Euro-Cluster“ consisting of a transnational tourism branding platform that brings together jurisdictions in different countries that share MD values (MD-NET Manual, n.d.). This illustrates both the strength of UNESCO's certification role and the degree of innovation that the designation has enabled.

Figure 7. The Mediterranean Diet as a resource of sustainable tourism





THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET

as a Resource for Sustainable Tourism

More than food – it is a way of life that connects people, landscapes, traditions and local communities.
A living heritage that nourishes both people and places.



CULTURAL HERITAGE
Traditions, knowledge and conviviality



LOCAL & SEASONAL
Rooted in the land, in tune with the seasons



CONVIVIALITY
Sharing meals, building connections



SUSTAINABILITY
Biodiversity, respectful use of resources



LOCAL ECONOMY
Strengthening communities and local value chains

FROM PLATE TO PLACE – UNIQUE EXPERIENCES



Farm & olive experiences



Local markets & food stories



Cooking classes & workshops



Community meals & festivals



Nature, culture & slow travel

The Mediterranean Diet turns destinations into authentic, memorable and sustainable experiences.

A HOLISTIC APPROACH FOR A SUSTAINABLE ADRIATIC-IONIAN REGION



CULTURAL CONTINUITY
Living traditions, transmitted through generations



- Traditional knowledge
- Seasonal rhythms
- Festivals & rituals
- Culinary heritage
- Community identity

Preserving and celebrating what makes our communities unique.



ENVIRONMENTAL EMBEDDEDNESS
Eating with the seasons, respecting nature



- Biodiversity & local varieties
- Olive oil, pulses, whole foods
- Sustainable fishing practices
- Low food miles
- Resilient landscapes

Nourishing people while protecting our land and sea.



ECONOMIC TERRITORIALITY
Strong local value chains, shared prosperity



- Local producers
- Artisans & processors
- Restaurants & hotels
- Guides & experiences
- Stronger rural economies

Creating jobs, supporting communities and keeping value local.

WHY IT MATTERS

- Shifts from mass tourism to meaningful, year-round experiences.
- Supports rural areas and reduces seasonality.
- Protects cultural heritage and local identities.
- Builds a greener, fairer and more resilient tourism future for EUSAIR.

Heritage on the plate. Sustainability in practice. A better future for our region.

unesco
Intangible Cultural Heritage

EUSAIR
ADRIATIC & IONIAN REGION

SUSTAINABLE
TOURISM
FOR ALL

It would also be false to assume that the UNESCO designation is unambiguously good for sustainable tourism. Moro (2016) highlights the potential for „mystification“ of MD, which is the act of taking a complicated, contextualised cultural action and rebranding it simply for external audiences. When the MD is sold as a tourism good, there is a real possibility that all of the authentic activities (seasonal eating, using local products, and cooking together) associated with the MD will be replaced with artificial versions of those activities performed only for tourists. There is empirical evidence for this concern (Ingrassia et al., 2023) - a survey of restaurants in Sicily identified substantial discrepancies between how the MD is scientifically and culturally understood and how it is commercially implemented in a tourism context.

This is frequently reflected through standardised „Mediterranean menus“ being used instead of the more cultural sense of authenticity that the MD has been UNESCO-listed to preserve. The way forward for destination managers and policymakers is to use the UNESCO designator as a tool for preserving culture rather than just as a marketing term, which requires commitment from both the institutions involved and the community.

However, UNESCO status should not be interpreted as a guarantee of sustainability. Heritage recognition can increase visibility, but it can also generate selective appropriation, standardised narratives and symbolic overuse. The Mediterranean Diet is especially vulnerable to this risk because it is already globally familiar. As mentioned above, Ingrassia et al. (2023) show that even in Sicily, a highly



symbolic Mediterranean Diet territory, knowledge of the diet's holistic meaning is limited among restaurant clients and many operators. The diet is frequently perceived primarily as a healthy food regime rather than as a cultural, environmental, and territorial model. This finding is directly relevant to EUSAIR: promotion without interpretation may increase demand, but weaken the heritage meaning that makes the product sustainable.

4.1.2. The relationship between the Mediterranean Diet, cultural heritage, and tourism

The relationship between food, culture, and tourism has attracted sustained scholarly attention over the past two decades, evolving from a peripheral concern of hospitality management into a substantive field of inquiry at the intersection of cultural geography, sustainable development, and tourism studies. Within this broader intellectual movement, the Mediterranean Diet occupies a privileged analytical position: it is simultaneously a nutritional paradigm, a cultural practice, an ecosystem service, and, increasingly, a structured tourism resource. Understanding the MD's function in tourism requires engaging with multiple layers of conceptualisation - from its anthropological roots in the idea of shared eating as constitutive of community identity, to its contemporary framing within the sustainability transitions discourse of EU policy.

The notion of the Mediterranean Diet progressively evolved over the past 60 years (Dernini and Berry, 2015). First, it was considered merely a healthy dietary pattern, until it became a sustainable dietary pattern. In this interpretation - nutrition, food, culture, people, environment, and sustainability - all form a new model interpreted as a sustainable diet. Some perspectives frame the Mediterranean Diet explicitly as a sustainable consumption/dietary pattern that balances health, environment, socio-cultural and economic dimensions, emphasising that protecting and promoting this diet can help reconcile nutrition objectives with resource constraints (Hachem et al., 2016). It also connects nutritional quality with ecological and social sustainability, showing that the Mediterranean diet can serve as a reference model for rethinking food consumption in policy and practice.

The foundational and conceptual work was largely established outside of tourism studies. Ancel Keys' landmark Seven Countries Study of the late 1950s and 1960s, the first major international study to investigate diet and lifestyles, identified the dietary patterns of Mediterranean populations as conferring significant cardiovascular protection, initiating a decades-long scientific conversation about what has come to be known as the „Mediterranean dietary pattern“ (Moro, 2016). Yet the significance of this work for tourism lies not in its epidemiological findings, but in the cultural legitimisation it provided: by placing Mediterranean foodways at the centre of an internationally recognised scientific discourse, it laid the groundwork for a later re-reading of those foodways as heritage. This transition from nutritional model to cultural heritage marker was formalised and accelerated by the UNESCO inscription of the Mediterranean Diet in 2010, which was extended in 2013 to include Cyprus, Croatia, and Portugal alongside the original countries of Greece, Italy, Morocco, and Spain (UNESCO, 2013; Moro, 2016).

Conclusively, the Mediterranean diet stands out as an important model for combining healthy nutrition with sustainability goals, offering a practical reference point for shaping more nutritious and environmentally responsible food systems (FAO, 2022). Moreover, it should be understood as a



territorial and cultural system embedded in local economies, biodiversity and social life, since it can support rural development, cultural continuity and more sustainable patterns of consumption (CIHEAM, 2012).

Theoretically, the significance of the Mediterranean Diet in tourism can best be conceptualized by considering the intersection of three streams of literature. The first stream is the conceptual framework of the "tourist gaze," which has transitioned from predominantly passive (seeing) to predominantly experiential (doing) in how contemporary travellers engage with new places they visit. In this regard, contemporary travellers engage with new places more and more in order to seek out authentic and sensory experiences, rather than they do to passively observe them (OECD 2012; UNWTO 2012). The second type of literature examines destination identity and place branding, which demonstrates how comparably unique cultural assets can be utilized to promote differences between various tourism products (CIHEAM 2016; Ingrassia et al. 2023). Third, the numerous recent proclamations concerning sustainable food systems as articulated from the FAO, CIHEAM, and European Commission, have arisen regarding the use of dietary patterns such as the MD, for purposes of encouraging/enabling not only environmental sustainability, but also creating/enabling territorial cohesion and promoting rural viability (FAO/CIHEAM 2015; European Commission 2020).

Framed this way, it results in the conceptualization of the MD as what could be termed a „living cultural landscape“, one that is both materially (olive groves, fishing harbours, local markets, communal ovens) and immaterially (systems of knowledge, seasonal rhythms, convivial practices, intergenerationality) lived and expressed. As such, the MD has a unique degree of durability as a tourism asset - while built heritage (structures built to last) may become deteriorated and damaged/missing, and while event-based tourism assets necessarily exist only seasonally, aspects of the MD are recreated every day through social activities. Therefore, the tourism experience created from the MD exists within this everyday framework/context, providing tourists opportunities to have authentic encounters with cultural heritage, rather than the socially constructed performances of cultural heritage performed solely for the financial gain of the performer.

Figure 8. The relationship between the Mediterranean Diet, cultural heritage, and tourism





There is an extremely strong conceptual link between sustainable tourism and cultural heritage in terms of the Mediterranean Diet. The Mediterranean Diet is a food system, a form of cultural practice, and a resource for territorial development at the same time. UNESCO defines the Mediterranean Diet as a set of skills, knowledge, rituals, symbols and traditions related to growing, harvesting, fishing, animal husbandry, conserving, processing, cooking, and especially sharing and consuming food (UNESCO, 2013). This definition can be considered critical for an analysis of tourism, because it shifts the focus away from single dishes to food's total heritage. Thus, landscapes of production, local varieties, fishing practices, markets, household knowledge, festivals, hospitality practices, and the social act of eating together become part of how food is recognized as a cultural heritage. In that sense, the Mediterranean Diet can serve as a tool to apply the principles of sustainability, gastro-tourism, resilience, visibility, and regional cohesion to the development of sustainable, innovative food systems throughout the EUSAIR area (Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development of the Republic of Slovenia, 2025).

Tourism-wise, the holistic nature of the Mediterranean diet represents an „experience infrastructure“ in tourism. It is crucial for gastronomy tourism, but it also endorses travel types of slower pace and place-sensitive travel, where visitors interact with producers, farms, olive trees, vineyards, fish markets, rural homes, and community festivals. Moreover, food often acts as an entry point into local culture and allows visitors to connect and create the same cultural experience as the locality they are visiting (OECD, 2012). Similar to the above, gastronomy tourism is where culinary practices, destination management, and local food resources intersect, so gastronomy tourism is not seen simply as a subcategory of restaurants (UNWTO 2012, 2017).

Additionally, gastronomy is the core aspect of the intangible heritage, holding the potential for development and strengthening of specific types of tourism, such as cultural, rural, health, active tourism, and more (Vicentijević, 2025). It should be understood as both a cultural expression and a tourism resource that shapes visitor experience (Mohanty et al., 2020). Since gastronomic experiences contribute to local economic benefits, heritage preservation and responsible tourism practices, gastronomy should also be considered a mechanism that can support sustainable development when properly planned and governed (Padyala and Kiran, 2025). It ultimately contributes to sustainable food heritage tourism development, emphasising and balancing authenticity, economic viability, and community participation (Barrak and Salameh, 2023).

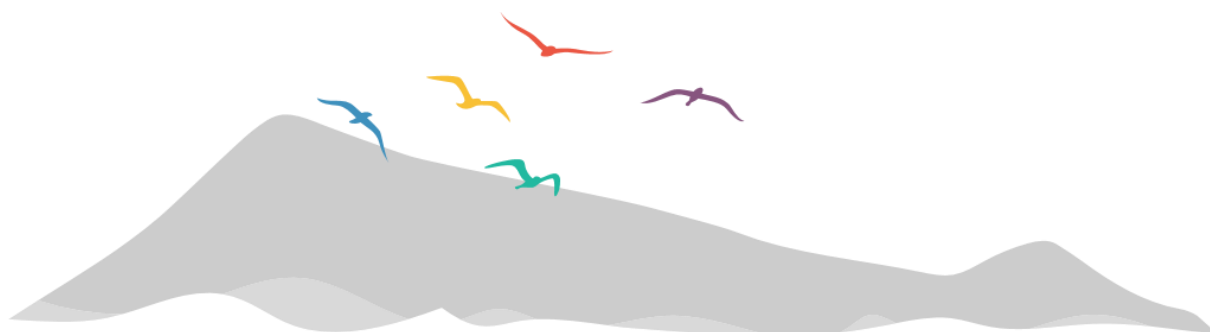
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Accordingly, it is possible to identify three dimensions that are normally separated in existing tourism policies, which are brought together through the theoretical relevance of the Mediterranean Diet. Cultural continuity refers to the traditional practices and knowledge, which have been passed down between generations, that give a community its identity. Environmental embeddedness represents the traditional method of eating according to the seasons, utilizing a diversity of plant-based sources, olive oil, and legume-based sources, and using local resources in an environmentally sustainable way. An example of this is FAO and CIHEAM's use of this diet as a reference point for building a sustainable diet (Burlingame & Dernini, 2012; FAO & CIHEAM, 2015). Economic territoriality refers to how the Mediterranean Diet connects the producers, processors, restaurants, accommodation providers, and guides that participate in the Mediterranean Diet in the area, thereby creating a strong local value chain. This relationship is particularly relevant for EUSAIR countries, where coastal tourism, rural out-migration, and fragmented agrifood systems coexist.

4.1.3. Role in shaping tourism demand

The global landscape of tourism demand has shifted substantially over the past decade, with gastronomy tourism emerging as one of the fastest-growing and most economically significant niche segments. Tourism demand has increasingly moved from passive sightseeing towards experience-seeking, authenticity and participation. Gastronomy tourism responds to this shift because it enables visitors to learn through taste, proximity and social interaction. The Mediterranean Diet can shape this demand in three interconnected ways. As **gastronomy tourism**, it offers visitors distinctive local products, culinary techniques, restaurant experiences and food-related events. As **experiential tourism**, it creates opportunities for participation in harvesting, cooking, fishing, preserving, foraging and tasting. As **slow tourism**, it encourages longer engagement with places, seasonal rhythms and local communities rather than rapid consumption of iconic sites.

Figure 9. The role of the Mediterranean Diet in shaping tourism demand





The UNWTO's Second Global Report on Gastronomy Tourism (UNWTO, 2017) identified gastronomy as a key motivating factor for international travel and a primary vehicle for the transmission of cultural heritage. More recent market analyses confirm that this trend has accelerated: the global culinary tourism market was estimated at USD 922 billion in 2023, expanding at a compound annual growth rate exceeding 16% (Future Market Insights, 2024). According to the World Food Travel Association, approximately one third of tourists consider the culinary offer a primary criterion in destination selection - a figure that underscores the economic stakes of effective gastronomic positioning.

In addition to this demand framework, there are also several reasons that make the Mediterranean Diet unique. In contrast to many types of „food tourism“, which tend to focus on either one prominent dish or a specific region through an iconic restaurant, the MD is all-encompassing and offers a whole range of tourism experiences by combining agricultural landscapes, artisan production, seasonal cycles, and social ritual. These multi-faceted tourism experiences fit very well with OECD (2012) definition for the „food and tourism experience“ - an experience that involves multiple levels of interaction, such as consumption, immersion, learning, and emotional connection to place. As previously mentioned, the MD also fits well within the framework of slow tourism, where tourists spend time actively engaging with the local culture at a slower pace, and ultimately contributing to health and wellness, mindfulness, and responsible use of resources.

Moreover, there is a diverse demand from the different traveler groups. Cultural tourists with higher budgets seek out curated dining experiences featuring locally sourced products and meals prepared by chefs. However, there are rural/nature tourism groups who enjoy eating farm-to-table dishes, helping to

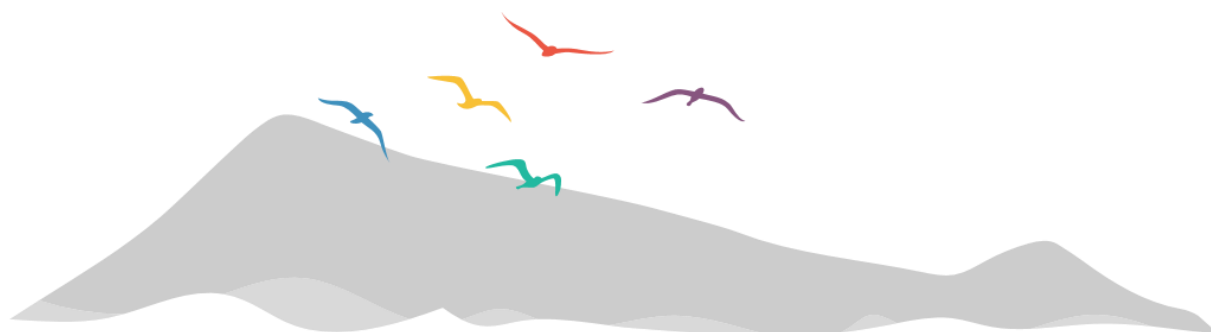


harvest olives, wine and olive trail adventures, hiking and learning about local food, and staying in agritourism facilities. Families and education/school groups may seek cooking classes or a farm-to-school experience. Silver (older than the age of 55) tourism groups want to eat healthy and may want to find ways to travel the countryside while promoting wellness. Conclusively, this shows that the Mediterranean Diet is not one tourism product but a platform for destinations to develop a range of different tourism products for various segments of the market.

Therefore, EUSAIR countries have distinct advantages over competitors in a quickly changing global environment. Greece and Italy have long histories of international reputations as world-class culinary destinations where their many long-standing gastronomical traditions are often identified as among the most popular in Europe by tourism research study reports. Croatia's wine and olive oil routes that were funded through the Interreg ADRION QNESt and QNESt Plus project represent tangible product development examples to develop and bring together the overall MD heritage into more structured ways for tourists to explore and experience through organized itineraries (EUSAIR GASTRO Tourism Handbook, 2023). „Slovenian Cuisine“ in Slovenia is an example of how even a smaller country can leverage the MD framework for the development of a local food identity based on seasonal and locally sourced ingredients, and that the MD may not always be the primary cultural reference point in providing geographic branding for food items in other regions of the world. In addition to Montenegro's long history of producing high-quality olive oil, and Bosnia and Herzegovina's long-standing culinary traditions heavily influenced by Mediterranean-style culinary practices, both countries have yet to tap into their inherent tourism potential.

At the same time, there is a disparity in the evidence of market size and demand, with the knowledge of the cultural and sustainability components of the Mediterranean Diet. Ingrassia et al. (2023) show that there is a demand from consumers for menus and products anchored in the Mediterranean Diet, while at the same time, there are inefficiencies in cultural understanding from tour operators.

However, demand-side growth of tourism based on the Mediterranean Diet cannot be achieved through branding alone. For example, as part of tourism based on the Mediterranean Diet, the following will be required: interpretation, education of staff, destination-specific stories, a labelling system connecting the menu items with local producers, and communication of the environmental/sustainability of the Mediterranean Diet. Without putting these elements in place, the Mediterranean Diet could become a generic healthy food theme focused solely on health and not connected to the food, community, and environment where the Mediterranean Diet was created.



4.1.4. *The Mediterranean Diet in EUSAIR countries – contribution to destination identity, branding and authenticity*

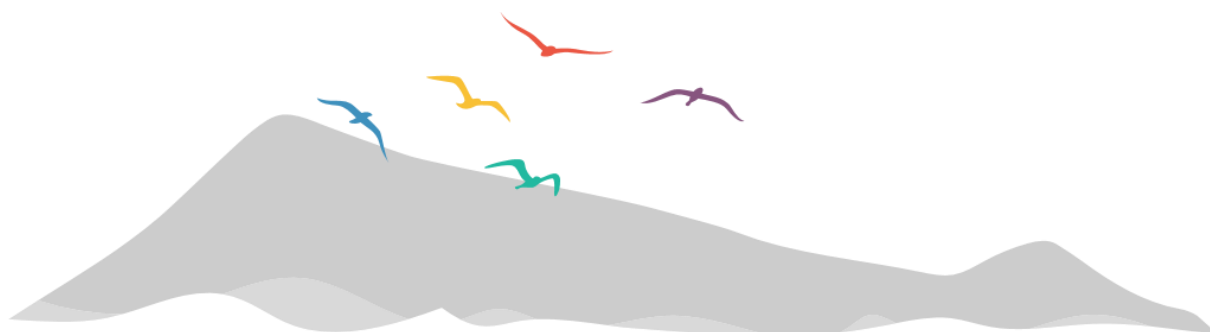
Theoretical literature finds cultural distinctiveness as the longest-term advantage in the marketplace of tourism. Therefore, the branding of the Mediterranean Diet is a multilayered asset with historical, ecological, institutional and emotional characteristics.

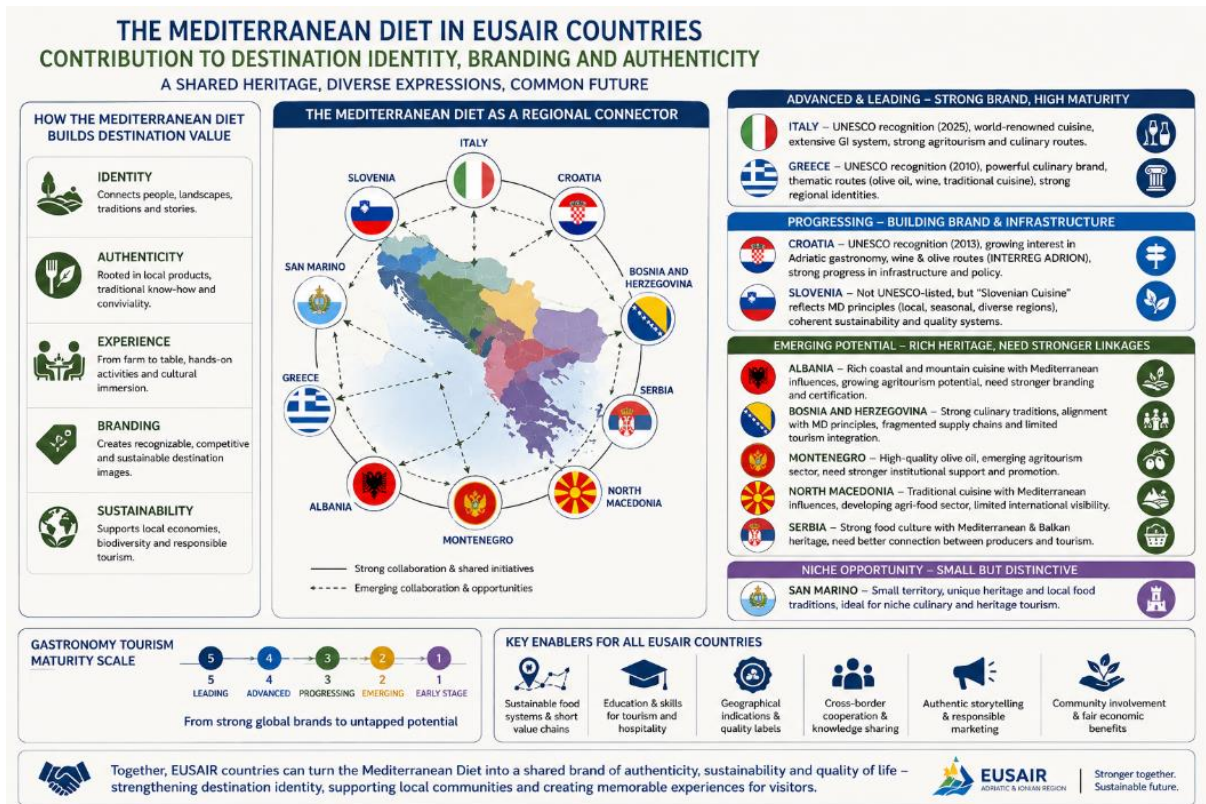
The Mediterranean Diet is generating a link between destination identity and images connected to the physical and cultural assets of a particular place - landscapes, local agricultural varieties, methods of food production, collective gatherings, and everyday stories about the village or town. With increasing competition in the tourist market, food is becoming the language of destinations that differentiates them from each other and creates an opportunity for a competitive advantage that is difficult to replicate based on the ecology and culture of each location.

Multiple countries in the EUSAIR region utilize the Mediterranean Diet to build their brand as tourist destinations, varying in levels of sophistication. However, EUSAIR countries have differences in the degree of their gastronomy branding maturity, and their capacity to use the Mediterranean Diet in the promotion of sustainable tourism. Specifics about each EUSAIR country are mentioned in various contexts and for different purposes in this study. However, it is important to analyse and highlight their similarities and differences in the overall context of the Mediterranean Diet as a whole.

For example, countries such as Italy and Greece have matured in their agriculture-based gastronomic tourism sectors, as well as developed strong agritourism systems throughout their respective countries, and developed numerous geographical indications for food products. Italy's and Greece's gastronomic brands are both internationally recognised for their longstanding histories of international reputation, and have strong regional food identities. They are already using food, wine, olive oil, and rural landscapes in a powerful way within their destination narratives. In addition, they have both been identified as representatives of these recognised communities by UNESCO. Italy achieved the inscription of Italian cooking, which is intertwined with the Mediterranean Diet, on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity only recently, in 2025. In Greece, specific thematic routes are developing across the country around elements of the Mediterranean Diet (olive oil, wine, and traditional Greek cuisine) that help leverage UNESCO recognition from across the globe, and build upon the established brand equity of tourism in Greece in connection with the MD.

Figure 10. The Mediterranean Diet in EUSAIR countries – a comparative overview





Due to becoming an EU member and being recognised by UNESCO in 2013, Croatia has seen an increase in interest from tourists in exploring the gastronomy of the Adriatic Sea and island regions. It has made remarkable progress towards establishing a viable foundation for increasing tourism based on the Mediterranean Diet by developing infrastructure and institutional methods to encourage the promotion or use of the Mediterranean Diet. The national tourism strategy of Croatia indicates that the inclusion of sun, sea and gastronomy will be connected to the overall effort to extend tourism from the coastal season into more of an all-year-round experience, by establishing a sense of culinary experiences within the cultural experiences associated with the MD. In parallel, the organic farming area in Croatia has increased by fourfold between 2012 and 2022 (Eurostat, 2022). Moreover, Croatia received great recognition of its gastronomy practices. Its region Kvarner was awarded the prestigious title of the European Region of Gastronomy 2026 by the International Institute for Gastronomy, Culture, Arts and Tourism (IGCAT) (IGCAT, 2026). Moreover, its region Central Dalmatia was also awarded this prestigious title - the European Region of Gastronomy 2027 - by IGCAT (IGCAT, 2026).

Slovenia is not formally recognised as a part of the UNESCO recognition of the Mediterranean Diet, but it does possess an original national gastronomy identity that is based upon the key principles of the Mediterranean Diet, relating to local food sources, seasonal food sources and biodiversity. It has also developed its own coherent sustainable tourism, a more complex regional gastronomy, quality systems, and culinary strategy, called „Slovenian cuisine“ - a diverse culinary heritage combined of three unique geographic regions; Alpine, Pannonian and Mediterranean.



On the opposite side of the spectrum are the EUSAIR candidate countries in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia), which have a highly developed significant food and culinary heritage compatible with the Mediterranean Diet, but have much less developed institutional frameworks for the tourism valorisation of this food heritage. They have generally established strong traditions of food in their cultures, but have less integration into the destination markets, fewer international quality certifications, and more fragmented producer-tourism relationship records. Organic agriculture in these countries represents a relatively low proportion of total agricultural area (EEA, 2023; Eurostat, 2023), non-food supply chains to the end consumer are not well-developed beyond local markets, and the linkages between the tourism sector and agrifood system are generally weak.

San Marino is a particularly interesting case. It is a small municipality with a distinct cultural identity, so its localised food customs and enclosed cultural heritage site are a niche tourism opportunity, which is still largely untapped. Being so small, San Marino might even be more ideally suited for niche-heritage and culinary tourism than for large-scale transformation of their overarching food systems.

Hence, each of the examples above illustrates how the tourism products, based on the Mediterranean Diet, are not simply transferable through mechanical means - they must be adjusted to take into account the institutional capacity, producer base, visitor demographics, and cultural geographies of the host country.

However, there is potential for local governments and larger corporations to benefit from greater investment in the institutional resources needed for MD branding among the EUSAIR candidate countries and smaller states. For example, the Mediterranean coastal cuisine of Albania, along with Serbia, engaging in traditional Balkan-style food cultures, has been influenced by both Ottoman and Mediterranean traditions, as well as the new agritourism sector being developed in Montenegro. They provide a way to build an MD branding framework to systematically position these advantages at the regional level. The proposed EUSAIR Mediterranean Diet Flagship Project, a strategic initiative (led by Pillar 4 and supported by Pillar 5 and Pillar 1 under the new EUSAIR Action Plan 2025) positioning the Mediterranean Diet as a driver of sustainable tourism, rural development, and cross-pillar cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region, will seek to use these regional interests to create a common infrastructure of branding that will allow all Member States to obtain value from everyone else's reputation for EUSAIR MD destination use (European Commission, 2025a).

Authenticity in this case is not to be seen as a fixed and unchanging representation of history. More specifically, it is a major hurdle to cross in this brand creation process. As previously stated, Ingrassia et al. (2023) demonstrate significant gaps between the MD as cultural heritage and the MD as a marketed tourism product, which were confirmed by the surveys conducted among restaurant owners and staff located at official UNESCO sites in Sicily. While much of this gap can be attributed to a lack of knowledge of MD's traditional cultural components, the menu offerings of restaurants catering to tourists traditionally differ from what would be considered authentic. The implication of this type of branding is clear: a brand associated with MD authenticity is only going to be viable for as long as the actual product being sold has maintained its authentic and original character. To maintain original character, however, there must be ongoing investment made not only in the marketing of MD, but in the education of tourism industry personnel, the preservation of traditional agricultural practices, and the development



and preservation of the short food chain connecting local agricultural products to the dinner plates of tourists.

As a result, the term "authenticity" can be correctly defined as a reliable form of continuity - the degree to which community members are willing and able to modify foodways for tourists while still maintaining control over the meaning, quality, and benefits associated with those practices. Managing this process requires there to be adequate governance mechanisms to ensure that tourism development stays reasonably close to the producers and cultural producers of the community. Systems such as geographical indications, origin labelling, and bio-regions, farmers' markets, culinary procurement systems, and community-based events can help translate authenticity into working systems. The absence or ineffectiveness of such systems will create a disconnection between the branding and the reality of production, and destinations will be selling images of the Mediterranean, yet importing food products from another part of the world, executing standardised menus, or eliminating small producers from their supply chain.

Ultimately, the framework of EUSAIR's macroregional governance structure that focuses on transnational cooperation, developing common branding, and transferring knowledge, lends itself well to this gradient. More developed countries will act as knowledge partners to developing countries and provide a regional branding opportunity for lesser-known or relatively invisible territories to take advantage of the overall EUSAIR Mediterranean brand through association. A major risk to success will be if the regional brand's power becomes concentrated in the countries having the most capacity (institutions), with candidate countries' territories being marginalised and able to benefit from the brand but not be co-creators of the shared identity.



4.2. Organic agriculture in EUSAIR countries - innovative and sustainable food chains as drivers of sustainable tourism

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Organic agriculture, also called organic farming, is an agricultural method that aims to produce food using natural substances and processes, encouraging a high standard of animal welfare, and requiring farmers to meet the specific behavioural needs of animals (European Commission, 2026). Therefore, organic farming has a limited environmental impact due to the responsible use of energy and natural resources, maintaining biodiversity and water quality, preserving regional ecological balances, and enhancing soil fertility.

The EU policy framework recognises this, and through the European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy, it has set the objective that at least 25% of EU agricultural land should be under organic farming by 2030. Moreover, through the EU Organic Action Plan, the European Union seeks to stimulate demand, conversion, processing and value-chain organisation (European Commission, 2020; 2021), as well as to fully mobilise the Common agricultural policy (CAP) (European Commission, 2021a).

Figure 11. The concept of organic agriculture in EUSAIR



Organic agriculture is a key enabling condition for credible Mediterranean Diet-based tourism, although the two concepts should not be confused or merged. The Mediterranean Diet can include products that are local, seasonal, and traditionally produced without necessarily being certified organic. Nevertheless, organic farming strengthens its environmental and market credibility by providing regulated standards for production, biodiversity protection, reduced chemical inputs, and traceability. Hence, organic agriculture is considered a key pathway towards more sustainable food production (European Commission, 2026), due to its benefits for biodiversity, soil, animal welfare and farm resilience, as well as the importance of supportive institutions and knowledge systems (European Commission, 2026).

Generally, organic farming is especially relevant when considering the need to adapt to climate change. Specifically, organic agriculture can reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve carbon sequestration, while supporting on-farm biodiversity (FAO, 2015/2020; FAO, 2022). This means that, if well managed, organic agriculture can play a significant role in climate mitigation and ecosystem conservation. For example, according to research, agricultural production systems located in the Mediterranean region, such as Italy, are experiencing vulnerability from an increase in temperature and severe weather patterns, which will adversely affect crop yields (Pulighe et al., 2024). However, the principles of organic farming often place great importance on maintaining soil fertility and biodiversity, making organic farming a more sustainable and climate-resilient alternative to conventional chemical-based farming methods. Therefore, including organic production as part of regional development strategies provides the EUSAIR member countries with an opportunity to mitigate environmental risk while meeting the growing consumer demand for "clean" and "fair" food products.

Additionally, organic agriculture can contribute to feeding the world within environmental limits. However, it cannot serve as a single solution, but as a major component of broader strategies for sustainable food systems (Muller et al., 2017). Hence, organic agriculture contributes to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those related to poverty reduction, food security, health, climate action, and biodiversity. Conclusively, if embedded in coherent policies and value chains, organic approaches can help align farming practices with global sustainability targets.

Furthermore, from the perspective of tourism, as a component of gastronomy and eno-gastro tourism, and as being a factor in the term "eco-gastronomy", organic agriculture is a differentiator. For example, restaurants and lodges providing certified organic Mediterranean Diet produce are helping to preserve local ecosystems and biodiversity throughout the EUSAIR region. Similarly, financial support by financial institutions to green transition and sustainable investments related to organic agriculture is more promising, since it is consistent with the financial and environmental aspirations expressed in the EUSAIR Action Plan 2025 (European Commission, 2025a).

Additionally, there is a growing recognition and legal significance of the concept of "Organic Districts" (Bio-distretti). This refers to geographical areas consisting of farmers, citizens, tourist operators, and local authorities who have formed agreements defining how to sustainably manage the local resources based on organic values. This modality creates a legal and organizational framework to connect the agricultural sector to the tourism sector directly. In an organic district, the Mediterranean diet is elevated from being merely an experience to an actual "short food supply chain" of food sourced from the local region and consumed at local hotels and restaurants. This strategy results in reduced carbon footprints



of the tourism industry as well as greater equitable economic impact of the tourism industry on local producers.

4.2.1. *State, trends, and regional disparities of organic agriculture*

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Organic farming is no longer marginal, even though its growth remains uneven across countries and sectors (FAO, 2022). Namely, although organic farming generates new business models, employment, and added value for rural areas (IFOAM, 2025), recent data show both progress and a significant gap to the 2030 target. The European Environment Agency reports that the EU share of agricultural land under organic farming increased from 5.9% in 2012 to an estimated 10.8% in 2023 (EEA, 2025). It also concludes that the pace of growth would need to rise, more than double, to reach the 25% target by 2030 (EEA, 2025).

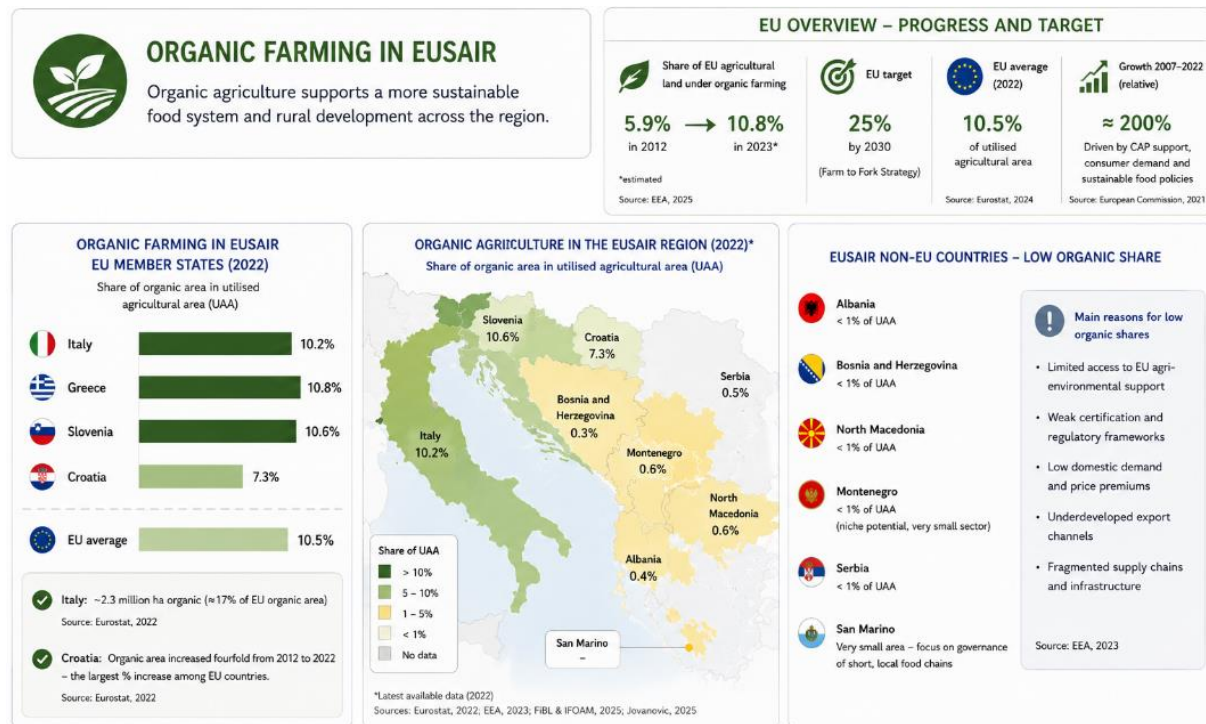
Moreover, the EU average in 2022 was placed at 10.5% of utilised agricultural area, with Italy, Greece, and Slovenia above 10% (Eurostat, 2024). Meanwhile, Croatia remains below that threshold but has shown expansion over the previous decade (Eurostat, 2024). This differentiated EUSAIR pattern indicates that certain EU Member States have already begun to incorporate some element of organic agriculture into established systems of food and tourism (productive interactions between organic farming and tourism), whereas others are still developing scale/certification capacity/marketing channels. The result is about 200% increase (relative - % increase compared with pre-2007), largely as a result of combined factors from CAP eco-scheme assistance (policies) combined with direct payment for organic farms, demand from consumers for organic products, and increasing use of sustainable food systems principles in governance of food systems throughout Europe (European Commission, 2021).

The EUSAIR area has a varied landscape that reflects how agriculture evolved historically and how EU policies treated agricultural development in the past on an EU-wide basis. Of the European Union countries, Italy and Greece are the most important organic producers relative to the entire EU in terms of total area and relative area of organic production. Italy's organic area in 2022 was approximately 2.3 million hectares, making up about 17% of the entire organic area in the EU, and about 10% of the utilised agricultural area in Italy is its organic area (Eurostat, 2022).

Greece had a greater share of its total Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA) in 2022 than the EU average. However, each country faces similar challenges regarding the quality of the data and making precise data comparisons between each country. Slovenia had an organic share of more than 10% UAA, where 79% of the country's certified organic area is comprised of organic meadows and pasture. Slovenia's structure is a reflection of the significant amount of mountain and upland farming that dominates the overall agricultural production landscape in Slovenia. Furthermore, Croatia had the most pronounced change in organic area from 2012 to 2022, with organic area increasing by four times the amount of organic area in 2012 – this is the largest percentage increase of all EU countries since joining the EU (Eurostat, 2022).

Figure 12. Organic farming in EUASAIR





The gaps are much bigger when EUSAIR countries that belong to the EU are compared to the countries that do not belong to the EU. The global statistics on organic farming show that the countries of the Western Balkans typically do not have as much land certified organic as the EU Mediterranean countries. In many cases, land in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Serbia is less than 1% of total land area, therefore limiting the potential for organic production for these countries in the short term (FiBL & IFOAM, 2025; Jovanovic, 2025). Natural resources present in Montenegro's mountain, coast, and pastoral regions are ideal for niche development, but the size of the organic sector is very small. San Marino lacks sufficient area to provide a straightforward comparison – it is more able to provide evidence about governance systems in short supply chains through niche and heritage.

The EEA has established that non-EU EEA cooperating countries, particularly Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania, have all reported organic production being less than 5% of usable agricultural area in the EEA (EEA, 2023). As such, the large disparity between these countries (and the EU countries) relates to a range of structural factors including: limited access to EEA agri-environmental support mechanisms, weak infrastructure/limited regulatory/certification frameworks related to organic products, low rates of domestic purchasing of products at organic premiums, underdeveloped export channel opportunities for organic producers to access more affluent regional and EU markets, and retain greater amounts of net income from their products.

Consequently, all parts of EUSAIR are facing a double structural asymmetry around food production. One is between EU countries and non-EU countries, on how well organic forms of agriculture have been



developed at the regional level. The second is the asymmetry within EU countries between three regions (Italy, Greece, and now increasingly Croatia) that possess highly developed agri-food innovation systems, and emerging frameworks in Slovenia. These asymmetries affect how closely linked the tourism and agriculture sectors are. In those regions with high organic proportions and developed short supply chains, tourism-related businesses will be able to provide the high-quality locally produced food required to develop authentic MD-style tourism products. In contrast, businesses in regions with undeveloped organic sectors will have much weaker credibility when developing a tourism-related story grounded in local agricultural production.

Against this backdrop, policymakers are required to manage the coexistence of productivity, environmental performance, and rural livelihoods generated through organic cultivation in the context of competing pressures on climate, biodiversity, and resource use limitations (OECD, 2026).

4.2.2. *Organic agriculture in EUSAIR countries – a comparative analysis*

Based on the comparison data presented so far, we could identify three categories of countries in EUSAIR. Group 1 includes Italy, Greece, and Slovenia, and they are generally characterised by a higher share of organic farmland, as well as a more developed gastronomy, tourism, and certification system. Based on this position, these countries could easily integrate organic products into the overall tourism experience (olive oil tourism, food and wine routes, biodistricts, stopovers on farms, etc.).

Group 2 is only Croatia, which has developed organic production, and there is demand for tourism. However, Croatia has additional challenges as it seeks to connect domestic producers with the coastal tourism market on a more systematic basis (connecting hospitality providers on islands with domestic producers).

Group 3 includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and San Marino. These countries have significant cultural and landscape potential. However, they have less developed certification systems, fragmented farm structures, limited processing capacity, and lower visibility of organic products in the value chain of tourism.

Table 1. EUSAIR countries – comparative overview of organic agriculture and Mediterranean Diet-based tourism

COUNTRY (GROUP)	ORGANIC AGRICULTURE POSITION	TOURISM AND HERITAGE LEVERAGE	STRATEGIC PRIORITY
Italy, Greece, Slovenia	Relatively stronger organic land shares and more mature organic market structures within the EUSAIR area.	Established gastronomy, wine and olive oil, rural tourism, and quality-label ecosystems.	Move from product visibility to integrated low-impact experiences, traceability, and climate resilience.
Croatia	Growing organic base, below the strongest EU	Strong coastal demand, UNESCO Mediterranean	Connect hospitality demand with local



	performers, but with significant territorial potential.	Diet recognition, and island and hinterland gastronomy.	producers, develop shoulder-season and inland products.
Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia	Smaller certified organic sectors, weaker data systems, and lower market penetration, with high potential for conversion and niche products.	Rich traditional food cultures, rural landscapes, and emerging tourism products, but limited international visibility.	Build certification capacity, producer aggregation, training, logistics, and cross-border routes.
San Marino	Limited agricultural land base makes standard organic-land comparison less meaningful.	Small-scale heritage, culinary identity, and proximity to wider regional networks.	Develop niche, high-quality experiences linked to origin, heritage, and regional cooperation.

These variations are not just statistical - they define how policies are managed. In newer and developed systems, the focus is on upgrading quality, traceability, climate adaptation, and preventing over-commercialization. In newer systems, the focus tends to be on capacity building, providing certification assistance, aggregating small producers, providing access to local markets, and creating opportunities to integrate into rural tourism routes. Regardless of where these systems exist, organic agricultural production must be attached to the demand for that produce. If farms convert without having established or identified stable market channels (distribution systems), the long-term viability of organic production will continue to be economically unsustainable. If businesses engaged in tourism promote and market for sustainability without any purchase or use of locally produced organic or origin products, that tourism story becomes weak and potentially misleading.

The organic transition also has a relation to the enlargement of the EU as it applies to candidate and potential candidate countries through their alignment with the organic regulation of the EU, the CAP-related rural development instruments, food safety, and quality standards. This can lead to both submitting formal applications for membership and increasing the global tourism competitiveness of these countries. However, in order to achieve this, some degree of institutional support needs to be provided. The costs of certification, advisory services, the capacity to carry out inspections, data systems, and producer organisations are not minor issues, but represent the infrastructure through which sustainable agrifood systems can be demonstrated to be viable and dependable to tourism markets.

4.2.3. *Short supply chains, farm-to-table models and tourism value chains*

Relatively short food supply chains are particularly important for organic and sustainable agriculture, as they promote the transformation of food items into a relational economy. Short supply chains create the possibility for farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, local procurement contracts, farm shops, on-farm tastings, cooperative distribution, and direct supply of farm products to restaurants, thereby reducing the number of intermediaries and providing visitors with visibility over the provenance of food products. The EU Organic Action Plan (European Commission, 2021) identifies local



production, short supply chains, and small-scale processing as key aspects in enabling farmers to take advantage of the additional value associated with the sale of organic products.

Short food supply chains (SFSCs) have emerged as an organizing principle for connecting sustainable agriculture to tourism development (FAO, 2014; European Commission, 2021). They are characterized by a close geographical relationship between producers and consumers, minimal intermediary involvement, and being anchored in a territorial community.

SFSCs have two purposes in MD and EUSAIR tourism. For one purpose, SFSCs provide fresh, locally produced food products that help create authentic, regional dining experiences. For the other purpose, the SFSCs provide economic gain to the local producers rather than to the intermediary wholesalers or large multinational distributors.

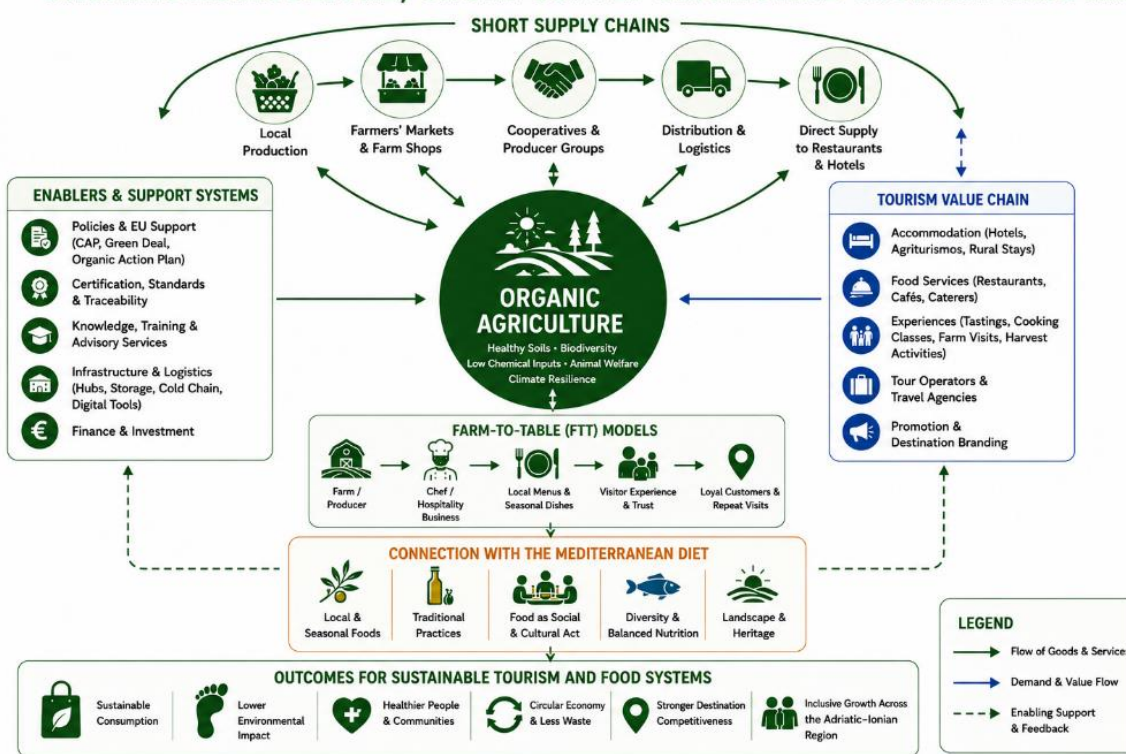
Short chains have been defined in several ways based on tourism's diverse nature, culture, geography, and other factors. For example, short chains help to close the gap between product branding and product supply, they assist in retaining more of the tourism dollar in the local economy, they support visitor interpretation through storytelling and education, and they can help to promote seasonal design and use of local produce on a menu.

On the other hand, **Farm-to-Table (FTT)** supply chains are particularly relevant to the small hotel, family-run restaurants, rural accommodation, and agritourism industries, as they enhance the opportunity to establish a tangible relationship between the host, producer, and visitor. Both economically and interpretively, through the lens of the Mediterranean Diet, visitors understand how to associate specific foods with their geographic location, time of year, and culturally distinguishable practices.

Figure 13. The relationship between organic culture, short supply chains and tourism value chains in the context of the Mediterranean Diet



ORGANIC AGRICULTURE, SHORT SUPPLY CHAINS AND TOURISM VALUE CHAINS



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Nevertheless, operating on a short supply chain can be difficult. Small-scale producers may not produce sufficient quantities of product, or they may lack the necessary packaging materials, logistics support, and digital tools or documentation to meet the food safety requirements in hotels and restaurants. In addition, many tourism businesses may focus on purchasing based on price, convenience, or year-round availability, rather than purchasing from local producers. Additionally, due to the lack of coordination among public procurement policies and procedures, fragmented municipal policies, and a lack of brokerage businesses, there are further barriers to establishing linkages. Therefore, a policy programme for the EUSAIR should not only promote the use of local food, but also invest in providing coordination between producers: establishment of producer cooperatives, logistics hubs, digital marketplaces, destination-level procurement guidelines, training for chefs and purchasing managers, and assistance with establishing small-scale processing businesses.

The expansion of Farm-to-Table (FTT) models, or short supply chain (SSC) systems, to connect agricultural food producers with hospitality businesses, is continuing throughout the EUSAIR region, but at very different rates and scales. For example, Italy established an *agriturismo* concept in 1965, in which agricultural producers operate what they call „agriturismo“ farms, which are farm-based hospitality establishments in which they bring visitors to a place used primarily for agricultural purposes. *Agriturismos* typically provide their guests with most of the food products that they serve, from their own or nearby farms, establishing a direct connection between the food consumed by guests and the agricultural landscape surrounding them. The establishment of *agriturismo* in Italy is now extensive,



with approximately 25,000 *agriturismo* farms, hosting millions of guests every year and generating revenues estimated to exceed EUR 1.5 billion annually (ISTAT, 2022). Agritourism in Italy has grown considerably since its introduction, specifically through the passing of national *agriturismo* legislation (National Agriturismo Legislation (Law No. 96/2006)) and additional regional *agriturismo* legislations. This concept provides an example of the types of permanent connections between agricultural production and tourism services that EUSAIR wishes to develop in the region.

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Furthermore, the growth of rural and agritourism in Greece has been rapidly increasing over the last decade, due to continued support from the European Union structural funds. Greece has a significant amount of potential for creating small farms/sustainably farmed local foods for sale through direct farm-to-consumer channels, with a recent surge in interest in the development of an experiential rural tourism experience, which has created an opportunity for farmers to engage directly with consumers as they do in many parts (United Nations, 2019). The barriers to the growth of rural and agritourism are primarily due to limited coordination between providers of rural tourism and the management of agriculture in the country (Cavicchi, 2023).

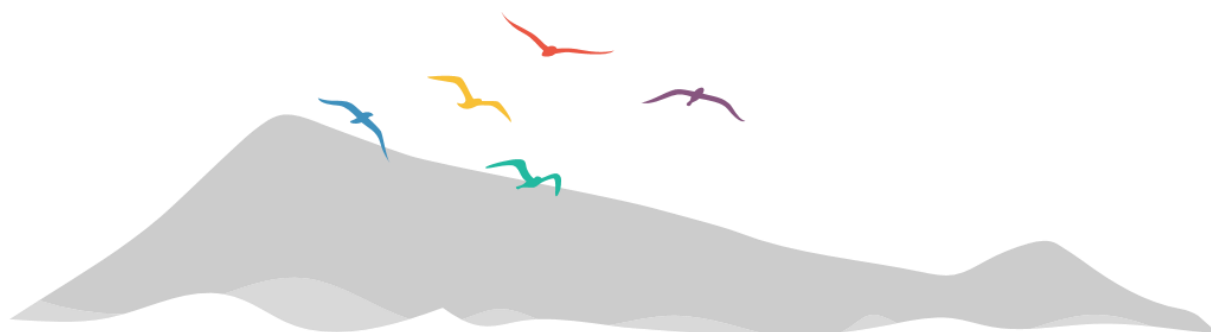
On the other hand, agritourism and FTT models are still being pioneered in candidate EUSAIR countries. Montenegro has been blessed with many favorable conditions for either low-intensity sustainable agriculture or for ecotourism, particularly in the mountainous parts of the country. However, coastal regions benefit from the Mediterranean diet traditions combined with growing tourism development activity. In the case of Albania, its recognition from UNESCO regarding some of its natural landscapes has offered many opportunities to add "anchor" points for MD-based rural tourism in specific areas, such as Gjirokastra and along the Riviera Coastline. But, it has limited ability to create institutional capacity to develop and/or certify FTT supply chains due to a lack of sufficient resources.

Additionally, the transnational project „CIRCUS - Circular economy Strategies, action plans, and Solutions for agrifood systems transition in ADRION coastal communities“ (2024–2027) that has received funding through Interreg IPA ADRION, has involved municipalities in Italy, Bosnia Herzegovina, Albania, Montenegro, Greece and Croatia, and directly addresses this issue through the development of circular economy strategies relating to agrifood systems within Adriatic-Ionian coastal communities. This will offer a viable model for integrating the principles of FTT into tourism value chain activities across this candidate country cohort.

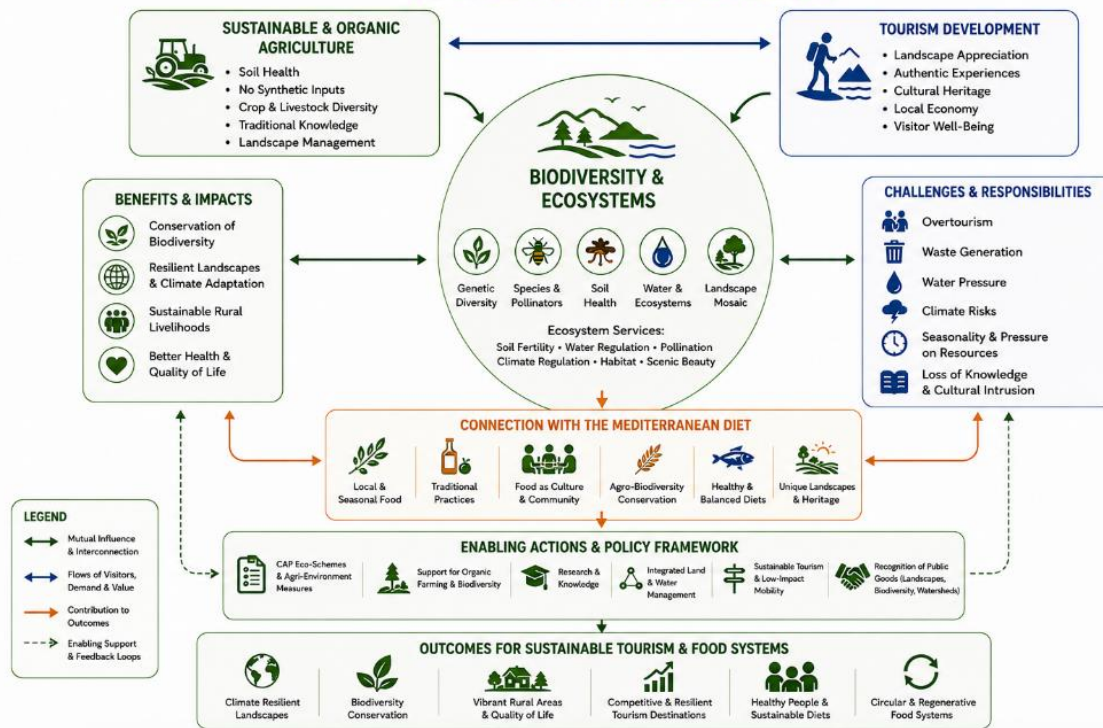
4.2.4. *Agriculture, biodiversity, ecosystems, and tourism development – linkages and interconnectedness*

Agriculture and food systems are at the centre of current environmental challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource use, proving that sustainability goals cannot be reached without major changes in the way food is produced and consumed (European Environment Agency, 2026).

Figure 14. The ecosystem of agriculture - linkages and interconnectedness



AGRICULTURE, BIODIVERSITY, ECOSYSTEMS & TOURISM DEVELOPMENT LINKAGES AND INTERCONNECTEDNESS



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There is a fundamental connection between organic agriculture, biodiversity, and tourism that is not merely accidental - it is written into the structure of these relationships. This structural connection is particularly relevant to the Adriatic-Ionian region - landscapes in this area provide one of the region's primary assets for tourism, while simultaneously being one of its most fragile ecological resources. The reasons that make Mediterranean landscapes so popular as sites for tourism include the visual splendour of olive groves, the variety of different types of ecosystems (including both coastal and terrestrial), and the variety of plant and animal life associated with traditional agriculture in the region.

Agriculture, over time, has influenced the development of these scenic resources. Therefore, without the agricultural practices that have been employed over many years to manage the landscape and create these sites for tourism, the Mediterranean's landscapes would not be as attractive as they are for tourism today. In its report „State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture“, FAO (2019) explains that Mediterranean agro-biodiversity possesses great global significance and contains very high levels of genetic diversity in relation to domesticated species (crops), the wild relatives of those crops, and the living things that come from different types of agricultural cropping systems. Agro-biodiversity results from a series of traditional agricultural cropping patterns, which also serve to support traditional agricultural cropping systems in the Mediterranean region.

Moreover, genetic materials (genetic resources), the many different types of plants, animals (species diversity), different soil living organisms (soil organisms), pollinators (pollinating insects), and aquatic ecosystems are key components of food systems, and ultimately are dependent upon biodiversity for



food and agriculture (FAO, 2019). Overall, the contribution of organic farming to the conservation of biodiversity has been documented in numerous studies demonstrating that organically grown crops tend to have greater species diversity than conventionally grown crops. Specifically, these studies demonstrate higher species richness of multiple taxa on organically managed land compared with conventional land. Thus, there is generally a stronger relationship between the type of management (organic versus conventional) for insect (arthropods), bird, and soil organism diversity than for plant species diversity (FAO, 2002).

In the Mediterranean region, where significant reductions in the number of native varieties, wild plant collecting, and ecosystem services have occurred due to the development of conventional agricultural systems, organic farming practices may provide an avenue for the partial restoration of these types of ecosystems while simultaneously supporting tourism. That is, diverse, biodiverse agricultural landscapes (organic) are more appealing to tourists than agrarian monoculture systems. Furthermore, sustainable diets also have similar definitions related to safeguarding biodiversity, sustainably produced food, culturally appropriate foods, nutritionally balanced foods, and accessible and affordable (FAO, 2012).

Related to the above, the Mediterranean Diet is important not just for what people eat, but also how their eating habits contribute to the conservation of agrobiodiversity, conserve agrobiodiversity, and promote local ecological knowledge, through the development of mosaic landscapes and the creation of unique ecosystem-based agricultural systems.

Namely, organic farming helps create the environments that tourists enjoy visiting, such as terraced olive groves, vineyards, orchards, pastoral areas, gardens, dry-wall boundaries, wetlands, and coastal fishing and mountain grazing. These types of farms are working ecosystems in their own right, and when farming ends in a region, the terraces begin to fall apart, the land becomes abandoned, there may be an increase in the risk of wildfire, there may be a decline in biodiversity, and rural towns may not have the same level of energy. Alternatively, when tourism generates a need for local food produced sustainably, this can help keep farmers' sustainability and profits viable over time. This represents one of the most valid justifications to include Mediterranean diet tourism as part of the local and regional strategies for rural and inland development.

Biodiversity and tourism also have responsibilities associated with increased visitation. Increased visitation will require careful planning and management of potential disturbances, waste, water pressure, and intrusion into the local culture of the area (European Commission, 2025a) to develop sustainable tourism. Some of the key challenges of sustainable tourism will be climate risks, natural disasters, seasonal variation, and pressure on natural and cultural resources (EUSAIR Action Plan, 2024). In addition, the EUSAIR Action Plan promotes ecotourism, agritourism, fishing tourism, and rural tourism as concepts that will work within the context of a more resilient development model. Mediterranean Diet products need to be developed based upon principles of carrying capacity, low-impact mobility, waste prevention, water-efficient hospitality, and visitor education.

Moreover, it was found from the analysis of sustainability problems specific to food systems in the Mediterranean Region, including land degradation, changes in dietary habits, and the lack of water supply, that integrated technologies can augment means through traditional knowledge and lifetime fit



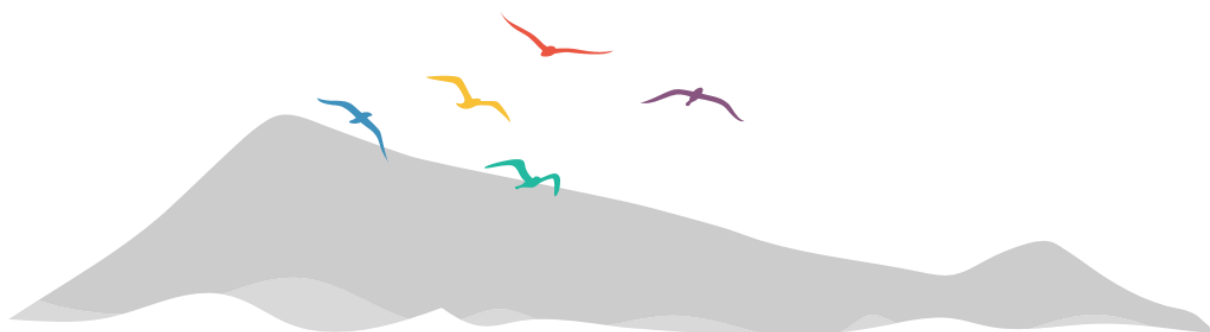
dietary models (Capone et al., 2021). The AGROBIODIVERSITY Index, for Mediterranean food systems, created by Bioversity International, lists a total number of Mediterranean agrobiomass hotspots in EUSAIR countries (CGIAR, 2021). Of these, Greece, Italy, and Croatia have an overall higher level of traditional variety (other uses), there are continued breeding programs, and maintenance of livestock breed characteristics is commonly found throughout the country. This corresponds directly to tourism - countries or regions that can provide visitors with genuine experiences of ancient grains, heritage variety tomatoes, heritage variety olives, and traditional cheese, produce an authentic, superior tourism experience than what is offered by commercial farming.

However, agricultural biodiversity in the EU is still under stress from climate change and land abandonment due to agricultural intensification, as well as other forms of agricultural pressure (European Environment Agency, 2025). The post-2023 CAP reform introduces the CAP eco-schemes as a value addition to support agricultural biodiversity through the CAP. The tourism market of agricultural landscapes that are also biodiversity-rich, therefore, cannot take for granted an acknowledgment of value. Rather, these landscapes will need active policy assistance in recognizing the value of public goods (aesthetics of landscapes, biodiversity of agricultural landscapes, watershed functioning of agricultural landscapes) in addition to any market returns that can be received by individual farmers.

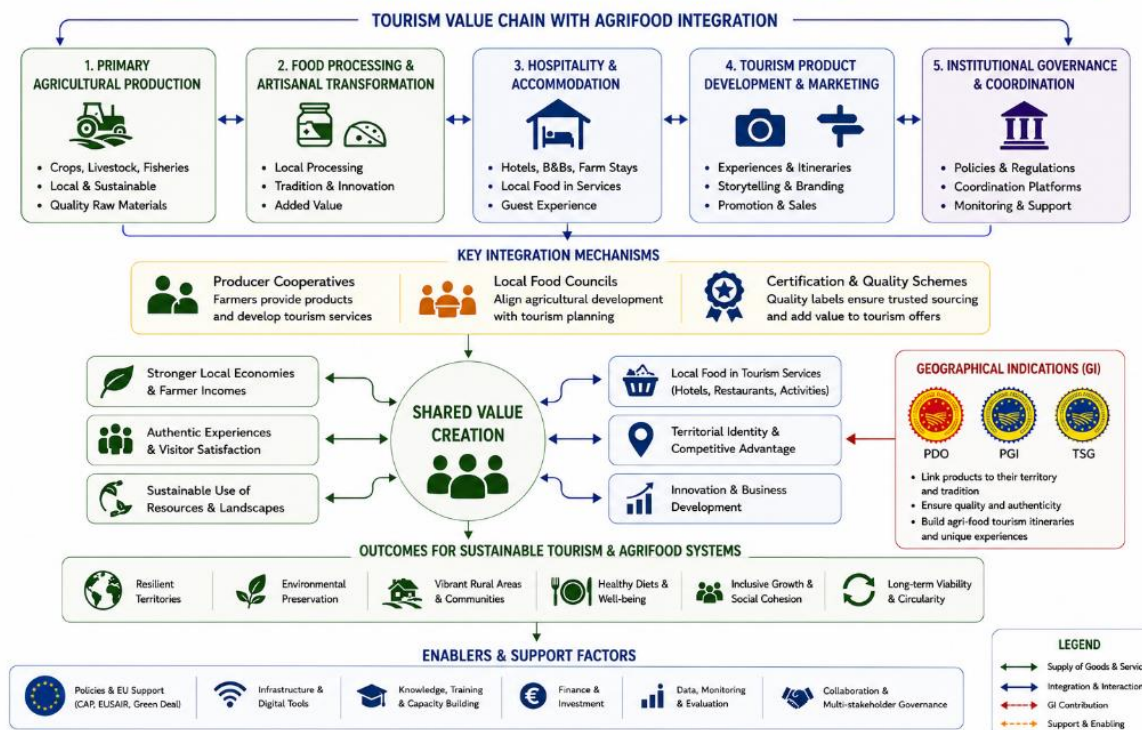
4.2.5. Integration of agrifood systems into tourism value chains

Integrating agrifood systems into tourism value chains is one of the most important strategic elements and practical challenges of sustainably developing tourism in the EUSAIR region. A conceptual definition of the integration challenge is the creation of "strong" connections across several (distinct but interdependent) systems. That is, primary agricultural production, food processing/artisanal transformation, hospitality/accommodation, tourism product development/marketing, and institutional governance. Each of these systems has a unique logic, is governed by different actors and regulatory frameworks, and has different performance measures. For successful integration, there will need to be either a coordinating actor with adequate authority and resources to align them, or the development of governance platforms through which these systems can collectively be directed.

Figure 15. The overview of integration of agrifood systems into tourism value chains



INTEGRATION OF AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS INTO TOURISM VALUE CHAINS



According to the sustainable agritourism guidelines (2024) published by the One Planet Network (Sustainable agritourism: an opportunity for agrifood systems transformation in the Mediterranean – Technical brief), there are several ways in which agrifood-tourism can be successfully integrated. They include producer cooperatives that develop tourism services as part of their agricultural production, local food councils that combine tourism planning at the municipality level with strategic plans for agricultural development, and certification schemes that enable tourism operators' sourcing methods to be used as quality indicators for their products. All three methods have been demonstrated throughout the EUSAIR region, but so far none have been established on a macroregional basis. An example is the INNOVAGRO project („Development of an innovative network for the promotion of extroversion of agro-food companies in Adriatic - Ionian Area“ (Interreg IPA ADRION, 2017-2020)), which provided a transnational virtual business incubator for promoting the agrofood-tourism linkages and demonstrates the willingness of agrifood-tourism businesses to cooperate across borders, even though the countries involved have significantly different institutional development stages.

One of the main ways of integrating agri-food with tourism, as part of the EU quality policy, is through the use of previously elaborated Geographical Indications (GI) - Protected Designations of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indications (PGI), and Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG). Products that use GI typically have higher prices than products that don't have GI – this is because they have unique territorial identities and methods of production associated with them. The existence of well over 300 such agri-food production methods registered as GI and existing in EUSAIR EU Member States - with Italy alone accounting for more than 300 (eAmbrosia, 2024) - enables a wide variety of

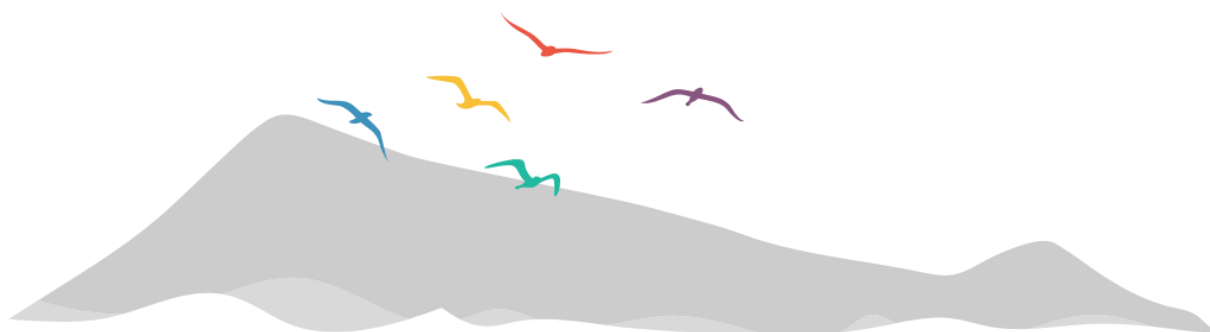
distinctive local foods to be produced. Additionally, it provides the basis for constructing agri-tourism itineraries. Examples include GI products such as Greek Olive Oil, Dalmatian Prosciutto, Slovenian Štajersko Oil, and Macedonian Tikveš Wine, which have established distinct linkages between tourism experiences and their respective territories to form the product-landscape-identity nexus. This is continuously being identified as the most sustainable form of gastronomic tourism in the multidisciplinary MD valorisation literature.

4.2.6. *Role of innovation, circular economy, and sustainable food systems*

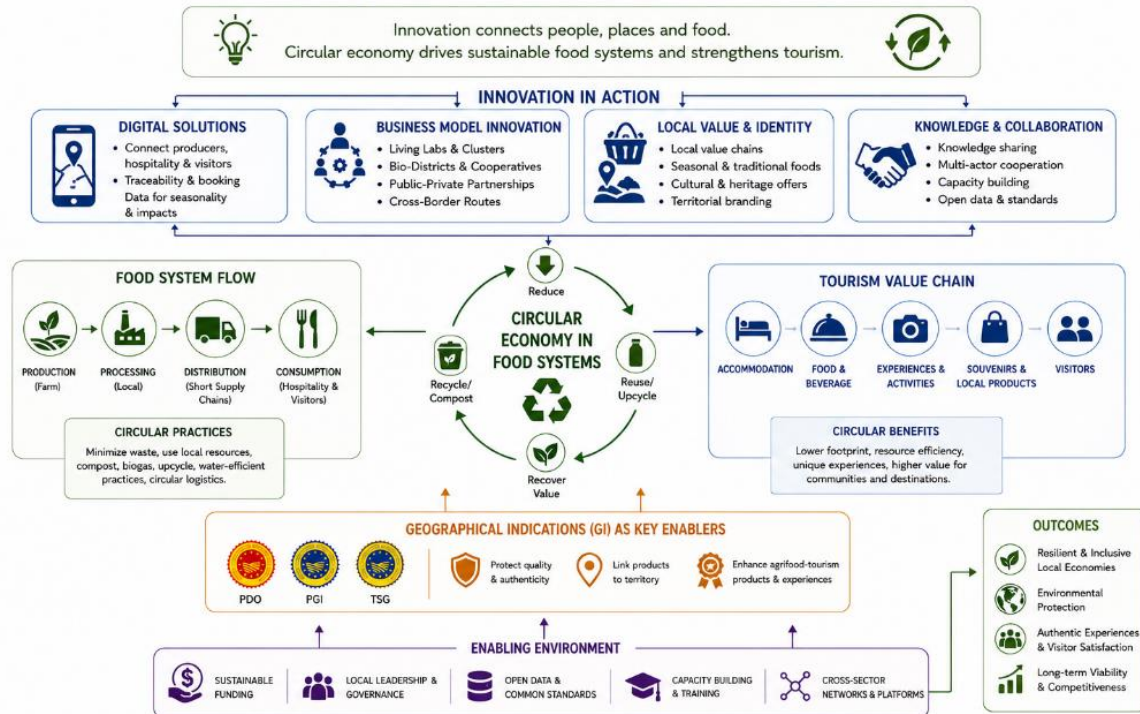
The Mediterranean Diet serves as an effective means of linking food-system innovation and tourism developments in a community by emphasising collaboration, local value chains, and the importance of promoting an area through its own identity (Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development of the Republic of Slovenia, 2025). Innovating in Mediterranean Diet-based tourism can go well beyond simply using digital marketing tools to gain customers - there are much broader strategic goals associated with creating new relationships between consumable products, hospitality, and cultural offers.

For example, the focus on innovation and using the circular economy model are central to transforming the sustainable food system. It is also playing an important role in the agrifood-tourism nexus of EUSAIR. Practically speaking, using a circular approach in food systems for agrifood-tourism involves eliminating waste throughout all stages of the food supply chain, from surpluses on the farm to waste on the restaurant plate, recovering value from by-products by composting, creating biogas, and upcycling items to develop new products using local agricultural products, as well as designing agri-food-tourism products based on the unique, highly seasonal nature of agricultural production.

Figure 16. The role of innovation, circular economy and sustainable food systems in agriculture and its function in the Mediterranean Diet tourism model



ROLE OF INNOVATION, CIRCULAR ECONOMY & SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS



Specifically, circular economy approaches hold particular relevance for tourism and food systems due to the material flows created by tourism and food systems that contribute to the burdening of, or reclamation of, territories. Composting food waste, minimizing the use of one-time-use packaging, valorizing by-products, bridging farms to restaurants, using local biomass or circular logistics, and producing food using water-efficient practices are just a few examples of the types of initiatives that can be undertaken to lessen the footprint of gastronomy tourism. As in the case of coastal EUSAIR destinations, where seasonal peak visitors strain both the demand for water and producers' capacity to manage waste, they can represent an initial step in the greening of tourism services and products that are being promoted as part of the updated version of the EUSAIR Action Plan (European Commission, 2025a).

The 2024 CIHEAM report, specifically the book "Sustainable Food Systems: Change of Route in the Mediterranean", describes the transition as a „pivot“ that requires going back and re-evaluating the whole institutional structure of the Mediterranean food systems, which consists of production standards, the organisation of supply chains, norms for consumption, and a system for managing waste (CIHEAM, 2024). The implications of this change to the restaurant sector of the tourism industry are specific - restaurants that participate in the circular food system by using locally sourced organic products, composting waste products, and operating a seasonal menu, may find that they too can be tourism attractions, and demonstrate ways in which they are practising sustainability that are much broader than just the food on their plates.

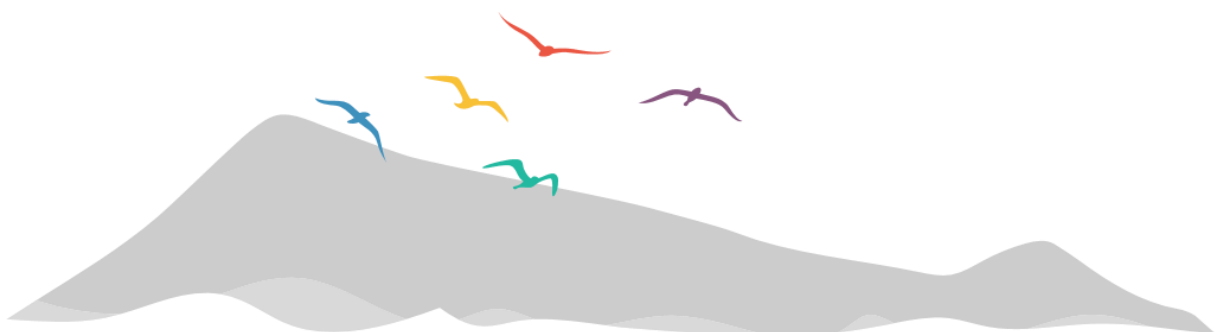


Moreover, digital tools are also increasingly relevant to the innovation agenda for EUSAIR, via digital platforms that create connections between local (food) producers, hospitality operators, and tourism visitors. Digital tools can provide new efficiencies in terms of supply chain coordination and new opportunities for consumer engagement, create maps that identify producers, paths to travel, and things to experience. Additionally, traceability technologies help consumers connect menu items back to their source in the agricultural sector, booking websites are available for consumers to find small businesses, and data systems can be utilised to measure seasonality and demand, as well as environmental impacts related to the production of consumable products and providing hospitality services.

Innovation in business models is also very important, examples of which include: Living Labs, Clusters, Bio-Districts, Cooperatives, Public-Private Partnerships, and Cross-Border Routes. The MD.net project („Mediterranean Diet - When Brand Meets Peoples“, financed by Programme 2014 - 2020 INTERREG VB Mediterranean, 2018 – 2022) is an example of this kind of platform, creating a „Med Diet Euro-Cluster“ digital infrastructure that connects MD territories in eight countries with knowledge-sharing features and a tourism product development and marketing interface (MD-NET Manual, n.d.; CIHEAM/EUSAIR, 2025).

An important example is also the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach, a mandatory instrument under the Common Agricultural Policy implemented through LAGs. It connects the Mediterranean diet with local fisheries, tourism, cultural heritage, and environmental protection. One of its most important components is participatory planning. It engages local fishers, restaurants, public bodies, tourism operators, and community organisations to jointly identify local needs and develop smaller, targeted projects through Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs). The projects are based on local knowledge, short supply chains, and existing community resources. For this reason, although these projects usually have limited budgets, they can create lasting value, especially for the Mediterranean Diet concept. Good examples of this include projects [„Fishermen Recommend“](#) and [„Grain of Salt“](#), which connect local fishers with restaurants and promote locally caught seafood as part of an authentic regional food culture. Additionally, the new project [„PESTourism good practise collection – PESTOUR“](#), funded under the Interreg Italy–Croatia programme, expands this model through pescaturism. It combines legal analysis, field research, workshops, and stakeholder participation to develop a shared cross-border framework for small-scale fisheries, as well as tourism diversification and the preservation of maritime heritage.

However, practice shows that innovation projects have the potential to fail if they are treated as separate projects from other activities. In the EUSAIR region, rather than constantly developing new projects, the focus should be on creating ways for existing pilot projects to develop. The main categories of support for this include being able to access sustainable funding sources, having a local leadership structure for using institutionalised systems, sharing open data and common standards, and having capacity-building training systems in place. Most of the value of cross-sectoral networks, policies, and agrifood innovation platforms comes when they exist beyond the normal duration of the project, allowing for their integration into governance of the destination policy.



4.3. Potential of the Mediterranean Diet as a foundation for sustainable tourism products

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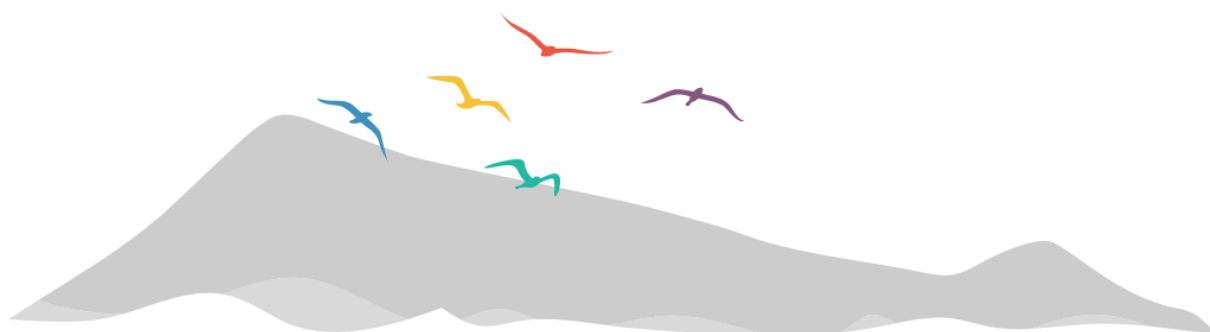
The analysis of the potential of the Mediterranean Diet as a foundation for sustainable tourism products shows the interconnection of the development of sustainable, green, and experience-based tourism products, with the integration of food heritage into tourism offers and destination development strategies. Through these channels Mediterranean Diet has the potential to significantly contribute to the diversification of tourism and reduction of seasonality. A significant factor in this process of establishing sustainable tourism and territorial development are the various types of SMEs and local communities.

4.3.1. *Development of sustainable, green, and experience-based tourism products*

Agritourism is the best developed and most formally established type of sustainable tourism product in the EU countries that comprise the EUSAIR region. The already mentioned Italian *agriturismo* model (which is legally defined as „mixed“ accommodations (hospitality and production) maximizes the relationship between tourism sustainability and agricultural sustainability through its structural relationship. The *agriturismo* model has been developed (to some level) within some EUSAIR countries, depending on the individual country's legal framework, quality standards, and market development.

Just as important, the Mediterranean Diet enhances a region's identity, delivers a broader range of tourism products, and drives long-term development on the land. Following this perspective, the Mediterranean Diet can be considered a key element in the growth of tourism in the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region (European Commission, 2025). This conclusion is not drawn just based on the Mediterranean Diet as a sole or isolated „product“ or tourism offer, but because it can provide a basis for multiple sustainable tourism product groupings. The examples of this can be visiting farms for lodging, participating in farm operations (harvesting), taking cooking classes, participating in farm-based tastings, and providing educational experiences at farms.

For example, rural tourist products may connect food culture with hiking, cycling, interpretation of biodiversity, cultural routes, and village regeneration, while gastronomy tourist products may connect food production to chef-producer collaborations, themed menus, farmers' markets, festivals, culinary workshops, routes tracing the production of wine and olive oil, seafood and fishing adventures, and protected origin tasting itineraries. Moreover, gastronomy and wine tourism are strategically positioned as niche markets to assist in diversifying the variety of available tourism products, build brand awareness, and create high-value experiences based on the local terroir (UN Tourism, 2026). Similarly, wellness products can connect healthy eating, physical activity, landscapes, and slow rhythms. Conclusively, each product type has different operational requirements, but all depend on authenticity, interpretive quality, and credible sourcing.



For instance, the concept of „slow food“ and „slow tourism“ was developed primarily through the Slow Food movement, founded in Italy and subsequently internationalised. It offers a useful framework for characterising the experiential dimension of sustainable MD-based tourism products. Slow tourism valorises extended stays, deep local engagement, low-carbon mobility, and the deliberate deceleration of the tourist experience to allow genuine cultural encounter. These values align closely with both the sustainability objectives of the EUSAIR Action Plan and the cultural values embedded in the MD's UNESCO inscription, suggesting that the „slow“ framework may provide a useful branding and product development tool for MD-based tourism across the region. Ultimately, the integration of gastronomy tourism (and therefore the concept of the Mediterranean Diet) with sustainability goals can catalyze not just economic development, but also cultural and environmental conservation (Padyala and Kiran, 2025).

Beyond agritourism, the EUSAIR region provides a wealth of experience-based tourism product potential, such as olive oil and wine routes (that combine the enjoyment of the landscape and a tour of the producers), as well as foraging and collecting wild herb experiences that directly connect tourists to the Mediterranean's biodiversity, cooking schools and culinary workshops designed to provide international tourists with the skills and knowledge related to MD, and community-based food tourism products that connect the tourist experience with the local communities through shared experiences.

Specifically, the potential for tourism associated with olive oil serves as an example of the wider application of this trend. Olive oil tourism, as defined in the academic literature, is considered a special interest form of tourism because it involves tourism associated with oil-producing sites and producing sites for food products (Barač Miftarević & Mitrović, 2019; Pulido-Fernandez et al., 2019). When tourists visit an olive oil-producing site, they may enjoy tastings as well as educational components such as the description and appreciation of the environmental qualities of the land and the process of making oil. This type of model and tourist experience can also be found in regions like Italy, Greece, Croatia, Albania, Montenegro, and parts of Slovenia that have a landscape dominated by olives as well as agriculture, cultural history, biodiversity and gastronomy. Similar models of tourism can be developed around wine, cheese, herbs, fish, bread, legumes, honey, fruit preserves, and seasonal vegetables, by developing tours or events that are not tourist traps, but are based on authentic producers and have a historical basis to them.

Generally, creating new eco-friendly travel experiences developed around the Mediterranean Diet is a great way for the EUSAIR region to support the European Green Deal's goals of sustainable tourism. The Transition Pathway for Tourism outlines a need for travel experiences that lower their impact on the environment, provide social value to host communities, and preserve their culture. Well-constructed MD-based travel experiences have the ability to meet all three of these goals. (European Commission, 2022; European Agenda for Tourism 2030).

Particularly, according to the Blue Tourism Initiative's report on Sustainable Blue Tourism in the Mediterranean region in 2025, the relationship between coastal and rural tourism using tourism from the MD region works together to develop trails or itineraries that provide depth (due to the many different cultural and gastronomical activities available) and time (due to the location of these activities across a specific territory). This creates an additional area of economic benefit across a region (not only the benefits already experienced through coastal mass tourism) and also reduces some of the environmental



impacts caused by mass tourism at coastal destinations. For example, an existing institutional framework for cooperation between MD-based coastal and inland tourism can be developed using the „Routes of the Olive Tree“ cultural trail, certified by the Council of Europe, and includes MD countries like Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Albania, and Croatia.

Moreover, fishing tourism is one of the integral aspects of the Mediterranean Diet. It can be developed through previously mentioned coordinated FLAG and LAG actions that help small-scale coastal fishers diversify their income and take a more active role in tourism. The Blue Tourism framework invites visitors to join fishing trips, learn about traditional fishing methods, taste locally caught seafood, and discover the everyday life and heritage of coastal communities. This creates tourism products based on local resources. It also connects fisheries with gastronomy, environmental awareness, cultural heritage, and local entrepreneurship. A good example is the cooperation project between Greek and Italian FLAGs, which enables fishers to develop fishing-tourism activities. Other examples include the PESTOUR project, the „Fishermen’s House“ visitor centre, the „Taste the Heritage“ initiative, and events supported by FLAG Brač (Croatia). These activities connect local seafood, traditional knowledge, community identity, and responsible use of marine resources. These efforts provide an opportunity for small-scale fisheries to become an important part of the MedDiet concept.

However, the development of green products must include considerations of accessibility and inclusion. Food tourism typically assumes some kind of physical mobility/sensory abilities and disposable income. Therefore, providing a sustainable Mediterranean Diet should include an accessible place/space to do tastings, as well as the ability to provide clear information regarding dietary requirements. It should also include the potential for inclusive interpretation, intergenerational information sharing (learning), participation of women/youth/small producers in the economy as productive, rather than as decorative representations of tradition.

4.3.2. Integration of food heritage into tourism offers and destination development strategies

In order to integrate food heritage properly with destination branding efforts, there need to be substantial reforms of how food heritage is currently used within all phases of tourism development. To date, food festivals, culinary days, and restaurant weeks have all been utilized by various destinations as ways of increasing the destination's visibility, but in most cases, they do little to offer any transformational service offerings throughout the local value chain if they are not fully integrated into traditional destination management practices. This means that they have to have complete linkages with other key elements of the destination infrastructure, procurement and supply chain processes, training/education, producer/app marketing and promotion networks, and destination governance.

The Mediterranean Diet represents the ideal framework for connecting people, produce, and places by encompassing accommodations, restaurants, farms, marketplaces, national parks, museums, cultural routes, schools, health care services, and local governments throughout the Mediterranean region. In order to build our future connections to food heritage and the foodways of the Mediterranean (as this will become the cross-cutting framework for future destination development), we must take steps now to develop these integrated linkages within the context of the entire Mediterranean Diet.

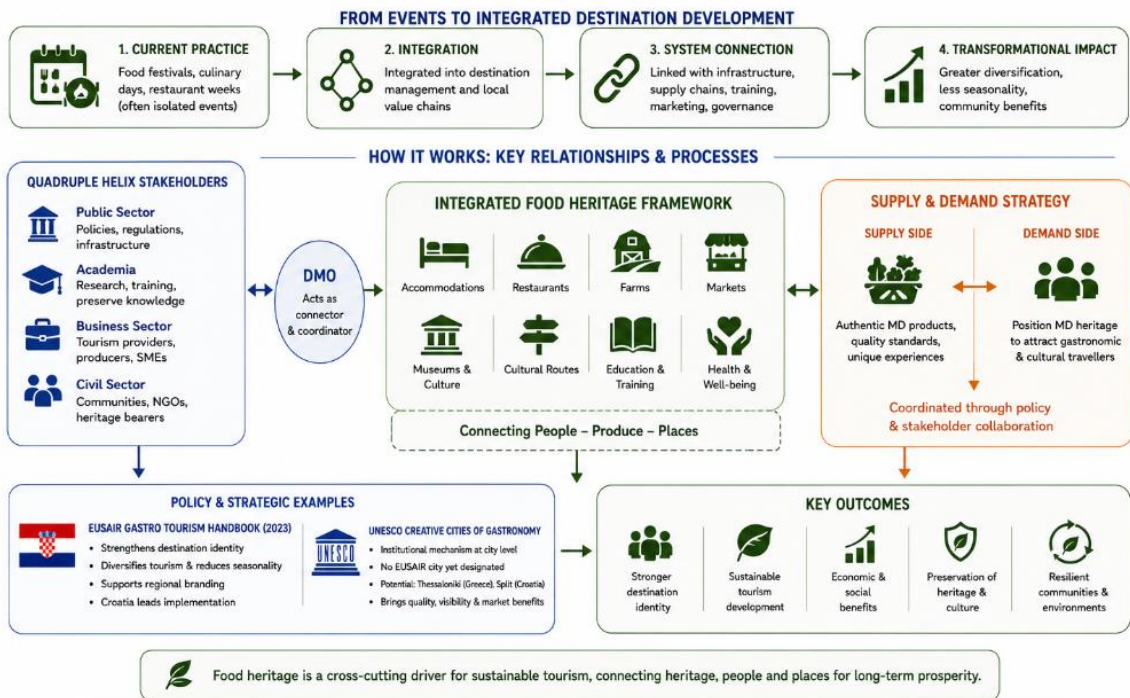


In order to achieve this, strategic efforts, coordination, and collaboration are needed on all sides of the Quadruple Helix – public sector, academia, business sector (tourism providers), and civil sector in tourism or related areas. The Destination Management Organisations (DMO's) need to act as intermediaries between the producers and the activities. They have to be tasked with creating a set of industry guidelines, aligning calendars, creating online visibility for their chefs-to-farm connections, and protecting traditional storytelling through heritage. The cities need to provide regulations for the quality of events held at farmers' markets, develop a framework for small kitchen productions, and utilize the area's food heritage to improve the community infrastructure. Cultural organizations have to work towards maintaining recipes, oral histories, and ceremonies that can be displayed in the hospitality industry. Finally, the universities and vocational institutions may help with training and research as well.

Figure 17. Integration of food heritage into tourism offers and destination development strategies



INTEGRATION OF FOOD HERITAGE INTO TOURISM OFFERS AND DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES



This integration's strategic advantage is to diversify. Mediterranean Diet products have the potential to increase visitor numbers in locations with sun and beach tourism by encouraging visitors from August through October and by enhancing the distribution of visitors toward rural and inland locations. Mountains are visited even less than beaches, so food heritage can help lower the barriers to entry to tourism in these areas and leverage existing community resources. However, care must be taken to manage the diversification of rural communities. Otherwise, tourists will put pressure on housing, create a homogenized culture, and generate unequal tourism benefits.

To establish food heritage as an integral part of destination tourism, there is a need for developing both a supply-side strategy (ensuring that there are enough authentic MD food products and global travel experiences to offer to tourists) and a demand-side strategy (positioning the MD history in such a way that it effectively attracts tourists who primarily have gastronomical and cultural motivators). Coordinating these two dimensions of the food heritage and the destination tourism requires collaboration among stakeholders within the tourism destination, which typically does not happen spontaneously. Therefore, it needs to be planned through policy.

One example of a coordinated policy and strategic effort is Croatia, and the Ministry of Tourism and Sport of the Republic of Croatia, which published the EUSAIR GASTRO Tourism Handbook (2023) to assist in incorporating MD into the tourism development plans for EUSAIR within Pillar 4. The Handbook describes gastronomic tourism as a way to use MD to improve a destination's overall identity and to help establish a diverse tourism product base, minimise tourism's seasonal impacts, and develop



a regional tourism product brand. The principles of the Handbook provide guidance on how to develop tourism products based on MD heritage.

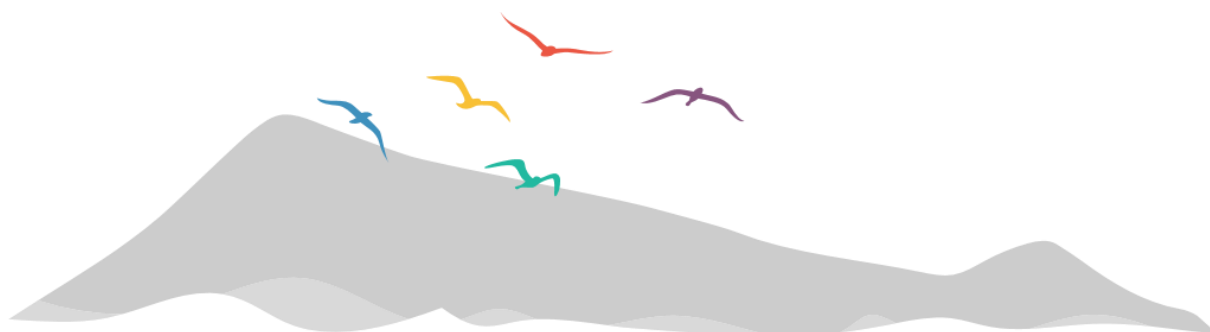
A certificate of gastronomy, as indicated by the UNESCO Creative Cities of Gastronomy Network, can provide an additional institutional mechanism for integrating food heritage into an urban scale. No EUSAIR city has currently received this designation, but there are potential cities, such as Thessaloniki (Greece) and Split (Croatia), that could benefit from the designation process as an opportunity to systematically integrate food heritage through the development of their overall local tourism strategies. The Report on Gastronomy Tourism and Sustainability (Garibaldi, 2023) identifies certified sustainable gastronomy cities and regions as among the fastest-growing tourism segments, suggesting that formal quality certification of this kind can deliver tangible market benefits.

4.3.3. Role of SMEs, local communities, and territorial development

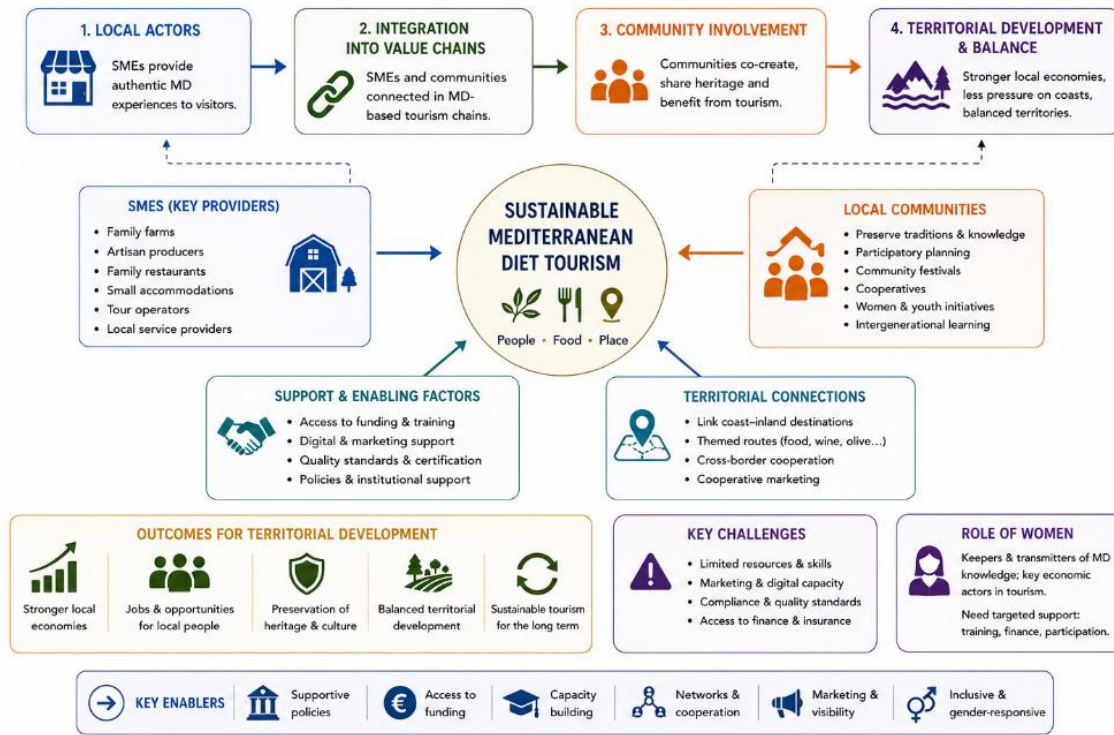
The local development of the Mediterranean Diet tourism takes place in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). SMEs include (but are not limited to) family farms, artisanal food makers, family restaurants, boutique (small) accommodations, small tour operators, and more of specific tourism or related service providers. The actual services of the MED provided by SMEs create the experiences that visitors have while they are in the place they are visiting.

The small size of family farms and artisan producers, and thus their close interaction with customers, can be viewed as a positive quality (therefore creating an authentic experience). However, while the small scale of family farms and artisan producers can serve as an asset to create authentic experiences for customers, it can also be viewed as a challenge for producing high-quality products and providing multilingual services, sufficient digital reservation systems, liability insurance, and a means of accessibility for all customers, and compliance with food safety regulations.

Figure 18. The role of SMEs, local communities, and territorial development



ROLE OF SMES, LOCAL COMMUNITIES & TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT



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The economic fragility of these types of enterprises is a structural vulnerability from an economic viewpoint, because they generally do not possess the financial resources or expertise to either develop or market visitation products independently. They are too small to successfully negotiate with tour operators or distribution systems (supply chains), and most of them do not have the institutional mechanisms to access EU funding and policy supports. Because of this, there is a need to support the integration of SMEs into the MD-based tourism value chains, as this will assist in creating a sustainable and functional MD-based tourism product.

Moreover, local communities are also essential in the MD model. Heritage cannot be created only by local communities, but it also cannot be created without them. Concretely, household knowledge, the allocation of work based on gender, social norms related to food, rituals, and different ways of enjoying one's life in the context of the Mediterranean Diet cannot solely be produced by an outside operator.

Community participation also contributes to the design of products related to heritage. Examples of community participation include food heritage participatory mapping, community-led festivals, cooperatives, women-led food preparation initiatives, youth-led businesses, and training across multiple generations. By using these types of community participation strategies, we can create alternative sources of income for the community through the prevention of exploitative tourism practices. Exploitative tourism is a practice where out-of-town tourists create an opportunity for out-of-town companies to exploit the culture of the local community, while failing to reinvest in that same community.



Models of Community-Based Tourism (CBT), which allow local communities to co-develop, co-govern, and co-benefit from tourism, provide a model of response to the problem of the fragility of SMEs. CBT agreements permit separate small producers and service providers to pool resources and coordinate quality standards in presenting a unified tourism product to tourists and intermediaries. The SLOWMED project („Food as a means of dialogue in Mediterranean Contexts – SLOWMED“, financed by the Interreg MED programme, 2014-2015) demonstrated the social, cultural, and economic value of community-based approaches to food tourism development using food to promote intercultural dialogue among Mediterranean communities. In addition, various emerging initiatives are using the CBT model, including the MedDiet Go! Project („Med Diet identities - from territorial networking to cluster organization“, financed by the Interreg Euro MED Programme, 2024-2026) linking multiple countries' MD territorial networks to support rural communities in creating their own MD-based tourism identities.

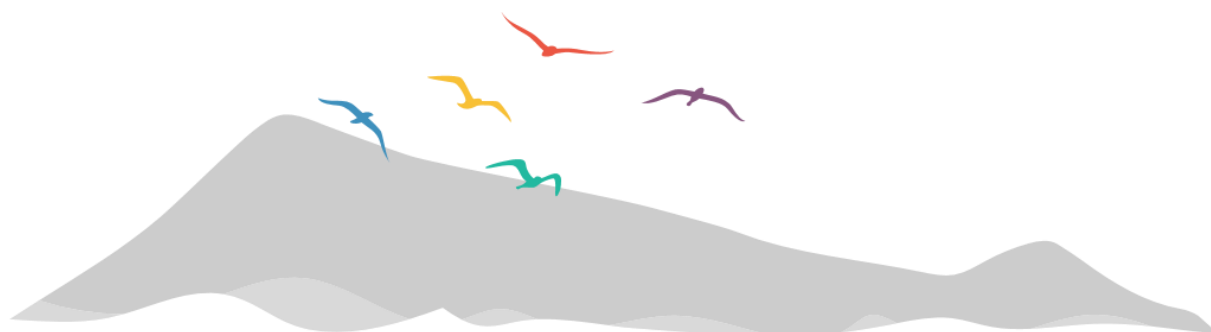
In this regard, it is necessary to pay full attention to the women's involvement in the transmission of the MD heritage and tourism development. The UNESCO inscription of the MD recognises the contribution made by women to the transmission of knowledge of MD, emphasising that they are responsible for safeguarding MD techniques, following seasonal cycles and festivals, and transferring MD values to successive generations (UNESCO, 2013). Tourism development strategies that take into account and support women as keepers of knowledge and tourism-related economic agents by providing targeted training, access to microfinance for tourism-related businesses, and participation in local decision-making bodies, will have a greater impact than gender-blind tourism development strategies.

Another aspect of territorial development is spatial balance. Overall spatial distribution of EUSAIR destinations shows an imbalance between concentrated coastal destinations, versus rural/inland or less developed areas. One way to help mitigate the imbalance between coastal regions and inland/rural regions is through Mediterranean Diet tourism. This type of tourism provides consumers who have demand along/near the coast with the means to purchase goods that will ultimately be produced further from the coast, and encourages tourists to travel throughout the various jurisdictions that comprise EUSAIR rather than remain in a single, high-pressure area. The opportunities to take advantage of cooperative marketing efforts based upon shared food traditions, particularly in island communities, mountain villages, river valleys, and olive and wine regions, along with areas that span across international borders, can provide additional benefits when promoting tourism in EUSAIR.

4.3.4. Contribution to diversification of tourism and reduction of seasonality

The EUSAIR region is facing a long-standing structural issue when it comes to tourism: seasonality. In fact, throughout Mediterranean coastal destinations, the concentration of tourist arrivals from June to September creates instability in tourism operations, puts an excessive strain on the environment during peak periods, and results in poor economic performance in off-peak periods.

The MD-based tourism industry provides a strong, but not complete, solution to the seasonality issue. The agricultural calendar for most Mediterranean food systems is spread out throughout the entire year. For example, wild herbs and asparagus are collected in the spring, the production of first-pressed olive



oil also occurs in the spring, as well as the production of many types of vegetables. In the fall, grape harvest festivals, the pressing of olives to produce olive oil, truffle hunting, and the traditional practices of rural communities tend to occur. In the winter, citrus is harvested, cheese is traditionally produced, and slow foods made by preserving and fermenting products are created.

All four of these seasonal tourism experiences provide a unique basis for a tourism product that cannot be duplicated or substituted by traditional coastal summer tourism, as well as being attractive to a target market (typically older, more affluent, and more culturally motivated than coastal sun and sea tourists) that has disposable time and income to travel during the off-peak tourist season.

Therefore, the Mediterranean Diet, in terms of food heritage, is very useful for prolonging the tourism season at a destination where the time of year differs from summer peak times. This means that harvests of olives, grapes, spring greens, fall mushrooms, winter food preservation, food traditions from religious observances, and fishing in accordance with local farming fairs can all create a longer season of travel and tourism. Using food heritage will allow a place to extend the tourism season without using artificial events that have no connection to local culture.

In line with this, the Sustainable Tourism Development Policy for ADRION Region (2022) developed under the THEMATIC project („Thematic Tourism founded on Innovation Capacities“, financed by the Interreg ADRION Programme, 2020-2022), specifically identifies culinary and cultural tourism as the primary means and processes for extending the tourism season for coastal and inland locations throughout the Adriatic-Ionian region. This is well-supported by the research literature on the demand for rural and gastronomic tourism.

Ultimately, in relation to depopulation rates and productive youth exportation from the European Union and EUSAIR areas, different models must be used to regulate tourism activity. This entails different models for peak period restrictions versus off-peak seasonal restrictions. There will be pressure on hotel and tourism businesses at all locations throughout EU/EUSAIR to provide more long-term tourist accommodation in order to establish an acceptable volume of year-round tourists. However, the goal is to create appropriate patterns and densities of visitation in a manner that supports sustainable development of tourism at the destination level.





5. Good practices, synergies, and cooperation models

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The growth of tourism based on the Mediterranean diet within the EUSAIR region depends increasingly on the capacity of various actors involved in the operation of destinations to work together across all sectors. Strategic framework development and policy alignment set a positive foundation for sustainable tourism development. However, once implemented, these frameworks require effective governance models, synergies across multiple sectors, and operational mechanisms to allow for connection between agriculture, tourism, culture, historic sites, and local communities.

This chapter examines selected best practices, cooperation models, and initiatives that help develop Mediterranean Diet-based tourism in the EUSAIR. It first outlines the broader synergies, interregional networking opportunities and transnational cooperation mechanisms relevant for integrating the Mediterranean Diet into sustainable tourism. It then examines the successful models on the macroregional level and transnational level, followed by national good-practice examples from EUSAIR countries.

5.1. Synergies, interregional networking and transnational cooperation

"Sustainable tourism policy" is a term that is often misused and has been defined by different organizations and academics from various perspective. The term "synergy" appears to be common among discussions regarding sustainable tourism policies, but it can also be misused in similar ways.

There are several real synergies between agriculture, tourism, and culture related to the Mediterranean Diet tourism. However, they represent contingent and vulnerable synergies, and they are often misrepresented in official policies as synergies that existed before the actual establishment of their respective collaborative institutions.

Understanding how synergies were developed, and under what conditions they may have been transformed to structural activities, will be necessary in order to identify the key barriers to achieving cross-sectoral relationships/ synergies (tourism with cultural heritage/agriculture), and develop viable collaborations within the context of EUSAIR's multi-sectoral actors (tourism, cultural heritage, and agriculture).

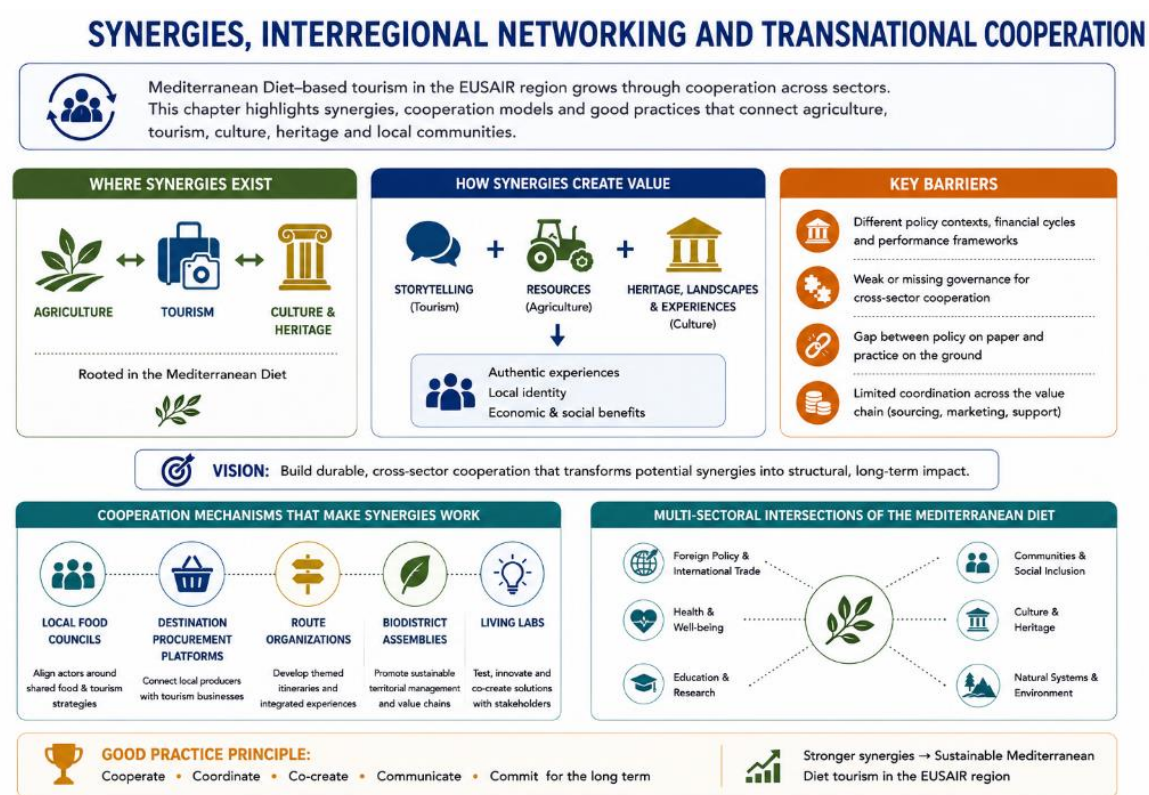
The most important barriers to the development of cross-sectoral synergies/relationships relates to the creation and implementation of governance structures designed to govern two (or perhaps three) very different types of entities (the tourism, cultural heritage, and agriculture sector) which exist within very



different policy contexts, financial cycles, and performance/target structures, without an appropriate or functional system for the long-term sharing of strategic objectives.

The most productive synergies are expressed through collaboration between tourism, agriculture, and culture by combining the storytelling dimension of tourism, resources from agriculture, and exhibiting heritage, landscapes, and experience from culture. As a result of this, it is not sufficient for EUSAIR to only create initiatives, but they must also create governance structures that define the roles of each sector within this concept of cooperation. Creating local food councils, destination procurement platforms, route organizations, biodistrict assemblies, and Living Labs can achieve those objectives by creating an intent to pursue a vision that is longer than the life of a single project.

Figure 19. Synergies, interregional networking and transnational cooperation



The Mediterranean Diet provides the clearest examples of EUSAIR's potential to develop synergies as it exists at all of the intersections between tourism (all sectors) and agriculture. It also exists at the intersections of foreign policy, international trade, culture, health, education, and natural systems. Yet, while tourism stakeholders (government entities, tourism boards, agricultural chambers, producer associations, cultural organizations, and small/medium enterprises) provide conceptual support for the tourism development of gastronomy, the ability of these entities to coordinate tourism experiences – from sourcing, to marketing, and to providing support for new tourism experiences at their destination – is minimal. Thus, there is generally a disconnect between the policy framework and what can actually



be provided through the institutional support. To clarify, strategies are ultimately an instrument for sustainable tourism, but the rules of the supply chain, destination marketing systems, agricultural advisory systems, and other supply chain links typically do not support what is documented on paper.

5.1.1. Geographical Indications - the real contribution to tourism

As previously introduced, the MD is supported through **EU Quality Schemes**, which include (1) **Geographical Indications (GI)**, which establish intellectual property rights for specific product especially linked to the area of production, and consisting of **Protected Designation of Origin (PDO)** (food and wine), and **Protected Geographical Indication (PGI)** (food and wine), as well as the (2) **Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG)** (food and agricultural products) (European Commission, n.d.-b). GI ensure that only products originating in the designated area and produced according to traditional restrictions can carry the GI, acting to protect local producers from improper competition, "food piracy," or unspecified originating products. Protection of the "territorial brand" enables EUSAIR countries to charge premium pricing on the global market and to signal value for quality to tourists.

The Geographical Indications represent one of the most extensive ways by which food has been linked to tourism in the European Union. The part that GIs could play within the context of the EUSAIR Mediterranean Diet merits further consideration than is afforded to them in policy or other documents. GIs have often been considered as indicators of territorial food heritage and strength in the marketplace. However, sometimes they have been identified merely as if their existence was the basis of the tourism product. The reality regarding GIs is not so straightforward.

Economic evidence related to GI products has demonstrated a price premium for GI products compared with non-labelled products in the marketplace (European Commission, 2021). The European Commission has shown that GIs and TSGs can contribute to creating market value and differentiating products (European Commission, 2026b) as well as support sustainable development through the reinforcement of territorial organization, biodiversity, knowledge transfer, and the establishment of fairer market linkages (FAO, 2018, 2023). However, there is frequently a presumption regarding the role of GIs in tourism and tourism development.

In terms of GI systems, there are differences between the countries of the EUSAIR region. Countries such as Italy and Greece have developed robust GI systems and well-established gastronomic reputations, while Croatia and Slovenia have increasingly sophisticated systems for the identification and protection of origin and quality. Other countries in the Western Balkans are in the process of developing or aligning with these systems, but generally, there is less recognition of their products internationally, which reflects an absence of integration between their GI products and their tourism markets.

Specifically, Italy has the largest number of registered GIs in the eAmbrosia register of GIs – over 300 in 2026 (eAmbrosia, European Commission, 2026). Greece has as many as 121 registered GIs, Croatia 51, Slovenia 26, and Bosnia and Herzegovina only 1. No other EUSAIR countries have any registered GIs. The relative lack of GIs is a result of these countries' relatively shorter time being engaged with the



EU quality policy system, as well as not being directly connected to the EU legal framework to register a GI (eAmbrosia, 2024).

As a result, the difference in GI status affects how Mediterranean Diet destinations can create tourism platforms. When the territory has multiple GI products produced directly and dense portfolios like Italy or Greece, tourism destinations create travel "routes" based on their GI products (the physical landscape of the tasting experience). Where the territory has only a few or no GI products, the long-term goal of communicating and marketing this food heritage as a GI will be challenging. Food heritage may be as culturally significant as GI food products, but GI food products have the institutional credibility of EU quality assurance, which is an advantage for tourism destinations that have GI products for creating a quality standard for travelling consumers.

At the same time, what ultimately provides the tourism value of GI products is whether or not these products are linked to the overall visitor experience, compared to being simply available for purchase in a retail environment (different types of stores). For example, a visitor who purchases PDO olive oil at a grocery store does not learn about the source of the olive oil, the practices used to produce the olives, or the people who produced the olives. However, if a visitor has the opportunity to visit an olive oil mill, taste olive oil with the producer, walk in the olive grove, and enjoy a meal at a family-owned and operated restaurant that sources its ingredients only from certified local producers, this is a much deeper and lasting experience than purchasing PDO olive oil from a grocery store.

The distinction is important because it means that the ability to develop tourism around GI products is the result of building the interpretive and experiential framework around the products, rather than simply the number of registered GIs. An evaluation of GIs as a vehicle for sustainable territorial development (FAO, 2022b) and investigation into the role of GIs in developing smart territories, demonstrate that GIs have the greatest territorial impact when they are integrated within an active value chain or producer organisation, and as part of a tourism destination strategy, whereby the certification of products is leveraged to create an experience for the consumer (GISMART, n.d.).

This difference among EUSAIR nations represents an important issue when considering their respective ability to brand products in transnational markets. For example, if the narrative of the Mediterranean Diet is to be successful in assisting the visibility of less-recognized regions, it must not also reproduce some form of hierarchy among regions in the Mediterranean by positioning well-recognized products as dominant assets when defining the macro-regions' image. Rather than using a "showcase" approach to cooperation (higher-quality destinations allowing only the demonstration of their excellence), it would be more beneficial to focus on the value chain as the basis for cooperation. This means that mature regions should provide information on product specifications, consortia governance, tourism interpretation, and quality control for emerging regions that contribute distinctive types of food culture and less commodified experiences. When knowledge is shared in both directions, it exemplifies cooperation. However, if it is unidirectional, it constitutes a soft hierarchy.

There are several strong examples of GIs effectively used in value development for the tourism sector in EUSAIR countries. Besides obviously Italy and Greece, the PDO products of the Dalmatia region in Croatia, which consist of Dalmatian prosciutto, several Dalmatian wines, and Dalmatian olive oil, are another great example of tourism development within a geographical indication that has both deep



territorial roots and a well-established food culture. The Dalmatian food culture has a long and rich culinary tradition based on EU quality systems (such as PDO and PGI) and is also founded on a very strong regional food identity that existed prior to the implementation of these EU quality systems. The integration of Dalmatian food culture into the coastal tourism product of Croatia has provided a significant return on investment for local economies.

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On the transnational level, the Routes of the Olive Tree was a certified cultural route of the Council of Europe that included EUSAIR countries Croatia, Greece, Italy, Albania, and Slovenia. This route represented the largest effort to institutionalise food heritage that is adjacent to GIs into a transnational tourism itinerary by providing a holistic narrative about the connection between the landscape, history, cultural practices, and origin products to travellers (Council of Europe, n.d.; ADRION Interreg, 2023).

Within the context of the Mediterranean diet, the TSG category needs to be specifically mentioned because it provides protection of traditional production and preparation methods and authentic recipes, rather than territorial origin, which are relevant to some degree to the candidate countries of EUSAIR that have food traditions that are culturally indigenous but not necessarily associated with a defined geographic area that has specific agricultural production criteria. Culturally significant meat products from the regions of Slavonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, like „kulen“ and „sudžuk“ respectively, may use TSG to develop tourism. However, the process from being culturally recognised as TSG to being developed into tourist products is neither quick nor easy. However, TSGs are not commonly used in tourism as an instrument to promote sustainable food systems with the potential to support traditional food cultures, as tourism products are a relatively unexplored area of research, especially regarding government policies (FAO, 2022b).

The GI registry may help to create tourism for candidate countries in EUSAIR, but should only be one part of a larger strategy to develop tourism through quality schemes. There are many inconsistencies in the success of quality schemes, as some GI schemes have created substantial impacts on their regional territories, while other schemes were provided little to no economic benefit to the producers or to the region (European Commission, 2021).

Particularly, the GI registry does not elevate consumer interest in or demand for tourism. It reflects a precondition for GI tourism, given that GIs have an appropriate quality control mechanism, provide tourism operators with proper training, communication to targeted customers, and develop local supply chain opportunities. Thus, while developing GI registries is valuable, they should only be one component of a larger capacity-building agenda for tourism. Specifically, in terms of tourism, these quality schemes can provide a destination narrative based on legally protected products.

Moreover, the existence of a GI or TSG-protected product does not guarantee that visitors will have an experience that refers to that product, nor that such an experience will be sustainable. The existence of protection of origin can increase the bargaining power of producers and contribute to the branding of a destination as "high-quality", but only if individual tourists are able to experience the product in a meaningful manner - for example, by visiting farms, mills, cellars, markets, restaurants, museums, participating in festivals, traveling along GI-themed routes, or visiting GI interpretation centres.



Conversely, the use of food-related GIs in export-oriented retail may provide economic benefits to producers without creating beneficial tourism impacts. Similarly, GI-themed tourism routes may provide more visibility to certain products while excluding smaller producers who are unable to meet volume, language, or hospitality-related requirements. Therefore, the policy implication is that a strong connection between GI-related strategies and the tourism value chain should be made, for example, through experience design, local purchasing, training, or interpretative elements.

5.1.2. *Innovation ecosystems*

While digital innovation plays an important secondary role, the true challenge lies in the innovative structure for these organisations to cooperate and coalesce to establish quality standards for their respective or common products (food), and develop marketing strategies within the respective territories. And this understanding could come in the form of living labs, clusters, biosphere reserves, agri-food innovation platforms, etc. and will help to establish organisations through which this collaborative effort is increasingly being developed and established throughout the EUSAIR region.

The development and establishment of innovation ecosystems can help to address the existing implementation deficit; and this must be considered broadly. Living labs, clusters, digital tools and innovation hubs are of value because they connect users, producers, public authorities and knowledge providers towards an iterative process of identifying and solving common issues. An example could be an innovative gastronomy living lab that defines and tests out different forms of taking part in tastings, low-waste restaurant, producer-to-chef logistical systems, and/or digitally based storytelling on a rural themed route. A cluster may allow for small farms, restaurants and accommodation services to coordinate their marketing and procurement efforts; whereas a digital platform may create a visual map of producers, certified products, seasonal experiences and booking processes, providing the foundation of a good quality product. The European Network of Living Labs provides a key reference when discussing innovation focused on user needs; however, in the context of EUSAIR, the most critical question relates to governance as relates to who maintains the digital platform, who keeps the data up to date, who coordinates and funds this innovative process and/or who will ensure small and/or rural producers are not excluded from this collaborative effort by virtue of digital or administrative barriers.

The European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL) has created an approach of „living laboratories“ (**Living Labs**) in rural areas and in food systems that can be applied to tourism related to Mediterranean Diets. A living laboratory is a setting for real-world experimentation, where stakeholders come together to create, test, and evaluate new ideas and better processes using these ideas as they become operational. Living laboratories also typically engage with universities or research organisations who play an important role in their operation (ENoLL, n.d.). Research and tourism have both been tested as living laboratories in the food and tourism areas of the Mediterranean through a variety of ways in various locations within the EUSAIR countries. An example of this is the Slow Food Presidia network in Italy, which has since expanded to include elements of the Dalmatian, Greek, and Albanian food cultures. While not branded as a living laboratory, the Slow Food network is a community-based form of innovation that shares the core components of the living laboratory model, i.e. the participation of a community in an activity, the development of an experimental product based on consumer feedback, the co-creation of quality standards, and continual improvement practices.



Another important institutional innovation related to the EUSAIR area is bio-districts. **Bio-districts** are regional governance models or frameworks for the management of organic production and distribution, local food systems, and sustainable tourism as an integrated system, including examples such as the Cilento bio-district in Italy and the Adriatic bio-district model that is currently being established through the cooperation of the CIRCUS project. The creation of bio-districts provides the necessary supply chain coordination, quality labelling, and visitor communication systems that individual businesses cannot create alone.

It is vital to the entire ecosystem and important for the development of rural communities to have small- and medium-sized enterprises (SME) involved, however, small and medium enterprises must not be ethereal. Authentic Mediterranean Diet-based tourism is reliant on small businesses (restaurants, family-run farms, artisanal producers and accommodation providers) for authenticity of food, but the operating environment for them includes low margins, labour shortages, regulatory burden and limited ability to market themselves effectively. Without the assistance of intermediary institutions, cooperative models that leverage SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises) do not reduce costs associated with transactions between the SMEs involved. Therefore the existence of an intermediary institution between and among the SMEs is essential, as they provide a mechanism through which to translate policy objectives into services that can assist the SMEs with training, packaging goods for market, certification assistance, public calendar of cooperative promotional events, coordinated booking systems, quality standards for their products, as well as ongoing guidance and support.

SME participation is both the greatest asset and the greatest vulnerability of Mediterranean Diet tourism innovation. Family farms, artisanal food producers, boutique accommodation, small restaurants, and local guides are the operational backbone of authentic MD tourism experiences; without them, the product is sterile. Yet their economic fragility is structural: individually, they lack the financial resources to develop and market tourism products independently, the scale to negotiate effectively with tour operators and distribution intermediaries, and the administrative bandwidth to access EU funding and navigate quality certification processes. The Smart Specialisation Platforms (S3) and the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI) have generated useful methodological frameworks for addressing this challenge — clustering SMEs around shared territorial themes, supporting producer organisations, and connecting innovation investment to territorial development strategies (JRC Smart Specialisation, n.d.; EIP-AGRI, n.d.). The challenge is that these frameworks are designed primarily for EU Member State contexts and do not translate easily into the less developed institutional environments of candidate EUSAIR countries.

There is a dichotomy in the SME participation in the innovation of Mediterranean Diet-based tourism, in that they represent the single biggest strength and the single greatest weakness of MD-based tourism innovation. Small family farms, niche producers, small restaurants, boutique accommodations and local guides provide the day-to-day operations of authentic MD tourism experiences; however without their operation, the MD-based tourism offering is essentially a sterile offering. The fragility of the SME's economics is structural in nature. Collectively, they do not have the financial capacity to develop and market MD tourism products on a stand-alone basis. Individually, their challenge is comprised of: (a) an inability to negotiate with tour operators and tourism distributors for their share of the market due to lack of capacity to compete; (b) inability to access EU funding or navigate EU quality certification



systems; and (c) ability to supply tourism product due to inability to establish economies of scale. The S3 Platforms and the EIP-AGRI have developed some effective models to address this issue, clustering the SMEs around common themes (ie. territorial) and supporting the creation of producer organisations and linking their ability to attract innovation investments to their territorial development plans (JRC Smart Specialisation, n.d.; EIP-AGRI, n.d.). However, it must be noted that these management systems are more suited to the political structures of EU Member States and therefore will not translate to the less developed political and economic contexts of prospective EUSAIR countries.

The gap in governance is very pronounced at the local level. There are many areas in the EUSAIR territory that do not have destination management structures that would serve as effective co-ordinators of the development of MD tourism. DMOs exist in some parts of the EUSAIR territory to manage the mapping of local food heritage assets, developing quality standards, linking producers to tourism operators, managing the digital visibility of the regions' food offerings and ensuring that communications with visitors reflects the regional cultural value. However, DMOs also exist in many parts of the EUSAIR territory, but they have limited capability to partner on agricultural systems and food systems. Most DMOs are primarily structured around accommodations and visitor information with some capacity related to event co-ordination. Building these capabilities through training, reforming government institutions and creating cross-sector governance systems is a mid-term priority in EUSAIR cooperation programmes, but much less attention is given to addressing building the capacity of the DMOs than to the more obvious route development and product marketing activities that are conducted in EUSAIR.

5.1.3. Inclusive gastronomy tourism: the accessibility gap

The policy framework of UNWTO's principles related to „Tourism for all“, the European Accessibility Act (EAA), and the emphasis on inclusive development through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), clearly indicates that when designing tourism products, the framework and design should include people with disabilities, older persons, and all other groups whose participation is limited by physical, sensory, cognitive or economic barriers (UN Tourism, n.d.; GIZ, 2021). The reality of gastronomy tourism in EUSAIR is that, although there are examples of businesses that have included people with disabilities in their operations, the majority of gastronomy tourism opportunities are not inclusive.

Namely, accessible tourism has long been defined in the UN framework as a prerequisite for quality and universal tourism and not just an issue of a welfare category (UNWTO, 2016). The accessibility chain in tourism consists of the following steps: information about the tourism experience before travel; transport; the ability to access the physical environment; communication with the senses; accommodation and dietary requirements; providing customer service; providing accessible restrooms; the availability of seating; payment methods; and post-travel follow-up (UNWTO, 2016).

However, inclusive gastronomy tourism is one of the areas least developed and most strategically important for further cooperation among EUSAIR countries. Although accessibility is included within many tourism policy documents, as previously shown, the concept of designing gastronomy (food and beverage) experiences throughout the entire accessibility chain is not yet standard.



Particularly, gastronomy tourism encompasses specific accessibility challenges that are not always recognised or taken into consideration. For example, farm visits and agritourism experiences typically involve uneven terrain, outdoor environments, and physical activities (olive and grape picking, foraging, fishing) that assume a particular type of physical capability. In addition, traditional restaurant environments may lack appropriate seating, sensory communication support, or dietary information for people with specific food allergies, intolerances, or religious requirements. Also, cooking workshops may assume a level of sensory and motor capability that excludes participants with visual, hearing, or motor impairments. It is also important to point out that interpretive materials for food heritage, such as signage, menus, guided tour content, are rarely available in accessible formats, whether through audio description, tactile elements, large print, or accessible digital interfaces (Veitch et al., 2024; Agovino et al., 2020).

In order for accessibility to be fulfilled as part of Mediterranean diet tourism, the category of visitors must include travellers with disabilities, older persons, families with young children, those who have sensory sensitivities, and those who have dietary restrictions/requirements. With the increasing number of tourists aged 55 years or older in Europe, and with this trend projected to continue in future years, it is imperative for destinations and businesses to consider the implications of the increase in older tourism consumer demand on a destination's continued competitiveness. The inclusion of older persons as part of tourism opportunities is not just a matter of a wide tourism offer, but a rights-based issue.

The development of best practices in inclusive gastronomy tourism design does not require abandoning the idea of authentic tourism product development. However, creative design must drive best practices in inclusive gastronomy tourism development. This means that accessible formats can be designed for printed menus, physical access and exists enabled in tasting rooms, staff training developed for disability issues, market tours can have quiet time options, cooking classes can be adjusted to allow for seated participation, allergen information can be conveyed without causing gastronomy to become bureaucratic.

However, one type of disability – sensory disability - needs special consideration because the tourism aspect of gastronomy depends heavily on the five senses: taste, smell, hearing, touch, and sight. The challenge for the tourism industry is that many small operators do not have appropriate guidance or the funds to implement accessibility improvements. Small operations often operate outside the scope of the developing framework and the guidelines designed to bring about change. A macroregional approach can help by designing an EUSAIR accessible gastronomy toolkit, including available training modules and example pilot programmes measuring success and highlighting barriers experienced throughout each of the different territorial types: coastal restaurants, farms, wineries, olive oil mills, farmers' markets, and cultural routes.

The most recent research studies examining accessibility across the EUSAIR indicate that progress is inconsistent and typically limited in many regions simply to meet basic legal standards, and not as a result of a real commitment to provide an inclusive design (Darcy and Buhalis, 2020). In fact, access for people using wheelchairs has increased substantially in some coastal regions due to accessibility requirements for beaches, ramps, and elevators in historic areas, while subtle aspects of inclusive



tourism, such as sensory, cognitive, and developing welcoming social settings where individuals with visible disabilities are welcomed, have had little or no progress.

Conversely, in regard to gastronomy tourism, research conducted by Veitch et al. (2024) regarding user sensory accessibility has demonstrated that there is a number of creative ways to use inclusive design when creating sensory experiences for people with sensory disabilities. However, it does take a significant investment of capital through training staff, adapting facilities, and making changes to traditional attitudes toward individuals with disabilities before these inclusive designs will be successful in offering a quality experience.

The current divide between the policy framework and the level of compliance only reflects a larger structural problem: the opportunity for marketers to take advantage of inclusive design in tourism will be perceived as a liability (a requirement to comply with a legal framework) rather than a business opportunity or an expression of the values of a community. Nevertheless, market research shows that seniors and people living with disabilities represent significant and generally undiscovered segments in the market. According to the Global Report on Inclusive Tourism Destinations by UNWTO, about 100 billion USD was spent by tourists with disabilities in 2018, and as the EUSAIR regions' populations age - the majority of tourists needing either mobility, sensory, or other types of easier access will be visiting EUSAIR destinations in increasing numbers over the next two decades (UNWTO, 2018).

In relation specifically to Mediterranean Diet tourism, there is a natural fit between accessible food (healthy and wellness-focused) and gastronomy tourism. Accessible food experiences fit nicely with slow travel itineraries, sensory-based food experiences, and community-based dining, which all align easily with the principles of Inclusive design if Inclusive design has been proactively implemented.

While several EUSAIR regions have made reasonable strides toward establishing good accessible gastronomy tourism practices, there has been no system-wide development of accessible gastronomy tourism for EUSAIR. Examples of what is possible when there is both institutional commitment and support include wine and olive oil tastings accessible to people living with disabilities, modified into a Dalmatian (Croatia) and Tuscan (Italy) cellar environment, intentionally designed blended tasting experiences for people with visual impairments, and adapted cooking workshops conducted in cooperation with local disability organisations in selected cities throughout Italy and Greece. While not the primary objective, the Silver Wellbeing initiative (as part of Interreg ADRION) has developed accessible wellness supplements and food heritage products specifically aimed at the expanding senior market segment within the destination tourist market, and thus directly connects to the principles of the Mediterranean Diet - longevity, healthy aging, and reflective wellness principles.

These findings indicate that EUSAIR's commitment to achieving accessible tourism, as well as inclusive design, should be built into the product development methodology for Mediterranean Diet tourism. While the EUSAIR GASTRO Tourism Handbook (2023) includes a list of tourism accessibility considerations, it does not provide implementation measures (facility standards, training standards, interpretation design principles, certified accessible route characteristics, and more) that would result in the commitment becoming a standard practice. Developing these measures, likely through a specific EUSAIR cooperative coordination initiative modelled on UNWTO's accessible „Tourism for All“ framework, and the practical examples demonstrated by the Silver Wellbeing Initiative, would fill one



of the most significant gaps in the current EUSAIR Pillar 4 programming – the accessibility gap in (gastronomy) tourism.

5.1.4. *Education and capacity building*

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A key takeaway from a comparison of Mediterranean diet tourism business models lies in one common element. All models demonstrated that human capital - consisting of knowledge, skills, and relationships between stakeholders - ultimately has more influence on whether or not an area will be successful, rather than the quality of its heritage or the sophistication of its planning policy framework(s).

Areas with high-quality heritage assets (exceptionally high-quality food products) but without appropriately trained operators, destination management professionals, and agricultural producers who possess adequate level of knowledge about the tourism offer and consumer demand will be unable to capitalize on their Mediterranean Diet tourism advantages. In contrast, destinations that have average quality heritage assets (average-quality food products), yet possess the requisite amount of destination management capacity, entrepreneurial capability, and creativity-associated tourism-related interpretive quality (as demonstrated by Slovenia) have been able to successfully create and maintain viable, profitable Mediterranean food/culinary tourism identities.

Knowledge transfer, education, and capacity building are critical for establishing sustainable cooperation with regard to producing Mediterranean Diet tourism. The Mediterranean Diet will not be effectively explained by operators/participants who think of the Mediterranean Diet as only a healthy way to eat. As already demonstrated, both consumers and operators currently lack knowledge about the Mediterranean Diet as a whole, and especially about its specific elements. For example, chefs might not have access to information regarding sourcing from local food suppliers or about local agricultural heritage narratives. Farmers may not possess enough knowledge to be able to welcome tourists at their farm or to accurately price their experiences. Tourism providers and operators may not have enough knowledge regarding a location to be able to provide visitors with an interpretation of monuments versus food-related landscapes. Tourism boards may promote food-related tourism products without considering seasonality. Similarly, public officials may publicly support cooperation, but practices associated with procurement and licensing make it highly challenging for operators to cooperate with them in practice.

Not all skills training should be treated as hospitality training (UN Tourism, 2025). Consequently, training programs must reflect collaborative approaches between agricultural and tourism-based sectors, and be specifically designed for the needs of each stakeholder group (chefs, farmers, destination managers, etc.). However, specific trainings designed for each tourism stakeholder group are not enough to fundamentally transform the collective successes of country- and region-based food communities. To achieve more transformational results, food community members must work together in joint learning environments, such as through farm-to-restaurant laboratories, geographical indicator interpretation workshops, accessible gastronomy skills development, and practical examples through circular food systems modules, route management academies, and peer-to-peer learning visits linking developed and developing territories.



The development of specific skills required to deliver Mediterranean Diet tourism products should be encompassed in a multi-disciplinary approach, which current training systems have not adequately addressed. In addition to classical cooking techniques, chefs need to be able to understand food procurement systems, seasonal sourcing, relationships with producers, and the cultural significance of the ingredients they use. Tour guides must be provided with a working knowledge of agriculture in combination with the knowledge of history and culture. In addition to the practical skills of farming, farm operators must be trained to be able to provide quality hospitality, communication, and food safety. Destination managers must have knowledge across sectors to be able to effectively manage agricultural policy, governance of tourism heritage, market development, digital communications, and financial management. Public sector bodies and representatives need to have the capacity to develop appropriate procurement frameworks, establish effective agricultural quality certification systems, and create funding mechanisms that support the relationship between agriculture and tourism (UNWTO, 2025).

The „UN Tourism's Education Guidelines“ (2025) and CAP Network's knowledge exchange platforms (EIP-AGRI Projects Database of innovative projects, Subgroup on Innovation and Knowledge Exchange (SoIKE), focus groups, workshops, seminars, CAP Implementation Contact Point, etc.) are institutional frameworks through which training requirement issues are being addressed at a European level. However, the translation of the training into EUSAIR specific environment and conditions is inconsistent.

The most effective strategies for capitalising on the capacity building aspects of EUSAIR collaboration frameworks are to actualise training in EUSAIR collaboration frameworks through the embedding of training in project-related activities, such as on-site learning visits, cross-border producer exchanges, and workshops focused on the real product development challenges, rather than treating capacity building as a separate preparatory activity. Examples of these efforts are the QNeST and CIRCUS projects. Ultimately, learning by doing in an authentic cross-sector cooperation experience is more effective than classroom training that has been disconnected from operational contexts to develop the hybrid competencies that are in demand by MD Tourism.

The continued institutional fragmentation remains the single most prevalent structural barrier to effective capacity building across EUSAIR. Training system organisations exist nationally, and many EUSAIR countries regionally, and are contained within sectoral-based institutional frameworks that do not share objectives and or curriculums across the tourism - agriculture boundary. Hospitality vocational training does not have food system sustainability components, agricultural training for young farmers does not include knowledge of tourism product development, nor visitor communication skills, and heritage management education normally does not correspond with either hospitality or agriculture training systems. The EU funding structure further reinforces the fragmentation of training support deliveries by typically allocating funding through individual sectors, such as the labour market under the European Social Fund and CAP national strategic plans for agriculture training, and Interreg cooperation funds for project-based learning - rather than through any cross-sector integrated training instrument. One example of good practice can be seen in Croatia, where a national Network of regional competence centres in vocational education (Official Gazette, 45/2018) was established in 2018, which also included six (6) vocational schools (high schools) from six (6) counties in Croatia that represent six (6) Regional Competence Centres in the sector of tourism and hospitality (Ministry of Science, Education and Youth, 2018).). These Regional Centers of Competence are centers of excellence in



vocational education and training in which regular vocational education programs, professional development, and lifelong learning programs will be implemented (Ministry of Science, Education and Youth, n.d.). They also include other forms of formal and non-formal education, such as work-based learning, competitions, presentations of knowledge and skills, and similar activities.

While the EUSAIR governance framework offers the potential for overcoming this fragmentation at the macroregional level, this outcome depends on making an intentional investment in cross-pillar coordination, which has not happened to date. The establishment of a Mediterranean Diet tourism training and educational programme developed collaboratively under EUSAIR Pillar 4, and involving agricultural knowledge exchange networks, hospitality education sectors, heritage sectors and civil society sectors across all 10 EUSAIR countries, will represent a significant step towards integrated human capital development needed for sustainable Mediterranean diet tourism. The programme should place an emphasis on training in all countries, with special emphasis on the Western Balkans, which have major training deficits, lack of trained personnel and capable intermediaries, as well as no institutional capacity to develop credible product offerings for Mediterranean diet tourism.

The findings indicate that the EUSAIR region has the aggregate cultural heritage resources, the policy framework, the emerging market demand, and institutional models in the most advanced areas to create a truly distinctive, sustainable, and economically viable Mediterranean diet tourism sector. However, there are significant deficits generally, in terms of the cross-sectoral governance capability at the macroregional level, the required chain coordination infrastructure, and trained personnel who know how to leverage these defined assets into viable long-term, community-based, authentic tourism products.

The good news about this condition is that it represents a deficiency in capacities, and not in available resources to create sustainable tourism. If the political will exists to invest in cross-sector governance and training and in long-term institutional development, this capacity can be established by means of continued financial support that can only currently come from EU co-funding at the scale necessary under Interreg and national strategic plans to conduct these investments across all 10 EUSAIR countries. Consequently, the new programming of EUSAIR cooperation moving forward should not focus on developing additional pilot projects in previously piloted sectors. The focus should be on scaling up successful cross-sector governance models, supply chain arrangements, training programs, accessibility standards, and inclusive community development practices to become permanent institutional features of the macroregion's sustainable tourism economy.



5.2. Successful models of integrating the Mediterranean Diet into tourism – transnational cooperation, knowledge transfer, replicability, and scalability

This chapter will show successful models of integrating the Mediterranean Diet into tourism, through transnational cooperation, knowledge transfer, replicability, and scalability. The analysis was conducted on the international, macroregional, and transnational level, as well as on the level of all EUSAIR countries.

5.2.1. *International, macroregional, and transnational analysis*

Tourism models based on the Mediterranean Diet are more successful if they are a modular and flexible approach, as opposed to being predictable and fixed. This allows the potential for cooking workshops, olive routes, farm-to-table networks, bio-district itineraries, or producer-market platforms to be rather easily transferable across countries. However, it always requires that they have locally-based content.

The key element that is consistent across all countries, and easily replicable and transferable, is the governance model, which includes: resource mapping, formation of cooperative producer-tourism partnerships, defining sustainability standards, operators training, interpretation development, impact monitoring, and connecting to regional branding. Thus, tourism model replication will take place through structured processes, rather than through a standardised narrative.

However, to achieve successful examples of integration of the Mediterranean Diet into tourism, the EUSAIR macroregional goals need to use a macro-regional collaboration framework and transnational partnerships as their operating tool. There are already numerous macro-regional initiatives and transnational projects (either already implemented with a sound knowledge base or currently in implementation) related to the Mediterranean Diet. While this body of work provides a substantial amount of cooperation on Mediterranean Diet and/or sustainable tourism, it is largely disparate. An understanding of what these projects have accomplished, how they have incurred difficulties, and what patterns exist is critical to effectively designing the next round of programming.

As shown in the table below, this extensive body of work was supported through different initiatives and funding programmes, such as:

- **Macroregional and international initiatives:**
 - The EUSAIR strategic framework: The EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR Strategy), Thematic Steering Group 4 (TSG4) for Sustainable Tourism and Cultural Heritage within the EUSAIR Strategy, and the EUSAIR Action Plan 2025.
 - The Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme
- **Transnational EU projects:**
 - The Interreg V-B Adriatic-Ionian (ADRION) Programme 2021 - 2027
 - The Interreg V-B Adriatic-Ionian (ADRION) Programme 2014–2020



- The Interreg VI-B EURO Mediterranean (EURO MED) Programme 2021 - 2027
- The Interreg VB Mediterranean Programme 2014 - 2020
- The Interreg VI-A Greece-Cyprus Programme 2021 - 2027
- The Interreg V-A Greece – Italy Programme 2014 - 2020
- The Interreg Mediterranean Sea Basin ENPI CBC Programme 2007 – 2013.

Although the Interreg V-B Adriatic-Ionian (ADRION) Programme 2021 – 2027 is the main EUSAIR funding tool, the strategic relevance also lies in the funding programmes such as the EURO MED Programme, specifically intended for the Mediterranean region, as well as programmes intended for smaller areas of the Mediterranean region, such as the Greece-Cyprus Programme and the Greece – Italy Programme. Specific importance lies also in the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme, established by the Council of Europe in 1987 to a model for transnational cultural and tourism management, allowing synergies between national, regional and local authorities and a wide range of associations and socio-economic actors. It provides a guarantee of excellence through the certification “Cultural Route of the Council of Europe” (European Commission, 2026a).

Collectively, these initiatives and EU projects (and consortia) have established frameworks for developing cultural routes, valorising heritage, creating networks of SMEs, and providing valuable tools. However, what actually happens after achieving visibility will determine the overall effectiveness of the activities of these organisations. In its assessment of territorial-wide-area cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region, a top-down approach is unable to provide complete integration to cooperation - integrated policies will be necessary to ensure the success of transnational partnerships (OECD, 2018).



Table 2. Overview of successful models of integrating the Mediterranean Diet into tourism – international, macroregional, and transnational level

NAME	STATUS	COOPERATION MODEL	PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES	DESCRIPTION
MACROREGIONAL COOPERATION MODELS				
<u>Mediterranean Diet Flagship Project (EUSAIR)</u>	In implementation (2025-)	EUSAIR macroregional initiative	Croatia, Italy, Greece, Slovenia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and San Marino	By implementing Topic 3 of Pillar 4 in the revised EUSAIR Action Plan, a new Interpillar Strategic Flagship Project focused on the Mediterranean Diet was proposed through the 10th EUSAIR Annual Forum in Crete. The initiative will coordinate activities, develop new policy initiatives and projects, mobilize EU programmes and funds, foster synergies and partnerships, capitalize on good practices and existing projects, and contribute to the economic, environmental, cultural, and social sustainability of the EUSAIR region.
<u>Sustainable and Innovative Food Systems (Bari Event)</u>	Implemented (2025)	EUSAIR macroregional initiative	Croatia, Italy, Greece, Slovenia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and San Marino	On 29-30 September 2025, CIHEAM Bari hosted the event “Sustainable and Innovative Food Systems: The Mediterranean Diet as a Tool for Tourism and Local Development in EUSAIR Communities”. The event explored how the Mediterranean Diet can serve as a strategic driver for sustainable tourism, rural development, youth engagement, and food system innovation across the Adriatic-Ionian region.
<u>Handbook on Gastronomic Tourism</u>	Implemented (2025)	EUSAIR macroregional initiative	Croatia, Italy, Greece, Slovenia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and San Marino	Within the 4th Thematic Pillar - Sustainable Tourism - participants of the workshop “Sustainable and Innovative Food Systems: The Mediterranean Diet as a Tool for Tourism and Local Development in EUSAIR Communities” took place at CIHEAM, where the Handbook on Gastronomic Tourism Development in the Adriatic-Ionian Region was presented.
<u>The Routes of the Olive Tree</u>	In implementation (2025-)	International cultural network:	„Routes of the Olive Tree” Cultural Foundation, a non-profit, non-governmental	The Cultural Foundation of the Olive Tree Route was founded in 2003, and certified in 2005. The Foundation “The Routes of the Olive Tree” is leading the network, highlighting European heritage,



		Council of Europe Cultural Route	organisation based in Kalamata (Greece)	the olive, tangible and intangible heritage, peace and intercultural dialogue, Mediterranean landscape, and human values embodied by Mediterranean populations.
TRANSNATIONAL EU PROJECTS				
<u>MED Routes: Enhancing MED sustainable cultural tourism through the creation of eco- itineraries inside European Cultural Routes</u>	In implementation (2024 – 2026)	The Interreg VI-B EURO Mediterranean (EURO MED) Programme 2021 - 2027	Italy, Spain, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Portugal, Bulgaria	The project pioneers a sustainable tourism model focused on the shared heritage of four Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe (CRs) in the Mediterranean (MED), emphasizing a “slow tourism” approach. The MED-Routes Project offers a solution by promoting cultural tourism across the MED-area by establishing and disseminating a locally based, low-impact model of sustainable tourism rooted in the common heritage of the 4 CRs.
<u>Indigenous edible plant species as determinants of biodiversity, local ecological knowledge and consciousness of a health-promoting food culture – AENaON</u>	In implementation (2025 – 2026)	The Interreg VI-A Greece-Cyprus Programme 2021 - 2027	Greece, Cyprus	The project promotes the knowledge of the nutritional value of Mediterranean indigenous edible plants and highlights the role of conscious nutrition in preserving ecosystems and biodiversity. It aims to document and conserve indigenous vegetables and fruits, safeguard biodiversity, support local economies, and promote environmental sustainability and Mediterranean dietary identity.
<u>Promoting ESG principles and healthy nutritional habits to increase competitiveness, market diversification and effective</u>	In implementation (2024 – 2027)	The Interreg V-B Adriatic-Ionian (ADRION) Programme 2021 - 2027	Italy, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Albania	The project promotes actions supporting the development and modernization of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in the fish industry through the introduction of quality and sustainable requirements. It collects information on labels and certification systems, develop KPIs regarding ESG standards, sustainability, health and nutritional values, and incorporate them in a self- evaluation online multi-lingual tool.



<u>communication for consumers in Adriatic-Ionian aquaculture and fishery sectors - FISHIMPACT</u>				
<u>Circular economy Strategies, action plans, and Solutions for agrifood systems transition in ADRION coastal communities – CIRCUS</u>	In implementation (2024 – 2027)	The Interreg V-B Adriatic-Ionian (ADRION) Programme 2021 - 2027	Italy, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Montenegro, Greece, and Croatia	The project supports the transition to a circular economy of the agrifood system in the Adriatic and Ionian coastal communities by developing and testing strategies, action plans, and management solutions, increasing knowledge and capacity of quadruple helix stakeholders, and setting up a cooperation network after project completion.
<u>Med Diet identities - from territorial networking to cluster organization - MedDiet Go</u>	In implementation (2024 – 2026)	The Interreg VI-B EURO Mediterranean (EURO MED) Programme 2021 - 2027	Spain, Bulgaria, Portugal, Greece, Italy, and Slovenia	The project connects old values of the Mediterranean Diet with new and innovative tools to increase stakeholders' awareness about the potential of a Mediterranean Diet holistic approach to make Mediterranean inner regions more competitive in the tourism global offer. It transfers MD.net results through technological innovation and networking.
<u>Quality Network on Sustainable Tourism PLUS - QNeST PLUS</u>	Implemented (2022)	The Interreg V-B Adriatic-Ionian (ADRION) Programme 2014–2020	Italy, Croatia, Greece, and Montenegro	The project intended to further disseminate the results achieved by the QNeST project. It promoted highly experiential tourism and sustainable quality products by reinforcing four routes: Wine and Olive Oil Routes, Routes of Merchants, Pilgrims and Travellers, Stone Routes, and Water Routes.
<u>Promoting Silver tourism through valorization of MED-</u>	Implemented (2018 – 2021)	The Interreg V-A Greece – Italy	Italy, Greece	The project aimed to create and promote a touristic offer mainly addressed to “silver” public (over 65), bringing together territorial valorization and promotion with the Mediterranean diet and a correct



<u>diet and wellbeing routes in the CBC area - Silver Wellbeing</u>		Programme 2014 - 2020		and healthy lifestyle. It exploited silver tourism as an asset of growth for the cross-border region.
<u>Mediterranean Diet - When Brand Meets Peoples - MD.net</u>	Implemented (2018 – 2022)	The Interreg VB Mediterranean Programme 2014 - 2020	Italy, Cyprus, Spain, Albania, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Croatia, and Portugal	The project challenged neglected and undeveloped opportunities of Mediterranean Diet. Its main objective was to strengthen exploration of the Mediterranean Diet, blending comprehensive MD concepts with innovative tools and cooperation of quadruple helix stakeholders.
<u>Development of an innovative network for the promotion of extroversion of agro-food companies in Adriatic - Ionian Area – INNOVAGRO</u>	Implemented (2017 – 2020)	The Interreg V-B Adriatic-Ionian (ADRION) Programme 2014 – 2020	Greece, Croatia, Slovenia, Albania, and Italy	The project focused on the development of links and synergies between farmers, agro-food enterprises, research institutes and public authorities for the promotion of agro-food products' extroversion, agro-food companies' internationalization, and environmentally friendly farming practices. Main outputs were a Transnational Cooperation Network in agro-food and tourism sector, and a Virtual Transnational Business Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center.
<u>Food as a means of dialogue in Mediterranean Contexts – SLOWMED</u>	Implemented (2014 – 2015)	The Interreg Mediterranean Sea Basin ENPI CBC Programme 2007 - 2013	Italy, Egypt, Portugal, Lebanon, Palestine, and Spain	The project aimed to encourage the preservation of the Mediterranean culinary heritage, promote the recognition of food as a form of cultural and artistic expression, and foster nutrition education based on the Mediterranean culinary heritage – Mediterranean Diet.
<u>MedDiet - Mediterranean Diet and enhancement of traditional foodstuff – MedDiet</u>	Implemented (2013 – 2015)	The Interreg Mediterranean Sea Basin ENPI CBC Programme 2007 - 2013	Italy, Greece, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, and Spain	The project aimed to raise the awareness of consumers about the importance of preserving healthy food traditions. Its specific objective was to increase awareness of consumers, in particular young people and children, and SMEs, in particular restaurants, about the benefits of the Mediterranean Diet.



On the **international and macroregional level**, several umbrella initiatives emphasize the importance of the Mediterranean Diet and its valorisation in tourism.

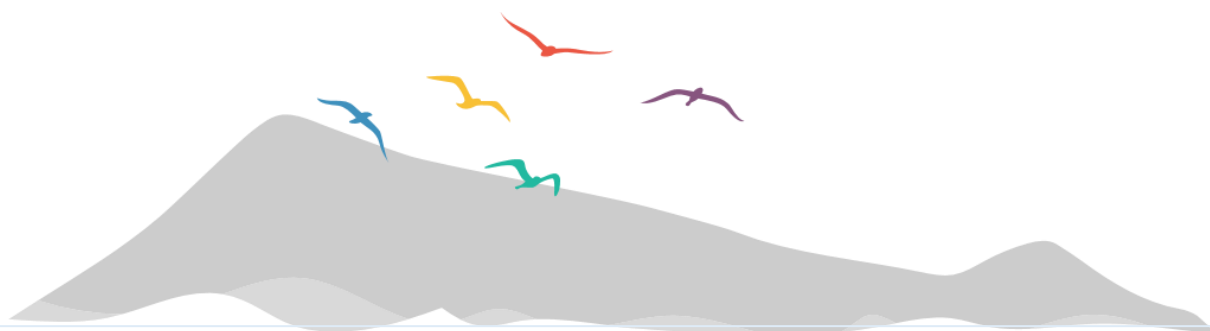
The Mediterranean Diet Flagship Project (EUSAIR), the new Cross-pillar Strategic Flagship Project focused on the Mediterranean Diet is proposed through the 10th EUSAIR Annual Forum in Crete, by implementing Topic 3 of Pillar 4 in the revised EUSAIR Action Plan. This initiative (with Pillar 4 in the lead and Pillar 1 and 5 contributing through skills partnerships and youth engagement) will position the Southeast Europe and EUSAIR as model regions for sustainable, innovative, and inclusive growth — leveraging their rich natural and cultural heritage through the universally valued Mediterranean Diet, through: coordinating activities, developing new policy initiatives and projects, mobilizing EU Programmes and funds, fostering synergies, complementarities and partnerships between actors and sectors, capitalising on good practices and existing projects, and ultimately contributing to the economic, environmental, cultural, and social sustainability of the EUSAIR region.

Sustainable and Innovative Food Systems: The Mediterranean Diet as a Tool for Tourism and Local Development in EUSAIR Communities (Bari Event) was implemented on 29-30 September 2025 by the CIHEAM in Bari. The event explored how the Mediterranean Diet can serve as a strategic driver for sustainable tourism, rural development, youth engagement, and food system innovation across the Adriatic-Ionian region.

This event also served as the introduction of the **Handbook on Gastronomic Tourism Development in the Adriatic-Ionian Region**, thus confirming the importance of sustainable tourism within the Strategy by the thematic coordinators and group members from Croatia and Albania.

Moreover, the EUSAIR cultural routes framework is worthy of a closer analysis, even though it is not as closely linked to EU funding cycles as the Interreg portfolio. Cultural Routes, whether through the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe programme, or in less formal and unrecognized route itineraries that may be developed under ADRION's thematic cooperation framework, can be viewed as a specific example of procedurally-based transnational tourism product development. Thus, their format is ideally positioned to support the development of the Mediterranean diet. The Routes connect territories rather than promote specific „destinations“ within those territories - they create a motivation for visitors to travel through the landscape rather than concentrate their activities at one location or another, and they can be designed to embed elements of agricultural heritage, food culture, and landscape experience within a coherent story about the territories through which they travel (Council of Europe n.d.; ADRION Interreg, 2023).

Specifically, Cultural routes have a special role in macroregional strategies because they cross boundaries naturally as they connect heritage sites, landscapes, and communities. The Routes4U project developed the Roadmap for the Adriatic-Ionian Region aimed at developing tangible cultural routes as a means of developing and promoting sustainable tourism, regional development, and regional identity for the Adriatic-Ionian Region, while identifying the existing lack of governance, management, and territorial integration issues (Council of Europe, 2018). In terms of developing tourism based on the Mediterranean Diet, cultural routes need to be extended beyond monuments and historical routes to include food landscapes, markets, traditional agricultural methods and systems, olive mill farms, fisheries, and non-material heritage events. Specifically, cultural routes result in sustainable tourism only



if they affect the behaviour of visitors and the economy of local communities. If tourists only visit coastal locations (places to visit) at the end of a cultural route while the route itself exists only in a web-based or brochure format, the type of economic value created from the development of the route will be very limited.

The Roadmap for the Adriatic-Ionian Region, developed by the Routes4U project, highlights the potential of route tourism as a means of regional development while acknowledging the ongoing governance challenges associated with transnational routes. The successful operation of transnational routes requires the establishment of ongoing coordination mechanisms for maintaining quality, market consistency, and interpretation among the many different national jurisdictions and institutional actors involved in providing forms of visitor communication (Adriatic-Ionian Region, 2019).

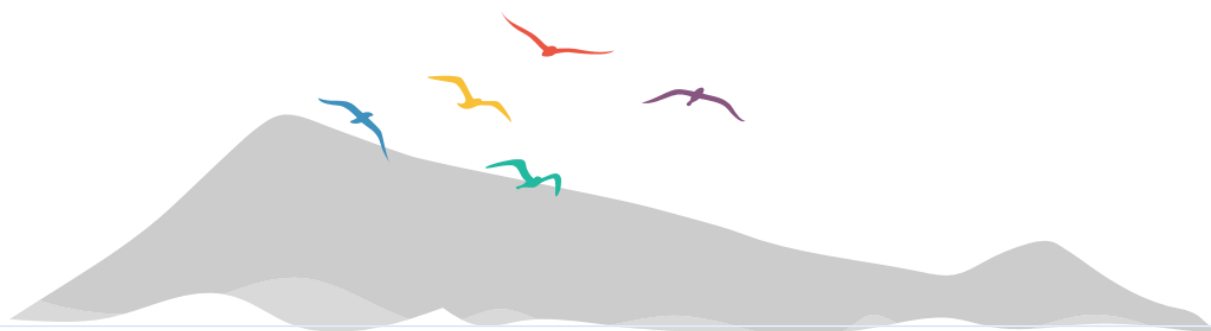
On the **transnational level**, numerous **EU projects** have been putting coordinated efforts into in the Mediterranean Diet movement, by promoting, valorising and integrating the Mediterranean Diet into tourism, and assisting with the shift from simply adding value to developing a tourism model based on the Mediterranean Diet.

The project „**MED Routes: Enhancing MED sustainable cultural tourism through the creation of eco-itineraries inside European Cultural Routes**“ (2024 – 2026), funded by the Interreg VI-B EURO Mediterranean (EURO MED) Programme 2021 – 2027, pioneers a sustainable tourism model focused on the shared heritage of four Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe (CRs) in the Mediterranean (MED), emphasizing a “slow tourism” approach. The MED-Routes Project offers a solution by promoting cultural tourism across the MED-area by establishing and disseminating a locally based, low-impact model of sustainable tourism rooted in the common heritage of the 4 CRs.

The ongoing EU project „**Indigenous edible plant species as determinants of biodiversity, local ecological knowledge and consciousness of a health-promoting food culture – AENαON**“, funded by the Interreg VI-A Greece-Cyprus Programme 2021 – 2027, promotes the knowledge of the nutritional value of Mediterranean indigenous edible plants and highlights the role of conscious nutrition in preserving ecosystems and biodiversity. It aims to document and conserve indigenous vegetables and fruits, safeguard biodiversity, support local economies, and promote environmental sustainability and Mediterranean dietary identity.

Another ongoing project regarding the Mediterranean Diet, „**Promoting ESG principles and healthy nutritional habits to increase competitiveness, market diversification and effective communication for consumers in Adriatic-Ionian aquaculture and fishery sectors – FISHIMPACT**“ funded by the Interreg V-B Adriatic-Ionian (ADRION) Programme 2021 – 2027, promotes actions supporting the development and modernization of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in the fish industry through the introduction of quality and sustainable requirements. It collects information on labels and certification systems, develops KPIs regarding ESG standards, sustainability, health, and nutritional values, and incorporates them in a self-evaluation online multi-lingual tool.

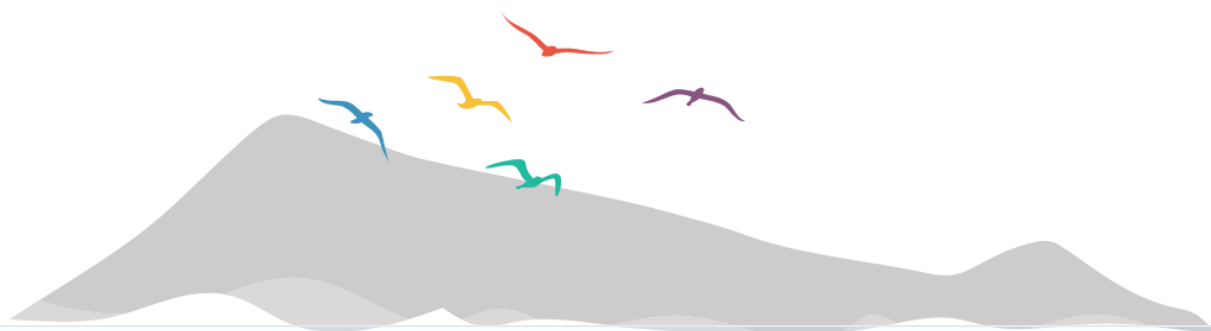
A very important ongoing project is also the „**Circular economy Strategies, action plans, and Solutions for agrifood systems transition in ADRION coastal communities – CIRCUS**“, funded by the Interreg V-B Adriatic-Ionian (ADRION) Programme 2021 – 2027. It supports the transition to a



circular economy of the agrifood system in the Adriatic and Ionian coastal communities by developing and testing strategies, action plans, and management solutions, increasing knowledge and capacity of quadruple helix stakeholders, and setting up a cooperation network after project completion. CIRCUS focuses on specific municipalities and allows them to connect with the governing bodies and reality of their coastal food systems, unlike a trans-national virtual platform such as INNOVAGRO platform from the project of the same name. Within the circular economy framework (to reduce food waste, to recover value from waste stream products, to create tourism products that celebrate seasonal variations, to connect restaurants to local farmers through a waste reduction and procurement framework) coastal EUSAIR destinations (which are facing growing ecological pressure due to seasonal peak tourism) may find circular economy solutions that directly contribute to a green tourism service framework as outlined in the revised EUSAIR Action Plan (European Commissioner, 2025a).

Moreover, the ongoing project „**Med Diet identities - from territorial networking to cluster organization - MedDietGo**“, funded by the Interreg VI-B EURO Mediterranean (EURO MED) Programme 2021 – 2027, is one of the most clearly defined cooperation projects focusing on the Mediterranean Diet, with the goal of creating networks of MD territories and establishing MD-based tourism identities in rural communities across multiple countries. It connects old values of the Mediterranean Diet with new and innovative tools to increase stakeholders' awareness about the potential of a Mediterranean Diet holistic approach to make Mediterranean inner regions more competitive in the global tourism offer. It transfers MD.net results through technological innovation and networking. Specifically, the approach of MedDiet Go! uses the legacy of MD-NET, but attempts to overcome several limitations of the previous project, notably information asymmetry in participation levels among territories that are more or less institutionally developed. The focus of this project is on rural communities as the primary source of Mediterranean Diet identity, rather than on destination brands or regional institutions. Through these types of cooperation, it is being recognised that durable MD tourism products grow out of living communities with active agricultural production rather than from marketing programs or institutional proclamation. The MedDietGo! project expanded the successful methodology from the previous project MD.net, by focusing on rural living, landscapes, innovations, and networking while also intentionally recognising the Mediterranean Diet destinations as tourism spots, as opposed to simply makers of healthy food products (Interreg EuroMED, 2026). This project family has a systemic interpretation of the diet as its strength (agriculture, hospitality, health, culture, and entrepreneurship) in one single framework. The limitation is also very informative. Transnational cluster can develop language, methods, and visibility, but there is no substitute for local governance. Clusters that are lacking institutional linkages between municipalities, producer groups, and tourism operators will only serve as an enabling framework, rather than a development mechanism.

The project „**Quality Network on Sustainable Tourism PLUS - QNeST PLUS**“ was implemented in 2022 under the Interreg V-B Adriatic-Ionian (ADRION) Programme 2014–2020. The QNeST PLUS promotes highly experiential tourism and sustainable quality products by reinforcing four routes: Wine and Olive Oil Routes, Routes of Merchants, Pilgrims and Travellers, Stone Routes, and Water Routes. The QNeST Plus project, and the previous project QNeST (Quality Network on Sustainable Tourism), used the concept of quality sustainable tourism in the Adriatic-Ionian region by using cultural heritage, experiential products, and transnational routes to differentiate their destinations (QNeST Plus, 2026). The different themes of the routes - which included olive oil and wine - were all quite similar to the Mediterranean Diet, even though they may not have been explicitly classified in this manner. While the

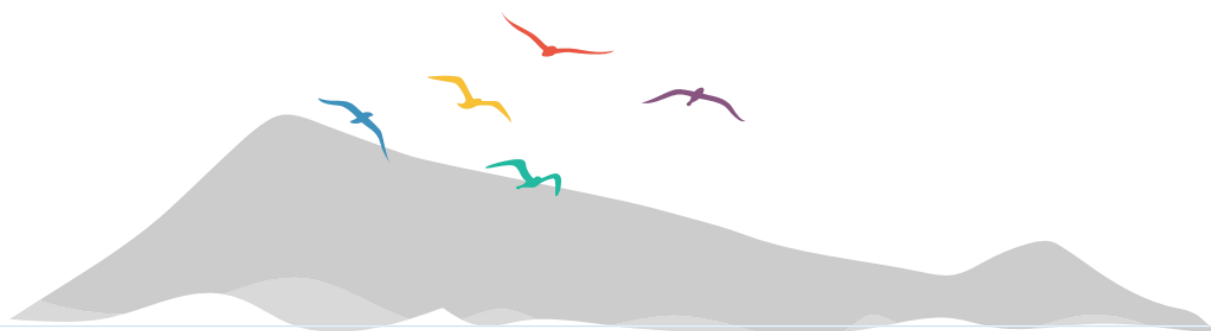


routes themselves are valuable, an equally valuable aspect of this project was the process used to co-design them. Multiple stakeholders from Puglia, Marche, Veneto, Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Greece, and other areas within the region participated in workshops and collaborative route-building activities. This collaborative process was important because tourism products between different countries will need to have similar standards for interpretation and quality of service. The QNeST experience also demonstrates the weak point of project-based partnerships, that is, the lack of preservation, marketing, and governance once financial support is withdrawn unless another entity is responsible for maintaining and promoting the project results. Moreover, the QNeST program is an example of how Interreg has the potential as a tool for cooperation, but it also highlights the limitations of this instrument. While the project fostered connections and shared knowledge and developed products or prototypes, embedding the outcomes into a long-standing governance structure, such as destination management organisations, regional tourism strategies, or national accreditation frameworks, could not be fully achieved by the project's completion date. This is a structural issue that arises from the nature of cooperation through projects, rather than a failure specific to QneST. Furthermore, it signifies an explicit need for EUSAIR to develop mechanisms for continuity so that successful project outcomes can endure beyond the funding lifecycle.

The project „**Promoting Silver tourism through valorisation of MED-diet and wellbeing routes in the CBC area - Silver Wellbeing**“ was implemented in 2021 under the Interreg V-A Greece – Italy Programme 2014 – 2020. It aimed to create and promote a touristic offer mainly addressed to “silver” public (over 65), bringing together territorial valorization and promotion with the Mediterranean diet and a correct and healthy lifestyle. It will exploit silver tourism as an asset of growth for the cross-border region.

The project „**Mediterranean Diet - When Brand Meets Peoples - MD.net**“ was implemented in 2022 by the Interreg VB Mediterranean Programme 2014 – 2020. It challenged the neglected and undeveloped opportunities of the Mediterranean Diet. Its main objective was to strengthen exploration of the Mediterranean Diet according to the UNESCO Med Diet Convention, blending comprehensive MD concepts with innovative tools and cooperation of Quadruple Helix stakeholders. In particular, MD-NET has played a major role, since it did not exclusively consider the Mediterranean Diet as a food system, but rather as a complete culture and tourism system. As a result, MD-NET's manuals and Euro-cluster methodology helped to convert the Mediterranean Diet's UNESCO designation into a practical tool for local economies, rural tourism, and collaboration among stakeholders (MD-NET, n.d.).

The project „**Development of an innovative network for the promotion of extroversion of agro-food companies in Adriatic - Ionian Area – INNOVAGRO PLUS**“ was implemented in 2020 by the Interreg V-B Adriatic-Ionian (ADRION) Programme 2014 – 2020. The project focused on the development of links and synergies between farmers, agro-food enterprises, research institutes and public authorities for the promotion of agro-food products' extroversion, agro-food companies' internationalization, and environmentally friendly farming practices. The project established a virtual business incubator model for agrofood tourism linkages that planned to assist agricultural producers in creating tourism-compatible products and services across borders. Its significance lies in identifying the willingness of the countries involved to cooperate on a cross-border basis and to establish a replicable methodology for the integration of agrofood tourism and agrobusiness that was accessible through the outputs of the project. The virtual incubator model was the first step in developing agrifood and agro

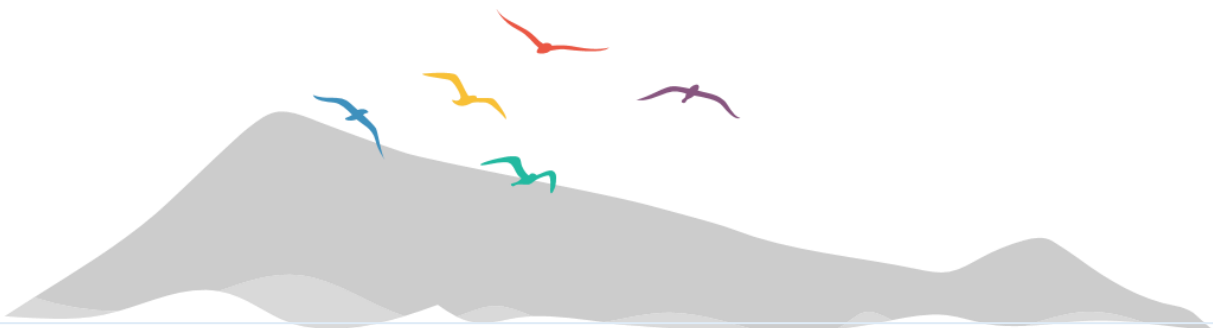


tourism linkages. However, the model did not generate the necessary on-the-ground relationships between agricultural producers and tourism operators that will provide the fundamental economic value of developing agro-food and tourism linkages. Digital platforms can serve as a means to introduce and connect individuals. However, building relationships and establishing stability through supply chain partnerships typically requires trust building, creating quality assurance processes, and working with logistical arrangements - processes which can be supported by but not completely replaced by virtual tools (INNOVAGRO Plus, 2026). This is particularly important for EUSAIR as many tourism initiatives based around the Mediterranean Diet have either not materialised or failed to reach fruition, not because there is a weakness with the heritage itself, but because small producers do not possess the managerial, digital, and commercial ability to enter tourism markets and derive optimal benefit for themselves. The incubator model is a way to address this bottleneck. At the same time, however, there is a risk that, if innovation support has been framed primarily as increasing the competitiveness of SMEs, there is a concomitant risk of diminished attention being afforded to heritage protection, community ownership of the product or service, and environmental thresholds. The lesson is not to abandon business incubation, this model should rather be embedded within a sustainable and cultural context.

The project „**Food as a means of dialogue in Mediterranean Contexts – SLOWMED**“ was implemented in 2015 under the Interreg Mediterranean Sea Basin ENPI CBC Programme 2007 – 2013. The project aimed to encourage the preservation of the Mediterranean culinary heritage, promote the recognition of food as a form of cultural and artistic expression, and foster nutrition education based on the Mediterranean culinary heritage – Mediterranean Diet.

The project „**MedDiet - Mediterranean Diet and enhancement of traditional foodstuff – MedDiet**“ was implemented in 2015 also under the Interreg Mediterranean Sea Basin ENPI CBC Programme 2007 – 2013, with the aim to raise the awareness of consumers about the importance of preserving healthy food traditions, increase awareness of consumers, in particular young people and children, and SMEs (particularly restaurants), about the benefits of the Mediterranean Diet.

Conclusively, the most structurally significant finding of a review of the project and existing synergies portfolio was the unequal participation of EUSAIR countries in transnational cooperation. EU member states, particularly Italy, Croatia, Greece, and Slovenia, account for the majority of project leadership, coordination capacity, and knowledge production within the framework of EUSAIR cooperation. The candidate countries participate as partners and often act with a high degree of motivation. However, the disparity of institutional capacity, language ability, technical capacity, and administrative bandwidth has generally developed a hierarchy of functionality within the partnerships. The asymmetry within EUSAIR occurred because of compounding structural obstacles that wedge between the EU and non-EU countries of the EUSAIR. These obstacles include, but are not limited to: weaker national institutions, less developed civil society organizations, lack of access to EU funding mechanisms, and lower compensation rates for qualified staff. If an honest evaluation of cooperation accomplishments under EUSAIR is to be conducted, it must recognize that the creation of such barriers makes meaningful transnational cooperation more costly to non-EU country actors. Future cooperation design must address this point through providing flexible formats for participation, support for technical assistance to assist candidate country partners, and investing in developing institutional capacity to allow candidates to participate equally in the cooperation process and to gain equal benefits through cooperation activities.



5.2.2. *Analysis on the level of EUSAIR countries*

Agritourism is considered the most direct link to achieve integration of the Mediterranean Diet into tourism. National models (in the sense of local and territorial models) provide a more tangible view of what integration actually looks like, as far as agritourism is concerned.

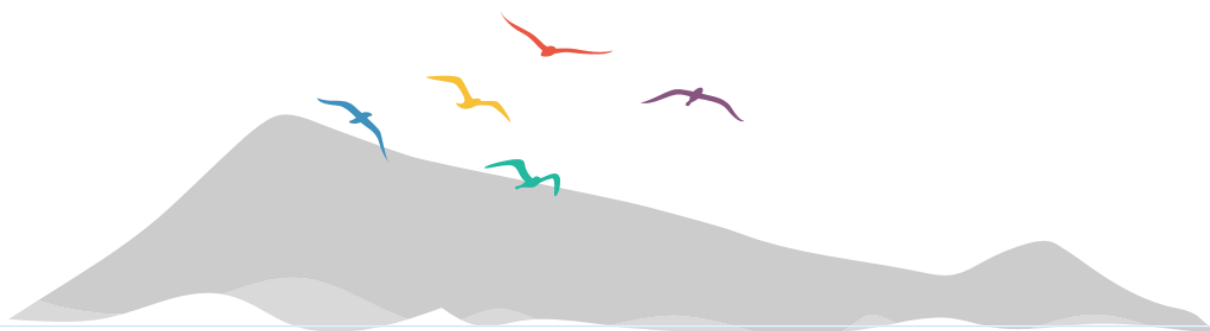
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Practical examples have shown that best-performing companies do not view the Mediterranean Diet as an added value and benefit to tourism. Through creating connections between eating and understanding a place, they restructure and embed how people think about agriculture, hospitality, heritage interpretation, and local governments. Therefore, the best-performing examples have three shared characteristics: they link a meal to where it was raised, they retain enough local value to keep it economically viable, and they create interpretive information as opposed to simply relying on generalised claims of authenticity. When any of these three characteristics are missing, tourism related to the Mediterranean Diet is more often than not about decorations (for example, using olive branches for promotional purposes), providing visitors with "traditional" menus that lack strong sourcing, or holding festivals celebrating Mediterranean Diet identity without changing the associated value chains.

Besides this approach to the Mediterranean Diet, another key element of success is overall alignment of actions with the relevant and national and EU policies, and implementational capacity. However, being aligned with relevant policies is not the same as having concrete implementation capacity. The critical question is whether EU and macro-regional objectives can be translated into local instruments that SMEs and communities can actually use. For example, funding calls often favour project consortia with administrative capacity, while the smallest producers and community organisations may struggle to participate due to criteria other than having an MD product or service. A scalable EUSAIR model should therefore include intermediary institutions: local action groups, chambers, cooperatives, tourism boards, development agencies and universities that can translate policy priorities into practical support.

EUSAIR evidence indicates the most convincing models have an experience that begins when the visitor leaves their origin, and continues post-experience. For example, a wine tasting is only an experience of the Mediterranean Diet if connected to the soil, grapes, production, managing landscape, seasonality, food pairing, livelihoods of those who provide the product, and how to travel responsibly. The culinary culture of the region is extremely diverse, much more than the currently existing database reveals. To fully understand and appreciate, each unique culinary experience requires the balancing of multiple variables from one location to another. These include the types of foods, textures of foods, how food was grown, prepared, consumed, and so on. Ultimately, the culinary experience is an amalgamation of all of these variables. The same goes for olive oil, fish, veggies, herbs, bread, cheeses and cured items. In mature areas (for example, of Italy, Greece, Croatia and Slovenia), this broad way of looking at food will be more and more common as we see tastings being linked to walking trails, mills or cellars, festivals, museums, producer stories as well as local accommodations. However, in emerging destinations, the food experience is largely still found in restaurants, or sometimes at events.

Italy is the best illustration of a successful modern regional ecosystem, where the institutions are the most advanced of any in the EUSAIR region. There are numerous means by which food heritage is integrated into tourism in Italy, such as through *agritourismo*, geographical indication (GI) consortia,

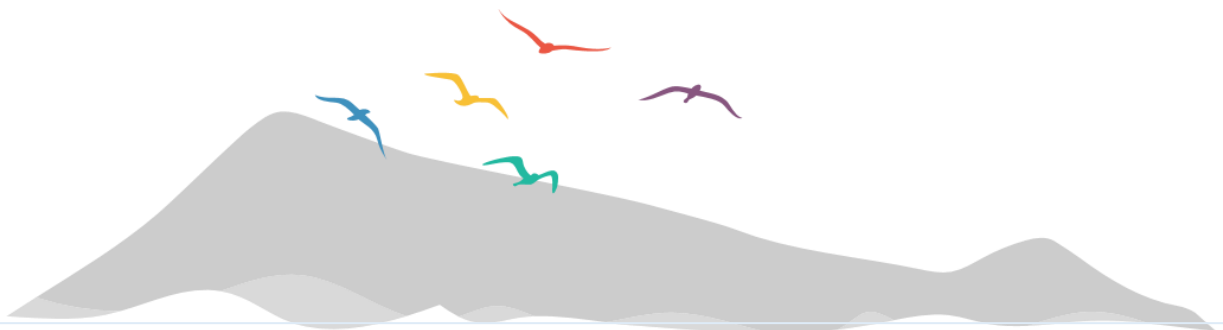


enoturismo, and olive oil routes, Slow Food networks, biodistricts (agribiodistricts) and regional tourism systems comprising many means of transferring food heritage to tourism.

The agritourism system in Italy is the most studied aspect of agritourism. Currently there are around 25.000 agritourism farms across Italy, which together generate estimated revenues of over EUR 1.5 billion on an annual basis by Eurostat aligned national surveys (ISTAT, 2022). This extensive agritourism model is sustainable in large part due to the existence of an agritourism governance architecture. The agritourism law of 1985 (and its subsequent regional legislative enactments) provided a legally binding definition of agritourism, specifically that only those agritourism businesses that produce food through agriculture will be allowed to operate as an agriturismo, thus assuring that agritourism businesses cannot become purely recreational (ie no longer connected to farming activities). This structural constraint, while often perceived as a regulatory burden by operators, uses the regulatory structure to preserve the structural integrity of the agritourism business. In most instances, farm stays in Italy are closely connected to farming and food production, which is why they can be excellent platforms for delivering Mediterranean Diet-based experiences, such as farm-to-table menus that use fresh ingredients from the farm or nearby, cooking classes that are based on the agricultural calendar, and experiences that include the opportunity to participate in olive oil pressing, grape picking, or traditional food preservation.

The agriturismo market in Tuscany, Umbria, and Cilento, Campania, have very different characteristics compared to the market for agriturismo in Sicily or Calabria, and this difference is primarily related to both the physical geography and the presence of different institutional infrastructures in these regions (active producer cooperatives, regional tourism destination management agencies, regional quality certification schemes, and culinary education systems). One of the particular regions that deserves special mention for its agriturismo, is Cilento, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and one of the original emblematic communities that received the Mediterranean Diet designation. In Cilento, the tourism model integrates three separate layers of tourism development that normally do not interact with each other - the designation of the natural landscape, the certification of food heritage, and the territorial gastronomic identity (olive oil, legumes, artisan cheeses, fishing heritage, and communal eating customs). This layered system creates a highly concentrated, tourist-oriented experience where food is not just a marketing incentive, but rather the primary reason to visit. The challenges for Cilento's agriturismo based tourism model are also very relevant. Despite the high level of cultural richness associated with agriturismo, the region has limited transportation links, limited capacity for accommodation, seasonality, and is unable to accommodate the number of international tourists who are often anticipating a much more modern, international, and accessible tourism experience than what the region currently provides (MD-NET Manual, n.d.). Heritage depth and market readiness are not generally coincidental. Therefore, if EUSAIR regions wish to mimic the cultural capital of the Cilento Region, they must commit significant resources to creating the practical infrastructure required to commercialise the-experience.

The Italian agritourism model is unique and effective in part because of its pluralism - rather than relying on a single national approach, the model is supported by a dense web of regional and local institutions. The model's weakness derives from the same reason: due to the size of the regions that receive the bulk of the tourism, there is a higher likelihood that standardisation will occur and certain regions may be excluded from premium-market tourism. Therefore, small agritourism producers may be left behind in

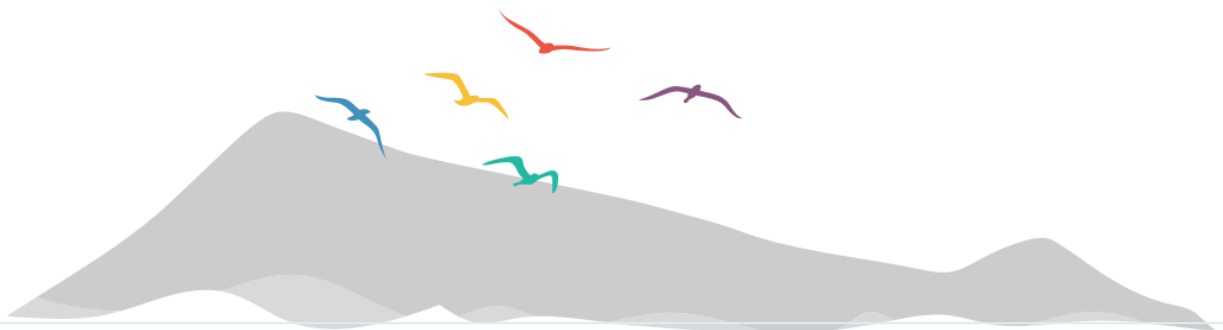


the gastronomy economy because all of the profits will be captured by larger producers, who have more bargaining power. Thus, the twofold lesson that the EUSAIR can learn from the Italian agritourism model is twofold - one lesson is that institutional density is important, while the second lesson is the need for vigilance regarding whoever takes a disproportionate amount of value from the production of a food experience. What makes the Italian model of agritourism analytically significant, rather than simply large, is the different rates at which each of the regions has matured compared to each other.

In **Greece**, the nature of the culinary tourism experience differs from that of Italy, since it includes elements of internationally recognised cuisine, landscapes identified with olive oil production, quick access to island destinations with strong, independent rural communities and cultures, and agricultural producers with a long history of hospitality. Tourism based on the Mediterranean Diet has significant potential for development in Greece due to the fact that the MD is already a prominent part of Greece's identity. The challenge of improving Greece's culinary tourism experience is shifting the focus away from the "familiar trio" of sea, sun, and taverna and creating more structured experiences around food systems that include olive harvesting, traditional varieties of seeds, mountain products, fishing, women's cooperatives, culinary schools, and opportunities for cultural enrichment in rural areas during low season. Greece has the opportunity to illustrate how coastal tourism systems can be reconfigured to be balanced through MD/culinary heritage through the connections made between the above-mentioned food systems. If no connection or link is made between the above-mentioned food systems, then MD and culinary heritage will continue to be associated with mass tourism only in terms of its current branding and product category.

The evolution of Greece in the development of MD-based tourism has a different but complementary logic, whereby the MD-based tourism in Greece has developed to date through a combination of health traditions, expertise, and investments. A variety of ethnocentric gastronomy tourism products have been developed in the MD region of Greece through the development of multiple thematic routes, the establishment of PDO products, the development of regional food identities, and increasing agritourism investment. The combination of Greece's unique food products, including both olive oil and wine, has created a strong foundation for developing a business model for MD-based tourism in Greece that includes: exceptional coastal tourism, an agricultural system that is about half in the traditional peasant production form, and an established coastal tourism system that can provide food and wine resources from the entire MD region of Greece. Territorially anchored Mediterranean diet tourism products rely on the Kalamata olive oil PDO area of the Peloponnese, the agricultural landscapes of Crete, and the island micro-economies of Lesbos, Chios, and Kefalonia, to provide real economic benefits to local communities. The success of the examples from the aforementioned areas lies in the established links between landscape governance and food heritage; that is, olive grove management, soil conservation, and biodiversity are linked to the tourism product design. As such, tourism experiences can achieve ecological credibility and visual richness from these linkages (through several EU LIFE and LEADER funded initiatives in the Peloponnese and Crete).

As the institutional fragmentation between agriculture (Ministry of Rural Development and Food), tourism (Greek Tourism Organisation and equivalent regional offices), and cultural heritage authorities in Greece presents a structural challenge for MD tourism, this issue is not limited to Greece but is problematic due to the complex multi-tiered nature of Greece's administrative geography. Coordination of cross-sectoral initiatives tends to occur on a project basis instead of through permanent governance

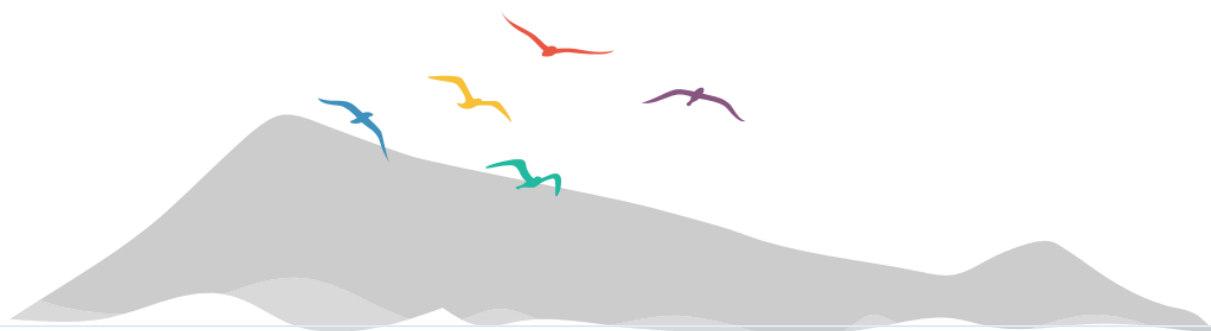


frameworks, resulting in the most complete examples of integrating food, agriculture, and tourism being through time-specific EU-funded initiatives rather than enduring institutional frameworks (Cavicchi, 2023). Since 2015, the development of gastronomy tourism has produced many new small business owners who provide curated local food experiences, olive oil production, wine tours, food markets, and others. The combined economic activity of these individuals has led to the emergence of a new gastronomy tourism sector that requires governance.

Croatia represents another distinctive example. The recognition of the Mediterranean Diet by UNESCO, the strong visibility of Adriatic destinations, and the developing gastronomy of Istria, Dalmatia, and the islands combine to form the basis of tourism. Wine routes, olive oils, protected products, fishing traditions, and farm stays are now part of the tourism vocabulary. It is not that there is a lack of practice, but rather a lack of complete integration – for example, coastal restaurants promoting local cuisine with inconsistent supply chains, inland and island producers with excellent products but no access to tourism outlets, and the actual interpretation of local products and producers being determined by individual entrepreneurs rather than as part of a destination-wide system. In this way, Croatia is well positioned to serve as a bridge within EUSAIR: having sufficient experience to provide other partners with knowledge, but having sufficient proximity to the challenges of integrating to understand the needs of less developed partner regions.

In Croatia, agritourism has been established through the development of wine and olive oil roads and agricultural-based gastronomy in the Istrian, Dalmatian, and island areas. As the most recent member of the EU to achieve UNESCO's Mediterranean Diet inscribed-community status, and as the country that has rapidly developed an organic agriculture sector, has participated in a large number of EU projects, and has sustained growth in demand for coastal tourism, Croatia provides a real example of the MD tourism link and a case study of the challenges between concentration on the coast and marginalisation in the hinterlands. The Dalmatian Coast of Croatia - olive groves, stone villages, fishing ports, and wine routes - offers some of the most visually stunning MD landscapes within the greater EUSAIR region. Additionally, the Ministry of Tourism and Sport of the Republic of Croatia is building on its investment in gastronomy as one of the pillars of its national destination strategy to provide a "story" framework. EUSAIR has developed the Gastronomy Tourism Handbook in 2023 under the guidance of the Ministry of Tourism and Sport of the Republic of Croatia as an institutional investment. The handbook is an effective governance tool by contextualising gastronomy tourism as the driving force behind EUSAIR's four primary goals for increased diversity and reducing seasonality.

On the other hand, **Slovenia** shows that the principles of the Mediterranean Diet can be put into practice, even though it does not have the Mediterranean Diet as the predominant heritage label for its country. Slovenia has uniquely built a compelling identity as a food and tourism destination based on Mediterranean Diet-aligned principles, but it does not hold UNESCO designation for Mediterranean Diet. Instead, the Slovenian Cuisine brand developed by the Slovenian Tourist Board, represents a diverse culinary heritage combined of three unique geographic regions: Alpine, Pannonian, and Mediterranean. Furthermore, by the explicit integration of sustainable principles into the promotion of Slovenian gastronomy (approximately 10% of UAA is organic, systems for eco-certification for tourism operators are in place, seasonal menus are produced with producers from the same geographic region), it is evident that the Mediterranean Diet branding framework can be appropriated (while allowing for the retention of their own cultural uniqueness), rather than adopted by countries on the edges of the



Mediterranean geographic area, as a strict template who have an opportunity to participate credibly in a collective regional identity due to the standards defined by the Eurostat database (Eurostat, 2022).

The EU country candidates in EUSAIR represent another level of analysis - **Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and North Macedonia** - all have rich culinary traditions that contain Mediterranean, Ottoman/Balkan, and mountainous influences. This hybridity could represent a comparative advantage, but the institutional tools for turning food heritage into tourism value - protected designation of origin, producer associations, route governance systems, digital booking, visitor interpretation, accessible facilities, and ongoing training - are either less developed or applied unevenly across the region. This implies that their requirements for cooperation will vary, as they will require technical assistance, peer-to-peer learning, small-scale investments, and inclusion in transnational networks beyond simply being offered promotional opportunities.

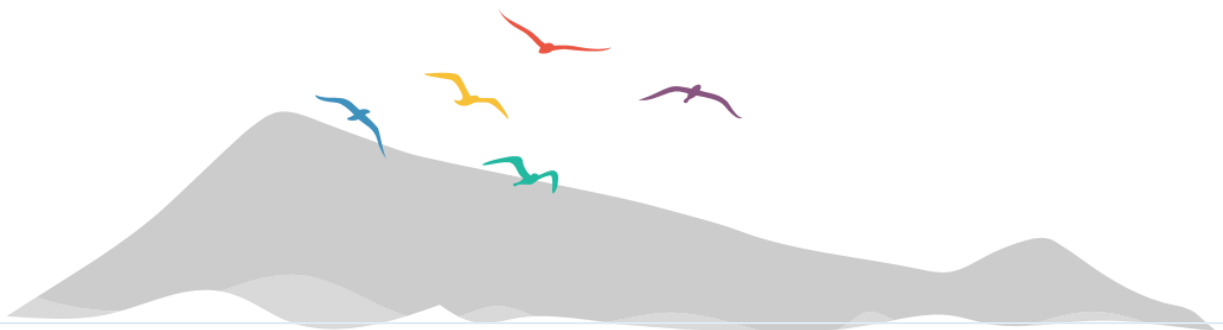
As indicated by the candidate EUSAIR countries, viable models are those that link natural assets (landscape) and traditional food cultures with EU pre-accession funding, even when market development is limited. **Montenegro's** mountain and coastal agritourism sector has benefited from IPARD support and INTERREG collaboration to develop a small but rapidly expanding inventory of farm-based lodging and gastronomy tied to its unique production (olive oil, cheese, and smoked fish).

The Gjirokastra UNESCO heritage site on **Albania's** Mediterranean Riviera highlights a locality where, under the appropriate governance framework, a tourism product based upon the confluence of landscape heritage, food culture, and tourism infrastructure investment will create an MD international tourism product of true distinction.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's traditional cuisine has a rich blend of Mediterranean and Ottoman influences and has therefore been the subject of academic interest within the context of its potential for tourism growth. However, traditional Bosnian cuisine has little interaction with either destination management systems or international market networks. The academic literature supporting the contribution of Balkan traditional foods to tourism is abundant. However, the difference between academic recognition and the development of market-ready products demands that national and regional institutions provide assistance, which most of the regions do not have the capacity to do independently.

In **Serbia**, Pirot, Serbia's most heavily-promoted tourist destination for food and craft products from a unique, local identity, has developed a significant marketing strategy for its tourism worldwide based on three key gastronomic products: Pirot ironed sausage, Pirot kashkaval cheese, and Pirot carpets. In all three cases, the products are strongly associated with Pirot's location, traditions, and daily living. Tourists visiting Pirot will not only have the opportunity to sample and purchase these products, but they will also meet the producers of the products and learn about them - they will be able to visit the workshops where the products are created, they will learn about traditional crafting processes, and they will be able to participate in local cultural activities. The goal for all stakeholders involved (including schools, small producers, tourism businesses, artisans, and the local community) is to support the long-term sustainability of this heritage.

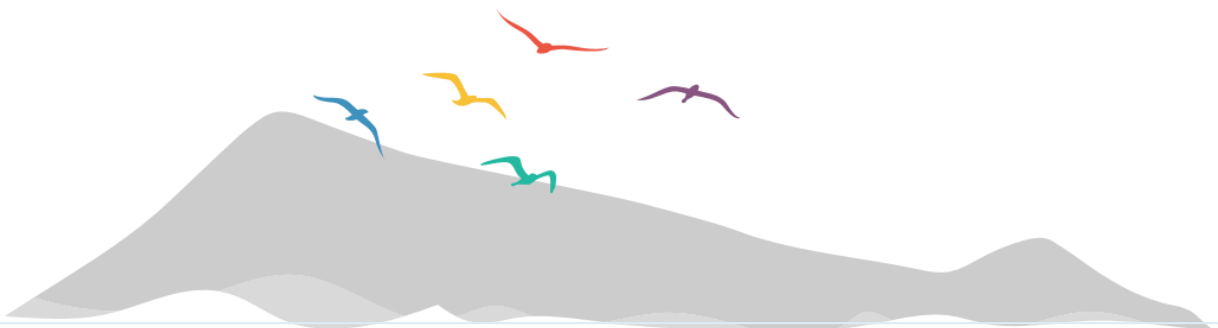
In **North Macedonia**, the tourism model is evident through several initiatives focused on connecting local food, rural life, and community-based experiences. In Prespa, for example, the Apple Route



connects visitors from the region to local orchards, family farms, tastings and other simple (and authentic) farm-to-table experiences. This project provides opportunities for farmers and small family-run businesses to earn additional income, while highlighting the environmental value of the ecosystem in Prespa to all visitors. Similarly, Slow Food Ohrid follows the same logic as The Apple Route, but places more emphasis on local gastronomy, traditional recipes, responsible sourcing of ingredients, and cooperation among producers, fishermen, restaurants, and tourism operators. Collectively, these two examples illustrate how food can serve a purpose other than simply providing a tourism product. Namely, they can also serve the purpose of protecting local identity, providing support for small-scale producers, increasing the involvement of women-owned/family-run businesses in the supply chain, and creating tourism experiences that are authentic and tied to the place.

San Marino, as a separate context, has changed the logic of intervention that would be necessary for large Mediterranean Diet territorial systems to develop like those of Italy, Greece, or Croatia. Instead, San Marino can create small-scale niche experiences highlighting the intersection of heritage, local products, small-state identity, and the regional food landscapes surrounding it.

For micro-territories, cooperation is networking rather than scale - how a small place integrates with broader routes, quality narratives, and knowledge networks while remaining distinctive. This applies to EUSAIR as a whole. All the territories in a macroregion do not have to do everything the same way - they must be visible, integrated, and complementary within a common approach to development.

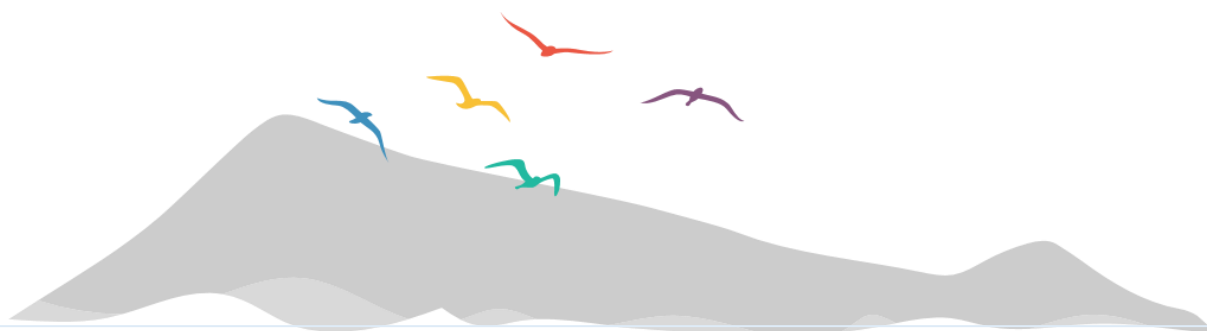


5.3. Good practice in EUSAIR countries – national examples

For deeper analysis, examples of good practice were selected from each EUSAIR country, according to the 16 criteria grouped into four (4) categories: (1) strategic and governance cooperation, (2) sustainability and green transition criteria, (3) cultural and gastronomy identity, and (4) economic and tourism development.

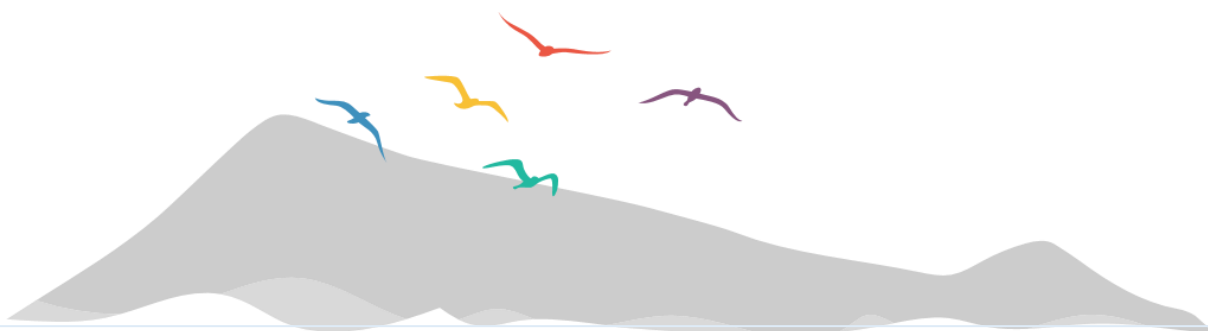
Table 3. overview of the methodology behind the criteria for selection of good practice examples of the Mediterranean Diet in EUSAIR countries

CRITERIA CATEGORY	CRITERIUM	SELECTION METHODOLOGY
Pillar A: Strategic, Governance & Cooperation	Alignment with the EUSAIR Strategy	Initiatives and projects funded under EUSAIR or through European Union programmes that support the implementation of the EUSAIR Strategy.
	Cross-Sector Cooperation (Tourism, Agriculture, Culture)	The level of integration and partnership among different sectors involved in the development of the initiative.
	Potential for Interregional and Transnational Cooperation	The possibility of integrating the initiative into wider networks, thematic routes, or projects at the regional and international level.
	Transferability of the Model to Other Regions (Replicability)	The flexibility to adapt and apply the model or approach in other regions or contexts within the EUSAIR area.
	Knowledge Transfer and Capacity Building	The initiative's contribution to stakeholder education, knowledge transfer, and capacity building in the field of sustainable food production and gastronomic tourism.
Pillar B: Sustainability, Green Transition & Inclusion	Sustainability and Environmental Protection	The initiative's contribution to preserving natural resources, reducing negative environmental impacts, and promoting sustainable practices in tourism and food production.
	Contribution to Sustainable Food Systems	The initiative's connection with local food production, short supply chains, and the promotion of organic or sustainable agriculture.
	Contribution to the Green Transition of Tourism	The initiative's contribution to the development of sustainable tourism products, reducing the ecological footprint, and promoting responsible tourism.
	Inclusiveness and Accessibility	The initiative's contribution to ensuring access to gastronomic and tourism experiences for different social groups, including persons with disabilities, older people, and other vulnerable groups.
Pillar C: Heritage &	Authenticity and Preservation of Cultural Heritage	The initiative's contribution to safeguarding and promoting local gastronomic traditions, cultural practices, and community identity.



Territorial Identity	Valorisation of Local Products and Quality Labels	The level of promotion of local products, quality labels (e.g. Geographical Indication, Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI)), and the contribution to their integration into the tourism offer.
	Contribution to Regional Identity and Destination Branding	The initiative's contribution to strengthening destination recognition through the promotion of local products, traditions, and gastronomic identity.
	Educational and Promotional Value	The initiative's contribution to educating visitors and local communities about gastronomy, cultural heritage, and sustainable development.
Pillar D: Innovation & Local Economy	Innovation in the Tourism Product	The introduction of new approaches, models, or concepts linking gastronomy, culture, and tourism.
	Economic Contribution to the Local Community	The initiative's potential to generate income, create jobs, and stimulate local economic development.
	Involvement of the Local Community	The level of participation of local stakeholders, including producers, entrepreneurs, civil society, and local institutions, in the development and implementation of the initiative.

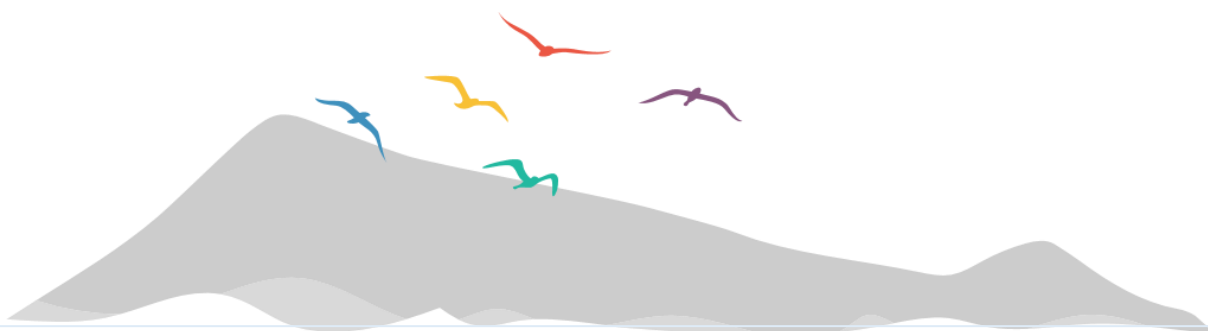
These examples of good practice from each EUSAIR country are presented below.



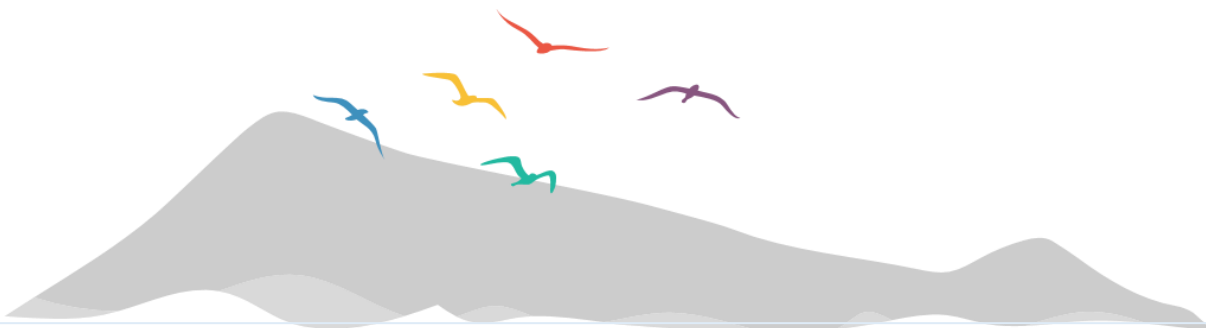
5.3.1. Croatia

INFORMATION ABOUT THE GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE - 1	
Name of the project/initiative	House of Istrian Olive Oil – Museum Olei Histriae
Location/region/country	City of Pula, Istria County, Croatia
Type of initiative	▪ Gastronomy / food tourism initiative ▪ Cooperation between tourism and agri-food sectors ▪ Education / training programmes linking tourism and agriculture
Short description of activities	The Olive Oil Museum in Pula is the only Croatian interpretive centre dedicated to presenting olive oil in a comprehensive way, covering its history, chemistry, culture, and gastronomy. Through its permanent exhibition, the museum showcases more than 2,000 years of Istrian olive-growing tradition — from Roman oil production techniques to modern cold-pressing methods — using artefacts, multimedia, and interactive displays. Visitors take part in an educational tour that explores the history of olive cultivation, presses, tools, technological development, and the role of olive oil in the Mediterranean diet and health. Special emphasis is placed on professional sensory tastings, where visitors learn how to distinguish quality oils, recognise aromatic profiles, and understand the chemical and health properties of extra virgin olive oil. The interpretation has a strong gastronomic focus, linking olive oil with local dishes, terroir characteristics, and the UNESCO-recognised values of the Mediterranean diet. The museum also connects visitors with local producers through a shop offering the widest selection of premium Istrian olive oils in Croatia, as well as truffles and other indigenous products. Thanks to its quality and authenticity, it has been featured in international guidebooks such as Rick Steves, Le Routard, Lonely Planet, and DuMont, making it one of the most recognised gastro-interpretive centres in Southeast Europe.
Main stakeholders involved	House of Istrian Olive Oil, local olive growers and olive mills, tourism institutions of the City of Pula, local guides, and educators.
Contribution to sustainable tourism – brief description of how the initiative contributes to sustainability, local development or preservation of cultural heritage	▪ Promotes short supply chains and local family farms ▪ Raises awareness of the Mediterranean diet as a sustainable model ▪ Encourages cultural and gastronomic education ▪ Creates a year-round tourism product independent of the seasonal cycle
Link to a website or additional information	https://oleumhistriae.com/

INFORMATION ABOUT THE GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE - 2	
Name of the project/initiative	Museum of Salt & House of Salt
Location/region/country	

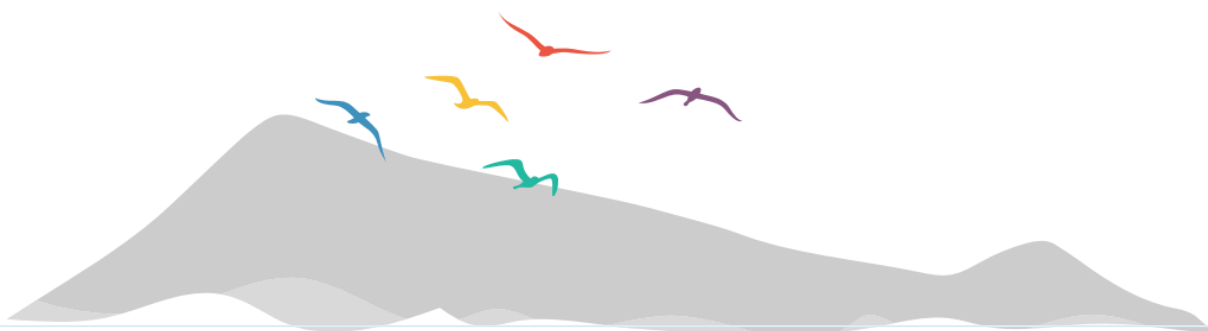


City of Nin, Zadar County, Croatia
Type of initiative
▪ Gastronomy / food tourism initiative ▪ Cooperation between tourism and agri-food sectors ▪ Education / training programmes linking tourism and agriculture
Short description of activities
Nin Saltworks is a unique Croatian interpretive centre dedicated to the tradition and culture of sea salt, with a documented production history spanning more than 1,500 years. The entire saltworks functions as a “living museum,” while the Salt Museum and House of Salt serve as interpretation spaces featuring artefacts, old tools, black-and-white photographs, interactive models, and documentary films about traditional salt production. Visitors can experience educational tours explaining the natural process of salt formation through the sun, sea, and wind, as well as the tradition of manual harvesting that has remained unchanged to this day. The saltworks organises annual events such as the Salt Festival and Open House Days, where visitors can participate in salt harvesting, creative workshops, interpretation programmes, and guided tours of the salt fields. The centre highlights the importance of salt in local history, gastronomy, and Mediterranean culture — including tastings of “flower of salt,” the most valued form of sea salt, which is hand-harvested and environmentally friendly, and plays an important role in Mediterranean cuisine. Thanks to the preservation of natural processes, rich biodiversity (more than 200 bird species), and the absence of surrounding industry, Nin Saltworks is an outstanding example of sustainable management of cultural and natural resources for tourism purposes.
Main stakeholders involved
Nin Saltworks, the Salt Museum, the local community of Nin, tourism boards of Zadar and Nin, local craftspeople, and producers.
Contribution to sustainable tourism – brief description of how the initiative contributes to sustainability, local development or preservation of cultural heritage
▪ Integrates natural and cultural heritage into educational tourism ▪ Promotes traditional and environmentally friendly salt production ▪ Empowers the local community through festivals and thematic programmes ▪ Encourages interpretation of gastronomy connected to the Mediterranean diet
Link to a website or additional information
https://www.solananin.hr/hr/o-nama/muzej-i-kuca-soli/



5.3.2. Greece

INFORMATION ABOUT THE GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE	
Name of the project/initiative	
Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe: a) Iter Vitis - Greek Network as part of the Cultural Route Network “Iter Vitis” Additional Greek Good Practices: ▪ Greek Breakfast – Initiative of the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels	
Location/region/country	
a) The Iter Vitis Cultural route of the Council of Europe (coE) is based in Italy, Sicily . The Greek Network includes: Region of Peloponnese, Region of Crete, Region of North Macedonia, Region of Western Greece. b) Greece – Nationwide implementation (with regional adaptations across regions such as Crete, Peloponnese, Cyclades, Epirus, Macedonia, etc.) c) Greek Breakfast: Greece – Nationwide implementation (regional adaptations across multiple regions including Crete, Peloponnese, Cyclades, Epirus, Macedonia)	
Type of initiative	
▪ Integration of Mediterranean Diet into tourism products ▪ Gastronomy / food tourism initiative ▪ Thematic routes or cross-border cooperation ▪ Cooperation between tourism and agri-food sectors ▪ Innovation platforms / Living labs / clusters ▪ Education / training programmes linking tourism and agriculture	
Short description of activities	
The Cultural Routes are grass-roots networks promoting the principles which underlie all the work and values of the Council of Europe: human rights, cultural democracy, cultural diversity, mutual understanding and exchanges across boundaries. EUSAIR countries are involved a) The culture of the vine, wine-making and viticultural landscapes are an important part of European and Mediterranean food culture. b) The Culture of Olive: ▪ The olive tree is a symbol of peace and cultural heritage, deeply rooted in the Mediterranean but present across five continents. ▪ Olive growing supports millions of rural families, providing livelihoods, food security and environmental protection. ▪ Olive oil and table olives are essential to the Mediterranean diet, recognised for their nutritional and preventive health benefits. ▪ Olive groves contribute to the mitigation of climate change, thanks to their capacity to sequester atmospheric CO₂. ▪ The sector plays a strategic role in the global agri-food system, with EUSAIR member countries representing a remarkable quantity of global production. Particularly Italy, Greece, Croatia, and Slovenia—are pivotal to global olive oil production, contributing significantly to the EU's 67% share of world output (https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/farming/crop-productions-and-plant-based-products/olive-oil_en) The “Greek Breakfast” initiative operates as a nationwide cooperation framework linking hotels with local producers, promoting regional products and strengthening short supply chains. Main activities: ▪ Interregional networking and transnational cooperation, such as joint thematic routes, quality labels, cross-border initiatives and collaborations or platforms for sharing knowledge and good practices. ▪ Greek Breakfast: The initiative integrates the Mediterranean Diet into the tourism experience through the provision of locally sourced, seasonal breakfast products in hotels. It promotes collaboration	



between tourism enterprises and local producers, supports PDO/PGI products, and enhances authenticity and community involvement. It has been widely adopted across Greece and serves as a best practice of tourism–agri-food integration.

Main stakeholders involved

A) The Iter Vitis Network: The main stakeholders of the Iter Vitis Cultural Route within the EUSAIR region are a diverse mix of public authorities, wine industry associations, and academic institutions, primarily coordinated by the European Iter Vitis Federation. Key actors include national tourism bodies (Greece, Croatia, Italy), local municipalities, and specialized research institutes focusing on viticultural heritage and sustainable tourism.

Core Stakeholders in EUSAIR (Adriatic-Ionian Region):

- **Iter Vitis Federation & Management:** The Federation is based in Italy, Sicily and leads the international network.
- **Regional & Public Authorities:**
 - **Greek Network:** Region of Central Macedonia, Directorate of Tourism; Ministry of Tourism; Municipalities of Naoussa, Kastoria, Aigialeia, and Nemea. Emblematic participation of The **Captain Vassilis and Carmen Constantakopoulos Foundation** (Messinia/Kalamata city) - <https://www.cvf.gr/en/foundation/>
 - **Croatia:** Croatian Chamber of Commerce and local wine tourism partners.
 - **Other:** Involvement from Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia (as part of wider Danube/EUSAIR linkages).
- **Cultural & Tourism Operators:** Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki (Greece), Parnonas – Malvasia Myth Project, and various local cultural associations.
- **Industry & Research Representatives:** Association of Winemakers of North Greece, and various technical committees managing vineyard research and cultural mapping.
- **EUSAIR/EU Support Structure:** The Routes4U Project (joint program between the Council of Europe and the European Commission) supported the integration of Iter Vitis into the macro-regional development strategy.

These stakeholders collaborate on developing wine tourism products that align with EUSAIR's sustainable tourism goals and heritage preservation efforts.

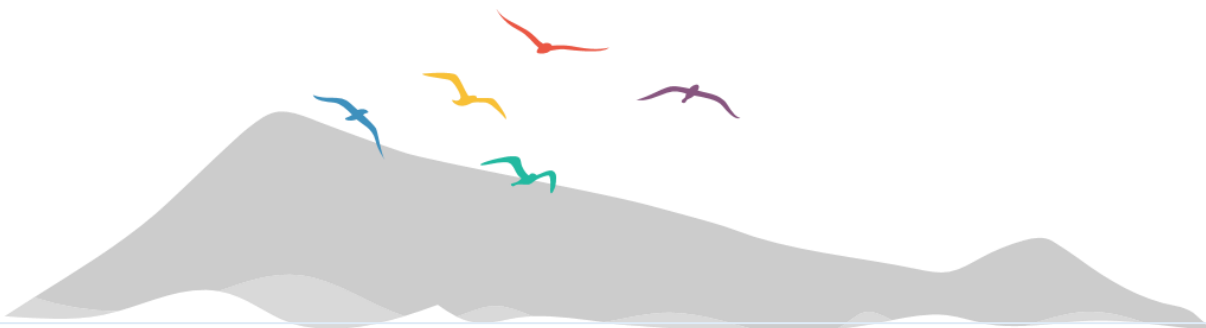
b) Greek Breakfast (Hellenic Chamber of Hotels)

Key stakeholders and roles:

- **Hellenic Chamber of Hotels (HCH)** – Lead coordinator; design and management of the initiative; development of standards and certification criteria; national promotion
- **Hotel enterprises** – Implementation of the Greek Breakfast concept; integration of local products into tourism services; direct interface with visitors
- **Local producers and agricultural cooperatives** – Supply of certified local products; preservation of traditional production methods; participation in local supply chains
- **Regional and local authorities** – Facilitation of partnerships; promotion of regional identity; alignment with regional tourism and agri-food strategies
- **Chambers of commerce and development agencies** – Business support, networking and capacity building
- **Chefs and gastronomy experts** – Design of menus; interpretation of Mediterranean Diet principles; innovation in local gastronomy
- **Tourism organizations and destination management bodies** – Promotion of the initiative; integration into destination branding and marketing

Contribution to sustainable tourism – brief description of how the initiative contributes to sustainability, local development or preservation of cultural heritage

a) Iter Vitis is a Council of Europe Cultural Route dedicated to preserving European and Mediterranean wine heritage by promoting sustainable, cultural tourism. It contributes to local development by connecting small-



scale wineries with tourism, preserving rural biodiversity, and protecting historic landscapes and ancient grape varieties from globalization.

Key Contributions to Sustainability and Heritage:

- **Sustainable Tourism & Development:** Iter Vitis focuses on experiential, "slow" tourism, encouraging visitors to explore rural areas rather than overcrowded hubs. It provides economic benefits to rural communities and small producers by promoting lesser-known wine regions.
- **Cultural Heritage Preservation:** The initiative documents and protects ancient wine-making techniques, historical vineyards, and traditional viticultural landscapes. It works to safeguard tangible (cellars, equipment) and intangible (traditions, oral history) heritage linked to wine.
- **Biodiversity & Education:** Iter Vitis promotes the conservation of traditional and indigenous vine biodiversity and conducts workshops and educational projects to teach young people about agricultural traditions.
- **Contribution to the Mediterranean Diet:** By highlighting the cultural and health aspects of wine as part of a balanced diet (a pillar of the Mediterranean diet), it promotes a sustainable and healthy lifestyle approach.

Iter Vitis works in partnership with local authorities and NGOs to ensure that tourism supports, rather than degrades, the local environment and culture.

b) The "Greek Breakfast" initiative represents a scalable and nationally recognized model for integrating the Mediterranean Diet into tourism services, generating strong impacts across economic, social and environmental dimensions.

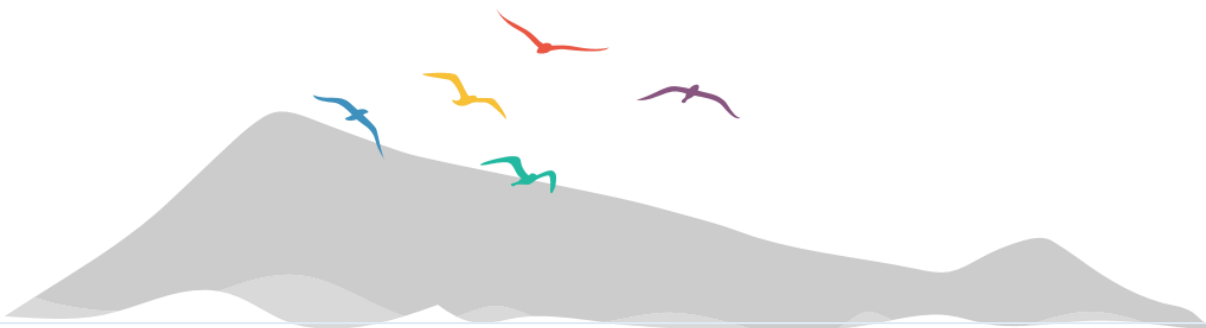
Key contributions:

- **Local economic development and value chains:**
Strengthens short supply chains by connecting hotels directly with local producers, increasing demand for regional products and supporting small-scale agricultural businesses.
- **Authenticity and destination identity:**
Enhances the tourism experience by offering authentic, place-based gastronomy, reinforcing regional identity and differentiation of tourism products.
- **Cultural heritage preservation:**
Promotes the Mediterranean Diet as a living cultural practice, preserving traditional recipes, local ingredients and culinary knowledge.
- **Environmental sustainability:**
Encourages the use of local and seasonal products, reducing transportation needs and environmental footprint, while supporting sustainable agricultural practices.
- **Social cohesion and community involvement:**
Fosters collaboration between tourism enterprises and local communities, strengthening trust, cooperation and shared value creation.
- **Policy relevance and replicability:**
Serves as a best practice model that can be replicated across Mediterranean and EUSAIR regions, aligning with EU priorities on sustainable tourism and food systems.

Link to a website or additional information

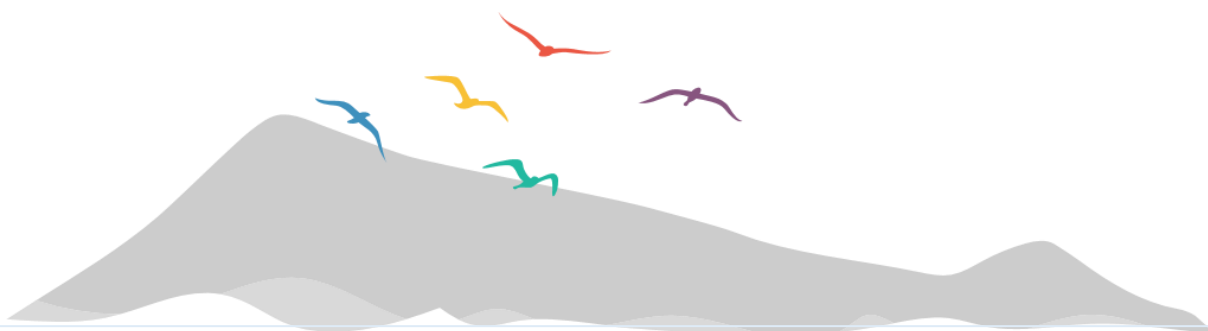
A) Iter Vitis: <https://itervitis.eu/>

B) Greek Breakfast: <http://greekbreakfast.gr>



5.3.3. *Italy*

INFORMATION ABOUT THE GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE	
Name of the project/initiative	MedDiet Go – Mediterranean Diet Goes Global is a project funded by the Interreg Euro-MED 2021-2027 programme
Location/region/country	- Official Chamber of Commerce Industry Services and Navigation of Seville (Lead Partner) – Spain - Mediterranean Diet Foundation – Spain - Institute for Comprehensive Development Solutions – Slovenia - Puglia Region – Italy - Company for Research Education Innovation and Development of the North Aegean Region S.A. – Greece - Alentejo Regional Development Agency – Portugal - Chamber of Commerce and Industry Vratsa - Bulgaria
Type of initiative	- Integration of Mediterranean Diet into tourism products - Gastronomy / food tourism initiative - Thematic routes or cross-border cooperation - Cooperation between tourism and agri-food sectors - Innovation platforms / Living labs / clusters - Inclusive gastronomy or accessible tourism - Education / training programmes linking tourism and agriculture
Short description of activities	- The project focuses on capitalizing on the results of the previous MD.net project to promote the Mediterranean Diet as a sustainable lifestyle. It supports rural communities in enhancing their cultural heritage—such as landscapes, agricultural techniques, and culinary traditions—to position these territories as authentic and sustainable international tourist destinations. - A core objective is the consolidation of the Med Diet Euro-Cluster. This network connects rural economies to face global market challenges through a common strategy, cross-border initiatives, and the use of digital tools to promote shared values across the Mediterranean basin. - MedDiet Go utilizes participatory governance models, specifically through Living Lab Workshops. These platforms facilitate direct interaction between local and international stakeholders (farmers, tour operators, and public authorities) to co-create innovative solutions at the intersection of food and tourism. - As part of the broader Sustainable Tourism Mission, the project emphasizes community involvement and social cohesion. The focus is on co-designing gastronomic experiences that are inclusive, ensuring that the Mediterranean heritage is accessible and beneficial to local inhabitants and diverse visitor groups alike. - The project focuses on knowledge transfer through the establishment of One-Stop-Shops (information and support hubs). These initiatives provide capacity building for stakeholders to improve mutual understanding between the agri-food and tourism sectors, ensuring that territorial resources are managed effectively.
Main stakeholders involved	- Local Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), farmers, and producers - Tour operators, travel agencies, and guides - Local and regional administrations - Universities and research centres - Local Communities and Citizens



Contribution to sustainable tourism – brief description of how the initiative contributes to sustainability, local development or preservation of cultural heritage

MedDiet Go aims to foster Mediterranean lifestyle and rural landscape as a tourism opportunity through innovation and networking, promoting the territories of the Mediterranean Diet (and its healthy products) as international and sustainable tourism destinations.

By transferring the main achievements of the MD.net Project, the project wants to expand stakeholder adherence to the values of the Mediterranean Diet. It also aims at consolidating the Med Diet Euro-Cluster to connect rural economies and face the challenges of the global market.

The project contributes to sustainable tourism and local development by transforming the Mediterranean Diet from a simple dietary regime into an integrated tourism experience that enhances rural areas and cultural heritage.

It supports local small businesses and agricultural producers by integrating them into a transnational network (Med Diet Euro-Cluster), fostering job creation and countering rural depopulation.

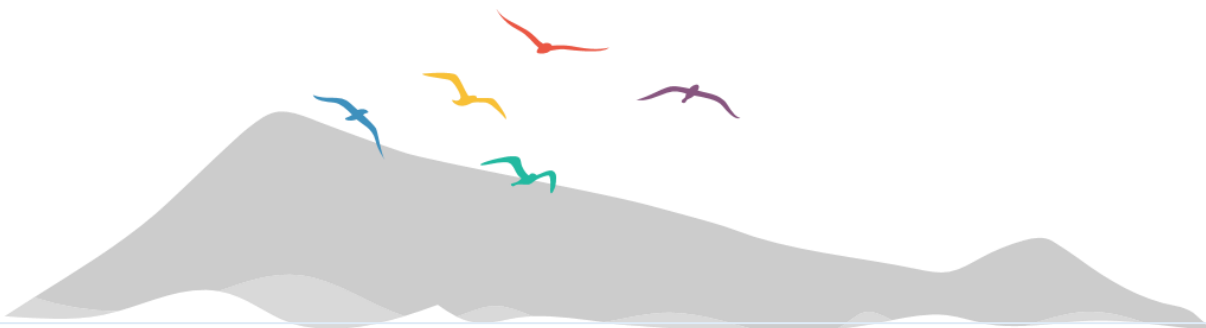
Through Living Labs, it engages local stakeholders (agriculture, transport, culture) to co-create new services that meet global market challenges.

The INNESCARE Living Labs (such as those held in Puglia Region) are co-creation workshops designed to promote the Mediterranean Diet as a driver for sustainable development. It is a participatory and inclusive process that actively involves citizens, businesses, institutions, and innovators to design new services integrating agriculture, culture, and tourism. The fundamental value of these workshops lies in their ability to "trigger" (innescare) change through direct participation. The key benefits include:

- Territorial Co-design: They allow for a shift from theory to practice, defining common methodologies across six European countries to create new tourism products based on Mediterranean identity.
- Sector Integration: They foster dialogue between different fields—such as research, agro-food, and creative industries—to generate innovative economic opportunities.
- Innovation and Sustainability: They support the development of an innovative web platform and new processes that make tourism more sustainable and deeply rooted in local traditions.

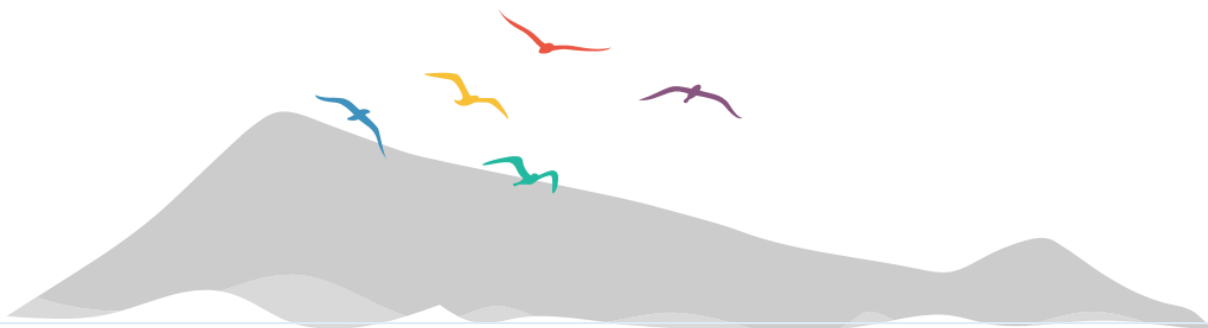
Link to a website or additional information

<https://meddietgo.interreg-euro-med.eu/>



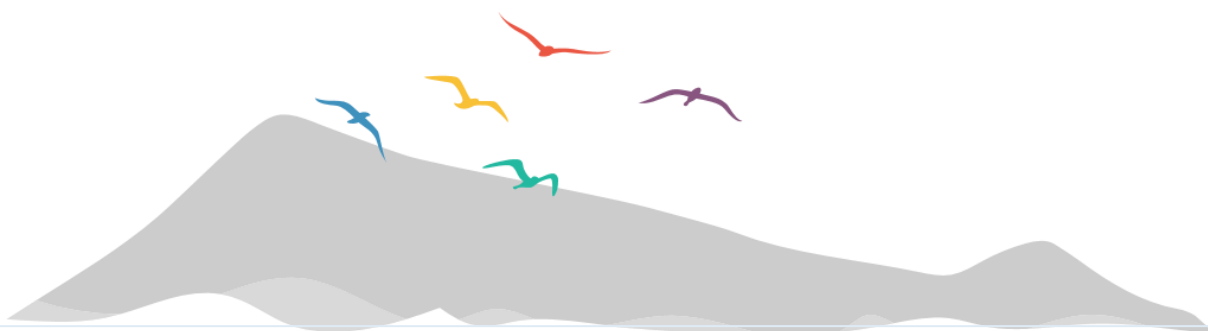
5.3.4. *Slovenia*

INFORMATION ABOUT THE GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE	
Name of the project/initiative	Taste Slovenia – National platform for promoting Slovenian gastronomy and sustainable food tourism
Location/region/country	Slovenia (national level initiative)
Type of initiative	- Integration of Mediterranean Diet into tourism products - Gastronomy / food tourism initiative - Cooperation between tourism and agri-food sectors
Short description of activities	Taste Slovenia is a national platform that promotes Slovenian gastronomy as a key tourism asset, strongly aligned with sustainability, local identity, and the principles of the Mediterranean diet. The initiative integrates gastronomy into tourism through curated culinary experiences, promotion of local ingredients, and storytelling around regional food traditions. It is closely linked to the Slovenian Green Scheme of Tourism and supports the country's positioning as a sustainable culinary destination. The platform fosters cooperation between chefs, farmers, tourism providers, and institutions. It promotes the use of local, seasonal ingredients and short supply chains, strengthening the connection between agriculture and tourism. Taste Slovenia also contributes to international visibility through collaborations with global initiatives and recognitions such as the Michelin Guide, which has significantly increased Slovenia's reputation as a gastronomy destination. Educational activities include training for tourism providers, awareness campaigns, and knowledge-sharing between stakeholders, with a focus on preserving culinary heritage while encouraging innovation.
Main stakeholders involved	Slovenian tourist board, Ministry of the Economy, Tourism and Sport, Local tourism organizations, Chefs and Restaurants, local farmers and food producers, hospitality and tourism providers, educational institutions in gastronomy and hospitality.
Contribution to sustainable tourism – brief description of how the initiative contributes to sustainability, local development or preservation of cultural heritage	Taste Slovenia contributes to sustainable tourism by positioning gastronomy as a driver of local development, cultural preservation, and environmental responsibility. The initiative emphasizes, use of local and seasonal ingredients, preservation of traditional recipes and food practices, support for small-scale farmers and producers and reduction of food miles and environmental impact. Slovenia's gastronomy is deeply rooted in regional diversity, combining Alpine, Mediterranean, Pannonian, and Balkan influences. Through Taste Slovenia, these traditions are transformed into authentic tourist experiences. The platform also strengthens Slovenia's identity as a green boutique destination, where food is not only a product but an experience reflecting culture, nature, and lifestyle.
Link to a website or additional information	https://www.tasteslovenia.si/en/taste-slovenia/slovenian-gastronomy/slovenian-gastronomy/



5.3.5. *Albania*

INFORMATION ABOUT THE GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE	
Name of the project/initiative	Autochthonous Seeds Project – Integrating Native Varieties into Sustainable Food Systems and Agritourism in Albania
Location/region/country	Albania (nationwide implementation, with key activities in Tirana, Lushnja, Korça, Dibra and other rural areas)
Type of initiative	- Integration of Mediterranean Diet into tourism products - Gastronomy / food tourism initiative - Cooperation between tourism and agri-food sectors - Innovation platforms / Living labs / clusters - Education / training programmes linking tourism and agriculture
Short description of activities	The Autochthonous Seeds Project, implemented within the framework of GIZ's Sustainable Rural Development Programme in Albania, aims to preserve, regenerate, and commercialize native plant varieties while integrating them into tourism and gastronomy value chains. The initiative contributes to the promotion of Mediterranean Diet principles by valorising local, seasonal, and biodiversity-based food products, strengthening the link between agriculture, culture, and tourism. The project supports the full value chain of native varieties, from identification and regeneration to certification and market integration. Activities include the cultivation and testing of native seeds through Agricultural Technology Transfer Centres (ATTCs), the technical support for certification and inclusion in the national catalogue, and the development of market opportunities through agritourism businesses, restaurants, and local producers. By reintroducing traditional varieties into the food system, the project enhances authenticity and strengthens local food identities. The project supported for the first time in Albania the commercialization of native varieties seeds across more than 10 businesses in the country. The initiative also fosters cooperation between institutions and stakeholders by establishing a coordinated platform involving research institutions, certification authorities, farmers, agritourism operators, and gastronomy professionals. This multi-actor approach enables knowledge sharing, joint planning, and alignment with national policies related to agriculture, biodiversity, and tourism. In terms of innovation and collaboration, the project operates as a practical “living lab” where native varieties are tested, cultivated, and valorised in real market conditions. It promotes direct collaboration between producers and chefs, encouraging the use of traditional ingredients in modern gastronomy and enhancing the visitor experience in agritourism settings. Education and awareness-raising are also key components of the initiative. Training sessions, workshops, and demonstration activities are organized for farmers, students, and tourism operators, aiming to build capacities in seed conservation, sustainable cultivation practices, and the integration of local products into tourism services. The project also engages younger generations through vocational education and community-based initiatives, strengthening long-term sustainability and knowledge transfer.
Main stakeholders involved	- Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (Sustainable Rural Development Programme) - Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) - Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport - Agricultural University of Tirana - Institute of Plant Genetic Resources (IPGR)

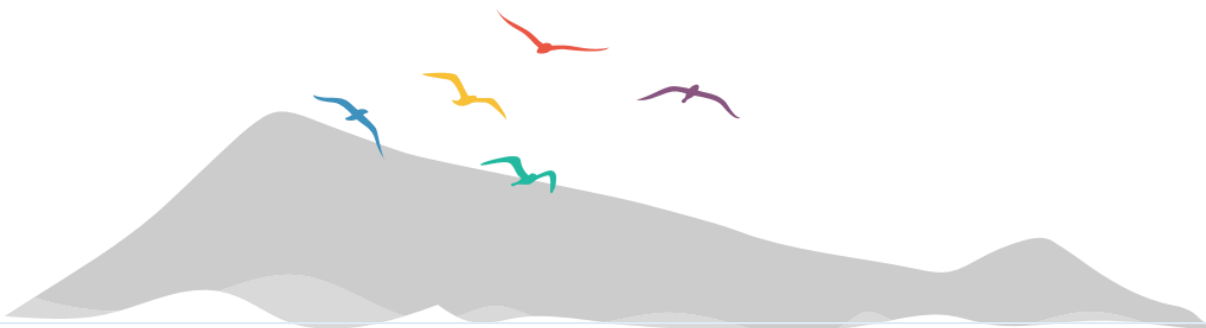


- Enti Shtetëror i Farave dhe Fidanëve (ESHFF)
- Agricultural Technology Transfer Centres (ATTCs) – Lushnja and Korça
- Agritourism Association
- Private Businesses
- Seed Producers – Alban Cakalli
- Gastronomy actors (chefs, restaurants, product developers)
- Civil society organizations and local communities

Contribution to sustainable tourism – brief description of how the initiative contributes to sustainability, local development or preservation of cultural heritage

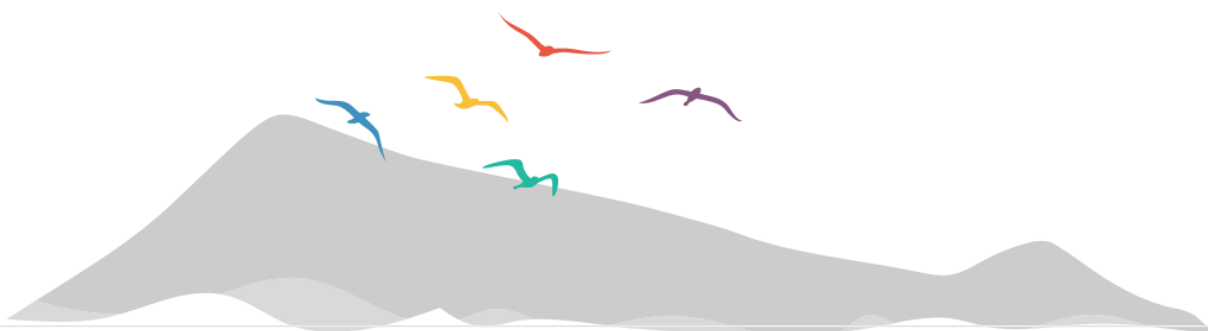
The initiative contributes to sustainable tourism by strengthening the link between biodiversity, local food production, and visitor experience. By reintroducing native plant varieties into agritourism and gastronomy, the project enhances the authenticity and uniqueness of tourism offerings in Albania. It supports local economic development by creating new value chains for farmers and small producers, while promoting environmentally sustainable agricultural practices that preserve biodiversity and reduce reliance on imported or standardized varieties.

Furthermore, the project contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage by revitalising traditional crops and culinary practices associated with the Mediterranean Diet. It fosters a more resilient and diversified rural economy, encourages shorter supply chains, and enhances the attractiveness of rural destinations for both domestic and international visitors.



5.3.6. *Bosnia and Herzegovina*

INFORMATION ABOUT THE GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE	
Name of the project/initiative	Herzeg House – local food product store
Location/region/country	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republic of Srpska, Herzegovina, City of Trebinje
Type of initiative	Cooperation between tourism and agri-food sectors
Short description of activities	Dialogue and cooperation between tourism and agri-food stakeholders are increasingly recognized as essential for sustainable and innovative local development. This collaboration is realized through this platform, matching modern marketing approach, knowledge exchange, joint planning, and the development of new products and services In this context, the Herzeg House project holds particular importance as an example of an integrated approach to linking local agriculture with the tourism sector. Herzeg House represents a concept that promotes local products, traditional gastronomy, and authentic Herzegovina experiences through direct cooperation between food producers and tourism stakeholders. As a thematic platform and cluster, Herzeg House brings together local farmers, food processors, hospitality providers, and tourism operators with the aim of: ▪ strengthening the visibility and market access of local products ▪ developing a recognizable regional brand (eastern Europe market) ▪ creating unique tourism experiences based on food and tradition ▪ improving the quality and standards of the overall offer At the same time, Herzeg House functions as an innovation space, where new products and tourism services are developed (such as tastings, gastro tours, and traditional cooking workshops), as well as a Living Lab, enabling direct involvement of visitors in testing and improving the offer. The importance of this project for the development of local agriculture is reflected in: ▪ opening new markets through tourism ▪ increasing the added value of agricultural products ▪ encouraging small producers to cooperate, innovate and grow ▪ preserving traditional production methods and cultural heritage For the tourism sector, Herzeg House contributes to the diversification of the offer and the development of sustainable, authentic tourism experiences increasingly sought by modern travelers. Overall, Herzeg House represents a best practice example of how synergy between agriculture and tourism can support local economic development, strengthen regional identity, and ensure long-term community sustainability.
Main stakeholders involved	▪ City of Trebinje ▪ Agrarian fund/Herzeg House ▪ Local food producers (rural households/farms/distilleries/wineries) ▪ Trebinje Tourism Council ▪ Trebinje Tourist Organization ▪ Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management ▪ Republic of Srpska Tourist Board
Contribution to sustainable tourism – brief description of how the initiative contributes to sustainability, local development or preservation of cultural heritage	Herzeg House makes a strong contribution to sustainable tourism by integrating local agriculture, cultural heritage, and authentic visitor experiences into a cohesive and responsible development model.



The initiative supports **sustainability** by promoting short supply chains and the use of locally sourced products, which reduces environmental impact and encourages more responsible consumption patterns. By prioritizing traditional, small-scale production methods, Herzeg House also helps maintain biodiversity and supports environmentally friendly agricultural practices.

In terms of **local development**, Herzeg House creates new economic opportunities for rural communities by connecting farmers and food producers directly with the tourism market. This increases income stability, adds value to local products, and encourages entrepreneurship, particularly among small producers and family businesses. The initiative also strengthens cooperation among stakeholders, contributing to a more resilient and diversified local economy.

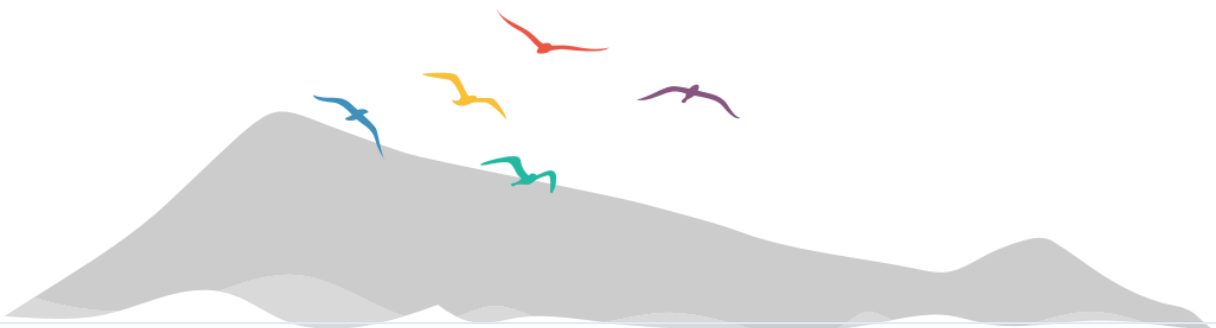
Regarding the **preservation of cultural heritage**, Herzeg House plays a key role in safeguarding traditional recipes, production techniques, and the gastronomic identity of the region. Through curated experiences such as tastings, workshops, and storytelling, visitors are introduced to the authentic culture and history of Herzegovina, ensuring that these traditions are not only preserved but actively promoted and passed on to future generations.

Overall, Herzeg House contributes to a model of tourism that is environmentally responsible, economically beneficial for local communities, and deeply rooted in cultural authenticity.

Link to a website or additional information

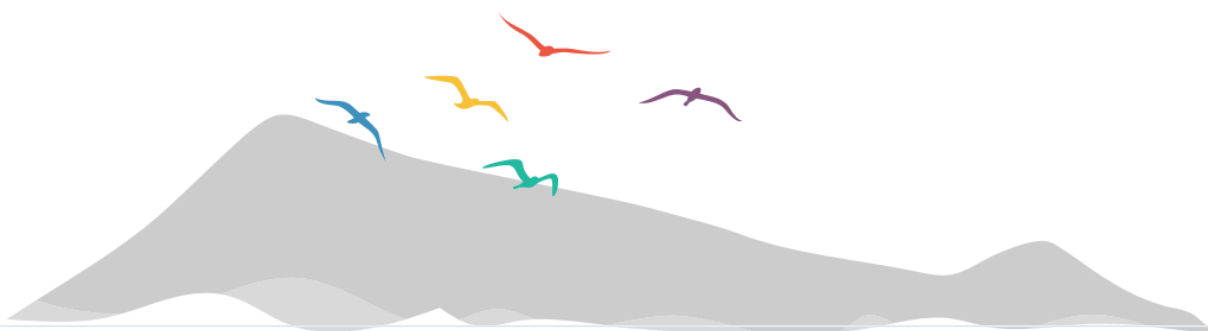
<https://www.agrarnifondtrebinje.com/>

<https://herzeghouse.com/>



5.3.7. *Montenegro*

INFORMATION ABOUT THE GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE - 1	
Name of the project/initiative	Local cuisine as tourism offer of cross border region
Location/region/country	Northern region of Montenegro
Type of initiative	▪ Gastronomy / food tourism initiative ▪ Thematic routes or cross-border cooperation ▪ Cooperation between tourism and agri-food sectors ▪ Gastronomy / food tourism initiative ▪ Thematic routes or cross-border cooperation ▪ Cooperation between tourism and agri-food sectors
Short description of activities	Within the project “Local cuisine as tourism offer of cross-border region”, a good practice example developed in Montenegro is thematic gastro route followed by the cookbook “Gorska trpeza” (Mountain Bounty), which represents a structured approach to integrating traditional gastronomy into the tourism offer of mountainous areas. The initiative is based on extensive field research conducted in Montenegro, through which traditional recipes were collected from local communities, particularly from rural households preserving culinary knowledge. These recipes were further adapted and standardized for use and compiled into the cookbook, ensuring their preservation while enabling their practical application in restaurants and rural tourism households. The approach emphasizes authenticity, the use of local ingredients and strong involvement of the local community. The cookbook functions as a practical tool that supports tourism providers in introducing traditional dishes into their offer, while also strengthening the link between agriculture and tourism by promoting products originating from local farms and small-scale producers. In this way, it contributes to improved cooperation and dialogue between tourism and agri-food stakeholders and supports the integration of local food systems into tourism experiences. The development of the initiative was accompanied by capacity-building activities aimed at chefs, rural households and tourism providers, contributing to knowledge transfer, improved skills in preparation and presentation of traditional dishes, and better mutual understanding between agriculture and tourism sectors. The initiative was implemented within a cross-border cooperation framework between Montenegro and Albania, enabling exchange of knowledge, joint promotion and the development of compatible tourism products in the wider region. In addition, the promotion of traditional gastronomy is supported through storytelling approaches, which communicate the cultural context, origin and meaning of dishes to visitors, enriching the overall tourism experience. While the initiative primarily focuses on mountain gastronomy, it reflects key principles associated with sustainable dietary practices, including the use of seasonal, locally sourced ingredients and the preservation of traditional food systems. Elements of accessibility are reflected through the inclusion of diverse local actors, including small rural households, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and community-based tourism offer.
Main stakeholders involved	▪ Regional Development Agency for Bjelasica, Komovi and Prokletije ▪ National Tourism Organisation of Montenegro ▪ Local rural households and producers ▪ Rural tourism businesses, restaurants, hotels



- Culinary experts and trainers

Contribution to sustainable tourism – brief description of how the initiative contributes to sustainability, local development or preservation of cultural heritage

The initiative contributes to sustainable tourism by promoting traditional food, local ingredients and the preservation of culinary heritage. It supports rural development in Montenegro by enabling local households and agricultural producers to participate in the tourism offer and generate additional income through gastronomy-related services. In this context, tourism represents a complementary activity to their primary occupation, which is agriculture, allowing them to place their products directly on the market through the preparation and serving of traditional dishes at their own households.

This creates additional economic opportunities for rural families and strengthens the sustainability of their livelihoods. The initiative involved both rural households engaged in tourism and local restaurants willing to enrich their menus with traditional dishes, thereby expanding the presence of authentic gastronomy within the tourism offer.

The ingredients used in the preparation of dishes are largely sourced from local farms in the region, ensuring authenticity, freshness and a strong connection to local production systems. In addition to cultivated products, traditional cuisine also relies on the use of wild, foraged plants typical for mountainous areas, reflecting local knowledge and sustainable use of natural resources. Rural households were additionally supported through the provision of packaging and labelling solutions for their products (such as juices, jams, honey and preserves), enabling them to improve product presentation and market readiness.

Traditional recipes are predominantly preserved by older generations, particularly women in rural households, who act as key holders of culinary knowledge. Therefore, the initiative also highlights the importance of transferring this knowledge to younger generations, through both practical application and promotion of traditional dishes, in order to ensure its continuity and long-term preservation.

The initiative contributed to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage through the development of gastro routes, cookbook, promotional brochure and website, as well as through branding activities that supported the visibility of traditional gastronomy. The cookbook “Gorska trpeza” (Mountain Bounty) received international recognition, having been awarded in two categories at the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards in Paris, one of the most prestigious global competitions dedicated to culinary publications.

By supporting the inclusion of local gastronomy into the tourism offer, the initiative contributes to the recognition of mountainous regions of Montenegro as destinations with authentic food experiences.

The approach shows potential for further application in other rural areas. The initiative also supports sustainable food systems by encouraging the use of locally sourced ingredients and strengthening the link between local production and tourism services, contributing to the development of local value chains. It contributes to strengthening regional identity through a community-based approach, promoting traditional gastronomy as a recognizable element of the destination offer.

Link to a website or additional information

- <https://montegastro.me/en/>
- <https://bjelasica-komovi.me/en/>
- <https://www.katunroads.me/en/>

INFORMATION ABOUT THE GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE - 2

Name of the project/initiative

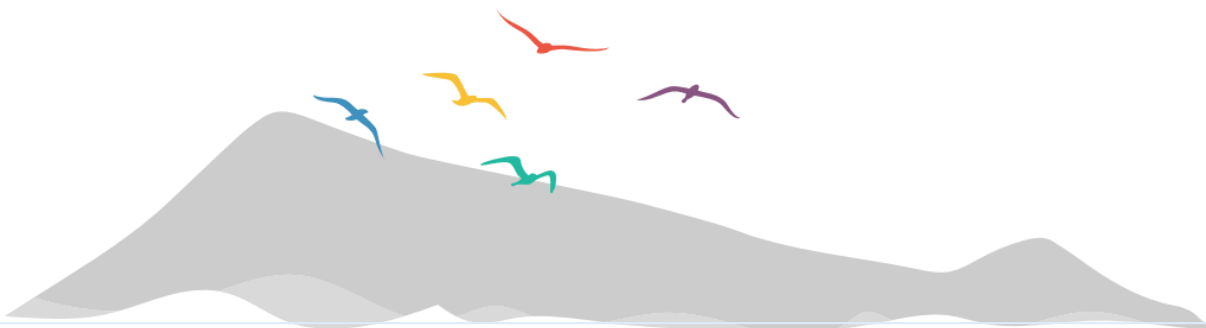
Nasljeđe Ukusa (Heritage of Taste)

Location/region/country

Kotor, Montenegro

Type of initiative

- Integration of Mediterranean Diet into tourism products
- Gastronomy / food tourism initiative



Short description of activities

The initiative promotes “Bokeška kužina” (Bokeška cuisine) and traditional Kotor recipes. Activities include creating publications and educational materials on the preservation of gastronomic heritage, organising thematic events and workshops for tourists and the local community, as well as promoting local products through media and cultural events. The initiative emphasises the integration of *Bokeška kužina* into the tourism offer.

Main stakeholders involved

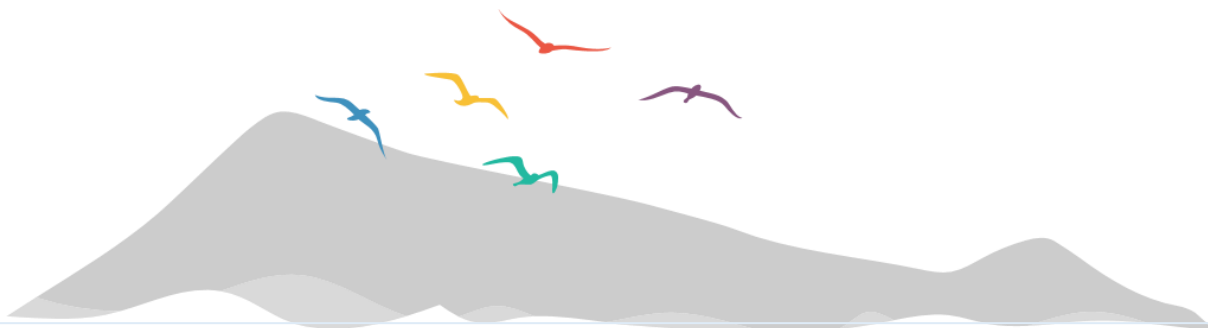
- Tourism Office Kotor
- Local food producers
- Citizens of Kotor
- Kotor Municipality
- Local communities
- Relevant associations (cultural and gastronomic)

Contribution to sustainable tourism – brief description of how the initiative contributes to sustainability, local development or preservation of cultural heritage

- Preservation and valorisation of local gastronomic traditions and cultural identity of Kotor.
- Promotion of local products and recipes in the tourism offer, contributing to sustainable tourism development.
- Education of visitors and the local community about *Bokeška kužina* and the protection of cultural heritage.
- Organisation of events promoting publications and local recipes.

Link to a website or additional information

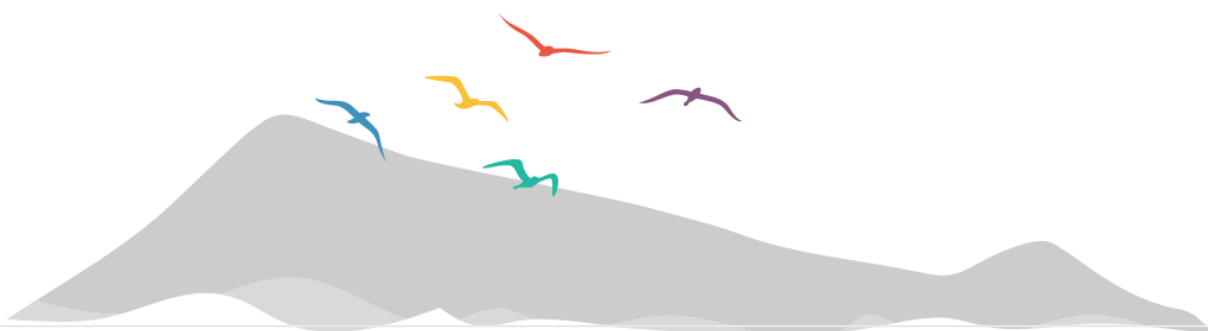
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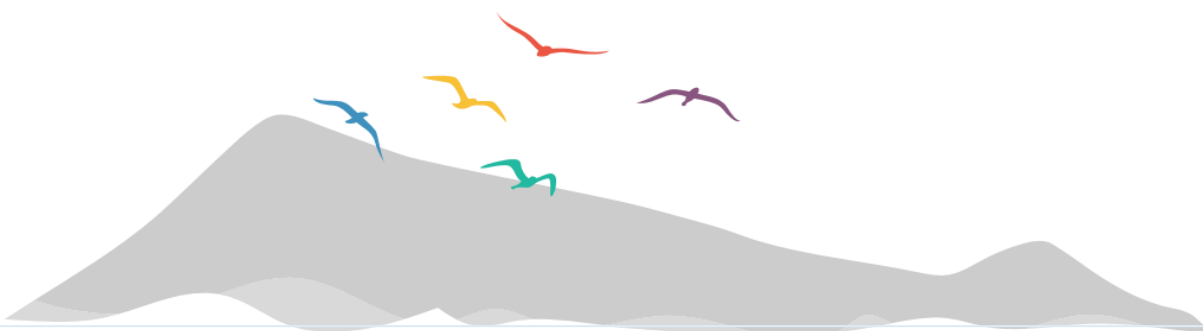
5.3.8. *North Macedonia*

INFORMATION ABOUT THE GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE - 1	
Name of the project/initiative	Prespa Apple Route – Linking Agriculture and Tourism
Location/region/country	Prespa region, North Macedonia
Type of initiative	- Integration of agri-food production with tourism - Thematic route - Community engagement and inclusive tourism
Short description of activities	The Prespa Apple Route is an emerging initiative that highlights the region's strong apple growing tradition through tourism experiences that connect visitors with local orchards, family farms, and traditional food products. Activities include guided orchard tours, apple tasting events, workshops on traditional food preparation, and farm to table experiences. The initiative helps farmers diversify their income, promotes short supply chains, and raises awareness of environmental challenges affecting the Prespa ecosystem. Additionally, the route supports community-based tourism and encourages the participation of women led and family micro businesses, contributing to sustainable rural development.
Main stakeholders involved	- Local apple producers and cooperatives - Municipality of Resen (region Prespa) - Local tourism businesses - NGOs working on environmental protection in Prespa
Contribution to sustainable tourism – brief description of how the initiative contributes to sustainability, local development or preservation of cultural heritage	The Prespa Apple Route contributes to sustainable tourism by creating direct links between agriculture, tourism, and the local community. It provides additional income opportunities for apple growers and small family businesses by turning traditional farming activities into authentic visitor experiences. This helps strengthen the local economy and reduces dependence on seasonal agricultural income. The initiative promotes environmentally responsible tourism by encouraging local consumption, short supply chains, and awareness of the fragile Prespa ecosystem. Visitors gain a better understanding of the region's natural resources and the importance of protecting biodiversity and landscapes. It also supports the preservation of cultural heritage by showcasing traditional apple cultivation practices, regional gastronomy, and homemade food preparation methods passed down through generations. Through the active involvement of women-led enterprises, cooperatives, and family farms, the route fosters inclusive rural development and helps keep local traditions alive.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE - 2
Name of the project/initiative
Slow Food Ohrid – Preserving Local Gastronomy through Sustainable Tourism

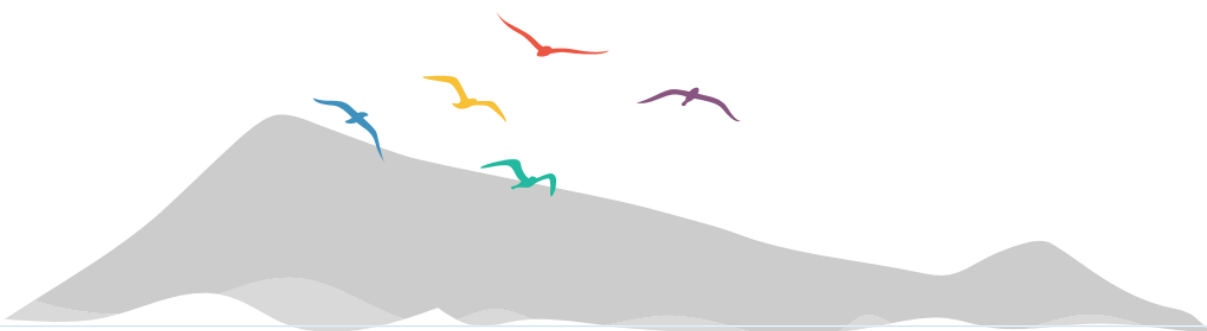


Location/region/country
Ohrid region, North Macedonia
Type of initiative
- Integration of traditional gastronomy into tourism products - Cooperation between tourism and agri-food stakeholders - Education and training on sustainable food systems
Short description of activities
Slow Food Ohrid is a long-standing initiative that promotes traditional local products, culinary heritage, and sustainable food production. The initiative connects local producers, fishermen, restaurateurs, and tourism operators to introduce authentic food experiences for visitors. Activities include tastings of traditional dishes (such as Ohrid trout-related alternatives due to protection measures), workshops on local ingredients, food festivals, and educational programs focusing on sustainable production and responsible consumption. Through its network, Slow Food Ohrid strengthens market access for small producers and enhances the region's visibility as a gastronomic destination rooted in cultural heritage and sustainability.
Main stakeholders involved
- Slow Food Ohrid - Local producers and fishermen - Local restaurants and guesthouses - Municipality of Ohrid - Tourism operators
Contribution to sustainable tourism – brief description of how the initiative contributes to sustainability, local development or preservation of cultural heritage
Slow Food Ohrid contributes to sustainable tourism by promoting authentic local gastronomy while supporting environmentally responsible food systems. By connecting producers, fishermen, restaurants, and tourism businesses, the initiative creates value chains that benefit the local economy and provide new market opportunities for small-scale producers. This helps keep tourism spending within the region and supports long-term rural and urban livelihoods. The initiative also encourages sustainable consumption by raising awareness of seasonal ingredients, responsible sourcing, and biodiversity protection. Special attention is given to alternatives to protected species, helping balance tourism demand with environmental conservation in the Ohrid region. At the same time, Slow Food Ohrid plays an important role in preserving cultural heritage by safeguarding traditional recipes, cooking methods, and food-related customs. Through festivals, workshops, and culinary experiences, visitors can engage directly with the region's history and identity, strengthening Ohrid's reputation as a destination where culture, sustainability, and gastronomy come together.
Link to a website or additional information
https://slowfood.mk/



5.3.9. *Serbia*

INFORMATION ABOUT THE GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE	
Name of the project/initiative	Traditional gastronomic products as a tourism brand and cultural identity: Pirot ironed sausage, Pirot kashkaval cheese, and Pirot carpet (ćilim)
Location/region/country	City Pirot/Southeast/Serbia
Type of initiative	Gastronomy / food tourism initiative
Short description of activities	Pirot is a recognizable tourist destination in southeastern Serbia, building its potential on high-quality services, traditional production of healthy food, and artisanal manufacturing. It has three products with protected geographical indication: Pirot ironed sausage, Pirot sheep's milk kashkaval cheese, and the Pirot carpet. These products also serve as souvenirs that reflect a brand based on tradition, quality, trust, and the inclusion of the local population in the sustainable development of agriculture and tourism, embodying the local cultural identity and traditions passed down through generations. Pirot ironed sausage is an authentic product of southeastern Serbia, created in the specific climatic conditions of the Pirot region. It is traditionally made from high-quality beef and sheep meat from Stara Planina, without additives, using natural drying and a characteristic "ironing" process (traditionally with a glass bottle), which ensures its distinctive appearance, quality, and long shelf life. The method of production and recipe are passed down from generation to generation, preserving the intangible cultural heritage and identity of the local community. Pirot kashkaval (famous Pirot cheese) was originally produced exclusively from sheep's milk from Stara Planina mountain, and only later also from cow's milk or a mixture (so-called mixed kashkaval). The earliest written records of kashkaval production on Stara Planina date back to the early 18th century. Pirot kashkaval is known worldwide for its distinctive aroma, which results from the rich mountain pastures. Sheep graze on 40,000 hectares of Stara Planina pastures, at altitudes ranging from 1,300 to 2,000 meters. The Dairy School in Pirot is the holder and user of the protected trademark for Pirot kashkaval. At this school, students are educated in specialized programs for dairy technology, and as part of their practical training, they participate in the production of Pirot kashkaval, which is then distributed both domestically and internationally. Through joint cooperation between the Tourism Organization of Pirot and the Dairy School, continuous promotion, tasting, and presentation of Pirot kashkaval are carried out. There is also the possibility for pre-announced small groups of tourists to schedule visits to the school and workshop, where students present the traditional method of producing Pirot kashkaval (the entire process up to fermentation), as well as visits to the school shop where these products can be purchased. A portion of the revenue from kashkaval sales in the school shop is reinvested into improving the quality of teaching at this renowned dairy school. Over the centuries, the most important craft and industrial branch in Pirot has been carpet (Kilim) weaving. It is an original weaving activity that originated in this town and is a hallmark of the female population. A key prerequisite for the development of carpet weaving was the development of livestock farming, sufficient quantities of wool as raw material, and the town's role as a trade centre. These conditions enabled the production process of Pirot carpet weaving to be fully integrated from the very beginning: high-quality sheep were bred (on Stara Planina mountain), wool was processed and dyed locally, weaving techniques were perfected, including the distinctive vertical loom, and trade was well developed. The Pirot carpet, as a valuable gift, was often presented in both private and official occasion—as an award, a gift for distinguished guests, and as part of a bride's dowry. It was enough to be kept in a bridal chest to serve as a talisman for the household. The carpet evolved from a simple fabric into a work of art and became a visual symbol of the city of Pirot, and over time, a national symbol of Serbia. It is a guardian of Serbian identity and a valuable cultural heritage, as evidenced by the awards and medals it has received at world



exhibitions. Its first international presentation was in Pest in 1881, followed by Vienna in 1886 at a World Exhibition, where it attracted great attention. At the World Exhibition in Paris in 1888, weavers worked in front of visitors, which was a major attraction at the time. In Paris in 1900, carpets were exhibited for sale, followed by exhibitions in Athens (1903), St. Petersburg (1904), Liège (1905), Milan (1906), and London (1907), where it won the Grand Prix. There is no continent where the Pirot carpet has not appeared, and records show that in 1906, around 5,000 women in Pirot were engaged in carpet weaving. At the time, this represented the largest informal “factory” in the Balkans, and even in Europe. Today, women from Pirot and the surrounding area work in this cooperative, ensuring their livelihood while passing on their valuable knowledge of Pirot carpet weaving to interested visitors and tourists.

On the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Serbia, out of around fifty elements, three originate from Pirot: Pirot carpet weaving, production of Pirot kashkaval, and the Pirot dialect/storytelling tradition.

In addition to their ecological and cultural value, these products are also economically sustainable, contributing to the strengthening of entrepreneurship, intersectoral cooperation (tourism, agriculture, culture, education), and regional cooperation (cross-border projects between Bulgaria and Serbia). These forms of cooperation support the sustainable development of rural and cultural tourism through gastronomy, while also weaving the invisible threads of cultural identity through the “Damsko srce” cooperative.

Events such as the Ironed Sausage Fair, the Stara Planina Food Fair, the Cheese and Kashkaval Festival, and the Pirot Carpet Festival are just some of the events organized by the Tourism Organization of the City of Pirot, together with all relevant local stakeholders, with the aim of presenting and promoting these gastronomic products/brands, as well as the knowledge and skills passed down through generations (through weaving workshops, kashkaval-making workshops, etc.). At domestic and international fairs, the Tourism Organization of Pirot not only promotes the destination but also includes producers of ironed sausage and Pirot kashkaval, who personally introduce tourists to the production process while simultaneously marketing their products.

If the Mediterranean Diet represents, among other things, a way of life and an expression of cultural identity in Mediterranean countries, tourists in Pirot can enjoy unique experiences through communication and interactive content while consuming and learning about these gastronomic products, which are equally a brand and an experience to be seen, felt, and lived.

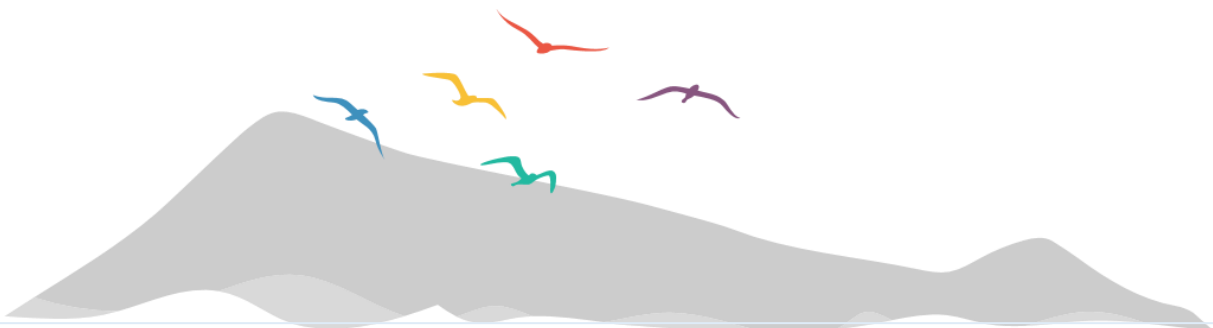
Pirot is one of three pilot destinations in Serbia where criteria for sustainable destination development are being implemented in line with the standards of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), with the support of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in Belgrade and the competent Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Serbia.

Main stakeholders involved

- Agricultural holdings (meat and dairy producers, livestock breeders)
- Local producers of ironed sausage (entrepreneurs)
- Secondary Dairy School in Pirot
- Artisan cooperative for carpet weaving “Damsko srce”
- Tourism Organization of the City of Pirot
- City Administration of the City of Pirot
- Intellectual Property Office of the Republic of Serbia
- Joint Secretariat for Cross-Border Cooperation Projects of the INTERREG VI-A IPA Bulgaria–Serbia Programme – office in Niš / Ministry of European Integration at the national level – The Cross-Border Cooperation Programme INTERREG VI-A IPA Bulgaria–Serbia 2021–2027
- National Tourism Organisation of Serbia
- Ministry of Tourism and Youth of the Republic of Serbia

Contribution to sustainable tourism – brief description of how the initiative contributes to sustainability, local development or preservation of cultural heritage

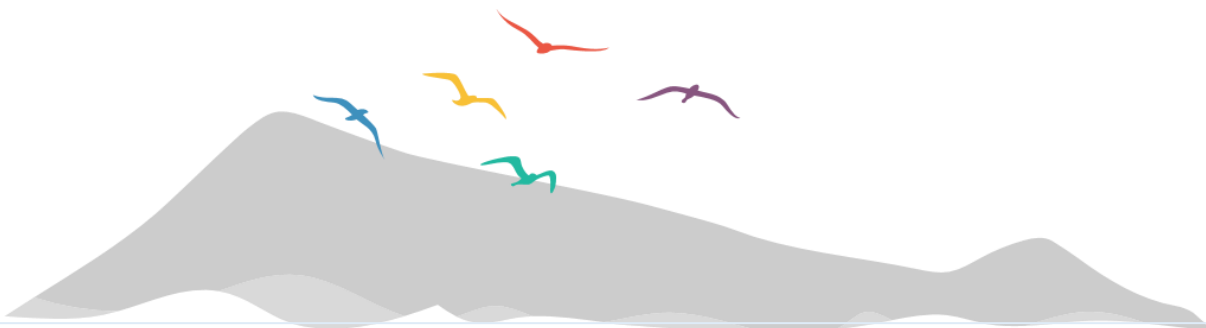
- Preserves traditional knowledge and intangible cultural heritage through the continued production of Pirot ironed sausage, Pirot kashkaval cheese, and traditional Pirot carpet weaving.



- Supports local livelihoods, entrepreneurship, and rural development by creating income opportunities for farmers, artisans, and small producers in Pirot.
- Strengthens short local supply chains through cooperation between agriculture, tourism, education, and cultural sectors.
- Enhances destination branding by positioning Pirot as an authentic gastronomic and cultural tourism destination.
- Encourages intergenerational knowledge transfer through workshops, festivals, school programmes, and visitor experiences.
- Contributes to sustainable destination management through alignment with GSTC standards and regional cross-border cooperation initiatives.

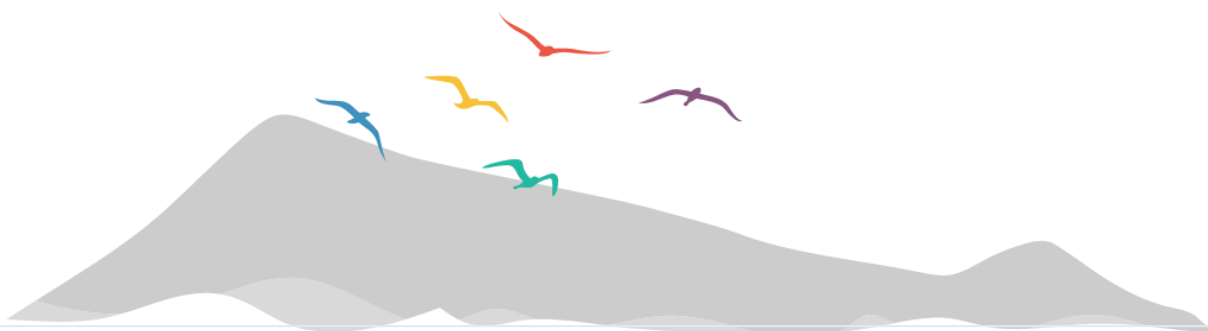
Link to a website or additional information

- <https://peglana.com/>
- <https://pirotskapeglana.rs/>
- https://www.instagram.com/pirotska_peglana_kobasica/
- <https://pirotskapeglana-dedamile.rs/>
- https://www.facebook.com/pirotskapeglana/?locale=sr_RS
- <https://topirot.com/pirot/brendovi>
- https://topirot.com/posts/sajam_peglane
- <https://topirot.com/posts/kackavali>



5.3.10. *San Marino*

INFORMATION ABOUT THE GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE	
Name of the project/initiative	From the Land to the Table
Location/region/country	San Marino / Republic of San Marino
Type of initiative	- Gastronomy / food tourism initiative - Cooperation between tourism and agri-food sectors - Education / experiential tourism programme
Short description of activities	“From the Land to the Table” is an initiative promoted by the Ministry of Tourism together with the Ministry of Territory, Environment and Agriculture in San Marino. It was created to promote local food and wine products, strengthen the country’s agri-food identity, and connect producers, restaurateurs, and tourism operators. The project develops experiential tourism through tastings, gastronomic events, and authentic visitor experiences that showcase local traditions, wines, olive oil, pasta, bread, and rural recipes linked to the values of the Mediterranean Diet.
Main stakeholders involved	- Ministry of Tourism of San Marino - Ministry of Territory, Environment and Agriculture - Visit San Marino - Agricultural producers - Wineries - Restaurateurs - Tourism companies - Local hospitality businesses such as Ristorante Spingarda
Contribution to sustainable tourism – brief description of how the initiative contributes to sustainability, local development or preservation of cultural heritage	- Strengthens short local supply chains through cooperation between producers, restaurants, and tourism businesses. - Preserves culinary heritage, traditional recipes, and local food culture. - Promotes authentic, small-scale, high-quality tourism experiences rooted in place. - Supports local economic resilience and community-based development. - Enhances the visibility of Mediterranean Diet values through tourism experiences. - Generated measurable local impact, including increased purchases of local wines by participating restaurants.
Link to a website or additional information	Visit San Marino (official tourism portal) / Republic of San Marino tourism information.



5.4. Good practice examples in EUSAIR countries – a comparative analysis

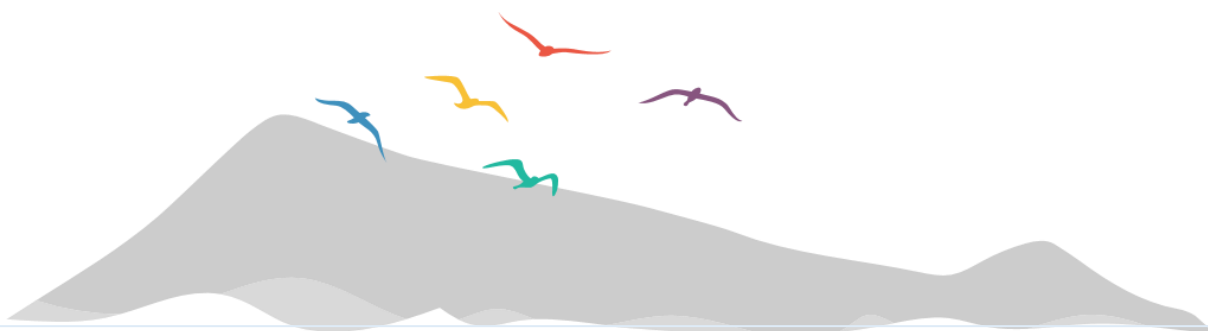
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The examples of good practice from each EUSAIR country presented in the previous chapter are comparatively analysed below, through the lens of the 16 criteria and four (4) categories.

Figure 20. Criteria for selection of good practice examples of the Mediterranean Diet in EUSAIR countries

GOOD PRACTICE IN EUSAIR COUNTRIES – NATIONAL EXAMPLES

PILLAR A: STRATEGIC, GOVERNANCE & COOPERATION		PILLAR B: SUSTAINABILITY, GREEN TRANSITION & INCLUSION		PILLAR C: HERITAGE & TERRITORIAL IDENTITY		PILLAR D: INNOVATION & LOCAL ECONOMY	
CRITERIUM		CRITERIUM		CRITERIUM		CRITERIUM	
	Alignment with the EUSAIR Strategy		Sustainability and Environmental Protection		Authenticity and Preservation of Cultural Heritage		Innovation in the Tourism Product
	Cross-Sector Cooperation (Tourism, Agriculture, Culture)		Contribution to Sustainable Food Systems		Valorisation of Local Products and Quality Labels		Economic Contribution to the Local Community
	Potential for Interregional and Transnational Cooperation		Contribution to the Green Transition of Tourism		Contribution to Regional Identity and Destination Branding		
	Transferability of the Model to Other Regions (Replicability)		Inclusiveness and Accessibility		Educational and Promotional Value		
	Knowledge Transfer and Capacity Building						



5.4.1. *PILLAR A: STRATEGIC, GOVERNANCE & COOPERATION*

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Table 4. Good practice in Mediterranean Diet examples in the EUSAIR countries - PILLAR A: STRATEGIC, GOVERNANCE & COOPERATION

PILLAR A: STRATEGIC, GOVERNANCE & COOPERATION						
EUSAIR country	Name of the good practice example and location	Alignment with the EUSAIR Strategy	Cross-sector cooperation (tourism, agriculture, culture)	Potential for interregional and transnational cooperation	Transferability of the model to other regions (replicability)	Knowledge transfer and capacity building
Croatia	House of Istrian Olive Oil – Museum Olei Histriae: City of Pula, Istria County, Croatia	Supports EUSAIR priorities through sustainable gastronomy, cultural heritage preservation, local food systems, education and year-round tourism development.	Connects tourism, olive growing, olive oil production, gastronomy, museums, education, local guides, producers and tourism institutions.	Suitable for Mediterranean and Adriatic-Ionian networks related to olive oil routes, Mediterranean diet, food heritage, sensory education and cultural tourism.	Replicable in other olive-growing regions through interpretive centres, producer networks, tastings, local product shops and educational gastro-tourism programmes.	Provides education on olive-growing history, oil production technologies, sensory evaluation, quality recognition, health aspects and Mediterranean diet principles.
	Museum of Salt and House of Salt: City of Nin, Zadar County, Croatia	Supports EUSAIR priorities through sustainable tourism, preservation of natural and cultural heritage, local development and promotion of Mediterranean food culture.	Connects tourism, traditional salt production, gastronomy, cultural heritage, environmental interpretation, local crafts, festivals and	Suitable for Mediterranean and Adriatic-Ionian networks related to salt routes, coastal heritage, traditional food production, biodiversity and cultural tourism.	Replicable in other coastal areas through living museums, heritage interpretation, traditional production demonstrations, festivals and	Provides education on traditional salt production, manual harvesting, natural salt formation, local history, biodiversity and the role of salt in Mediterranean gastronomy.



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			community-based activities.		educational tourism programmes.	
Greece	Iter Vitis - Greek Network as part of the Cultural Route Network “Iter Vitis”: Region of Peloponnese, Region of Crete, Region of North Macedonia, Region of Western Greece	Supports EUSAIR priorities through sustainable wine tourism, cultural route development, rural heritage preservation and transnational cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian area.	Connects tourism, viticulture, winemaking, cultural heritage, rural development, museums, municipalities, wine associations, NGOs and research institutions.	Strong potential through the certified Council of Europe Cultural Route “Iter Vitis” and cooperation among wine regions in Greece, Italy, Croatia and wider EUSAIR countries.	Replicable in other wine-growing regions through wine routes, vineyard heritage interpretation, tastings, producer networks, cultural mapping and thematic tourism products.	Promotes knowledge exchange on viticultural heritage, indigenous grape varieties, traditional wine-making, vineyard landscapes, sustainable wine tourism and rural entrepreneurship.
	Greek Breakfast – Initiative of the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels: regional adaptations across multiple regions including Crete, Peloponnese, Cyclades, Epirus, Macedonia	Supports EUSAIR priorities through sustainable tourism, local food systems, Mediterranean Diet promotion, regional identity and tourism–agri-food cooperation.	Connects hotels, local producers, agricultural cooperatives, chefs, chambers of commerce, tourism organisations and regional/local authorities.	Strong potential for exchange across Mediterranean and EUSAIR regions as a national model linking accommodation services with local gastronomy and producers.	Highly replicable through regional breakfast standards, local product mapping, hotel-producer partnerships, quality pacts and destination-level gastronomy branding.	Supports capacity building through standards, certification criteria, menu design, producer-hotel networking and promotion of Mediterranean Diet principles.
Italy	MedDiet Go – Mediterranean Diet Goes Global - project funded by the	Supports EUSAIR-related priorities through sustainable tourism, Mediterranean Diet	Connects agri-food, tourism, culture, rural development, innovation, research,	Strong potential through Interreg Euro-MED partnership, cross-	Highly replicable through Living Labs, One-Stop-Shops, common	Provides capacity building through Living Lab workshops, One-



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	Interreg Euro-MED 2021-2027 programme: Spain, Slovenia, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Bulgaria	promotion, rural development, cultural heritage valorisation and transnational cooperation.	SMEs, public authorities, tour operators, farmers and local communities.	border initiatives, Med Diet Euro-Cluster and cooperation among Mediterranean countries.	methodologies, digital tools, cluster models and Mediterranean Diet-based tourism products.	Stop-Shops, stakeholder training, knowledge exchange and transfer of MD.net project results.
Slovenia	Taste Slovenia – National platform for promoting Slovenian gastronomy and sustainable food tourism	Supports EUSAIR priorities through sustainable gastronomy, local food systems, destination branding, cultural heritage preservation and tourism-agriculture cooperation.	Connects tourism institutions, chefs, restaurants, farmers, food producers, hospitality providers, local tourism organisations and educational institutions.	Strong potential for cooperation through international gastronomy networks, Michelin visibility, sustainable tourism platforms and exchange with Mediterranean and EUSAIR regions.	Replicable as a national or regional gastronomy platform based on local ingredients, culinary storytelling, quality standards, stakeholder cooperation and sustainable destination branding.	Supports capacity building through training, awareness campaigns, stakeholder knowledge-sharing and education for tourism, gastronomy and hospitality providers.
Albania	Autochthonous Seeds Project – Integrating Native Varieties into Sustainable Food Systems and Agritourism in Albania: nationwide implementation, with key activities in Tirana, Lushnja,	Supports EUSAIR priorities through sustainable rural development, biodiversity preservation, local food systems, agritourism and tourism-agriculture cooperation.	Connects agriculture, biodiversity, research, seed certification, gastronomy, agritourism, education, public institutions, private businesses and local communities.	Strong potential for cooperation with Mediterranean and EUSAIR regions on seed heritage, biodiversity, native varieties, sustainable food systems and agritourism.	Replicable through native variety identification, seed regeneration, certification, farmer training, chef-producer cooperation and integration into agritourism offers.	Provides training, workshops, demonstrations and vocational education on seed conservation, sustainable cultivation, certification and use of local products in tourism.



	Korça, Dibra, and other rural areas					
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Herzeg House – Local Food Product Store: Trebinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina	Strong alignment with EUSAIR priorities related to sustainable tourism, competitiveness of SMEs, preservation of cultural heritage, and strengthening regional identity through gastronomy-based tourism development.	Excellent example of cooperation between local farmers, food processors, tourism operators, hospitality providers, municipal authorities, and tourism institutions. Strong integration of agriculture and tourism value chains.	High potential for inclusion in wider Adriatic-Ionian gastronomic routes, Mediterranean diet networks, and cross-border tourism cooperation initiatives.	Highly replicable model for rural and small urban destinations wishing to connect local producers with tourism markets through a branded platform. Particularly relevant for Western Balkans and EUSAIR regions.	Supports producer learning through joint promotion, quality improvement, market access, innovation, and collaboration with tourism stakeholders. Functions as a practical learning platform.
Montenegro	Local cuisine as a tourism offer of the cross-border region: Northern region of Montenegro	Supports EUSAIR priorities through sustainable rural tourism, cross-border cooperation, local food heritage, agri-food value chains and community-based development.	Connects tourism, agriculture, rural households, restaurants, hotels, local producers, culinary experts, trainers, tourism organisations and development agencies.	Strong potential through Montenegro–Albania cross-border cooperation, joint gastro routes, regional promotion and compatible mountain gastronomy tourism products.	Replicable in other rural and mountain regions through recipe collection, cookbook development, gastro routes, storytelling, training and local product branding.	Provides training for chefs, rural households and tourism providers on preparation, presentation, standardisation and promotion of traditional dishes.
	Nasljede Ukusa (Heritage of Taste): Kotor, Montenegro	Supports EUSAIR priorities through sustainable gastronomy,	Connects tourism, local food producers, cultural and	Potential for cooperation with Adriatic and	Replicable in other historic coastal towns through recipe	Supports knowledge transfer through educational



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		preservation of local food heritage, destination identity and integration of Mediterranean Diet values into tourism.	gastronomic associations, municipality, local communities and citizens of Kotor.	Mediterranean destinations through shared coastal gastronomy, Mediterranean Diet heritage and thematic food events.	documentation, local cuisine branding, workshops, publications and gastronomy-based tourism promotion.	materials, workshops, thematic events and promotion of traditional Kotor recipes and Bokeška cuisine.
North Macedonia	Prespa Apple Route – Linking Agriculture and Tourism: Prespa region, North Macedonia	Supports EUSAIR priorities through sustainable rural tourism, agri-food integration, community-based development, short supply chains and environmental awareness.	Connects apple producers, cooperatives, family farms, tourism businesses, Municipality of Resen, NGOs and local community actors.	Potential for cooperation with other rural and fruit-growing regions through thematic routes, agri-food tourism, eco-tourism and Prespa cross-border destination development.	Replicable in other agricultural regions through orchard tours, tastings, farm-to-table experiences, producer networks, local food workshops and community-based tourism.	Supports learning through orchard visits, food preparation workshops, interpretation of apple cultivation, environmental education and farmer-tourism cooperation.
	Slow Food Ohrid – Preserving Local Gastronomy through Sustainable Tourism: Ohrid region, North Macedonia	Supports EUSAIR priorities through sustainable gastronomy, local food systems, cultural heritage preservation, biodiversity protection and tourism–agri-food cooperation.	Connects local producers, fishermen, restaurants, guesthouses, tourism operators, Municipality of Ohrid and Slow Food networks.	Strong potential for cooperation with Slow Food networks, lake regions, Balkan and Mediterranean gastronomy initiatives and sustainable food tourism projects.	Replicable through producer networks, responsible sourcing, local food festivals, tastings, workshops, restaurant cooperation and sustainable gastronomy branding.	Provides education through workshops, food festivals, tastings, training on local ingredients, sustainable production and responsible consumption.





EU Strategy for the
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Serbia	Traditional gastronomic products as a tourism brand and cultural identity - Pirot ironed sausage, Pirot kashkaval cheese, and Pirot carpet (ćilim): Pirot, Southeast Serbia	Supports EUSAIR priorities through sustainable destination development, protection of intangible heritage, local food branding, rural tourism and cross-sector cooperation.	Connects tourism, agriculture, livestock farming, dairy education, meat production, carpet weaving, cultural heritage, local administration and national institutions.	Strong potential through Bulgaria–Serbia cross-border cooperation, regional food and craft routes, GI product promotion and sustainable destination networks.	Replicable through protected local products, producer-tourism cooperation, craft workshops, festivals, school-based training, storytelling and destination branding.	Supports knowledge transfer through dairy school programmes, kashkaval-making demonstrations, weaving workshops, producer presentations and intergenerational learning.
San Marino	„From the Land to the Table“: San Marino, Republic of San Marino	Supports EUSAIR priorities through sustainable gastronomy, local food systems, Mediterranean Diet values, cultural heritage and tourism–agriculture cooperation.	Connects ministries, tourism bodies, agricultural producers, wineries, restaurateurs, tourism companies and hospitality businesses.	Potential for cooperation with Mediterranean and EUSAIR destinations through food and wine tourism, local product promotion and Mediterranean Diet-based experiences.	Replicable in small destinations through producer-restaurant cooperation, tastings, food events, local product storytelling and experiential tourism programmes.	Supports knowledge exchange between producers, restaurateurs and tourism operators on local products, traditional recipes and visitor experience design.



5.4.2. *PILLAR B: SUSTAINABILITY, GREEN TRANSITION & INCLUSION*

Table 5. Good practice in Mediterranean Diet examples in the EUSAIR countries - PILLAR B: SUSTAINABILITY, GREEN TRANSITION & INCLUSION

PILLAR B: SUSTAINABILITY, GREEN TRANSITION & INCLUSION					
EUSAIR country	Name of the good practice example and location	Sustainability and environmental protection	Contribution to sustainable food systems	Contribution to the green transition of tourism	Inclusiveness and accessibility
Croatia	House of Istrian Olive Oil – Museum Olei Histriae: City of Pula, Istria County, Croatia	Promotes traditional olive cultivation, appreciation of local landscapes, responsible food choices and awareness of olive oil as part of sustainable Mediterranean lifestyles.	Supports short supply chains by connecting visitors with local olive growers, mills, family farms and premium Istrian extra virgin olive oils.	Creates a year-round, low-impact cultural and gastronomic tourism product based on education, local products and indoor interpretation rather than mass seasonal tourism.	Offers structured museum tours, multimedia interpretation and tastings suitable for different visitor groups; specific accessibility information is not fully specified.
	Museum of Salt and House of Salt: City of Nin, Zadar County, Croatia	Preserves natural salt-production processes based on sun, sea and wind; protects biodiversity, including more than 200 bird species, and promotes low-impact resource use.	Promotes hand-harvested sea salt and flower of salt as local, traditional and environmentally friendly products connected to Mediterranean cuisine.	Creates a low-impact educational tourism product based on natural processes, heritage interpretation, outdoor visits, local products and responsible visitor experiences.	Offers guided tours, workshops, festivals and interpretation programmes for different visitor groups; detailed accessibility information is not fully specified.
Greece	Iter Vitis - Greek Network as part of the Cultural Route Network “Iter Vitis”: Region of Peloponnese,	Supports preservation of vineyard landscapes, rural biodiversity, traditional agricultural practices and	Strengthens local wine value chains, small-scale producers, traditional varieties and links	Encourages slow, experiential and rural tourism based on local products, landscape	Offers route-based, educational and cultural wine experiences for diverse visitor groups;



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	Region of Crete, Region of North Macedonia, Region of Western Greece	sustainable management of wine-growing areas.	between viticulture, gastronomy and Mediterranean Diet culture.	protection, cultural interpretation and reduced pressure on mass-tourism destinations.	detailed accessibility information is not fully specified.
	Greek Breakfast – Initiative of the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels: regional adaptations across multiple regions including Crete, Peloponnese, Cyclades, Epirus, Macedonia	Encourages local and seasonal sourcing, reducing food miles and supporting more sustainable agricultural and hospitality practices.	Strengthens short supply chains by connecting hotels with local producers, cooperatives and certified regional products.	Promotes a lower-impact hospitality model based on local sourcing, seasonal menus, regional products and reduced dependence on standardised imported food.	Implemented in hotels across different regions and tourism segments, making local gastronomy accessible to a broad range of visitors; detailed accessibility data not specified.
Italy	MedDiet Go – Mediterranean Diet Goes Global - project funded by the Interreg Euro-MED 2021-2027 programme: Spain, Slovenia, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Bulgaria	Promotes sustainable rural landscapes, traditional agricultural techniques, responsible tourism, local resources and Mediterranean lifestyle as a sustainable model.	Strengthens local food systems, healthy Mediterranean products, short supply chains, farmers, producers and links between food production and tourism.	Encourages sustainable tourism products based on rural heritage, local gastronomy, digital tools, innovation, co-design and reduced dependence on mass tourism.	Promotes inclusive co-design of gastronomic experiences involving citizens, businesses, institutions, local communities and diverse visitor groups.
Slovenia	Taste Slovenia – National platform for promoting Slovenian gastronomy and sustainable food tourism	Promotes local and seasonal ingredients, short supply chains, reduced food miles, responsible sourcing and alignment with Slovenia's green tourism positioning.	Strengthens local food systems by linking farmers, producers, chefs and tourism providers around seasonal products and regional culinary traditions.	Encourages sustainable food tourism through green destination branding, local sourcing, authentic experiences and integration with the Slovenian Green Scheme of Tourism.	Promotes gastronomy experiences at national level across different regions and tourism providers; detailed information on accessibility for



					vulnerable groups is not specified.
Albania	Autochthonous Seeds Project – Integrating Native Varieties into Sustainable Food Systems and Agritourism in Albania: nationwide implementation, with key activities in Tirana, Lushnja, Korça, Dibra, and other rural areas	Preserves agrobiodiversity, supports native varieties, reduces dependence on standardised/imported seeds and promotes environmentally sustainable cultivation practices.	Strengthens biodiversity-based food systems, local seed production, short supply chains, seasonal products, farmers and small-scale producers.	Promotes low-impact agritourism based on local biodiversity, traditional crops, sustainable agriculture, authentic food experiences and rural destination development.	Involves farmers, students, agritourism operators, businesses, civil society and local communities; detailed accessibility information for vulnerable groups is not specified.
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Herzeg House – Local Food Product Store: Trebinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina	Promotes local sourcing and short supply chains, reducing transport impacts and supporting environmentally responsible consumption. Encourages traditional low-impact production methods.	Strong contribution through support to local food production, family farms, artisan producers, and direct farm-to-tourism market channels.	Supports low-impact tourism products based on gastronomy, local identity, authentic experiences, and reduced dependence on imported products.	Creates opportunities for small rural producers and family businesses to participate in tourism markets. Social inclusion impact is positive, though accessibility for persons with disabilities could be further developed.
Montenegro	Local cuisine as a tourism offer of the cross-border region: Northern region of Montenegro	Encourages use of seasonal local ingredients, traditional food systems, wild foraged plants and sustainable use of mountain natural resources.	Strengthens short supply chains by linking farms, rural households, small producers, restaurants and tourism providers around local ingredients and products.	Promotes low-impact rural tourism based on local food, authentic experiences, community participation, traditional knowledge and	Includes small rural households, women knowledge-holders, older generations, local producers and community actors in the tourism value chain.



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				diversification beyond mass tourism.	
	Nasljede Ukusa (Heritage of Taste): Kotor, Montenegro	Encourages use of local products, traditional recipes and place-based gastronomy, contributing to shorter supply chains and responsible destination development.	Promotes local ingredients, local producers, traditional recipes and integration of Bokeška cuisine into the tourism offer.	Supports low-impact cultural and gastronomic tourism based on existing heritage, local products, community participation and authentic visitor experiences.	Involves citizens, local communities, producers and associations; activities target both tourists and the local population.
North Macedonia	Prespa Apple Route – Linking Agriculture and Tourism: Prespa region, North Macedonia	Raises awareness of the fragile Prespa ecosystem, biodiversity protection, landscape preservation and environmentally responsible agricultural and tourism practices.	Promotes short supply chains, local apples, homemade products, farm-to-table experiences, family farms and direct links between producers and visitors.	Encourages low-impact rural tourism based on local production, seasonal experiences, local consumption, nature awareness and diversification beyond conventional tourism.	Encourages participation of women-led enterprises, family farms, micro-businesses, cooperatives and local community members in the tourism value chain.
	Slow Food Ohrid – Preserving Local Gastronomy through Sustainable Tourism: Ohrid region, North Macedonia	Promotes biodiversity protection, seasonal ingredients, responsible sourcing and alternatives to protected species such as Ohrid trout.	Strengthens local food value chains by linking producers, fishermen, restaurants, guesthouses and tourism operators around sustainable local products.	Encourages low-impact gastronomy tourism based on local sourcing, biodiversity awareness, responsible consumption and authentic food experiences.	Involves small producers, fishermen, restaurants, guesthouses and tourism actors, creating wider community participation and market access.
Serbia	Traditional gastronomic products as a tourism brand and cultural identity - Pirot ironed	Promotes traditional production, local raw materials, natural drying, mountain pastures, sheep	Strengthens short supply chains through local meat, dairy, sheep milk, mountain pasture	Encourages sustainable cultural and gastronomic tourism based on local products, traditional	Involves farmers, small producers, students, women artisans, cooperatives, schools and



	sausage, Pirot kashkaval cheese, and Pirot carpet (ćilim): Pirot, Southeast Serbia	breeding, wool processing and sustainable use of local resources.	products, protected food brands and cooperation with farmers and producers.	crafts, festivals, rural livelihoods and GSTC-aligned destination management.	local communities; detailed accessibility information is not specified.
San Marino	„From the Land to the Table“: San Marino, Republic of San Marino	Encourages local sourcing, short supply chains, seasonal products and responsible use of agricultural and rural resources.	Strengthens local food and wine value chains by linking producers, wineries, restaurants and tourism businesses.	Promotes small-scale, authentic and low-impact food tourism based on local products, rural recipes, tastings and place-based experiences.	Involves public institutions, producers, restaurateurs, tourism companies and hospitality businesses; detailed accessibility information is not specified.



5.4.3. *PILLAR C: HERITAGE & TERRITORIAL IDENTITY*

Table 6. Good practice in Mediterranean Diet examples in the EUSAIR countries - PILLAR C: HERITAGE & TERRITORIAL IDENTITY

PILLAR C: HERITAGE & TERRITORIAL IDENTITY					
EUSAIR country	Name of the good practice example and location	Authenticity and preservation of cultural heritage	Valorisation of local products and quality labels	Contribution to regional identity and destination branding	Educational and promotional value
Croatia	House of Istrian Olive Oil – Museum Olei Histriae: City of Pula, Istria County, Croatia	Preserves and presents more than 2,000 years of Istrian olive-growing tradition, from Roman production techniques to modern cold-pressing methods.	Strongly promotes Istrian extra virgin olive oil, local producers, olive mills, truffles and other indigenous Istrian products within the tourism offer.	Strengthens Istria's identity as a leading olive oil and gastronomy destination and enhances Pula's offer through a specialised gastro-interpretive centre.	Promotes visitor learning through exhibitions, artefacts, multimedia, interactive displays, guided tours, sensory tastings and interpretation of the Mediterranean diet.
	Museum of Salt and House of Salt: City of Nin, Zadar County, Croatia	Preserves more than 1,500 years of salt-making tradition, manual harvesting techniques, old tools, photographs, stories and local production knowledge.	Promotes Nin sea salt and flower of salt as distinctive local products with strong gastronomic, cultural and environmental value.	Strengthens Nin and Zadar County as destinations connected with salt heritage, biodiversity, Mediterranean gastronomy and authentic coastal traditions.	Promotes learning through the Salt Museum, House of Salt, documentary films, interactive models, guided tours, workshops, Salt Festival and Open House Days.
Greece	Iter Vitis - Greek Network as part of the Cultural Route Network "Iter Vitis": Region of Peloponnese, Region of Crete, Region of	Preserves European and Mediterranean wine heritage, historic vineyards, traditional wine-making practices, rural landscapes	Promotes local wines, indigenous grape varieties, regional wine identities, wine tourism products and quality-	Strengthens the identity of Greek wine regions such as Peloponnese, Crete, Central Macedonia and Western Greece	Provides educational value through wine routes, tastings, vineyard visits, cultural interpretation,



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	North Macedonia, Region of Western Greece	and intangible viticultural knowledge.	based gastronomic experiences.	through wine heritage and terroir-based storytelling.	workshops, heritage mapping and promotion of wine landscapes.
	Greek Breakfast – Initiative of the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels: regional adaptations across multiple regions including Crete, Peloponnese, Cyclades, Epirus, Macedonia	Preserves traditional recipes, local ingredients, breakfast customs and Mediterranean Diet practices as part of the visitor experience.	Promotes PDO/PGI products, regional specialties, traditional foods, local producers and certified Greek products within hotel services.	Strengthens the gastronomic identity of Greek regions through locally adapted breakfast offers and place-based food storytelling.	Introduces visitors to Greek regional products, Mediterranean Diet values, traditional recipes and local food culture through everyday hotel services.
Italy	MedDiet Go – Mediterranean Diet Goes Global - project funded by the Interreg Euro-MED 2021-2027 programme: Spain, Slovenia, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Bulgaria	Preserves Mediterranean Diet heritage, culinary traditions, rural landscapes, agricultural practices, local knowledge and community-based cultural identity.	Promotes healthy Mediterranean products, local food, traditional ingredients, regional agri-food identities and value-added gastronomic tourism products.	Positions Mediterranean Diet territories as authentic, sustainable and internationally recognisable tourism destinations.	Raises awareness of the Mediterranean Diet through workshops, digital platforms, stakeholder exchange, tourism experiences and promotional tools.
Slovenia	Taste Slovenia – National platform for promoting Slovenian gastronomy and sustainable food tourism	Preserves traditional recipes, regional food practices and Slovenia's diverse culinary influences, including Alpine, Mediterranean, Pannonian and Balkan traditions.	Promotes local ingredients, regional specialties, seasonal products, quality gastronomy and cooperation with chefs, farmers and food producers.	Strengthens Slovenia's image as a green, boutique and sustainable culinary destination rooted in regional diversity and authentic food experiences.	Promotes Slovenian gastronomy through storytelling, culinary experiences, awareness campaigns, international visibility, Michelin recognition and knowledge-sharing.
Albania	Autochthonous Seeds Project – Integrating Native Varieties into	Revitalises traditional crops, native plant varieties, culinary practices, local	Supports certification, national catalogue inclusion and market	Strengthens Albania's identity as a destination for authentic agritourism,	Promotes awareness through trainings, workshops,



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	Sustainable Food Systems and Agritourism in Albania: nationwide implementation, with key activities in Tirana, Lushnja, Korça, Dibra, and other rural areas	food identities and Mediterranean Diet-related rural heritage.	integration of native varieties, traditional ingredients and biodiversity-based local products.	native biodiversity, local gastronomy and Mediterranean food heritage.	demonstration plots, chef-producer collaboration, vocational education and community-based activities.
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Herzeg House – Local Food Product Store: Trebinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina	Strong contribution through safeguarding traditional recipes, production methods, and Herzegovina gastronomic heritage. Promotes authentic visitor experiences rooted in local culture.	Excellent promotion of local wines, spirits, honey, cheeses, dried products, and traditional specialties. Supports recognition of regional quality products and market positioning.	Herzeg House significantly strengthens the branding of Trebinje and Herzegovina as an authentic gastronomy destination. Serves as a flagship regional identity project.	High educational value through tastings, storytelling, workshops, and interpretation of local food traditions and production processes.
Montenegro	Local cuisine as a tourism offer of the cross-border region: Northern region of Montenegro	Preserves traditional mountain recipes, culinary knowledge, preparation methods, storytelling and intangible food heritage of northern Montenegro.	Promotes local farm products, juices, jams, honey, preserves, wild plants and traditional dishes through branding, packaging and market-readiness support.	Strengthens the identity of Montenegro's mountain regions as destinations for authentic rural gastronomy and community-based food experiences.	Promotes traditional gastronomy through gastro routes, cookbook "Gorska trpeza", promotional brochure, website, storytelling and international cookbook recognition.
	Nasljede Ukusa (Heritage of Taste): Kotor, Montenegro	Preserves Bokeška cuisine, traditional Kotor recipes, local food customs and the gastronomic identity of the Bay of Kotor.	Promotes local products and traditional recipes through media, cultural events, publications and tourism-related activities.	Strengthens Kotor's identity as a destination of authentic coastal gastronomy, Mediterranean food	Promotes education and awareness through publications, educational materials, workshops,



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				culture and local culinary heritage.	thematic events and media promotion.
North Macedonia	Prespa Apple Route – Linking Agriculture and Tourism: Prespa region, North Macedonia	Preserves apple-growing traditions, homemade food preparation, family farming practices, regional gastronomy and knowledge passed down through generations.	Promotes Prespa apples, apple-based products, homemade foods, local farm products and regional agricultural identity within tourism experiences.	Strengthens Prespa's identity as an apple-growing region and positions it as a destination for authentic rural, food and eco-tourism experiences.	Promotes visitor learning through guided orchard tours, apple tastings, workshops, farm visits, environmental interpretation and storytelling.
	Slow Food Ohrid – Preserving Local Gastronomy through Sustainable Tourism: Ohrid region, North Macedonia	Preserves traditional recipes, cooking methods, food customs, local ingredients and Ohrid's gastronomic identity.	Promotes traditional dishes, local ingredients, small-scale products, fish-related gastronomy and Slow Food principles within the tourism offer.	Strengthens Ohrid's image as a destination where cultural heritage, lake identity, sustainability and gastronomy are closely connected.	Promotes visitor learning through festivals, workshops, tastings, culinary experiences and interpretation of sustainable local food traditions.
Serbia	Traditional gastronomic products as a tourism brand and cultural identity - Pirot ironed sausage, Pirot kashkaval cheese, and Pirot carpet (ćilim): Pirot, Southeast Serbia	Preserves Pirot ironed sausage, Pirot kashkaval, Pirot carpet weaving, local recipes, traditional production skills and intangible cultural heritage.	Promotes three protected geographical indications: Pirot ironed sausage, Pirot sheep's milk kashkaval cheese and Pirot carpet.	Strengthens Pirot's image as an authentic gastronomic and cultural destination based on protected products, Stara Planina heritage and traditional crafts.	Promotes heritage through fairs, festivals, tastings, producer presentations, school visits, weaving workshops, kashkaval workshops and tourism fairs.
San Marino	„From the Land to the Table“: San Marino, Republic of San Marino	Preserves San Marino's culinary heritage, traditional recipes, local wines, olive	Promotes local wines, olive oil, pasta, bread, rural recipes and other food and wine products	Strengthens San Marino's identity as a destination for authentic food and wine experiences rooted	Promotes visitor learning through tastings, gastronomic events, storytelling, authentic





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		oil, pasta, bread and rural food culture.	within tourism experiences.	in local tradition and Mediterranean Diet values.	experiences and presentation of local agri-food traditions.
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5.4.4. *PILLAR D: INNOVATION & LOCAL ECONOMY*

Table 7. Good practice in Mediterranean Diet examples in the EUSAIR countries - PILLAR D: INNOVATION & LOCAL ECONOMY

PILLAR D: INNOVATION & LOCAL ECONOMY				
EUSAIR country	Name of the good practice example and location	Innovation in the tourism product	Economic contribution to the local community	Involvement of the local community
Croatia	House of Istrian Olive Oil – Museum Olei Histriae: City of Pula, Istria County, Croatia	Combines museum interpretation, gastronomy, sensory tasting, education, producer promotion and local product sales in one specialised olive oil tourism product.	Generates demand for local olive oils, olive mills, producers, guides, educators and indigenous products; supports year-round tourism and local income.	Involves local olive growers, olive mills, producers, guides, educators, tourism institutions and the wider Istrian gastronomic community.
	Museum of Salt and House of Salt: City of Nin, Zadar County, Croatia	Combines living museum, salt fields, interpretive centre, gastronomy, biodiversity, festivals and participatory harvesting experiences into one tourism product.	Generates demand for local salt products, crafts, guided tours, festivals, thematic programmes and related tourism services in Nin and the wider Zadar area.	Involves Nin Saltworks, museum staff, the local community, tourism boards, craftspeople, producers and participants in festivals and educational programmes.
Greece	Iter Vitis - Greek Network as part of the Cultural Route Network “Iter Vitis”: Region of Peloponnese, Region of Crete, Region of North Macedonia, Region of Western Greece	Combines certified cultural route methodology, wine tourism, heritage interpretation, local gastronomy, vineyard landscapes and transnational networking.	Generates opportunities for wineries, small producers, guides, hospitality providers, cultural operators and rural tourism businesses.	Involves regional authorities, municipalities, wineries, wine associations, museums, cultural organisations, research actors, tourism bodies and local communities.
	Greek Breakfast – Initiative of the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels: regional adaptations across multiple	Transforms the standard hotel breakfast into a structured gastronomy product based on regional identity, certification,	Creates demand for local farmers, cooperatives, food processors, chefs and small	Involves the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels, hotels, local producers, cooperatives,



	regions including Crete, Peloponnese, Cyclades, Epirus, Macedonia	local sourcing and producer cooperation.	producers, supporting local income and regional value chains.	chefs, regional authorities, tourism bodies and local communities.
Italy	MedDiet Go – Mediterranean Diet Goes Global - project funded by the Interreg Euro-MED 2021-2027 programme: Spain, Slovenia, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Bulgaria	Combines Living Labs, Euro-Cluster networking, digital platforms, One-Stop-Shops and co-created Mediterranean Diet tourism experiences.	Supports SMEs, farmers, producers, rural businesses and tourism actors; contributes to job creation, rural diversification and countering depopulation.	Actively involves farmers, SMEs, producers, tour operators, public authorities, researchers, citizens, innovators and local communities in co-design processes.
Slovenia	Taste Slovenia – National platform for promoting Slovenian gastronomy and sustainable food tourism	Combines national gastronomy branding, curated culinary experiences, sustainability standards, regional storytelling and international promotion.	Supports chefs, restaurants, farmers, producers, tourism providers and local destinations by increasing demand for local food and culinary experiences.	Involves national and local tourism bodies, ministries, chefs, restaurants, farmers, food producers, hospitality providers and educational institutions.
Albania	Autochthonous Seeds Project – Integrating Native Varieties into Sustainable Food Systems and Agritourism in Albania: nationwide implementation, with key activities in Tirana, Lushnja, Korça, Dibra, and other rural areas	Operates as a living-lab model linking seed regeneration, certification, market testing, chef collaboration, agritourism and modern gastronomy.	Creates new value chains for farmers, seed producers, agritourism businesses, restaurants, chefs and small rural enterprises.	Involves GIZ, ministries, universities, IPGR, ESHFF, ATTCs, farmers, seed producers, agritourism operators, chefs, CSOs and local communities.
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Herzeg House – Local Food Product Store: Trebinje, Bosnia and Herzegovina	Innovative combination of retail, gastronomy, tasting experiences, workshops, and tourism interpretation in one integrated concept. Operates as a cluster and experiential platform.	Generates income opportunities for local producers, creates multiplier effects in tourism, supports SMEs, and strengthens rural economic resilience.	Strong involvement of local producers, farmers, public institutions, tourism bodies, and entrepreneurs.



				Community participation is central to the model.
Montenegro	Local cuisine as a tourism offer of the cross-border region: Northern region of Montenegro	Combines thematic gastro routes, recipe standardisation, cookbook, storytelling, training, packaging support and cross-border tourism promotion.	Generates additional income for rural households, farmers, small producers, restaurants and tourism businesses through traditional food-based tourism services.	Involves rural households, women preserving culinary knowledge, local producers, restaurants, hotels, trainers, tourism organisations and regional development actors.
	Nasljede Ukusa (Heritage of Taste): Kotor, Montenegro	Integrates Bokaška cuisine into the tourism offer through storytelling, publications, workshops, events and promotion of traditional recipes.	Creates visibility and market opportunities for local producers, gastronomy actors, cultural associations and tourism providers in Kotor.	Involves the Tourism Office Kotor, Municipality of Kotor, local producers, citizens, local communities and cultural/gastronomic associations.
North Macedonia	Prespa Apple Route – Linking Agriculture and Tourism: Prespa region, North Macedonia	Combines apple orchards, farm visits, tastings, workshops, farm-to-table gastronomy, environmental awareness and community-based tourism into one route.	Creates additional income for apple growers, cooperatives, family farms, women-led micro-businesses and local tourism providers.	Involves local apple producers, cooperatives, Municipality of Resen, tourism businesses, environmental NGOs, family farms and women-led enterprises.
	Slow Food Ohrid – Preserving Local Gastronomy through Sustainable Tourism: Ohrid region, North Macedonia	Combines Slow Food principles, local producer networks, protected-species awareness, food festivals, workshops and authentic gastronomy experiences.	Creates market opportunities for small producers, fishermen, restaurants, guesthouses and tourism operators, keeping tourism spending within the region.	Involves Slow Food Ohrid, local producers, fishermen, restaurants, guesthouses, tourism operators, Municipality of Ohrid and local communities.



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Serbia	Traditional gastronomic products as a tourism brand and cultural identity - Pirot ironed sausage, Pirot kashkaval cheese, and Pirot carpet (ćilim): Pirot, Southeast Serbia	Combines protected gastronomic products, carpet heritage, live demonstrations, workshops, festivals, school production, souvenirs and destination storytelling.	Creates income opportunities for farmers, livestock breeders, sausage producers, dairy students, artisans, cooperatives, SMEs and tourism providers.	Involves producers, agricultural holdings, Dairy School, "Damsko srce" cooperative, Tourism Organization, City Administration, ministries and local communities.
San Marino	„From the Land to the Table“: San Marino, Republic of San Marino	Combines food and wine promotion, producer-restaurant links, tastings, events, experiential tourism and Mediterranean Diet-based storytelling.	Supports local producers, wineries, restaurants, tourism companies and hospitality businesses; increases demand for local products and wines.	Involves ministries, Visit San Marino, agricultural producers, wineries, restaurateurs, tourism companies and local hospitality businesses.



6. Conclusions and policy recommendations

6.1. Key findings

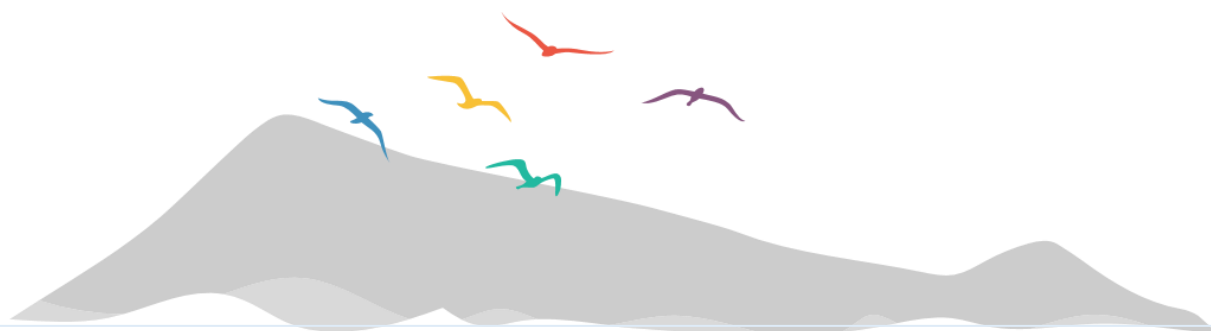
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The Mediterranean Diet, an integral part of the Mediterranean culture, is considered both an overall approach to nutrition (the food one consumes) and a way of life. It comprises food production through agriculture, fishing, harvesting, preserving, preparing, cooking, as well as the rituals associated with sharing meals, the local customs, and social practices that promote community and connection by referring to the place where the food is produced, raised, caught, or harvested. UNESCO has recognized the Mediterranean Diet as an example of a living heritage vital to Mediterranean communities, particularly for its contribution to the concept of conviviality, which recognizes the social value of sharing food and eating together.

The Mediterranean Diet can facilitate the development of authentic tourism experiences that extend beyond just gastronomy. The full “land-to-table” connection of this concept represents both the physical landscape setting of local products used in food preparation, and the interrelationships between the landscape, the local products, and the community’s quality and way of life. The Mediterranean Diet can serve as a vehicle/tool for sustainable regional development because it incorporates and connects culture, agriculture, health, tourism, biodiversity, and local communities. Additionally, the integration of the Mediterranean Diet in tourism can assist with mitigating the seasonality of tourism, enhancing local and rural inland economies, supporting the preservation of unique local identities, and creating an identifiable and attractive regional brand based on authenticity, quality, and sustainability. However, the tourism value of the Mediterranean Diet can only be secured by continuing to support tangible and intangible community practices embedded in the culture and lifestyle, rather than reducing the Mediterranean Diet to a simple culinary term, label or a static marketing term/concept.

The EUSAIR policy and strategic framework positions the Mediterranean Diet as a flagship theme, through the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region, Thematic Steering Group 4 (TSG4) for Sustainable Tourism and Cultural Heritage within the EUSAIR Strategy, the EUSAIR Action Plan 2025, and the Mediterranean Diet Flagship Project (EUSAIR). The Mediterranean Diet is also very closely aligned with all relevant key policy and strategic frameworks on the global level, the level of the European Union, as well as on the national level of EUSAIR countries – in areas from tourism to culture, agriculture, biodiversity, digitalisation, and skills. These frameworks set the strategic, regulatory, and institutional environment for the development of sustainable tourism focused around the Mediterranean Diet. This also includes the funding framework based on transnational cooperation programmes, which result in numerous macroregional and international initiatives, as well as implemented and still ongoing EU projects whose purpose are different forms of protection, valorisation, and promotion of the Mediterranean Diet.

However, the greatest challenge lies in the area of implementation, coordination, and governance. There is a wide range of differences in the levels of institutional capacity and maturity of the tourism sector, agricultural and cultural sector, certification systems, and supply chains across the EUSAIR. EU



member states such as Italy, Greece, Croatia, and Slovenia have more mature and complex policy and market infrastructures compared to non-EU countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and San Marino. The latter countries tend to have rich culinary histories, but weak infrastructures for integrating in the tourism value chains. Therefore, the Mediterranean Diet can become a catalyst for sustainable tourism, but only in environments in which there is coordinated governance in quality standards, cross-border cooperation, education, digital tools, and other mechanisms for ensuring that the Mediterranean Diet is appropriately valorised, and that the benefits remain in local communities.

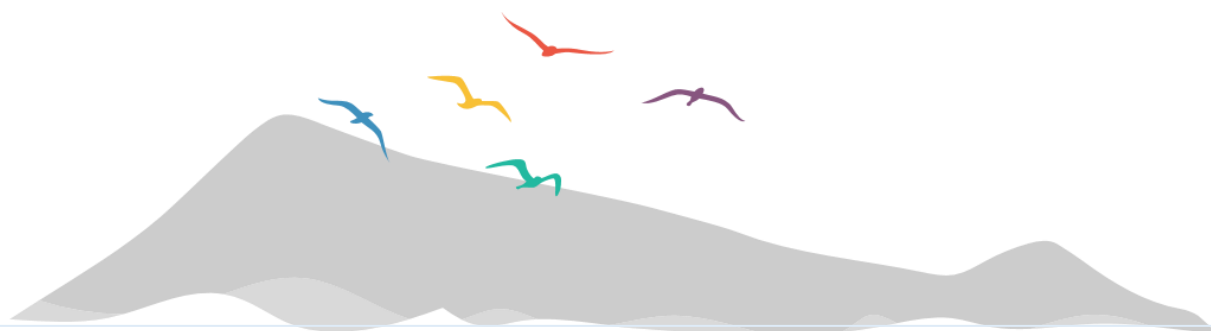
The Mediterranean Diet is important for sustainable tourism development, because it enables the change from mass tourism based on volume, seasonality, and coastal areas, to tourism based on experience - specialised, slower, community-based, and quality tourism. It provides not just a food product, but also an "experience infrastructure", combining elements from the local land, local markets, rural households, festivals, restaurants, to cooking traditions, landscape, community and social rituals. Therefore, the Mediterranean Diet supports a variety of different tourism formats – from gastronomy tourism, rural tourism, cultural tourism, health and wellness tourism, to slow tourism, education tourism, agritourism, and even beyond. Moreover, since the Mediterranean Diet can essentially create meaningful contact with the destination, it caters directly to the increasing tourist demand for authentic experiences, participation in the local community, and consumption of the local products.

However, in that role, the branding of the Mediterranean Diet is not enough. If destinations do not provide interpretation, education, authenticity, and traceability, as well as maintain strong ties with local production, the Mediterranean Diet risks becoming over-commercialized or labelled as a generic "Mediterranean menu". To be viable and sustainable in the long-term, tourism development needs to be focused around the communities, producers, landscapes, and cultural traditions that created the Mediterranean Diet, incorporated in all levels and chains of the tourism stakeholder and value chain.

Best practice examples include integration of all elements of the Mediterranean Diet into holistic models, instead of being marketed separately – such are cultural routes for wine and olive oil, farm stays and clusters of Mediterranean Diet products and producers, organic agricultural areas, communities linked with UNESCO, culinary education programs, certification for local products, and platforms for cooperation and collaboration across borders.

The most critical factor in replicating the success of the Mediterranean Diet as an area-based tourism product, throughout the EUSAIR, is establishing cooperation among stakeholders. No single destination can realize the full potential of the Mediterranean Diet on its own. Instead, the strength of the Mediterranean Diet is derived from both the regional identity that it represents, to all countries within the region. Implementing cross-border routes, co-branding, knowledge transfer, common quality standards, and creating producer networks and cross-regional platforms will allow less visible countries to benefit from the Mediterranean Diet's regional reputation and know-how, while allowing those countries to maintain their own unique identity.

Finally, cooperation among countries involved in creating the Mediterranean Diet must be balanced and inclusive. Countries and regions with weaker institutional capacity must not be viewed as active co-creators of the Mediterranean Diet brand. Ultimately, if good practices for promoting sustainable tourism



based on the Mediterranean Diet can be achieved, then the Mediterranean Diet can become an example of sustainable tourism. The preconditions for this to come true are establishing permanent cooperation mechanisms, developing local value chains, establishing governance systems that are focused on protecting the authenticity of the Mediterranean Diet, creating local benefits, and driving the green and digital transition of tourism across the EUSAIR.

6.2. The Mediterranean Diet as a resource for sustainable tourism in EUSAIR – the SWOT analysis

The SWOT analysis shows that the Mediterranean Diet is a highly valuable resource and asset for sustainable tourism development in the EUSAIR region. After its inscription on the UNESCO's World Heritage List, it started to gain global attention and credibility. Different types of tourism play a significant role because of their ability to help extend seasonality, reduce pressure on coastal destination areas, and strengthen linkages between tourism, local producers, and the shorter supply chains throughout the EUSAIR region.

There are key weaknesses such as an uneven development of countries in the EUSAIR region. Some countries have gastronomy branding systems, certification schemes, sustainable tourism systems, and some countries still have fragmented agricultural structures, limited capacity, weak institutional coordination, and poor integration of tourism and agrifood-related local supplies. Another major concern are commodities associated with the Mediterranean Diet. There is a risk that it will eventually become simply another label. Pressures of climate change, overtourism, and depopulation of rural communities, as well as labour shortages, and costs of production, continue to destabilise traditional food systems and lifestyles in connection to the Mediterranean Diet.

As shown in the SWOT analysis below, there is the need for an integrated governance approach incorporating cultural heritage, local food production, education, digitalisation, destination management, and transnational cooperation. The EUSAIR cannot insist solely on the promotion of gastronomy – it should build capacities, skills and innovation to preserve authenticity, strengthen resilient local value chains, communities, producers, and territorial integrity.

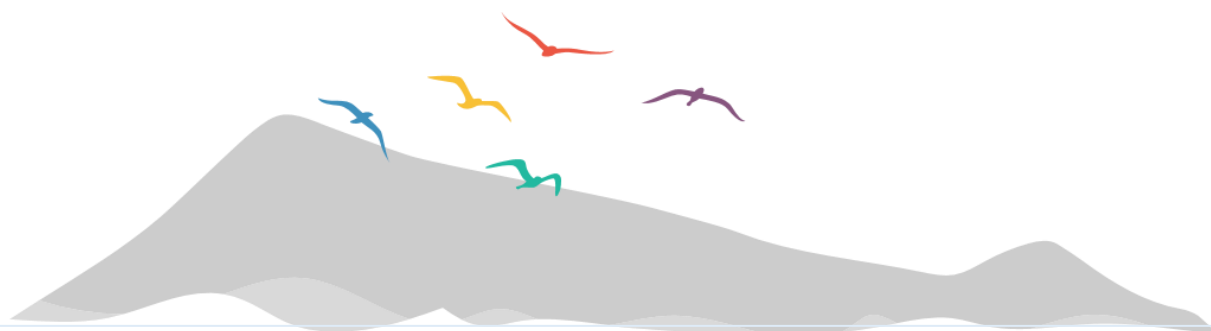
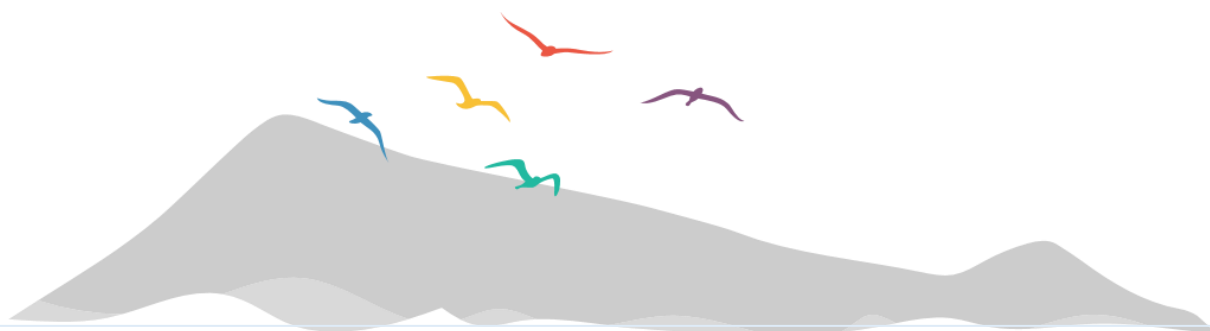


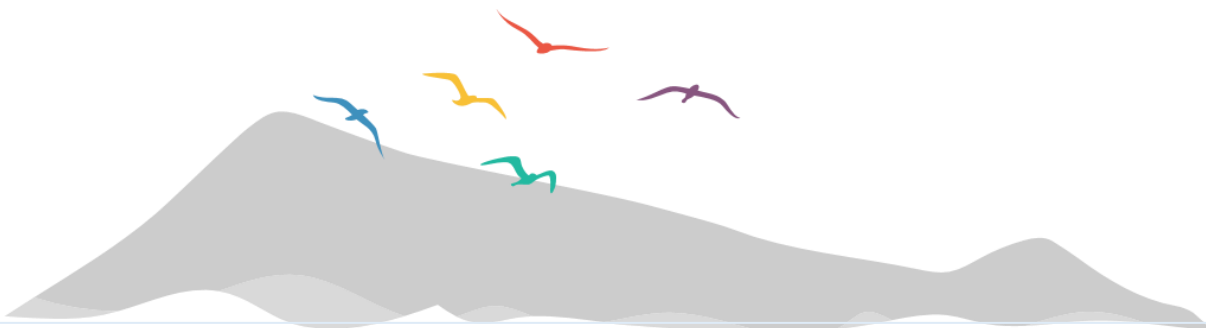
Table 8. The Mediterranean Diet as a resource for sustainable tourism in EUSAIR – SWOT analysis

INTERNAL FACTORS	EXTERNAL FACTORS
<i>STRENGTHS</i>	<i>OPPORTUNITIES</i>
▪ UNESCO recognition – inscription on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010 ▪ The UNESCO inscription gives the Mediterranean Diet global authority as a living heritage, rather than just as food or cuisine ▪ The Mediterranean Diet brings together food, culture, agriculture, biodiversity, landscapes, and the social aspects and traditions of eating into an authentic tourist experience ▪ Destination branding enabled through the strong global recognition of the Mediterranean Diet ▪ Rich heritage related to the Mediterranean Diet in EUSAIR countries ▪ Existing systems of GI - PDO/PGI/TSG protect origin, authenticity, and territorial identity ▪ Strong connection between the Mediterranean Diet and sustainability, health, biodiversity, and climate resilience ▪ Transnational cooperation and experience provide capacity for new projects and solutions ▪ Gastronomy tourism has become one of the fastest-growing and most profitable types of tourism ▪ The Mediterranean Diet enables an authentic experience for tourists ▪ Some EUSAIR countries (Italy, Greece, Slovenia, Croatia) have strong gastronomy and mature tourism ecosystems ▪ Strong connection between culture, emotion, food, identity, and place strengthens destination authenticity	▪ Strong policy alignment with EU Green Deal, Farm to Fork, EUSAIR Action Plan 2025, and SDGs - a favourable funding environment ▪ Rapid growth of gastronomy, rural, wellness, and slow tourism increases the demand for authentic local experiences ▪ Shift from “sun and sea” tourism toward year-round tourism of „experiences“ enables the extension of seasons and orientation towards inland areas ▪ Growing consumer demand for traceability, sustainability, and organic and/or local food strengthens the market potential of the Mediterranean Diet ▪ Development of bio-districts, short supply chains, and farm-to-table systems can strengthen local economies ▪ Digital tools, traceability systems, and storytelling platforms can enhance visitor experience, transparency, and satisfaction ▪ Innovative and creative thematic collaborations can create a shared regional identity ▪ Opportunity to connect tourism demand with local producers, SMEs, and rural communities through integrated value chains ▪ Organic agriculture expansion can support the transition toward low-impact tourism ecosystems ▪ Candidate countries can leverage EUSAIR cooperation and know-how ▪ Silver tourism, wellness tourism, and health-conscious travellers represent growing niche markets linked to MD benefits
<i>WEAKNESSES</i>	<i>THREATS</i>



FACILITYPOINT

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fragmented farm and producer structures limit market access ▪ Uneven development between EU and non-EU EUSAIR countries in certification systems, logistics, and institutional capacity ▪ Weak integration, collaboration, and governance of local tourism, culture, and agricultural sectors in many destinations ▪ Limited processing, logistics, aggregation, and distribution systems for local products ▪ Significant differences in organic agriculture development across the region ▪ Weak data systems and insufficient evidence on local socio-economic impacts of the MD ▪ Skills gaps in interpretation, storytelling, destination management, and sustainable gastronomy practices ▪ Tourism branding is often stronger than actual local sourcing and short supply chain implementation ▪ Limited understanding among tourism providers and visitors of MD as a holistic cultural-environmental system, instead of only “healthy food” ▪ Heavy reliance on project-based initiatives rather than long-term institutional governance ▪ Uneven destination-management capacity and weak interpretation infrastructure in inland and rural areas | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Risks of commodification and interpretation of the MD as a healthy diet, instead of as „living heritage“ ▪ “Mystification” and standardised tourist menus can weaken the authenticity and cultural meaning of MD ▪ Overtourism and excessive concentration on coastal areas threaten local communities and ecosystems ▪ Climate change and biodiversity loss threaten agricultural production systems ▪ Rising production costs and labour shortages increasingly pressure small producers ▪ Rural depopulation and an aging farming population threaten the continuity of traditional knowledge and practices ▪ Better-resourced destinations may dominate EUSAIR branding, in comparison to weaker regions ▪ Dependence on temporary EU-funded projects risks ▪ Unequal access to EU standards, funding, and certification systems disadvantages candidate countries ▪ Imported food and standardised supply chains may disconnect tourism branding from local production reality ▪ Greenwashing and superficial sustainability claims undermine trust and destination credibility ▪ Global competition from other gastronomy destinations intensifies pressure for differentiation and innovation |
|---|---|



6.3. Policy recommendations

The Mediterranean Diet is much more than just food or a type of tourism. It is, in fact, an important part of the environment and economy of all EUSAIR countries. This should be understood as a major territorial asset connecting culture, agriculture, tourism, biodiversity, natural landscape, health, local knowledge, and community. Therefore, the Mediterranean Diet can serve as an example of sustainable development, resilience, and inclusion for future tourism in the EUSAIR region.

For this to occur, efforts must move beyond fragmented and project-based approaches. This must not be viewed strictly as simply branding Mediterranean tourism, but rather as establishing effective governance mechanisms that facilitate the development of local value chains that promote a sense of place and strengthen identity while respecting cultural and natural heritage, and providing benefits to communities on a long-term basis. As indicated in this assessment, there are several policy options to be observed.

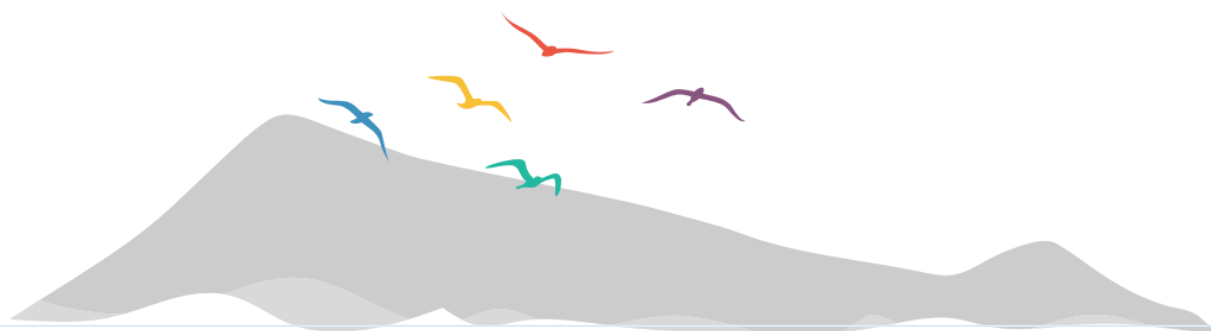
6.3.1. Governance, cooperation, and institutional support

The Mediterranean Diet should be considered as a cross-sector development framework connecting tourism, agriculture, fisheries, culture, health, education, biodiversity, and regional development. This type of concept requires strong institutional governance and coordination between sectors that are still fragmented, particularly between tourism and agri-food systems. Therefore, strong governance and transnational, macroregional and cross-sector cooperation should remain one of the central pillars of future Mediterranean Diet tourism development within EUSAIR.

The successful and sustainable development of Mediterranean Diet-based tourism in the EUSAIR requires strong financial instruments and institutional support systems, coordinated education policies, and more strategic destination branding approaches. Although many good practices and pilot initiatives already exist in the region, many of them remain not fully realised due to the temporary project-perspective approach, insufficient funding, or fragmented governance structures.

Therefore, it is important to improve the financing for SMEs, family farms, cooperatives, rural tourism providers, women entrepreneurs, young producers, and local gastronomy initiatives. This should be provided through the combination of different sources, such as the EUSAIR, Interreg programmes, CAP framework, Horizon Europe programme, Creative Europe programme, Digital Europe programme, and other Cohesion policy instruments, as well as funding sources on national levels of the EUSAIR countries.

However, one of the key elements is to enable access to funding even to those entities who do not have established implementation or highly operational capacities, since this is the most common reason that many entities do not get the opportunity to participate in any kind of funding schemes. Implementation and operational capacities, as well as knowledge and skills, grow with experience, so without these opportunities, or with opportunities that are not easily accessible due to strict policies on existing levels



of capacities, the very same implementation and operational capacities that are required in the first place, cannot be reached.

At the same time, stronger institutional support mechanisms are necessary for long-term cooperation between tourism, agriculture, culture, education, and regional development sectors. This means that the Mediterranean Diet initiatives should be integrated into destination-management strategies, rural development programmes, tourism policies, and local development frameworks.

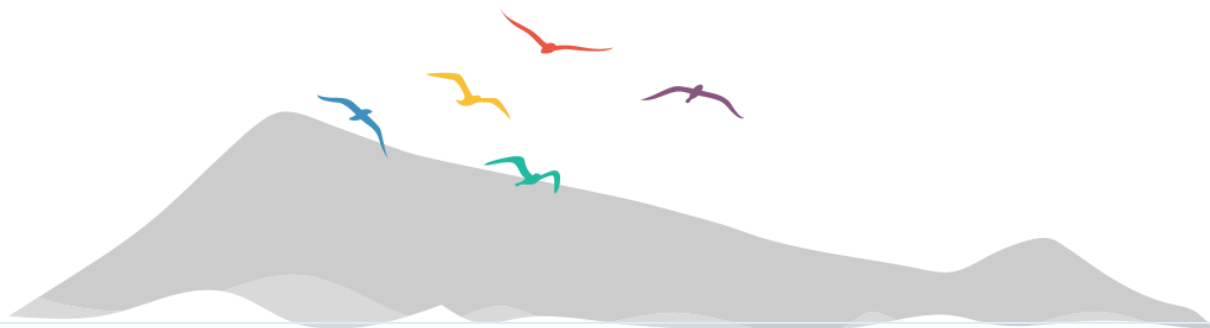
Education, training, and capacity building are also particularly important. Training and educational programmes should be cross-sectoral, and supporting different types of stakeholders - tourism providers, producers, farmers, chefs, guides, local authorities, as well as destination-management organisations. These programmes should be developing practical skills related to sustainable gastronomy, interpretation of heritage, storytelling, digital promotion, biodiversity protection, local sourcing systems, and sustainable destination management. They should also provide joint, innovative, and hybrid/virtual learning formats. Some examples of integrated trainings could be farm-to-restaurant labs, Geographical Indication interpretation workshops, accessible gastronomy training, circular food-system modules, academies for development and management of routes, and peer-learning visits between mature and emerging territories.

Particularly, one of the key preconditions for the successful integration of the Mediterranean Diet into sustainable tourism development is a stronger and more structured cooperation between the tourism sector and the agri-food industry. The most successful examples in the EUSAIR are based on partnerships formed between tourism providers, local producers, cooperatives, chefs, educational institutions, cultural organisations, local authorities, and local communities.

Policy should enable the development of reliable cooperation platforms and partnership models that enable the tourism sector and demand to connect with local production systems. One of the examples could be joint tourism-agriculture projects focused on farm-to-table experiences, gastronomy tourism, olive oil and wine tourism, organic farms, cultural routes, educational workshops, gastronomy festivals, and experiential rural tourism products. Moreover, these cooperation mechanisms must operate at local, regional, and macroregional levels in order to ensure continuity of collaboration that goes beyond temporary individual projects and programming cycles. Innovative business models could also include Living Labs, clusters, Bio-Districts, cooperatives, public-private partnerships, and cross-border routes.

In this sense, particular attention should be given to establishing integrated “farm-to-tourism” and “land-to-table” models, particularly through local procurement systems, regional gastronomy partnerships, and short supply chains that directly connect tourism demand with local production. This contributes not just to better integration of the Mediterranean Diet into tourism, but also to avoiding commodification or reducing the Mediterranean Diet to something that can be simply bought.

Moreover, partnerships that strengthen thematic tourism routes connecting olive-growing regions, wine destinations, fisheries communities, rural gastronomy areas, organic farms, and cultural landscapes would enhance the integration of local producers into tourism value chains. These cooperation models can significantly contribute to rural diversification, local employment and levels of accessibility, preservation of traditional production systems, and stronger territorial identity.



Ultimately, the cross-border cooperation within EUSAIR should facilitate knowledge transfer, exchange of good practices, joint promotion activities, harmonisation of quality standards, and development of shared Mediterranean Diet tourism products and thematic routes. It can contribute to joint promotion, exchange of knowledge and skills, harmonisation of quality standards, development of common storytelling tools, as well as a stronger integration of local producers into tourism value chains across the Adriatic-Ionian region.

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Essentially, the governance and cooperation model should combine three levels. At the local level, practical coordination of the destinations could include mapping of producers, route management, procurement links, interpretation and training. Moreover, civil society, local action groups, small producers and enterprises, as well as municipalities and cities, can form effective collaboration formats that can enable them to more successfully integrate in higher levels of coordination models in the region.

At the interregional level, EUSAIR countries can establish peer learning processes and thematic networks that connect similar destinations – for example, islands with islands, olive landscapes with olive landscapes, mature GI consortia with emerging origin-product groups, and so on. At the macroregional level, EUSAIR can provide joint branding, through visibility, standards, knowledge infrastructure and projects. This kind of layered and structured approach can provide real results faster than maintaining activities exclusively on the regional level.

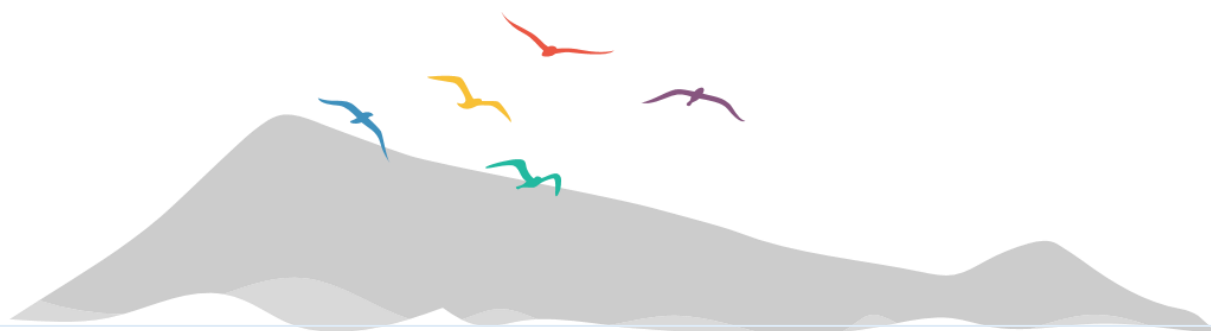
Additionally, new forms of partnership could encourage involvement of women, young people, family farms, fishermen, artisans, and small rural producers in tourism development processes. It is important to position the community participation as the central principle of Mediterranean Diet and related tourism models.

Finally, for all these frameworks to work, EUSAIR should establish a strong institutional support on the regional level, including tailored mechanisms that facilitate cooperation between sectors, support data collection and data-based decision-making, long-term planning, and coordinated destination management, as well as the inclusion of local communities as active co-creators of tourism products and experiences.

Finally, particular attention should be given to reducing disparities in institutional capacity between countries and regions. Less visible destinations and countries with weaker governance systems should be supported not only as beneficiaries of Mediterranean Diet branding, but as active co-creators of macroregional tourism products and networks.

6.3.2. „Living heritage“- authenticity, local value chains, and community engagement

The long-term sustainability of Mediterranean Diet tourism depends almost exclusively on the quality of interpretation and the authenticity of the Mediterranean Diet in visitor experiences. However, the Mediterranean Diet can remain a „living heritage“ only if local communities continue to actively participate in its preservation, transmission, and interpretation – including small rural producers, women



entrepreneurs, young people, and vulnerable communities. That means that tourism development needs to include local community participation and places local people at the centre of Mediterranean Diet tourism products and governance models. This participatory approach not only helps the preservation of the Mediterranean Diet concept, but also strengthens social cohesion, local ownership, economic resilience, and territorial identity.

In order to preserve macroregional and intergenerational knowledge of traditional food preparation, farming techniques, craftsmanship, and local customs connected to the Mediterranean Diet, the participation of local communities in tourism development and governance should not be treated only as a tourism resource – it is a fundamental condition for maintaining authenticity and long-term sustainability.

Destinations should invest in interpretation models that explain where food comes from, who produces it, how it is cultivated or prepared, and what cultural meaning it carries within local communities. Educational storytelling, sensory interpretation, local narratives, and direct interaction with producers significantly strengthen both the visitor experience and the perceived authenticity of destinations. However, all of this will be possible only through strong local value chains and short supply chains that enable the „land-to-table“ concept.

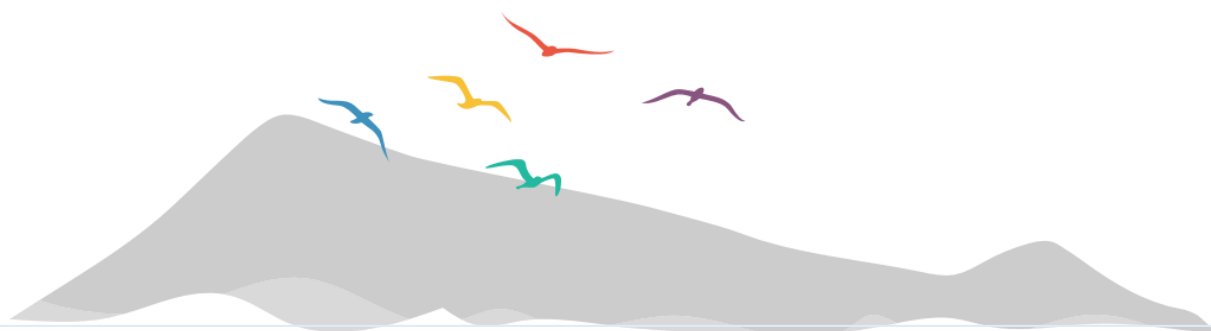
Therefore, one of the key priorities for sustainable tourism development within the EUSAIR, especially in connection to the Mediterranean Diet, should be the strengthening of local value chains connecting agriculture, fisheries, food production, gastronomy, hospitality, and tourism services. It is essential that the tourism demand is directly linked with all types of local producers.

This can be enabled through the development of local procurement systems, aggregation and distribution networks, and short supply chains, with special emphasis to organic agriculture, regenerative farming, biodiversity-based food systems, and innovative sustainable supply chains.

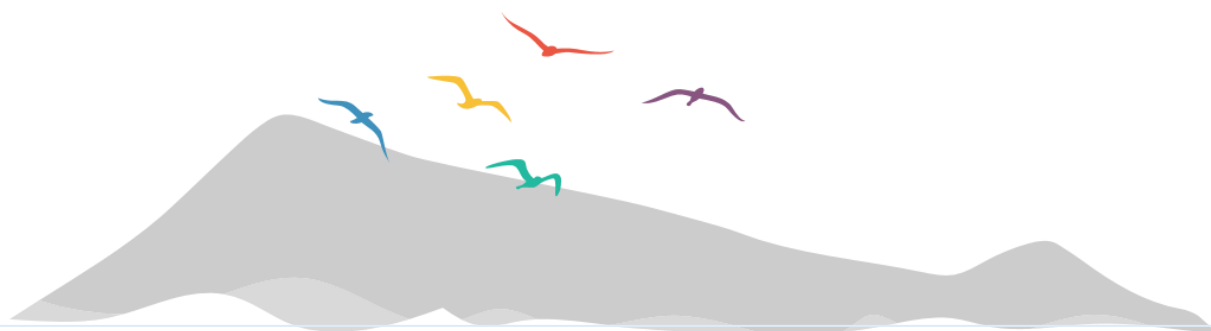
Moreover, the use of Geographical Indications and quality schemes such as PDO, PGI, TSG, as well as organic certification and local quality labels should be strengthened in order to reinforce authenticity, territorial identity, product traceability, and international recognition. These schemes are not only marketing tools, but also instruments for protecting heritage, local knowledge, traditional production systems, and territorial value.

Destinations should support the development of innovative thematic tourism products combining gastronomy, agriculture, wellness, culture, nature, and experiential tourism. This includes olive oil and wine routes, Mediterranean Diet clusters, Slow Food initiatives, organic farm stays, gastronomy festivals, educational tourism programmes, and community-based rural tourism experiences.

Moreover, destination branding strategies should include authenticity, territorial identity, local products, short supply chains, sustainability, and Mediterranean lifestyle values. Generic gastronomy promotion should be avoided, and branding should strengthen the visibility of local communities, producers, landscapes, and traditional knowledge systems connected to the Mediterranean Diet.



Ultimately, the destination branding strategies should increasingly focus on authenticity, local identity, Mediterranean lifestyle values, sustainability, and quality, rather than on standard gastronomy promotion. Finally, the focus should also be on developing and/or strengthening long-term monitoring and governance systems to reduce dependence on temporary project-based initiatives.



6.3.3. *Digital tools and smart tourism ecosystems*

Innovation and digitalisation are important tools for strengthening the visibility, traceability, competitiveness, and sustainability of Mediterranean Diet tourism products within the EUSAIR region. Therefore, digital tools should be used to improve storytelling, visitor engagement, product traceability, and cooperation between tourism stakeholders and local producers. This is especially relevant since digital platforms can facilitate the promotion of local products, direct sales, booking systems for experiential tourism activities, and interpretation of cultural and natural heritage.

At the same time, innovation should not undermine authenticity - technological solutions should support local communities, territorial identity, and sustainability goals, rather than replace direct contact between visitors, producers, and local culture. For example, it is essential to foster the development of Living Labs, innovation hubs, and other pilot projects and digital cooperation platforms that connect tourism, gastronomy, agriculture, biodiversity, and circular economy practices, without shadowing on community engagement, authenticity, and heritage.

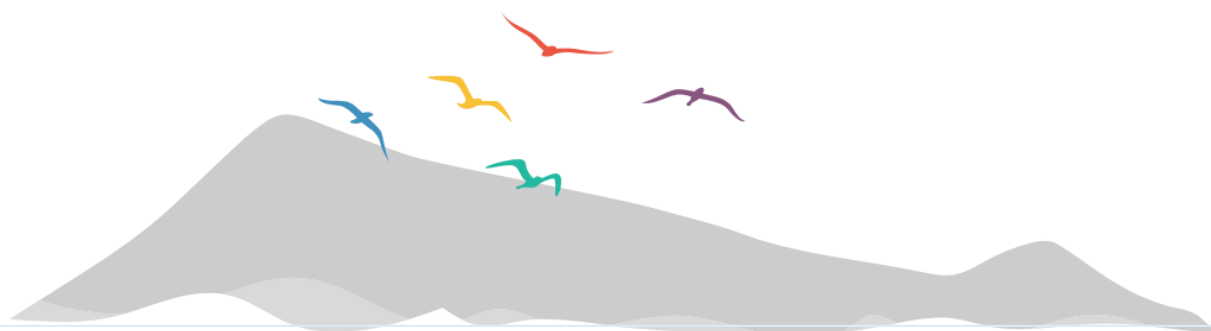
The Mediterranean diet does not just represent a cultural and gastronomic concept. It is also a territorial ecosystem that must have stronger digital visibility, coordination, and access. A coordinated EUSAIR digital platform could assist in creating a coherently identified Mediterranean Diet tourism, by providing a network and connecting local, national, and regional stakeholders, destinations, and initiatives.

The primary recommendation includes a collaborative digital platform and mapping tool that includes tourist initiatives related to the Mediterranean diet across the EUSAIR region. There are many local initiatives and resources related to appropriate (thematic) routes, local producers, clusters, festivals, museums, agritourism farms, and gastronomy experiences. However, they are often fragmented, inconsistent, not visible enough, and disconnected from larger regional tourism chains.

This digital platform could serve as both a governance and promotional tool. It could provide a map of Mediterranean Diet stakeholders, initiatives, tourism offers, as well as the support system on the EUSAIR level such as the strategic, legislative and funding framework for the Mediterranean Diet. The platform can also help trace and enable transparency about the tourism products offered by linking them directly back to local producers, geographical indications, traditional production methods, and short supply chains. If tourists are able to see authenticity in their experience, the economic opportunities, visibility and capacity for marketing of smaller communities will also be enhanced.

The digital platform could also serve as a networking space for all stakeholders, and provide a platform and framework for transnational collaboration, knowledge, technology, and information transfer, experience and best practice exchange.

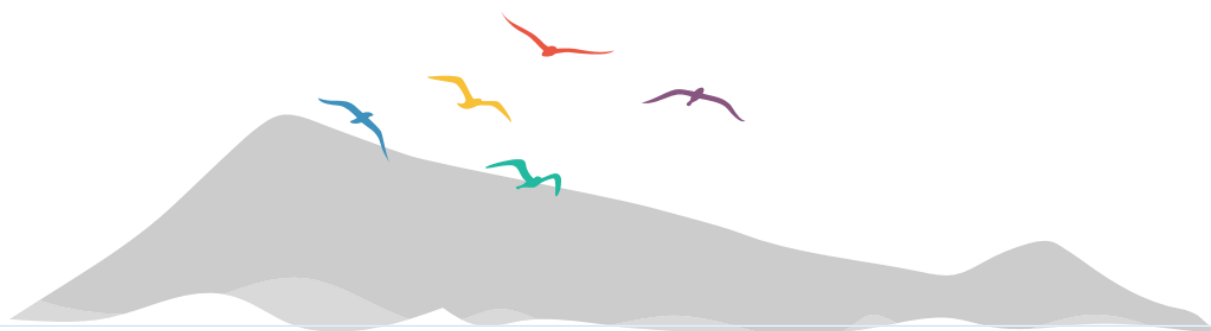
Additionally, this digital platform could integrate digital tools for supporting interpretation and storytelling around the Mediterranean Diet, to provide the tourists with an experience of a deeper understanding of the Mediterranean Diet - where the products come from, who produces them and how, as well as what culture, traditions and landscapes are associated with them. These specific digital tools could include interactive maps, QR codes based traceability systems, and multimedia storytelling.



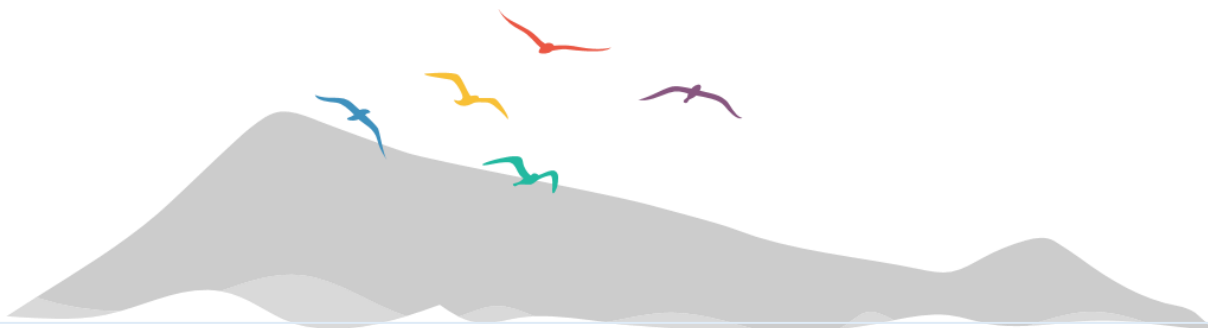
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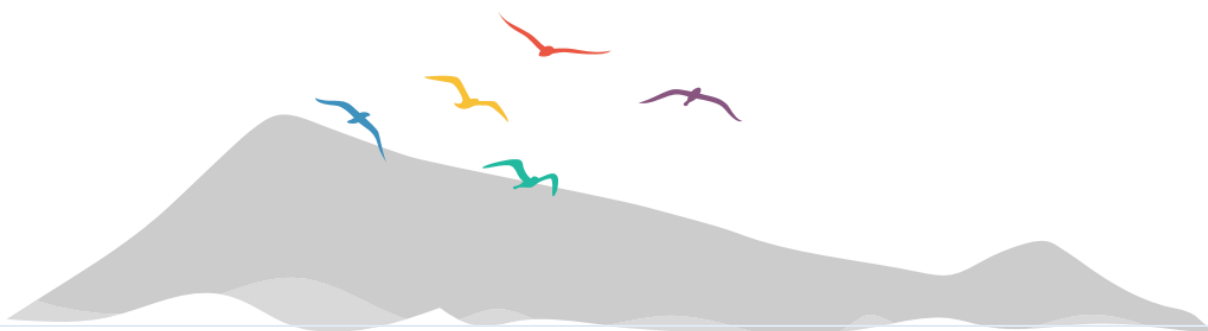
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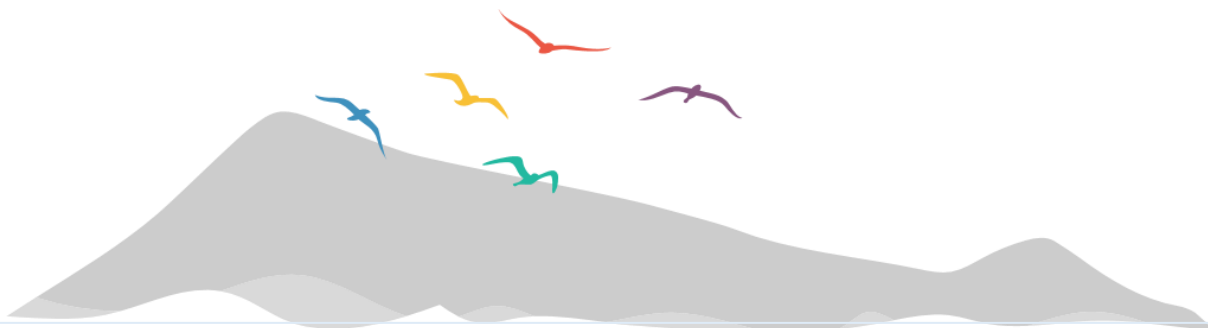


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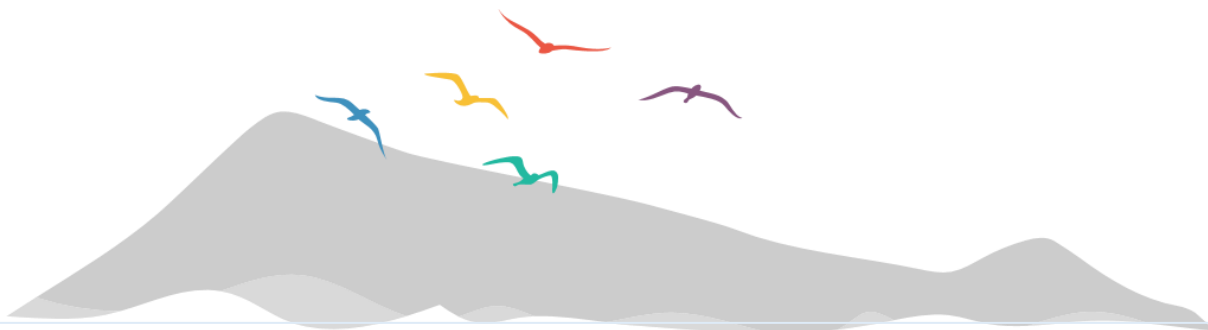


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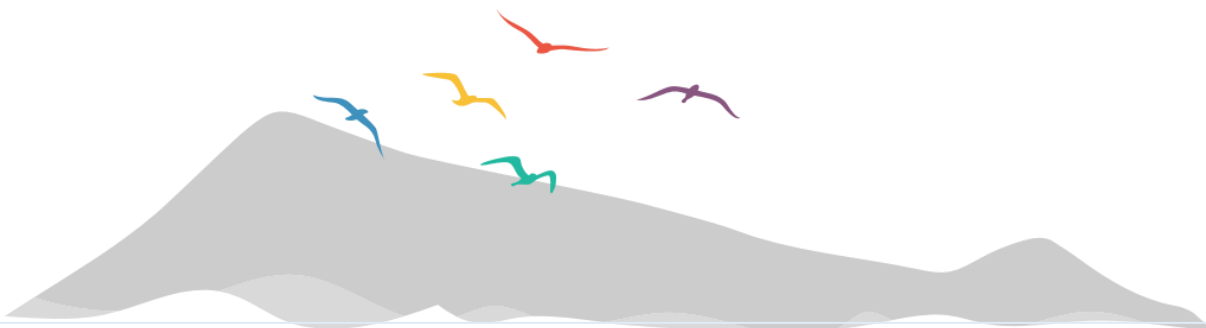
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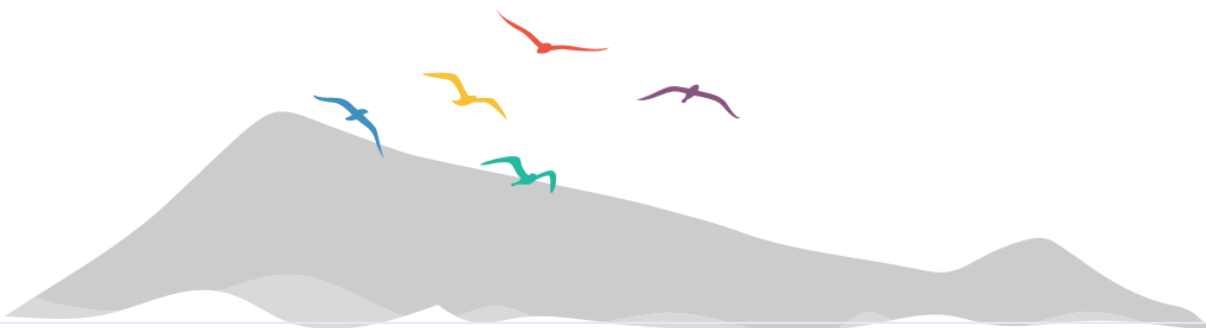
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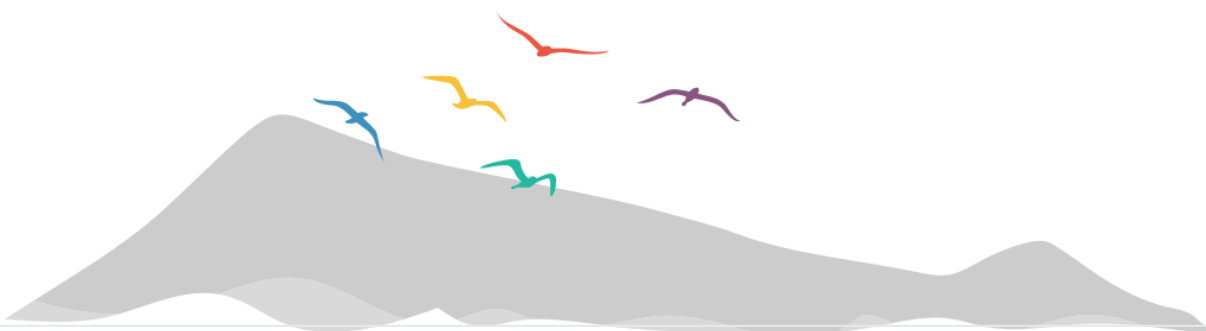
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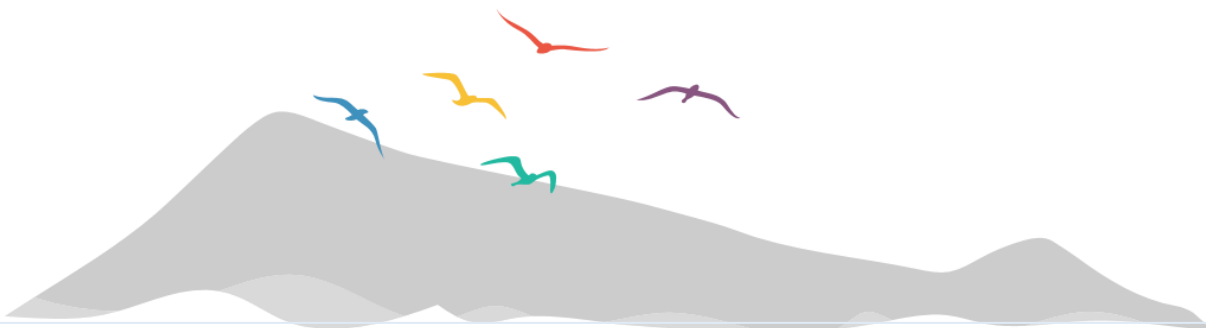


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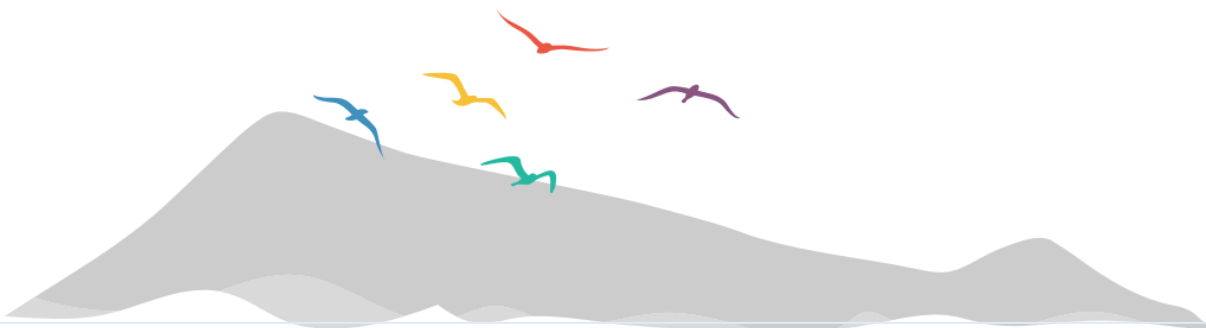


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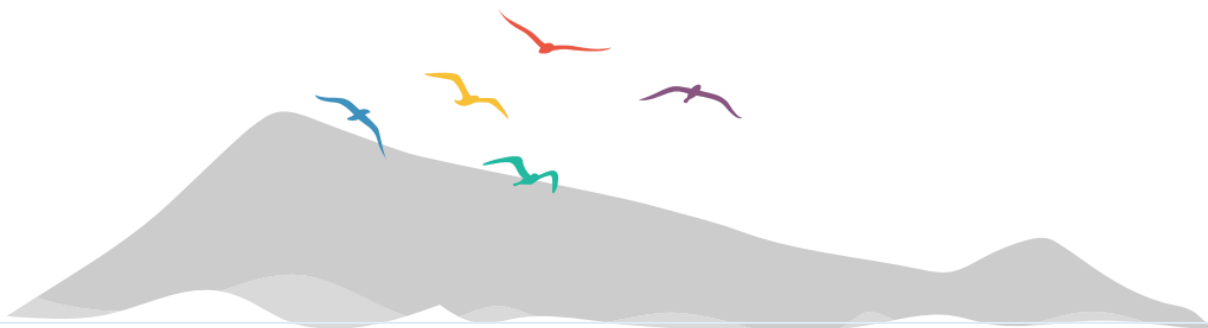


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Appendix: Methodology

Analytical scope, questions, and approach

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The goal of the study is to present the Mediterranean diet not only as a model of diet, but also as a cultural and social practice that embodies the values of sustainability, local community, intergenerational knowledge, and social connectedness. The approach to the implemented research, as well as to the development of the study, was multidisciplinary. It connects the fields of sustainable tourism, cultural heritage, gastronomy, agriculture, and regional development.

The study analyses the potential of the Mediterranean Diet as a foundation for the development of sustainable tourism products in the Adriatic-Ionian region, in line with the objectives of the EUSAIR Strategy and the 2025 Action Plan, particularly within Pillar 4 – Sustainable Tourism. The methodology combines policy analysis, comparative analysis, mapping of initiatives, and case studies of best practices, with the aim of formulating concrete recommendations for the development of sustainable gastronomic tourism in the EUSAIR region. This comparative approach allows the study to identify patterns, challenges, transferable good practices, and opportunities for macroregional development and cooperation across different EUSAIR contexts and levels of institutional development.

The scope of the geographical analysis in reference to the Mediterranean Diet and its use as a tool for tourism development in this case includes the 10 EUSAIR countries: Croatia, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and San Marino.

In order to address the complexity of the Mediterranean Diet as both a cultural heritage, local community system, and a sustainable tourism development framework, the study is organised through several interconnected thematic chapters.

The study is structured into six (6) chapters, each of them addressing one of the key pillars in the concept of the Mediterranean Diet:

1. Chapter 1. Executive summary
2. Chapter 2. Introduction and contextual framework
3. Chapter 3. Policy and strategic foundations
4. Chapter 4. The Mediterranean Diet as a resource for sustainable tourism
5. Chapter 5. Good practices, synergies, and cooperation models
6. Chapter 6. Conclusions and policy recommendations.

In order to ensure methodological coherence between the objectives, research questions, and analytical structure of the study, the following tables provide an overview of the relationship between the thematic chapters, analytical focuses, and research framework.

The contribution of the study chapters to the achievement of the research objectives is presented in the table below:



- To explore the potential of the Mediterranean Diet as a foundation for the development of sustainable tourism products and to analyse how food heritage can be integrated into the tourism offer of the Adriatic-Ionian region.
- To identify and present successful models of integrating the Mediterranean Diet into tourism through a comparative analysis of examples from all ten EUSAIR countries.
- To formulate policy recommendations aimed at improving financing, institutional support, education, and branding.
- To formulate recommendations for strengthening cooperation between the tourism sector and the agri-food industry through joint projects and new forms of partnership.
- To encourage interregional networking and transnational cooperation through joint thematic routes and the exchange of good practices.
- To examine organic agriculture in EUSAIR communities, as well as innovative and sustainable food supply chains, as drivers of sustainable tourism development.
- To provide an overview of the EU legislative framework for the tourism and agricultural sectors, including an analysis of synergies and interconnections between them.

Table 9. Analytical framework: contribution of study chapters to the research objectives

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE	CHAPTERS OF THE STUDY THROUGH WHICH THE OBJECTIVE WAS ACHIEVED
1. To explore the potential of the Mediterranean Diet as a foundation for the development of sustainable tourism products and to analyse how food heritage can be integrated into the tourism offer of the Adriatic-Ionian region.	▪ Chapter 2. Introduction and contextual framework: The Mediterranean Diet - A UNESCO intangible cultural heritage ▪ Chapter 3. Policy and strategic foundations ▪ Chapter 5. Good practices, synergies, and cooperation models ▪ Chapter 6. Conclusions and policy recommendations
2. To identify and present successful models of integrating the Mediterranean Diet into tourism through a comparative analysis of examples from all ten EUSAIR countries.	▪ Chapter 4. The Mediterranean Diet as a resource for sustainable tourism ▪ Chapter 5. Good practices, synergies, and cooperation models ▪ Chapter 6. Conclusions and policy recommendations
3. To formulate policy recommendations aimed at improving financing, institutional support, education, and branding.	▪ Chapter 3. Policy and strategic foundations ▪ Chapter 5. Good practices, synergies, and cooperation models ▪ Chapter 6. Conclusions and policy recommendations
4. To formulate recommendations for strengthening cooperation between the tourism sector and the agri-food industry through joint projects and new forms of partnership.	▪ Chapter 3. Policy and strategic foundations ▪ Chapter 5. Good practices, synergies, and cooperation models ▪ Chapter 6. Conclusions and policy recommendations
5. To encourage interregional networking and transnational cooperation through joint thematic routes and the exchange of good practices.	▪ Chapter 3. Policy and strategic foundations ▪ Chapter 5. Good practices, synergies, and cooperation models ▪ Chapter 6. Conclusions and policy recommendations
6. To examine organic agriculture in EUSAIR communities, as well as innovative and sustainable food supply	▪ Chapter 2. Introduction and contextual framework: The Mediterranean Diet - A UNESCO intangible cultural heritage



chains, as drivers of sustainable tourism development.	▪ Chapter 3. Policy and strategic foundations ▪ Chapter 5. Good practices, synergies, and cooperation models ▪ Chapter 6. Conclusions and policy recommendations
To provide an overview of the EU legislative framework for the tourism and agricultural sectors, including an analysis of synergies and interconnections between them.	▪ Chapter 3. Policy and strategic foundations ▪ Chapter 6. Conclusions and policy recommendations

Due to the interdisciplinary and holistic nature of the study, all chapters contribute, directly or indirectly, to the achievement of the research objectives and thematic focuses.

Furthermore, the foundational pillars of the study were specific thematic focuses and research questions. The study addresses the purpose, thematic focuses, and research questions of the study, as shown in the table below. The following table presents the alignment between the thematic focuses, research questions, and methodological approach applied throughout the research.



Table 10. Analytical framework: alignment between chapters, thematic focuses, research questions, and methodological approach

CHAPTER	FOCUS	RESEARCH QUESTION	METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH
Chapter 2. Introduction and contextual framework: The Mediterranean Diet - A UNESCO intangible cultural heritage	- Development of “green” and experiential tourism products that connect culture, nature, and food - Enhancement of regional branding through the Mediterranean Diet as an identity of quality	- How can the Mediterranean Diet be integrated into the development of sustainable tourism products in the Adriatic-Ionian region? - How can the Mediterranean Diet be used to strengthen regional branding and the promotion of quality? Which elements are the most recognisable?	- The chapter presents the Mediterranean Diet as a holistic socio-cultural system that connects culture, nature, and food - gastronomy, landscape, biodiversity, traditions, and local communities. It frames the MD as a foundation for experiential, authentic, and sustainable tourism aligned with EUSAIR sustainability goals. - The chapter positions the Mediterranean Diet as a shared identity and symbol of authenticity, sustainability, and cultural value in the Adriatic-Ionian region. It highlights UNESCO recognition and EU policy frameworks as tools for strengthening territorial branding.
Chapter 3. Policy and strategic foundations	Policy and strategic alignment of the Mediterranean Diet	How can the Mediterranean Diet be practically linked to the strategy for “green tourism products and services” (Action Plan, Pillar 4, Theme 3)?	The chapter analyses EUSAIR, as well as global, EU and national strategic and legislative frameworks that position the Mediterranean Diet as a tool for the green and digital transition of tourism.
Chapter 4. The Mediterranean Diet as a resource for sustainable tourism	The relationship between organic and sustainable food production, biodiversity conservation,	In what ways does the Mediterranean Diet contribute to the preservation of	The chapter presents the Mediterranean Diet as a „living heritage“ that preserves traditional knowledge, food practices, social rituals,



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	healthy ecosystems, and sustainable tourism	cultural heritage and the identity of local communities? - How can organic agriculture, innovative and sustainable food supply chains contribute to the development of tourism destinations and local communities? - How can education and training contribute to improved cooperation and mutual understanding between the agriculture and tourism sectors? Please provide examples of good practice. - Are there existing tools and frameworks (such as UNESCO sites, biosphere reserves, or geoparks) that could be further enhanced through the Mediterranean Diet? - How can cooperation between the agriculture and food sectors and the tourism sector be encouraged?	and local identities while strengthening tourism experiences. - The chapter explains that organic production, local sourcing, and short supply chains increase authenticity, support rural economies, reduce environmental impacts, and create tourism products of higher-value. - The chapter highlights education, skills development, and knowledge-sharing as tools for connecting tourism and agricultural stakeholders in the MD tourism concept, and preserving traditional practices through community participation and training programmes. - The chapter identifies UNESCO heritage frameworks, protected landscapes, biosphere reserves, and similar initiatives as platforms that can integrate Mediterranean Diet narratives into sustainable tourism development and destination management. - The chapter promotes integrated local value chains, participatory governance, and community-led tourism models, emphasising the important role of farmers, women, youth, and local producers in maintaining authenticity and regional sustainability.
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		What is the role of local communities, especially women, young people, and farmers, in this process?	
Chapter 5. Good practices, synergies, and cooperation models	▪ Comparative overview of successful models integrating the Mediterranean Diet into tourism (various EU-funded projects, initiatives, activities, and projects financed from different sources) ▪ Examples of good practice in inclusive design in gastronomy (the accessibility dimension of gastronomic experiences for persons with disabilities, older persons, and other vulnerable groups), ▪ Concepts of Geographical Indication and Origin of Product – opportunities for contributing to cultural heritage and sustainable tourism ▪ Proposals and research into opportunities and examples of good practice in dialogue and	▪ How can the Mediterranean Diet be integrated into the development of sustainable tourism products in the Adriatic-Ionian region? Which models and approaches have already been successfully implemented? ▪ Which types of examples (good practices, local initiatives, cross-border cooperation projects) would be the most useful to highlight? ▪ How can education and training contribute to improved cooperation and mutual understanding between the agriculture and tourism sectors? Please provide examples of good practice. ▪ In what ways do the concepts of Geographical	▪ The chapter compares successful models of collaboration and cross-border cooperation that integrate the Mediterranean Diet into sustainable tourism. ▪ The chapter highlights good practices that are transferable across the EUSAIR. ▪ The chapter uses good-practice examples to show what can improve cooperation between producers, tourism providers, institutions, and local communities. ▪ The chapter explains GI, PDO, PGI, and origin-based labelling as tools for protecting authenticity, strengthening destination identity, adding market value to local products, and creating recognisable gastronomic tourism experiences.



	cooperation between tourism and agricultural stakeholders through thematic platforms, innovation hubs, and Living Lab collaboration platforms ▪ Interregional networking through joint routes, labelling, and transnational cooperation	Indication and Origin of Product influence and contribute to tourism development?	
Chapter 6. Conclusions and policy recommendations	▪ Proposals for cooperation, such as the development of a digital platform/map for networking local initiatives (clusters, routes, experiential offerings),	▪ What new forms of cooperation or projects could be proposed within the context of the new programming period or Interreg/IPA initiatives?	▪ The chapter proposes recommendations for collaboration, education, and digital tools to support the Mediterranean Diet concept in EUSAIR.

