

Exploring the role of locally-sourced ingredients in the rural hospitality system of Hungary

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to examine the role of local ingredients in the Hungarian rural hospitality system and to analyze the benefits and drawbacks of their utilization in restaurants. Previous literature lacks comprehensive studies investigating the use of local products in restaurants and the collaboration between producers and restaurants, particularly those employing qualitative methods involving both parties. To address this research gap, sixteen interviews were conducted with restaurant representatives and local producers. The findings of this research contribute to understanding the structural barriers hindering the effective integration of local products in restaurant operations. The study reveals that the dynamic nature of restaurant offerings relying on local ingredients, poses challenges for chefs, requiring constant innovation. Additionally, factors such as reliability, transparency, and hyper-local procurement strategies play crucial roles in the adoption of local products. However, logistics and communication emerge as significant shortcomings in restaurant-producer relations, and addressing these issues could improve efficiency, financial outcomes, and product quality. Furthermore, the study provides practical recommendations for enhancing the efficiency of collaboration between local producers and restaurants and fostering mutual understanding between them.

KEYWORDS

local ingredients; local products; local producers; rural hospitality; restaurant procurement; Hungary

RESUMEN

El objetivo de esta investigación es examinar el papel de los ingredientes locales en el sistema de hostelería rural húngaro y analizar los beneficios e inconvenientes de su utilización en los restaurantes. La bibliografía anterior carece de estudios exhaustivos que investiguen el uso de productos locales en los restaurantes y la colaboración entre productores y restaurantes, en particular los que emplean métodos cualitativos con participación de ambas partes. Para colmar esta laguna, se realizaron dieciséis entrevistas a representantes de restaurantes y productores locales. Los resultados de esta investigación contribuyen a comprender los obstáculos estructurales que dificultan la integración efectiva de los productos locales en las operaciones de restauración. El estudio revela que la naturaleza dinámica de la oferta de los restaurantes, basada en ingredientes locales, plantea retos a los cocineros, ya que exige una innovación constante. Además, factores como la fiabilidad, la transparencia y las estrategias de aprovisionamiento hiperlocal desempeñan un papel crucial en la adopción de productos locales. Sin embargo, la logística y la comunicación surgen como deficiencias significativas en las relaciones entre restaurantes y productores, y abordar estas cuestiones podría mejorar la eficiencia, los resultados financieros y la calidad de los productos. Además, el estudio ofrece recomendaciones prácticas para mejorar la eficacia de la colaboración entre productores locales y restaurantes y fomentar el entendimiento mutuo entre ellos.

PALABRAS CLAVE

ingredientes locales; productos locales; productores locales; hostelería rural; contratación en restaurantes; Hungría

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1. INTRODUCTION

Food from a short geographical distance is considered a defining part of tourism products, contributing to both the creation and consumption of the travel experience (Datta, 2022; McKercher et al., 2008; Robinson and Getz, 2014). Local dishes can have a significant impact on the image of a destination and on tourists' satisfaction as well (Aydin et al., 2022, Ab Karim et al., 2011). Consumers have a keen interest in the origin of food and "neolocalism" is considered an increasingly popular consumer trend, connecting them to a specific geographical area (Bacig and Young, 2019). Recent research has shown that consumer demand for environmentally friendly goods and services is constantly increasing (Pekersen and Canöz, 2022), bringing about many changes in the field of hospitality management as well.

Restaurants aim to incorporate the highest possible proportion of locally-sourced ingredients into their operations (Lavecchia, 2008), and managers seek to identify consumers who are willing to pay a premium price for these services (Jang et al., 2011). Several restaurants in Europe and North America have played a significant role in reviving forgotten food and recipes, promoting local food heritage, thus revitalizing the cultural assets of certain regions (Zocchi and Fontefrancesco, 2020). Effective integration of locally-sourced ingredients influence the competitive potential of local businesses (Quattrocioni et al., 2017). In this regard, collaboration between local producers and local restaurants is a crucial aspect.

The literature review revealed that the number of qualitative studies examining the aspects of direct collaboration between restaurants (purchasers and/or chefs) and local producers is limited. Previous research articles published in SCOPUS-indexed

journals that examined the cooperation between producers and restaurants predominantly focused on the United States (Alsetoohy et al., 2021; Pesci and Brinkley, 2021; Sharma et al., 2014), Canada and New Zealand (Roy, 2022), as well as Spain (Meneguel et al., 2022), Italy (Paciarotti and Torregiani, 2018), and Ireland (Duram and Cawley, 2012).

However, consumers' food choices and supply chains are subject to various socio-economic, environmental, and political influences, thus they highly vary by countries (Roy and Ballantine, 2020). According to Török and Agárdi (2020), in Hungary, the period following World War II was characterized by an emphasis on economies of scale driven by the standardization of processes, mass production of food products and delocalization of supply chains. The trust-based relationship that had defined food production and consumption for centuries became increasingly less prominent and significant. Recently, there has been a notable increase in consumer demand for alternative, non-industrialized food systems in Hungary. Highlighting this trend, the characteristics of destinations have recently become more important in the Hungarian hospitality market; local ingredients are more valued, while visitors expect rural-specific features in the hospitality offerings (Kóródi et al., 2014). This change is partly due to recent local product-oriented developments, which are also reflected in consumer behavior (Madarász et al., 2021). However, this shift requires careful consideration in academic research due to the country's unique geographical features, geopolitical position, and the resultant differences in consumption patterns compared to Western European countries. As previous studies highlight, there is a noticeable gap in research on the benefits and obstacles in sourcing local food products directly from local producers in post-communist

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countries like Hungary, where the unique historical and political context calls for specialized examination (Makowska et al., 2024). Research including both the perspective of Hungarian restaurants and producers is limited. This study contributes to the literature by examining a less-researched destination and understanding how various, region-specific factors of Hungary shape the use of local ingredients in the rural hospitality sector. Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions: *What aspects influence the utilization of local ingredients in the Hungarian rural hospitality system through collaboration between local producers and restaurants?*

Exploring this topic, involving both restaurant representatives and producers, through qualitative methods may contribute to comprehending the underlying reasons and motivations behind utilizing local products. The findings of this study contribute to the local food system discussion and have implications for restaurants, producers and policymakers. The results will contribute to filling the research gap identified in the literature and provide practical advice to enhance the efficiency of collaboration between local producers and restaurants.

This paper is structured as follows. After the introduction, the literature on the demand and supply of local products will be analyzed. The research results are then presented, beginning with an overview of the applied semi-structured interview methodology, followed by a detailed analysis of the interviews conducted with restaurant representatives and local producers. Finally, the last section illustrates the main practical and theoretical implications, then the article concludes by summarizing the limitations and further research lines.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Integration of Local Food in Restaurant Operations*

Local products have been defined in various ways in the literature, depending on the perspectives and approaches of researchers. Previous studies have unveiled multiple conceptions of local food among both producers and consumers, encompassing definitions associated with political aspects, the proximity between purchase and sale, and the geographical source of production (Sharma et al., 2012). Trivette (2015) highlighted two approaches to defining local food. “Local by relationship” approach scrutinizes the actors within supply chains and the direct interaction between producers and consumers, while “local by proximity” considers geographic and/or political boundaries. Research has referenced a 100-mile radius (Dunne et al., 2011) or a 100-kilometer radius (Duram and Cawley, 2012). However, Duram and Cawley (2012) observed that hospitality experts seldom ground definitions on the geographical distance of origin. In accordance with this, Sharma et al. (2009) define local food in the restaurant sector as agricultural products that are cultivated or processed in close proximity and acquired by restaurants either directly from local markets or mostly from local suppliers.

The geographic location of restaurants significantly influences their ability to access and procure local food items necessary for their menus (Alsetoohy et al., 2021). Additionally, the utilization of local products in restaurants is affected by various factors, such as the chef's motivation. This motivation is influenced by the quality of available produce, the producers' willingness to meet specific requirements, storage capacity, and the prices consumers are willing to pay (Duram and Cawley, 2012). Munjal et al. (2016) demonstrated that chefs

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are moving away from frozen and semi-finished goods, opting for fresh and local products to be processed based on authentic recipes. Moreover, the availability of local products ensures a continuous supply, leading many establishments to incorporate them as ingredients. However, the “sustainability” factor does not usually play a decisive role in the purchasing decision of chefs (Ozturk and Akoglu, 2020).

Recent studies have also examined the underlying reasons behind localist restaurant concepts. Ozturk and Akoglu (2020) highlighted five factors, with better taste and freshness of local products being the most influential. Additionally, transparency and traceability criteria can be seen as added advantages of using local ingredients (Zocchi and Fontefrancesco, 2020). An increasing number of restaurants emphasize their close relationship with the environment, with seasonality being a defining component for authentic gastronomic experiences (Home et al., 2020). Duram and Cawley (2012) also noted that the variety of local ingredients presents creative challenges for chefs who work with them. Hyperlocal restaurant concepts, where a high proportion of necessary ingredients are sourced from the restaurant's own production, are also a major trend in the hospitality industry (De Chabert-Rios and Deale, 2018).

Since food costs typically account for a third of a restaurant's operating costs (Bristow and Jenkins, 2018), the price of local products plays a significant role in purchasing decisions. Dishes made from local ingredients may be more expensive for both consumers and restaurants, which is why lower costs often explain the purchase of imported and/or intermediate products (Alsetoohy et al., 2021). However, Zocchi and Fontefrancesco (2020) argue that farming activities carried out by the restaurants themselves can result in cost savings.

Offering locally sourced food enhances the satisfaction of guests by providing them with knowledge about the environmental impact, nutritional value, food safety protocols, utilization of local agricultural resources, and support for local farmers (Alsetoohy et al., 2021). Thus, many restaurants choose to collaborate with local suppliers and service providers as part of their corporate social responsibility strategy, as concerns about social sustainability rise among companies (Pozo and Tachizawa, 2018). This has the potential to improve the community's social connections and promote social equity for local residents. Thus, offering food made from local ingredients, restaurants can enhance their corporate image (Rahman et al., 2018; Kala, 2020). Communicating the use of local ingredients positively influences consumers' perceptions, evokes positive emotions, and increases their intention to revisit the restaurant (Bacig and Young, 2019). Moreover, menus based on local ingredients can significantly contribute to the restaurant's association with its destination, helping guests gain a deeper understanding of the place and fostering an implicit connection with the surrounding landscape (Home et al., 2020).

2.2. Challenges and Opportunities of Local Producers

According to recent studies, the increased demand for local foods not only benefits the local economy but also promotes agricultural diversification and sustainable regional development (Boas et al., 2021; Deere and Royce, 2019). However, recent articles have also highlighted various difficulties and obstacles. Paciarotti and Torregiani (2018) emphasize that producers encounter significant challenges in managing their daily activities, as they must handle both production and sales responsibilities, which has a direct impact

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on transportation logistics and overall delivery times. The time and effort invested in sales-related tasks, such as order processing, customer communication, and coordination with distribution channels, can divert valuable resources away from production activities. Consequently, the efficiency and effectiveness of transport operations may be compromised.

The link between the local producers' markets and the local hospitality appears to be relatively low (Paciarotti and Torregiani, 2018). One of the major difficulties faced by producers is ensuring a consistent quantity and quality of products, while dealing with fluctuating demand in the hospitality sector. Producers often struggle to meet the ordered quantity from all customers due to seasonal variations in demand. However, effective information sharing between restaurants and farmers plays a crucial role. If information is quickly and accurately conveyed, farmers can anticipate sales for the upcoming seasons and plan accordingly (Pesci and Brinkley, 2021). According to Roy et al. (2017), personal relationships between producers and chefs have improved over time through direct interactions, resulting in restaurants valuing purchased goods more than before. Another advantage of direct interactions between farmers and restaurants is that farmers often incorporate feedback into their production decisions (Pesci and Brinkley, 2021). To enhance supply chain efficiency, the proactive seasonal planning and regular communication can be provided by the distributors (Givens and Dunning, 2019). Providing predictable and reliable demand information not only allows producers to increase production volume (Paciarotti and Torregiani, 2018) but also enables them to expand their product portfolio (Deere and Royce, 2019). In this context, utilizing up-to-date digital solutions may be essential for businesses, particularly during crisis periods, as

they contribute to survival and operational effectiveness (Irimiás and Mitev, 2020).

A significant portion of the sales problems faced by small farmers are attributed to inefficiencies in work organization, resulting in disproportionately high sales costs compared to the production volume. Brinkley et al. (2021) highlight that small producers invest significant human and financial resources in sales and marketing, facing constant competition from more efficient larger producers for sales contracts.

2.3. Cooperation of Local Producers and Restaurants in the Hospitality Systems

Given the volatility of both the restaurant industry and food producers, the survival of actors relies heavily on their market connections, suppliers, and customers (Pesci and Brinkley, 2021). However, recent studies indicate that the primary obstacles for restaurants sourcing locally are inadequate communication (Paciarotti and Torregiani, 2018) and weak relationships between local food producers and restaurants (Alsetoohy et al., 2021) as well as a lack of awareness regarding local product availability (Paciarotti et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2014). Moreover, major barriers include limited product availability and logistical difficulties (Paciarotti and Torregiani, 2018).

To standardize and enhance the use of local food in restaurants and strengthen local food value chains, Duram and Cawley (2012) proposed several strategies: (1) improve certification and labeling for authenticity; (2) provide marketing support to connect farmers and chefs; (3) establish programs integrating producers, consumers, and chefs; (4) create professional designations for restaurants sourcing directly from producers; and (5) offer education for sourcing from small-scale producers. Paciarotti et al. (2022) developed a simulation

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framework to quantify the economic impacts of local food distribution systems and identify key logistical success factors for supply chains linking producers and restaurants. This framework aims to reduce delivery distances, thereby lowering costs and mitigating negative externalities of road transportation, such as air pollution and accidents.

Managing food supply chains between local producers and restaurants presents significant challenges. As the procurement of raw materials is a critical and resource-intensive aspect of restaurant operations, chefs often favor the coordination of ordering and delivery through wholesalers, optimizing time efficiency and ensuring prompt delivery (Givens and Dunning, 2019). Utilizing local food hubs to connect producers and restaurateurs offers the dual benefits of boosting local food consumption and providing a more coordinated and optimized food distribution system (Paciarotti et al., 2022). The restaurant's connections with local food hubs are instrumental in developing direct purchasing relationships with producers. These actors facilitated the expansion of the supplier network, promoted socially embedded relationships, and encouraged producers to adopt sustainable practices and produce high-quality goods (Pesci and Brinkley, 2021).

3. METHODOLOGY

The research objective is to identify the potential barriers and enablers of local products' distribution within the hospitality system of Hungary. Therefore, the primary research question (RQ) of the study is as follows: *What aspects influence the utilization of local ingredients in the Hungarian rural hospitality system through collaboration between local producers and restaurants?*

In addition to the main research question, four sub-questions have been formulated:

Q1: How do Hungarian producers and restaurant professionals define the term "local ingredient"?

Q2: What are the main directions of producers' sales activities and the role of local restaurants in them?

Q3: What are the main characteristics of restaurants' procurement strategies and the role of local ingredients in them?

Q4: What steps are necessary for fostering effective collaboration between local producers and restaurants?

Due to the nature of the research questions, a qualitative approach is proposed for the present study, allowing for a thorough exploration of the underlying reasons and explanations of the issue.

Qualitative methods provide an in-depth perspective that helps researchers understand phenomena differently than a purely positivist approach (Riley and Love, 2000). Inductive analysis is employed to understand these various realities as they are uncovered, leading to study designs that can adapt to unforeseen realities (Riley and Love, 2000). Over the past decade, qualitative tourism researchers have predominantly used interviews and observations (Wilson et al., 2020). Interviews are particularly valued by social scientists for examining social realities and tourists' experiences. Nevertheless, some scholars argue that tourism research is well-suited for exploring innovative, experimental, and mixed methods to study social phenomena (Wilson et al., 2020).

Therefore, semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with key decision-makers in sourcing food in restaurants and local producers in Hungary to examine their opinions, motivations, and attitudes.

The research is structured into four main steps:

- 1) Interview guide development based on literature, and pre-test;
- 2) Sampling;

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- 3) Conducting interviews (data collection); and
- 4) Data analysis and findings.

Following the literature review proposed in the previous section, two interview guides were designed to address the main actors within the hospitality ecosystem: local producers and restaurateurs. The preliminary version of the interview guides was then pre-tested with professionals from both fields to assess the difficulty, correct interpretation of interview questions, and time consumption.

The research employed a non-probability, purposive sampling approach. The list of interviewees was compiled based on a local restaurant guide rating Hungarian restaurants (Dining Guide) and an online source on local producers' rating in Hungary (Magyar Konyha) to represent a wide range of destinations, including lakeside and mountain areas of Hungary (see Table 1). Urban destinations within Hungary were specifically excluded from the sampling strategy, as were international cuisine restaurants catering predominantly to foreign tourists. All selected restaurants offer a variety of traditional Hungarian dishes. Participants were selected from those who purchase local ingredients to compile their menus and were assumed to have information on the operation of local supply chains. The sample included only representatives of enterprises operating outside the administrative boundaries of Budapest, the capital of Hungary. All interviewees operated within destinations designated by Hungarian Government Decree 429/2020. (IX. 14.). As a result, 16 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of 9 Hungarian rural restaurants (coded as R1 – R9), as well as with 7 local producers (coded as P1 – P7), as detailed in Table 1. These establishments were contacted initially via telephone to schedule on-site interviews. The data

collection phase was conducted over a two-month period in November-December 2022.

	Code of Interviewee	Gender	Position	Location of Represented Business (destinations based on Hungarian Gov. Decree 429/2020 (IX. 14))
Restaurants	R1	Female	General manager, owner	Eger region
	R2	Male	Executive chef	Greater Budapest
	R3	Female	General manager	Tokaj and Nyíregyháza
	R4	Male	Executive chef	Győr and Pannonhalma
	R5	Male	Executive chef, owner	Sopron region
	R6	Male	General manager, owner	Eger region
	R7	Female	Executive chef, owner	Balaton
	R8	Female	Executive chef	Szeged region
	R9	Male	General manager	Debrecen and surroundings
Producers	P1	Male	Individual operator	Greater Budapest
	P2	Male	CEO, owner	Greater Budapest
	P3	Female	Individual operator	Balaton
	P4	Male	CEO	Eger region
	P5	Female	CEO, owner	Szeged region
	P6	Female	Individual operator	Greater Budapest
	P7	Male	Individual operator	Debrecen and surroundings

Table 1. Interviewees and location of represented businesses (own editing)

The interview guides were developed by adapting previously utilized guiding questions (Pesci and Brinkley, 2021; Ozturk and Akoglu, 2020) and integrating findings from prior research (Duram and Cawley, 2012; Paciarotti and Torregiani, 2018). In

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both interview guides, there were 11 open-ended questions, including six main questions and five sub-questions (Table 2).

Interview questions
Restaurants
1. What does your establishment consider its main missions, and how is this reflected in its business concept?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How would you characterize the current market environment in which you operate?
2. Identify your current main procurement channels/sources!
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What changes have you experienced in terms of goods supply over the past 5-10 years? Please mention some positive and negative phenomena in the procurement area!
3. If you are referring to local products, what distance do you consider local? (expressed in kilometers)
4. Do you use goods from local producers near the restaurant? If yes, why? If not, why not?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If yes, what products do you buy from local sources? If you answered yes to the previous question, what characterizes the cooperation with local producers and suppliers? What role does the "locality" concept play in the restaurant's business model? If you answered no, why not? What are the primary factors that lead you not to choose local sources?
5. Do you agree with the statement that it is simpler and cheaper to source raw materials from large supermarkets, and furthermore, local producers may not always be able to provide the same quality and quantity of goods? Please share your experiences related to this!
6. What changes are necessary to promote and ensure the continuous supply of local ingredients?
Producers
1. What does your enterprise consider its primary missions, and how does this manifest in day-to-day operations?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How would you characterize the market environment in which you currently operate?
2. Identify your current main sales channels!
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What changes have you observed in the sales of goods produced/manufactured by your enterprise in the last 5-10 years? Please mention some positive and negative phenomena in this area!
3. If you are referring to local products, what distance do you consider local? (expressed in kilometers)
4. What significance do local sales hold in the life of your suppliers, particularly in relation to local restaurants?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What characterizes your relationship with local partner hospitality establishments? What are the positive aspects of the collaboration with local restaurants? What are the negative aspects of these collaborations?

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5. Do you agree with the assertion that sourcing ingredients from large supermarkets is simpler and cheaper than from local sources? Please share your experiences related to this!
6. What changes are necessary to promote the popularity and ensure the continuous supply of local ingredients?
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Table 2. Questions raised in the interview guides (own editing)

The concepts of local food products and sustainability mentioned in the questions were briefly explained to the interviewees. The interviews were conducted in Hungarian language. They lasted for 70 to 90 minutes and were tape-recorded, accompanied by detailed notes. Data underwent a filtering process to remove irrelevant information, thus, only statements aligned with the research objectives were selected. Subsequently, the transcripts of the interviews were coded line-by-line. The interviews were analyzed thematically, revealing distinct themes and sub-themes that pertain to the significance of local food and its utilization in restaurants. In the presentation of the research results that follow, direct quotes from the interviewees are included to clearly illustrate their opinions on the topic.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Definition of "local products"

Providing a precise definition of local products was one of the primary objectives of this study. However, based on the responses of the interviewees, a wide range of definitions emerged. One participant asserted that only ingredients sourced from within the boundaries of the restaurant's immediate settlement can be considered local. In contrast, the majority of participants defined local products based on a specified distance. Some interviewees mentioned a radius of 15 to 20 kilometers, while others expressed a more flexible perspective, considering goods from within 30 or even 50 kilometers as local. Concurrently, there was a general consensus that, for

the sake of a diverse restaurant offering, it is also necessary to procure products from more distant sources. Moreover, the study reveals variations in the definition of local products, which are contingent upon the specific product types under consideration (Table 3). This is exemplified by the distinct sourcing strategies employed by the restaurants, where some products exclusively originate from the region, while other ingredients are procured in close proximity to the restaurant. These nuanced distinctions underscore the complexity inherent in defining and sourcing local products, highlighting the importance of considering contextual factors and product-specific criteria in establishing local sourcing practices.

<p><i>“There is a buffalo reserve that falls outside the 30-kilometer radius for us, but they offer such unique products that we still consider the distance acceptable” (R6)</i></p> <p><i>“Regarding wines, our menu exclusively features those from the southern coast of Lake Balaton, so we do not source them from the northern coast or other regions. However, our vegetable producer and dairy manufacturer are located just two corners away from the restaurant” (R9)</i></p>
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Table 3. Different perspectives on the definition of local products (own editing)

4.2. Analysis of logistics and producers’ sales channels

In this study, one of the objectives was to examine the challenges faced by local producers in terms of logistics and sales channels. Thus, during the interviews, participants were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of direct sales to restaurants. Based on the responses, it was found that the catering industry was not identified as the primary target for direct sales. According to the interviewed producers, restaurants tend to order minimal quantities directly from them and predominantly purchase from wholesalers. One interviewee mentioned two high-end restaurants in their

immediate vicinity, but only one of them showed interest in local products, while the other primarily sourced from wholesalers for unknown reasons. Additionally, some producers mentioned farmers’ markets and mass caterers as their target customers. Moreover, several producers heavily relied on exports.

During the interviews, participants also discussed what they considered to be the most significant threat to the supply of local ingredients. The majority of participants identified lower-quality, cheap imported goods as the main danger, which could be addressed through producer cooperation and actions taken by authorities. Furthermore, one interviewee emphasized the need for Hungarian producers to focus on producing high-quality products in order to compete with imported goods.

Looking back at recent years, suppliers reported positive changes in restaurateurs’ interest in local products. According to several interviewees, there is an increasing openness among consumers towards regional products. One participant mentioned that the foundation of quality Hungarian gastronomy lies in local products: *“(…) because high-quality Hungarian cuisine begins there, that restaurants are supplied with locally grown ingredients”* (P4). Additionally, chefs are gaining more knowledge about the use of special ingredients and are handling them with greater consciousness in their work, allowing for creativity and exploration of flavors and aromas: *“They like to play with their colors, tastes, and smells”* (P2).

Overall, based on the interviews, logistics emerged as the most problematic aspect for small producers. One interviewee mentioned being responsible for production, logistics, and sales to partners simultaneously. Another supplier found delivery to be particularly challenging, especially during the summer when demand is highest, as

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delivering perishable dairy products quickly and professionally poses a challenge. Another producer mentioned that they used to have in-person meetings with existing and potential partners but could no longer accommodate them due to time constraints. They also highlighted that the decrease in personal contact is a negative consequence of increased administrative burdens affecting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Some interviewees emphasized the advantages of digital solutions, such as outsourcing logistics to external companies and integrating webshops for efficient order processing and delivery. Strategic marketing efforts were also deemed highly profitable and rapid cash-generating processes. Furthermore, the role of word-of-mouth marketing was mentioned, as consumers and hospitality professionals can effectively promote local suppliers among their colleagues.

However, a lack of quality was considered a significant disadvantage of local products by some interviewees. According to one participant, certain Hungarian small producers tend to justify quality deficiencies resulting from their lack of knowledge by blaming bureaucratic burdens. They claim that the need to handle paperwork alongside production leads to compromises in product quality.

Moreover, the majority of suppliers emphasized that the most challenging aspect of working with restaurants is the unpredictability of orders, which is often difficult to reconcile with seasonal to produce. Producers highlighted the problems related to ingredient supply caused by seasonal fluctuations in catering demand, which is common in several Hungarian destinations, such as Balaton and Eger regions.

4.3. Analysis of restaurants' ingredient procurement

During the interviews with restaurants' representatives, the focus was on understanding the

role of local products in their concepts. All the investigated establishments shared a common practice of highlighting seasonal dishes, the procurement strategy of the restaurateurs revolved around utilizing ingredients available during the current season to compose their menus. However, there were variations in the quality and utilization of local ingredients among the restaurants. One restaurant primarily relied on local ingredients from its inception, as its concept was built upon a strong emphasis on sourcing from local producers. In contrast, another interviewee expressed concerns about the limited availability of locally sourced goods, which is why they could only create temporary thematic programs and periodically available tasting menus based on them. Nevertheless, they sold products from nearby farms in the *delicatessen* attached to their restaurant.

In terms of the quantity of locally grown produce used by restaurants, an executive chef from a rural establishment mentioned that they relied on approximately 40 percent from local small-scale producers and 60 percent from wholesalers. In another interview, it was noted that local producers alone are insufficient to meet the demand for all necessary ingredients required by restaurants in the current Hungarian context. However, their products were seen as valuable additions to the menu, contributing to the uniqueness of the restaurants. One interviewee referred to the concept of hyper-local sourcing, where representatives of restaurants mentioned meeting their ingredient needs through their own production or by foraging for vegetable ingredients such as fruits, herbs, and seeds in nature. Regarding changes in the procurement of local products over the past five years, the majority of participants reported positive trends. They observed an overall improvement in the quality of farmers' products, enabling them to replace a certain amount

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of imported goods with locally sourced ones. According to a restaurant manager, they used to rely heavily on wholesalers for most of their necessary products. However, due to dissatisfaction with the quality of goods, they gradually increased their purchases from local producers.

Some interviewees mentioned that the relationship with local suppliers had changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. They reported more frequent negotiations, even on a daily basis. Conversely, a representative from another restaurant noted that after reopening following the COVID-19 lockdown, local suppliers struggled to meet the required quantities due to reduced inventory volumes.

The interviews also explored the details of contact between restaurants and producers. Producers now often visit restaurants in the hope of establishing collaborations. However, some restaurateurs expressed difficulties in finding local producers, and even when they did, the producers were unable to consistently supply the quantities needed by the restaurant. This aspect was discussed in most interviews, highlighting that local suppliers often struggle to ensure a continuous supply, with both the quantity and quality provided being quite unpredictable. While most restaurants prefer ordering smaller quantities multiple times due to limited storage capacities, local suppliers often struggle to meet these demands. Additionally, communicating “lack of quality” issues to suppliers was considered challenging, as it could strain the relationship.

Transparency emerged as one of the most crucial aspects in restaurant-producer relations, according to the narratives of the restaurant representatives. Interviewees emphasized the importance of finding trustworthy suppliers, noting that physical proximity was essential for transparency, allowing restaurant representatives to visit farms and observe their

production activities. Many participants considered trust and personal knowledge of the supplier to be more important than relying solely on products with various certifications such as responsible, sustainable, or organic labels.

However, according to the restaurateurs, suppliers had significant shortcomings in marketing and logistics. Some mentioned that farmers' markets were useful for marketing products, but during one interview, it was highlighted that products from small producers were often sold there at the same price as those intended for restaurants that continuously purchased larger quantities.

Nevertheless, based on the interviews, only a few restaurants were able to fully base their menus on local sources due to fluctuations in quantity and rapidly changing product quality. Thus, popular permanent menu items sometimes had to be prepared with ingredients from more predictable but distant sources. The nose-to-tail approach was also mentioned in multiple interviews, indicating that local producers often sell whole poultry, prompting restaurants to create menu offerings that utilize the entire animal.

Finally, despite the efforts to prioritize local sourcing, all the restaurants still had to purchase imported ingredients. France and Austria were frequently mentioned among the foreign sources, while some participants also mentioned Japan and India. One restaurant manager noted that until a Hungarian alternative was found, they would serve international products such as wagyu beef and Bresse chicken. An executive chef overseeing a fine dining restaurant and a bistro reported ordering special foods from foreign suppliers primarily for the fine dining menu, while compromises were necessary for the bistro, often relying on cheaper non-premium goods from wholesalers. In contrast, a representative from another restaurant mentioned that procuring

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goods in the Hungarian capital city, Budapest, faced fewer barriers compared to their current countryside restaurant, as high-quality product wholesalers were easily accessible.

<i>"Local producers could never take over the role of wholesalers, howbeit they should spice up my menu with their products." (R5)</i>
<i>"We usually visit the nearby forest and pick the pine buds, so that we can produce syrup of them." (R1)</i>
<i>"Our chef buys the cheese from a local source where we know what the goats are fed with." (R9)</i>
<i>"We consider 'organic' label as a plus, however, it is more important for us to know the supplier personally." (R3)</i>

Table 4. Comments from interviewees on different perspectives of local product procurement (own editing)

4.4. Necessary steps for effective collaboration of local producers and restaurants

It was also deemed important to investigate the steps deemed necessary by the interviewees to enhance the efficiency of collaboration between local producers and restaurants. Both the majority of restaurant representatives and producers emphasized the prominent role of state measures and governmental bodies. Some participants believed that calling for additional development programs and tenders specifically tailored to small producers would be necessary. They pointed out that the current tender systems primarily benefit larger farmers due to the high financial contribution and technical requirements imposed on them. Additionally, several individuals stressed the need for legislative amendments, highlighting the practical obstacles faced by the farm-to-table concept in Hungary, where multiple certificates are required as proof of origin for all products.

Moreover, one interviewee drew attention to the deficiencies in Hungary’s vocational education system, particularly in the field of dairy processing techniques. They expressed concern about the <https://doi.org/10.33776/et.v14i1.8106>

absence of established educational institutions addressing this area of expertise. Education-related issues were further discussed, with interviewees also addressing challenges in research and development. One producer suggested that a new production culture based on traditional local crops and vegetables could evolve in a few decades, potentially reducing the country's long-term import needs and making domestic products more widely accessible and affordable. However, it was emphasized that even with decisive government actions, it may take at least 15 years to observe measurable changes.

During interviews with representatives of specific catering establishments, the significance of local cooperatives and associations was highlighted. These organizations, comprising local operators with extensive networks within a particular settlement or micro-region, were seen as beneficial for fostering connections between the demand and supply sides of local products. Organizing forums and professional events was considered advisable to facilitate such connections. Additionally, professional support in the areas of sales and marketing was deemed necessary.

The interviewees also discussed the importance of a shift in attitude, which some anticipated with a generational change in the sector. However, restaurant representatives also expected a change in the mindset of local suppliers. They stressed the importance of suppliers being flexible and responsive to changes, producing in accordance with demand, and maintaining continuous communication with restaurants and other producers. Conscious production planning, focusing on growing unique or different varieties of produce, was seen as a potential means to improve the financial outcomes of local producers significantly.



Figure 1. Supply chain models in hospitality (own editing)

5. DISCUSSION

This study was conducted with the aim of analyzing the role of local ingredients in the hospitality ecosystem and identifying the limitations associated with their procurement. Based on a review of the existing literature and this empirical research finding, it is evident that restaurants in Hungary, as well as in South and Western European countries, face similar logistical challenges in sourcing local products (Meneguel et al., 2022; Paciarotti and Torregiani, 2018; Duram and Cawley, 2012). In line with Roy and Ballantine (2020), this study's findings have emphasized that the definition of local ingredients represents a primary challenge influenced by geographical, political, and economic factors. A notable disparity was observed between the interview results and the literature. While previous sources considered products within a 100-kilometer radius as local (e.g., Duram and Cawley, 2012), the interviewed participants mentioned significantly shorter distances, typically ranging from 15 to 50 kilometers.

The results of the interviews revealed considerable variations in the level of local ingredient utilization by restaurants, owing to fluctuating availability and quality of goods. Nonetheless, respondents highlighted the importance of freshness regardless of origin, corroborating previous research findings (Ozturk and Akoglu, 2020; Munjal et al.,

2016). The frequent changes in restaurant offerings based on seasonal and local ingredients, including tasting menus and thematic programs, can also be interpreted as a challenge for chefs, as it demands constant innovation, and these findings align with the results of Duram and Cawley (2012). Additionally, the aspect of reliability and transparency, also emphasized in the works of Zocchi and Fontefrancesco (2020) and Roy et al. (2017), can serve as additional motivation for local procurement.

In line with De Chabert-Rios and Deale (2018), this research also identified hyper-local procurement strategies, as representatives of several catering establishments reported meeting their ingredient needs through in-house production. The research underscores logistics and communication as major challenges in restaurant-producer relationships (Alsetoohy et al., 2021; Paciarotti and Torregiani, 2018).

Diverse perspectives regarding engagement were evident, with some facing difficulties in finding local producers (Sharma et al., 2014) and insufficient knowledge about the availability of local products (Paciarotti et al., 2022). Moreover, restaurateurs highlighted the unpredictability in both quantity and quality from small-scale producers, while suppliers emphasized the fluctuating demand and increased orders during peak seasons as significant hurdles. The interviews with producers also identified the issue of producers being responsible for multiple tasks, including production, marketing, and sales, which has already been highlighted in previous literature (Paciarotti and Torregiani, 2018).

Furthermore, in line with the findings of Irimiás and Mitev (2020), the adoption of digital solutions and the emphasis on strategic marketing activities can play a key role in this context. Greater involvement of professional organizations and governmental bodies is expected in promoting these

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initiatives (Duram and Cawley, 2012). Several interviewees expressed the need for active intervention by authorities, such as issuing development tenders, implementing deregulatory legislative amendments, and promoting research and development projects.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The study highlights the complexities inherent in defining and sourcing local products, emphasizing the need to consider local contextual factors and product-specific criteria. This contributes to existing literature on the challenges of local sourcing practices in the hospitality industry.

The findings underscore the critical role of trust and transparency in fostering successful relationships between restaurants and local suppliers. This contributes to supply chain literature by highlighting the importance of relational factors in the context of local food procurement.

External factors such as government policies and educational systems significantly influence the feasibility of local sourcing initiatives. This emphasizes the interconnectedness of the local food ecosystem with broader socio-economic structures, adding depth to discussions on sustainability and food system resilience.

The study suggests a potential shift in the local food culture towards conscious production planning and a focus on unique varieties of produce. This opens avenues for further research on the socio-cultural dynamics driving changes in food preferences and consumption patterns over time.

Overall, the findings contribute valuable insights for both practitioners and researchers in understanding the complexities and opportunities associated with local food sourcing in the hospitality industry.

5.2. Practical Implications

Based on the research findings, restaurants should invest in building strong relationships with local producers to secure a consistent supply of high-quality ingredients. Transparency and trust emerged as key factors in these relationships, suggesting the importance of personal connections and open communication channels.

Understanding the nuanced definitions of “local products” as revealed in this study is crucial for restaurants seeking to align their sourcing strategies with consumer preferences. Restaurants should consider adopting flexible definitions based on both distance and contextual factors to ensure a diverse and appealing menu offering.

Small producers face significant challenges in logistics, which can impact their ability to supply restaurants consistently. Restaurants could explore digital solutions, such as outsourcing logistics and integrating webshops, to streamline the ordering process and ensure timely delivery of perishable goods.

Both restaurants and producers advocate for government support and legislative amendments to promote the farm-to-table concept. Calling for development programs tailored to small producers and addressing vocational education gaps in food processing techniques are essential steps towards fostering a thriving local food ecosystem.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study provides an analysis of the role of local ingredients in the hospitality system, uncovering various challenges and opportunities associated with their procurement in Hungary. The study reveals a notable disparity between traditional definitions of “local” in existing literature and the perceptions of stakeholders in Hungary. While previous studies often defined local products within a 100-kilometer

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radius (Duram and Cawley, 2012), this study demonstrates significantly shorter distances, typically ranging from 15 to 50 kilometers. This discrepancy underscores the importance of context-specific definitions that consider geographical, political, and economic factors in determining the locality of ingredients.

Challenges abound in the sourcing and procurement of local ingredients, affecting both restaurants and local producers. Fluctuating availability and quality of goods pose significant obstacles, necessitating constant adaptation by chefs and producers alike. Logistics and communication emerge as major pain points in restaurant-producer relationships, highlighting the critical need for streamlined communication channels and transparent partnerships to ensure a consistent supply chain.

The study identifies a growing trend towards hyper-local procurement strategies, where restaurants seek to meet their raw material needs through in-house production or collection. This trend reflects a broader shift towards sustainability and authenticity in culinary offerings, signaling an opportunity for stakeholders to embrace local sourcing practices and strengthen connections with the surrounding community.

In conclusion, it is essential to facilitate communication between the parties involved. Smooth communication can help the daily work of stakeholders, such as menu compilation for restaurant representatives and production planning for producers. This positive aspect was also emphasized in the research conducted by Givens and Dunning (2019). In the long term, these efforts can lead to improved financial results and product quality, enhancing efficiency and reducing the dependence of restaurants on products from distant sources.

The adoption of digital solutions and strategic marketing activities emerges as crucial drivers for enhancing efficiency and reducing dependence on distant sources (Irimiás and Mitev, 2020). Moreover, greater involvement of professional organizations and governmental bodies is essential to promote these initiatives effectively. Stakeholders anticipate active intervention from authorities, including the issuance of development tenders, implementation of deregulatory legislative amendments, and promotion of research and development projects to support local sourcing initiatives.

In the pursuit of a more sustainable and resilient food system, fostering collaborative efforts between restaurants, local producers, and governmental bodies is paramount. By facilitating communication, embracing technology, and advocating for supportive policies, stakeholders can work towards building a robust local food ecosystem that promotes economic prosperity, environmental stewardship, and social well-being. Ultimately, these efforts are crucial for ensuring the long-term viability and sustainability of local sourcing practices in the hospitality industry.

6.1. Limitations and future research

However, the present research has several limitations that should be acknowledged and addressing them through planned future research would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Firstly, it is important to note that the results of the current study cannot be generalized due to the specificities of the methodology employed. To overcome this limitation, conducting future quantitative research involving a larger sample of representatives from diverse restaurants would provide a broader perspective on the role of local ingredients in the hospitality system.

Secondly, the timing of data collection may have influenced the findings, as the interviews were

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conducted within a context characterized by elevated energy costs and inflationary pressures, thus, the public mood was predominantly negative.

Thirdly, the research focused exclusively on certified rural restaurants and ranked producers, which may have limited the insights gained. Extending the scope of the research to include other types of catering establishments, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to local ingredient procurement across the broader hospitality sector. Additionally, involving a wider range of suppliers in the study would allow for a deeper exploration of their motivations, practices, and the everyday challenges they face in supplying local ingredients.

By addressing these limitations and pursuing these research ideas, a more comprehensive understanding of the role of local ingredients in the hospitality system can be achieved, ultimately leading to the development of effective strategies and practices that promote sustainable and locally integrated food systems.

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