



# CREATING CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING THROUGH TRAVEL

CultSense Case Collection

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# 2 TASTES OF CULTURE



# Gastronomy as Local Identity: The Case of Sarrabulho in the Minho

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## Summary

This case study focuses on Minho's gastronomy, particularly the peculiar speciality 'Sarrabulho', and how traditional food can simultaneously enable preserving local traditions and allow tourists to have a positive and memorable experience. Local gastronomy and peculiar traditions are not always easily understood by outsiders and foreigners. Therefore, if not to be appreciated, at least to be understood and respected, efforts must be made to explain its origins and to celebrate its role as part of local culture. How can we communicate food culture and gastronomic experiences so they can be better appreciated by tourists/foreigners? How can tourists' perception of local gastronomy be enhanced? What features should be included in a gastronomic experience? What characteristics determine a gastronomic region? If a region aims to be acknowledged and respected by its gastronomy, conditions must be created to facilitate its perception and enhance tourists' experience. The case study highlights the relevance of storytelling when communicating culinary traditions and local food, and suggests some initiatives which are believed would improve tourists' perception of gastronomy.

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## Tell me the story before I eat

I had just started my new job as a young tour guide, back in the '90s, and I was together with a group of German tourists in the Minho region, in a picturesque town named Ponte de Lima. The whole group was enthusiastic as they heard it was one of the oldest "Vilas" in Portugal and they were looking forward to tasting the local food and "Vinho Verde". On the bus to the restaurant, some passengers expressed their surprise about the local tradition of calling red wine "Verde" (green). I did my best to explain the origin of the name and I was happy with the way I handled it. But that was an easy question because the biggest challenge of the day was still to come.

When arriving at the restaurant, I realised that the programme prepared by the organizing tour operator only mentioned *Sarrabulho*: a local "specialty" on the menu. When we sat down and someone asked what exactly *Sarrabulho* was, the waiter promptly translated it as a dish prepared with pork meat, guts, and "mashed blood", according to what she had seen in the dictionary. There were several immediate reactions, and most of them were not positive. The idea of eating blood was not acceptable for some of the tourists, even if for no particular reason other than strangeness and preconception, or because they hadn't a specific idea of what it was. They were simply revolted by the idea of eating something made of blood, even before seeing or tasting it.

I did my best to trace *Sarrabulho*, and all its elements, back to the status of a local specialty. I had to be more emphatic in explaining its origin and roots in the local farm-based economy, and culinary traditions. Special

focus was placed on the underlying value of “nothing is wasted” that gave rise to this hearty dish, made from all parts of the pig, including blood, tongue, kidney, liver, or even the tripes. Throughout the meal, some aspects like the texture of the tongue and liver, or the smell of the tripe, were particularly noticed but in the end, most of the visitors had tried it and liked it. “Surprisingly, I kind of liked it”, someone said.

Like Sarrabulho, other Portuguese gastronomic traditions, considered as local specialties and highly appreciated, include blood. Other dishes are *Cabidela* (made with rice and a variety of meats and its blood, like chicken, lamprey, or goat). For some people, these dishes are very special, but for others, not so much, often because of their origins and why people have decided to use these ingredients are not known by the public, particularly tourists.

## Gastronomy as a tourist asset

Tourists are increasingly motivated by cultural aspects, and want to experience vibrant aspects of the destination, in a participatory approach. These trends require an approach of constant adaptation and novelty attitude towards tourism. Heritage has more and more to do with a social bond (building stronger relationships). People relate to heritage in a more playful, fun way. A different way of thinking is required to improve the tourist attractiveness of the destination. It is suggested that gastronomy provides opportunities for bonding through a grassroots, bottom-up approach to regional development.

Food-related travel is certainly a trend that is currently in vogue. Foodways of an area serve as a potential attraction for tourists for whom food has acquired a significance beyond that of providing nourishment for the body. For them, food is eaten for enjoyment, emotional release, social prestige, and for the experience, adverse or otherwise (Lowenberg et al, 1979, p. 133). In recent years, food and food-related tourism has become significantly important with gastronomy playing a major role in the way tourists experience the destination and influence some travelers to return to the same destination (Krivela and Crotts, 2006). Local food expresses national, regional, and personal identity, and can enhance the image of a destination (Choe & Kim, 2008). Gastronomy is important for stimulating local, regional, and national economic development, which has been recognized by destinations and tourism companies (UNWTO, 2012). In fact, in his classic work *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984: 6) shows us that the physical necessity of eating is also a cultural practice:

*cultural practices also appear in eating habits. The antithesis between quantity and quality, substance, and form, corresponds to the opposition – linked to different distances from necessity- between the taste of necessity, which favours the most ‘filling’ and most economical foods, and the taste of liberty – or luxury – which shifts the emphasis to the manner (of presenting, serving, eating, etc.) and to stylized forms to deny function.*

As Hughes (1995) points out, there is a natural relationship between a region’s land, its climatic conditions, and the character of food it produces. Geographical diversity provides for regional distinctiveness in culinary traditions, and cultural landscape and heritage. The principal challenge in promoting

### Topics for discussion

- **How** can we communicate food culture and gastronomic experiences so they can be better appreciated by (foreign) tourists?
- **How** can tourists’ perception about local gastronomy be enhanced? How can locals participate in this process?
- **What** features should be included in a gastronomic experience?
- **What** characteristics determine a gastronomic region?

gastronomy tourism is to determine how to develop its positioning. On one hand it can contribute to the conservation of traditional food patterns of a particular region (realistic involvement) but innovation is also required, as a warrant for the enrichment and enjoyment of the ever-demanding visitor (fantasy involvement).

In the Portuguese context, gastronomy and wines are considered as qualifying assets of the Portuguese tourist offer (Estratégia Turismo 2027, 2017). Regarding the specific geographic context of Minho, the most northern region in Portugal, its food culture is influenced by several aspects. The region's landform, soil, climate, and annual rainfall are rather important, together with the wealth, ideas, and products of Portugal's colonial times. Portugal's geographic position as a bridge between the Celtic gastronomy and the Euro-African Mediterranean culture of Semite origin, has also contributed to a food culture of which regional society is fiercely proud. The foods of Minho place great emphasis upon high quality locally produced primary products (Edwards, 1998).

In the gastronomic culture of Minho, home cooking remains a factor of pride for the individual and the community, perhaps the reason for the abundance of food-related events in the region. Traditional food is the "taste" of the landscape; it is a way of life. Family/subsistence agriculture safeguards the attractiveness of the landscape, possibly the biggest comparative advantage of Minho as a tourist destination. Local people maintain a close relationship with nature and traditional cultural heritage. For local people, the landscape is a mirror of their lifestyle and traditional food.

One of the big strengths of Minho is that it has maintained its traditions so that these 'poor' foods are now seen by others as something special – something that they themselves have lost; something worth cherishing. Whereas traditional food is seen as an integral part of the local culture, tourists who are unfamiliar with the culture often overlook Minho.

Traditional cuisine is not made from recipes; it is born out of necessity, availability, and intuition, and it is codified not in books but in individual recollection or in common wisdom. Traditional cuisine is folklore, inspired by the world in which its creators live, imbued with lessons about that world, and passed down by a people among themselves, with infinite variation and frequent adaptation (Andrews, 1996). It is important to recognize that sustainable development of gastronomy is not just about preserving the past, but also about creating the future. Cultural changes inevitably lead to changes in foodways.

Minho was designated the European Region of Gastronomy in 2016. The bid proposed that Minho establishes the foundation of its gastronomy by focusing on a retro-innovation perspective, making the most of past recipes and activities with authenticity or tradition and apply creativity to locally sourced food and apply innovation to better understand and meet the needs of today's ever-demanding consumer.

Richards & Fernandes (2015) argue that a certain amount of 'risk' is involved in all these strategies. In particular, the adaption of food to global tastes can run the risk of separating food from its gastronomic roots and turning it into a tourist pastiche. Trying to stick too closely to traditional methods and presentation is also risky because it may fail to engage the global consumer.

This case study emphasizes Minho's gastronomy, particularly the peculiar specialty Sarrabulho, and how traditional food can simultaneously enable preserving local traditions and allow tourists to have a positive and memorable experience.



Figure 1. Sarrabulho served.  
Source: authors



### **Sarrabulho: an ‘obscure mixture of various things without order’ or artistic, ‘porcine symphony’?**

Experts on Sarrabulho find nothing ‘obscure’ in it and prefer to emphasise its clarity as an harmonic ‘porcine symphony’, comprising “papas or rice, rojões (meat with fried potatoes and crumbled blood, loin with ‘belouras’, ‘farinhotas’, roast potatoes, chestnuts’. It is this ‘symphony’, with multiple variants and interpretations that, as is generally known, can be found in the “traditional cooking” of various regions of the country. This “symphony” also accompanied the Portuguese in their Diaspora, reaffirming identities and memories of flavours that have persisted” (cit in Brito and Vale, 2011, p. 26)

“On the various parts of the pig: All its meats can be cooked (...) as can be cooked all parts of the head, with two exceptions, which are the eyes (...). For this reason, I say that of all animals the pig is man’s best friend.” (Routh, & Routh, 2002: 245-246)

Since immemorial times pigs have been an essential food source for families in the Minho region, including Ponte de Lima. Pigs are relatively cheap to acquire and easy to raise and fatten, living in a court, and growing steadily to be ready for slaughter. In the past, a pig would normally have been slaughtered in November or December, at the homes of wealthier farmers. The first Sarrabulho was a day of feasting in the house and neighbourhood. If they were able to receive neighbours, they would all be invited to the meal. If this was impossible, blood, meat, ‘belouras’, stomach, sausages and bones were distributed to each house in the neighbourhood. That same Sunday everybody would cook the tasty dish, the Sarrabulho feast. The rest of the pig, particularly the trotters, hock, belly, and ears were preserved in salt for cooking during the rest of the year or to enrich a soup.

Sarrabulho has long been introduced into restaurants, and its importance as a factor of identity for the gastronomy of Ponte de Lima is widely acknowledged.

### **Sarrabulho: a cultural and economic resource**

Today only a few towns receive more visitors than Ponte de Lima at weekends. In what we cannot hesitate in calling a veritable ‘Gastronomic procession’,

with visitors being particularly attracted by the authentic and inimitable.

*Arroz de Sarrabulho à Moda de Ponte de Lima* is the municipality's largest export, in terms of volume of business. Sarrabulho is tradition and culture, but it also represents more than one thousand jobs, directly and indirectly, dependent on restaurants and the whole pork and food service "cluster". The renown of Arroz de Sarrabulho from Ponte de Lima has steadily grown and spread to the whole country to such an extent that among connoisseurs of good food there are few who do not know about this gastronomic phenomenon that attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors to the municipality every year to enjoy this typical dish in one of the most idyllic atmospheres in Portugal. The gastronomy of Ponte de Lima and Sarrabulho in particular, attracts thousands of tourists, and is responsible for one of the most dynamic economic sectors in the whole region and provides for the livelihood of hundreds of families and small family companies.

## Need for information and interpretation

Like many other dishes, which are considered "strange", around the globe or throughout Portugal, Sarrabulho is not always understood by outsiders and foreigners, as illustrated by the initial story. Therefore, if not to be appreciated, at least to be understood and respected, efforts must be made to explain its origins and to celebrate its role as part of local culture. This is particularly relevant in the context of a region that aims at being acknowledged as a gastronomic region or as an enogastronomic destination. Several initiatives can contribute to the recognition of Sarrabulho such as gastronomic events, routes, festivals...

In the case of Sarrabulho in Ponte de Lima, and its leverage as a cultural tradition and tourism asset, some initiatives have already been implemented, and others, although planned since some time ago, are still unrealized, e.g. a thematic route.

## Initiatives promoting Sarrabulho as a cultural gastronomic tradition and tourist asset

*Confraria Gastronómica do Sarrabulho* (Gastronomic Guild of Sarrabulho) à Moda de Ponte de Lima is set in 2003. One of the first conditions for the protection and leverage of a gastronomic tradition is the existence of organizations that work in favour of its protection and valorisation. One such organisation is a Confraria (Guild). The Confraria do Sarrabulho was born in 2003, during a Tourism Symposium organised by the Ponte de Lima Agriculture and Rural Development Vocational Training School, with the theme of Traditional Products – Protection of Controlled Appellations (Brito and Vale, 2011). This symposium, and therefore the Guild, reflected on the importance of traditional products and ancestral methods of production, and drew attention to the importance of Sarrabulho à Moda de Ponte de Lima for the local economy and to the need to preserve the quality of the ingredients used in its recipes.

Since its foundation, the Gastronomic Guild of Sarrabulho à Moda de Ponte de Lima has pursued its mission with a wide range of initiatives, including Gastronomic Evenings which meet certain criteria, such as presentation of the particularities and specific characteristics of the way of cooking Sarrabulho (its wealth is in its variety); promotion of an exchange of knowledge and practices among cooks and restaurant owners; the attraction of new Guild Members; and, above all, the creation of networks and an opportunity

for contact among Guild Members.

Sarrabulho was nominated as *Maravilhas da gastronomia Portuguesa* in 2011. The 7 Wonders of Gastronomy follows on from the promotion of Portugal's historical and natural heritage, through the 7 Wonders of Portugal program, in which the nominees are voted by the public instead of a jury. The objective of the event was to divulge and promote the national gastronomic heritage, based on traditional gastronomy, reflecting the gastronomy of the regions that represent them as well as the components of good Portuguese food.

Sarrabulho weekend – as part of the gastronomic festival: Fins de Semana Gastronómicos (The Gastronomic Weekends) are a large public-private project in the country organised by Turismo Porto e Norte which is already in its 12th edition and involves 78 municipalities, restaurants, tourist accommodation, farms, wineries and wine tourism spaces. These weekends, aim at showcasing traditional recipes. Tourist enterprises, as well as restaurants participating in the initiative, must apply a discount percentage of at least 10 percent on the rack price on Friday and Saturday nights.

## **How can Sarrabulho be better understood, and perceived by tourists?**

From the analysis of the literature and interviews with local stakeholders, as representatives of Confraria dos Gastrónomos do Minho, some initiatives are suggested which are believed would improve tourists' perception about gastronomy.

### ***Creation of Gastronomic Routes***

A gastronomic route is an itinerary whose objective is to make known a gastronomic culture of a given region or a variety of a certain product in a region, through a range of experiences, such as tasting the dishes (or products), but also its origin, production, and historical context. The idea of a gastronomic route about Sarrabulho is to facilitate the visitor's encounter with the environment and understand the context that gave rise to the underlying culinary traditions. Routes must always have a historical and genuine part and start right there with the production of products, or in the production of final products. Therefore, it can be a way of boosting the local economy, using its endogenous potential, and developing sustainable tourism.

### ***Sold farm products at local markets and shops***

Promotion of culinary and gastronomic heritage not only includes tasting samples in the local, but also the acquisition of regional food products (Torre & Pérez, 2014). There is a need to look, not just at restaurants and cooks but also at the essential people upstream who prepare the pigs and the products to be consumed, producing raw materials of incomparable quality impossible to replicate in any other part of the world. These products can be sold in local markets or shops, by local producers and farmers. Cooperatives can be a solution for some of those who are not formally organized or are too small to establish their own selling points.

### ***Gastronomy ambassadors – training initiatives for restaurant staff***

Success requires skill, rigour, professionalism, and passion for the true flavours of the regional food of Ponte de Lima, making a difference and ensuring that Ponte de Lima as a gastronomic route or a place to meet, celebrate or just enjoy a good meal is a mouth-watering suggestion. Restaurant staff

are in a privileged position to be ambassadors of local gastronomy, and to promote it as a landmark of local culture and to create a positive perception through storytelling.

## Conclusion

The described episode reflects the fact that local gastronomy and peculiar traditions are not always easily understood by outsiders. Some dishes require (some) preparation and contextualization. In a situation where a region wants to be acknowledged and respected by its gastronomy, conditions must be created to facilitate its perception and enhance tourists' experience. The creation of spaces where gastronomy can be contextualized, namely thematic events, gastronomic routes and interpretation centres. These spaces can be more generic or specific, but they are fundamental because they make it possible to understand the relationship between man and the landscape, and how gastronomy emerges from traditional economic activities and asserts itself as part of the heritage and territorial identity. Ultimately, the episode portrayed illustrates the need for training and preparation of professionals working in restaurants, so that they are able to transmit not only the dishes available, but also the ingredients, and above all, the underlying values and traditions.

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### Learning objectives

- **to explain** why gastronomy is a relevant aspect of any culture, with its peculiarities, which reflect environmental and cultural specificities
- **to explore** how visitors would benefit from better interpretation conditions of gastronomy
- **to reflect** on the strategies that regions can implement to position themselves as gastronomic destinations, enhancing tourists experience (ex. restaurant staff training; gastronomic routes; prepare tourism professionals to be gastronomic ambassadors)
- **to raise** awareness about the sustainability approach to gastronomy, namely zero waste; cultural and social sensitivity; economic, environmental, and social sustainability related to food