



Research Article

**THE CURRENT PERCEPTIONS OF TRAVEL AGENCIES IN İZMİR ABOUT GASTRONOMY  
TOURISM AND THEIR ACTUAL GASTRONOMIC TOURISM OFFERS**

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**Abstract**

Gastronomy tourism is not only captivating tourists' attention, but also contributing to the social, economic and environmental development of destinations. Even though it has emerged as a crucial segment of the tourism industry, gastronomy tourism development has not been analyzed in the context of travel agencies. The aim of this research is to find out whether travel agencies in İzmir make any efforts for gastronomy tourism development and also analyze their approaches, perceptions and overall support to gastronomy tourism. Travel agencies in downtown İzmir were surveyed in terms of their actual gastronomy tourism product offers and any future plans about creating one. Results indicated that gastronomy is not promoted as a principal theme. Travel agencies were also analyzed in terms of their gastronomy tourism knowledge, their approaches and perceived positive and negative effects of gastronomy tourism indicating that there is a lack of awareness about potential local and regional culinary sources. However, they have a positive approach for its development. And finally, their opinions were referred to highlight their overall support to gastronomy tourism; results indicating agencies' high interest for its development in İzmir as well as supporting increased number of gastronomy tourists.

**Key words:** Gastronomy tourism, travel agency, tour development, tourism product differentiation

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DOI: 10.33083/joghat.2022.127

## **Introduction**

The tourism industry makes up a significant portion of the worldwide economy with its revenues (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2021); yet, to be able to ensure high quality products all along the distribution channels is significant to attract an increasing demand of tourists. This is also a prerequisite for sustaining the attractiveness of the destination. Tourism is a hyper dynamic, highly competitive industry in which the ability to adapting to changing tourist needs and desires is vitally important. Stakeholders in the tourism industry should analyze the target markets' needs and wants better than the competitors. This way they can differentiate their product offers to match their demands high in popularity. Tourism industry stakeholders are employing a variety of promotional tools and marketing strategies to appeal more tourists (Duman and Kozak, 2010). Local or regional development within the tourism industry takes place in the form of alternative tourism types in the emerging economies. Gastronomic tourism in particular, ranks relatively high in popularity as a differentiation strategy for the destinations. Food has recently been acknowledged as a powerful tool for promoting and positioning a territory. The quest for and enjoyment of authentic and memorable food and food-related experiences is currently emerging as a primary motivation for travel when planning a vacation. Consequently, an increasing number of destinations are utilizing food and drinks as a primary tourism product (du Rand & Heath, 2006).

Tourism development is considerably led by travel intermediaries at the destination level. Their control over the whole tourism experience with volume planning, image creation and packages offered place them also in control of demand. They have an active role in tourism development as they link consumers and producers. As travel intermediaries interact directly with potential customers, they are aware of the growing demands for authenticity, experimentation and all other new trends for travel. They operate in a very dynamic and price sensitive market. Moreover, since they deal with a wide range of different suppliers, they can easily gather information on various best practices and facilitate the sharing of experiences throughout the supply chain. Their expertise allows for more offerings to a wide range of tourists (Zahari et al. 2020). Tour operators and travel agencies do not only act as distributors or points of sale, but also influence and address the demand towards destinations, stimulating the need of tourism, influencing the primary choice of destinations and providing the means to satisfy it. Therefore, it's important to examine their operational tactics and marketing strategies to understand their level of influence on the awareness of the destination with a certain type of tourism. New forms of tourism require specific and differentiated strategies with supported activities towards international market penetration. The marketing efforts should focus on the sources of destination and the local hospitality system; developing and marketing local authentic products that create diversity (Valedinskaya and Astafeva, 2018). In fact, besides providing information to potential travellers, travel intermediaries develop and promote destination packages, determine market trends, welfare of destinations and suppliers, and affect the demand levels for destinations. They transform environmental attractions, culture, heritage and services the tourist need to a package with a tailored personality and originality so that it can be marketed. Tour operators act as a catalyst of demand in the sense of understanding market needs and directing them to destinations. As a result, the destination gains an increased accessibility and visibility. Tourists, in turn, place more trust on intermediaries' services rather than those of individual suppliers (Lubbe 2000).

## **Literature Review**

### **Gastronomy Tourism**

The tourism market is exposed to globalization processes, and it represents changes in demand. Travelers are becoming more interested in experience-based activities that encompass the local identity and culture. They would like to become more sophisticated as they travel. Gastronomic experiences stand as a recent trend and one of the most outstanding cultural capital which turned out to be a major motivation for travel. There is a worldwide growth in the number of gastronomy-tour companies, food and drink focused events and food and beverage experience-focused marketing efforts. World Food Travel Association executed a survey with 4500 outbound travelers from Canada, China, France, Mexico, United Kingdom and United States and published the results in the FoodTravel Monitor Report (2020). This was a 350-pages report including in-depth data about the profiles and behavior patterns of gastronomy tourists. The research has indicated that gastronomy

tourism creates 25% more economic benefits to a destination and 53% of leisure tourists are food travelers. Until the 1990s, the tourism industry overlooked gastronomy, which was considered as a must-have for a memorable vacation. However, because of the diversity of tourist preferences, rising interest in culture, and postmodern consuming practices, there is now a growing acknowledgment of the link between tourism, intangible heritage, and cuisine. Gastronomy has become a primary focus of travel for visitors and an important aspect for tourism growth for tourism authorities as the change from traditional tourism activities to creative tourism has increased its importance (Richards, 2014). Food and drink travel has grown in popularity as a result of twentieth-century social developments. The interest in food and tourism, according to Boniface (2003), appears to be a reaction to modernity, industrialization, lack of distinctiveness and individuality.

Gastronomy, like a wide range of other attractions in tourism, is an important part of a destination. As travel necessitates dining away from home, it is an essential element of the tourism experience. Gastronomy proposes enriched insights to the culture in its original setting. Eating in a variety of places and settings improves the overall satisfaction of a vacation, whether it's for pleasure or work. Tourists get a taste of a place through food, just as they do with sounds and sights. For most tourists, eating away from home is a delightful form of leisure and a ravishing activity. It's like a gateway to a different culture (Shenoy 2005). People find gastronomy very appealing as part of their leisure activities this is due to fact that eating and drinking are among tourists' top three favorite activities. It is the only form of art that engages all five senses at the same time; and it is not affected by weather or seasonal variations. Furthermore, it is immersive in terms of engaging events and activities for people of all ages, with a focus on exploration (Kivela & Crofts, 2006).

A gastronomy tour is more than just going to destinations and eating at restaurants during meal times although it is a requirement and part of the human diet. A gastronomy tour focuses on a cuisine's traditions, origins, and inspirations, as well as showing visitors the journey of food from the farm, how it is harvested, and offered to market. It also refers to out-of-sight locations that only locals are aware of, where tourists can sample traditional and lesser-known specialties. Tastings and attempting to prepare a local delicacy are part of the experience from time to time (Tsai and Wang, 2017). Gastronomy products apply to each and every indigenous food and beverage item or any culinary-based activity of a country's culture and heritage. Its definition is now far from its elitist origins and encapsulates both one-of-a-kind restaurants and also all types of eateries and activities such as street vendors, food carts, trucks, gastro-pubs, wineries, food tours, cooking classes, beverage factories, wine and beer tastings, chocolaterie or bakery visits, culinary trails, gastronomic festivals, farm weekends, cookbooks, food guides (Long, 2013).

Gastronomy tourism is a viable alternative for less popular areas as well as those that lack natural resources such as stunning beaches, mountains, and scenic landscapes, as well as a rich history to draw tourists. The tourism season is extended as a result. It's a method of product differentiation for locations with comparable qualities, such as climate, architecture, and package offers, in order to avoid stereotypical identification. It assists a location in regaining its reputation during a period of stagnation or decline in its tourism development, as well as catering to the current consumption patterns of current tourism trends. It is better suited to the growing need for short weekend getaways for younger generations, such as packaged gourmet or wine weekend breaks (Chaney & Ryan, 2012; Ignatov & Smith 2006; Kivela & Crofts, 2006; Scarpato, 2002).

Food tourism is a complex system with many stakeholders like other types of tourism and interactions. They all mobilize their knowledge and talent to create high-quality culinary experiences. Tourists buy the complete experience that products and services provide, not just the products or services themselves. This is how value creation and memorable encounters create the overall image of the product in the minds of foodies. For this reason, with the support of all relevant stakeholders, resources should be diversified and translated into infrastructure, tours events, and venues (Getz et al., 2014). For the best return economic targets, broader strategies and action plans should be formulated and the destination's food history should be included in its branding efforts. These culinary tourism efforts must be backed up by government regulations. Marketing activities should be co-created and financed by official bodies. Also, public awareness and service quality should be

consolidated. Partnerships and collaborations between public and private industries should be initiated (Henderson 2004).

### **Current Role of Travel Agencies and the Need for Differentiation**

Travel agencies have important functions in the tourism system such as developing, promoting and organizing package tours to meet the needs and wants of tourists with varying travel motivations, length and price. They assemble a wide range of ground services in bulk at diverse destinations and convert them into a package to the interest of tourists either directly or through a distribution channel at an all-inclusive price. In other words, they are manufacturers of tourism products. They must provide the greatest possible conditions for the entire experience; this includes an appealing concept and a successful service provision that makes tourists feel that they are getting an extra value and that all they need to do is enjoy their holiday. (Gade & Ankathi, 2016).

Package tours increase the destination attractiveness by rendering them more accessible to visitors which results in the development of destinations (Clerides et al., 2008; Mısırlı, 2010). The advantages acquired by package tours enable tourists to leverage multiple features to create their own unique destination experiences (Sharma 2006; Singh, 2008; Thirumaran, 2016). Tour operators and travel agencies thus must come up with innovative products to increase their market share and attract new customers (Čavlek, 2013; Liao and Chuang, 2020). They are one of the actors in the tourism system that can adapt their products to changing consumer tastes and new trends in the tourism market relatively quickly. Their significant share in the overall tourism system also tremendously effect tourism flows and destinations. That's the reason behind why they are beginning to package experiences that have not been offered previously. These packages comprise creative products that encourage tourists to become more active and also be part of the experiences. Tourists also prefer tour packages as the travel becomes more hassle-free and convenient; so they become a crucial element of the destination's product. Besides that, package tours mean more reasonable and safe visits (Kanellou, 2000; Puri and Chand, 2009). It's also an opportunity to visit multiple places over a limited vacation period with reliable and convenient services.

Since the technological advancements are reshaping the decision making process and purchase channels of tour packages; travel agencies are going through a structural change. They constantly search for innovative business models in a less fragmented market as they also reached at their consolidation phase. They offer more personalized and innovative products on a wide variety of themes with new marketing strategies (Cavlek, 2013; Liao & Chuang 2020). It's an undeniable fact that travel booking sites on the internet have deeply distressed the function of traditional travel agencies in the travel distribution channel; yet, they are still the most preferred channel of travel purchases. They also enriched their offers for dynamic packaging options to be able to compete with the same or lower prices as online booking channels. Another reason for why tourists still prefer the travel agencies is that people become too confused due to the vast and confounding data of the net (Puri & Chand, 2009).

Traditional tourism suffers from increasing international competition based on prices, quality and accessibility. Having reached its maturity phase; there is a need for differentiation and also revitalization strategies. In addition to this, there is an ever-increasing demand for new typologies of tourism which is more connected with territory and local culture. Travel agencies come up with niche offers to be able to personalize tourist products and satisfy the desires of changing market demands (Trunfio et al.,). Ionnides (1998) refers to travel agencies as "gatekeepers of tourism" since they exercise influence over the geography of origin-destination tourist flows and that they determine the dynamics of international tourism Some of the very foremost roles of travel intermediaries can be listed as follows (Cavlek, 2002; Clerides, Nearchou & Pashardes, 2008; Da Silva, Costa & Moreira, 2018; del Bosque, San Martín & Collado, 2006; Lubbe, 2000; Mısırlı, 2010; Reimer, 1990):

- Contribution to tourism development
- Contribution to publicity and marketing activities
- Exploration of new tourism destinations and offering them as a product

- Creation of tours with price alternatives for various segments
- Connecting power between suppliers and large masses
- Provision of holistic information
- Rebuilding destination image in the post-crisis period

Despite their indisputable impact in the industry and the fact that they have an extensive expertise and knowledge of tourism market and tourism products; the literature on their perceptions towards gastronomy product development is scarce. This suggests the need to conduct a detailed analysis of travel agencies in the context of their perceptions towards gastronomy tourism.

## **Methodology**

Izmir is an important destination for international visitors and ranks among the top five destinations in Turkey. İzmir has a rich variety of food themed events, facilities, gastronomic products shaped by the influences of Aegean culture, Ottoman, Greek, Jewish, Italian and French cuisines. Izmir blends local flavors with world cuisine. One other advantage thanks to its geography and mild climate is the variety of natural herbs, fruits and vegetables. With various herbs, mezzes, vegetable dishes, and world-famous olive oil; healthy eating is in the center of the culinary culture. The coastline is rich in fish restaurants and fish markets. It's part of the Slow Food Movement with its Seferihisar district. Yet, this gastronomic potential is rarely used as part of tourism activities which can be used to diversify touristic product offers. This can also alleviate seasonality problems, help rebuilding the destination image and spread the tourism activities to year-around in İzmir as well as achieving increased tourist numbers since all destinations suffered from COVID-19 and experienced sharp declines in tourism earnings. İzmir must be positioned as a gastronomic destination and food tours should be developed for this purpose.

Group A Travel agencies in İzmir were selected for this research as it is the only group of agencies that can develop tour packages. In this study, a questionnaire using convenience sampling was applied in order to gather information after acquiring an ethical committee approval. The survey was applied in Turkish language using hard copy surveys and online survey tools. The survey instrument was derived from previous related articles emerged from the literature review (Hall and Mitchell, 2002; Boyne et al., 2003; Čavlek, 2005; Kivela and Crofts, 2009; Puri and Chand, 2009; Boniface, 2013; Da Silva et al., 2018; Liao and Chuang, 2020) and in correspondence with the research objectives to collect data. It consists of 3 sections in which the first section includes questions about descriptive statements; second section has the statements about gastronomy tourism knowledge, their approach and perceived positive and negative effects of gastronomy tourism; and in third, there are statements to determine the support given to gastronomy tourism. Respondents were asked to evaluate the questionnaire using a mixture of technical measures such as 5-point Likert Scale from 1 “strongly disagree to strongly agree”, multiple choice and yes/no questions. The survey was administered online and face to face between January 2021, and August 2021 and a total of 157 questionnaires were collected in downtown İzmir area where there are 251 travel agencies in total according to information acquired from İzmir Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism. The results were analyzed by using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). First, the respondents' descriptive profiles and other supportive information were depicted in frequencies and percentages and secondly, means of each item were calculated to identify the importance score. The following part includes survey results related to descriptive information about travel agencies; agencies' gastronomy tourism knowledge, their approach and perceived positive / negative effects; their support to development of gastronomy tourism.

## **Findings**

It is found that the participants were mostly agency owners and managers followed by sales and marketing managers and operation managers; 24,2% with 1-5 years of experience, 29,9% with 6-10

years, 15,3% with 11-15 years, 8,9% with 16-20 years and 21,7% with 21 years and above. It was also found that the majority of the agencies employ 1-5 staff. 73,2% of the agencies organize both incoming and outgoing tours; 18,5% organizes incoming and 8,3% organizes outgoing tours only. When their target markets were asked; they stated that 54,8% of their customers are within a mixed market, 34,4% mass market and 10,8% is the specialized/niche market. The agencies' main tour theme is cultural tourism with 70,7% and gastronomy tourism has been only mentioned by 5,7% of the agencies as a main tour theme. Best selling tours are weekly tours with 42%, weekend tours rank in the second place with 24,8% and followed by 13,4% with tours that last more than seven days. When the the main region where the agencies organize tours were examined, it was found that the majority of the agencies (33,1%) choose destinations within Turkey; 31,2% prefers both Turkey and abroad; 19,7% organizes tours within İzmir and the immediate surroundings and 15,9% organizes tours abroad. The results are shown on Table.1 below.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Related to Travel Agencies in İzmir**

		n	%
Position in the agency	Owner / Manager	70	44,6
	Sales and marketing manager	46	29,3
	Operation Manager	41	26,1
Years spent in the industry	1-5	38	24,2
	6-10	47	29,9
	11-15	24	15,3
	16-20	14	8,9
	21 years and above	34	21,7
Number of employees that travel agency has	1-5	97	61,8
	6-10	46	29,3
	11-15	9	5,7
	16-20	1	0,6
	21 and above	4	2,5
Travel agency's type of operation	Outgoing	13	8,3
	Incoming	29	18,5
	Mixed	115	73,2
Travel agency's target market	Mass market	54	34,4
	Specialized / Niche	17	10,8
	Mixed	86	54,8
Travel agency's main tour theme	Cultural tourism	111	70,7
	Gastronomy tourism	9	5,7
	Business tourism	7	4,5
	Leisure tourism	12	7,6
	Health tourism	7	4,5
	Rural / Agro tourism	1	0,6
	Other	10	6,4
Travel agency's best-selling tour	Daily tours	31	19,7
	Weekend tours	39	24,8
	Weekly tours	66	42
	Tours that last more than 7 days	21	13,4
The main region where the agency organizes tours	İzmir and immediate surroundings	31	19,7
	National	52	33,1
	International	25	15,9
	Mixed	49	31,2

The survey was intended to highlight the travel agencies' actual and / or potential gastronomy tourism offers for the development of gastronomic tourism in İzmir. They were asked whether or not they have any plans about organizing a gastronomic tour in the near future; have any preparations for a gastronomy tour that they will put on sale in the near future; have a gastronomic tour currently on sale; have information about the places to be evaluated for gastronomic tourism in and around Izmir

and also about any projects, training or cooperation executed with tourism authorities. Table 1 summarizes the results as follows:

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

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

The results indicated that almost half of the respondents (47.1%) have plans about organizing a gastronomic tour in the near future; yet, only 20.4% make preparations for a gastronomy tour to put on sale in the near future. 9.6% already has gastronomic themed tours currently on sale but 62.2% does not have knowledge about the places to be evaluated for gastronomic tourism in and around İzmir. Finally, only 13.4% of the respondents are aware that tourism authorities have projects, trainings and cooperation about gastronomic tourism.

### Analysis Results of Scale Items

Reliability analysis have been applied on the scale items due to measure the consistency of response and Cronbach Alfa ( $\alpha$ ) value has been determined as 0.892.

**Table 3. Reliability Statistics**

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
,892	,910	33

Alfa ( $\alpha$ ) value for all statements has been found to indicate total reliability of questionnaire and this value must be larger than 0.7; if  $\alpha$  value is less than this value, it can be said that questionnaire has the weak total reliability. On the contrary, if  $\alpha$  value of questionnaire is greater than 0.8, it can be said that the questionnaire has the high reliability degree.

Statements and the scale items in the questionnaire that applied on respondents have been analyzed and the results have been demonstrated below.

**Table 4. Gastronomy Tourism Knowledge**

	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
Gastronomy tourism is a type of tourism that is on the rise in İzmir.	3,1847	1,17026	157
We have information about the places to be evaluated for gastronomic tourism in and around İzmir.	2,6242	1,10020	157
Gastronomy tourism may be the primary reason to visit İzmir and its surroundings.	3,0255	1,17642	157
The regional cuisine of İzmir is unique and qualified in terms of being demanded for gastronomic tours.	3,7261	1,06585	157

Travel agencies in İzmir think that the demand for gastronomy tourism is increasing and they approve the likelihood of its being a primary motive for travel to visit İzmir and its surroundings. They also find the regional cuisine of İzmir as unique and qualified in terms of being demanded for gastronomic

tours; yet, their information about the places to be evaluated for gastronomic tourism in and around Izmir is unsatisfactory as the mean values indicate.

**Table 5. Perceived Power to Impact Gastronomy Tourism**

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>	<b>N</b>
Gastronomic tourism in İzmir will develop with agency activities	4,0764	0,92363	157
It is possible for the gastronomic tourism to reach large masses through agency activities.	4,1146	0,89849	157
Travel agencies are the most effective channel in gastronomic product diversification in İzmir.	3,7643	0,98150	157
Travel agencies take an active role in the promotion of gastronomic tourism	4,1274	0,85279	157

Travel agencies were also surveyed to find out about their perceived power to impact gastronomy tourism development in İzmir. According to results of the survey, they believe that travel agencies take an active role in the promotion of gastronomic tourism. They also agree that gastronomic tourism can develop and reach large masses through agency activities. They also evaluate themselves as the most effective channel in gastronomic product diversification in İzmir among all the other stakeholders.

**Table 6. Approach to Gastronomy Tourism**

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>	<b>N</b>
Gastronomy tourism is a popular type of tourism in Izmir and its surroundings.	3,0064	1,05913	157
Gastronomy tours positively affect the image of Izmir	4,2038	0,79048	157
Gastronomy tours increase the quality of tourism in Izmir.	4,3567	0,65057	157
We would be pleased if İzmir is mentioned with gastronomic tourism.	4,4904	0,68517	157
We want agencies to organize gastronomic tours in Izmir.	4,5796	0,65170	157

Their approaches to gastronomy tourism are mostly positive. They are willing to organize gastronomic tours with all other agencies indicated with the second highest mean value of all statements presented in the survey. They believe that gastronomy tours will positively affect the image of Izmir as well as increasing the quality of tourism in Izmir. And that they would be pleased if İzmir is mentioned with gastronomic tourism. The only statement with the least support in this part of the survey is related to its the actual state; they don't all agree that gastronomy tourism is a popular type of tourism in Izmir and its surroundings

**Table 7. Perceived Personal Benefits from Gastronomy Tourism**

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>	<b>N</b>
We think that we will gain economic benefits from the development of gastronomy tourism in İzmir.	4,2484	0,99135	157
We think that we will benefit from gastronomy tourism to differentiate our agency.	4,1146	0,99980	157
We think that gastronomic tourism will increase the number of our customers.	4,0255	1,07387	157
We think that gastronomic tourism will be an opportunity for new business connections.	4,0133	1,00061	157

Travel agencies agree that they will gain economic benefits from the development of gastronomy tourism in İzmir and benefit from gastronomy tourism to differentiate our agency. Besides thinking that gastronomic tourism will increase the number of their customers, they also think that gastronomic tourism will be an opportunity for new business connections.



**Table 8. Perceived Positive Effects of Gastronomy Tourism**

	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
It is a year-round marketable product .	4,3885	0,85971	157
It provides high income per person.	3,9873	0,94724	157
It is important in terms of product differentiation and offering alternatives.	4,4713	0,67521	157
It meets the needs and expectations of today's tourists.	4,0318	1,04034	157
It increases the number of existing customers.	4,3248	0,76138	157

Their answers related to perceived positive effects of gastronomy tourism revealed that they find gastronomy tours as a year-round marketable product. They agreed that it is important in terms of product differentiation and offering alternatives, it meets the needs and expectations of today's tourists, it increases the number of existing customers and also provides high income per person.

**Table 9. Perceived Negative Effects of Gastronomy Tourism**

	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
Gastronomy product is expensive.	3,1465	0,98590	157
It is risky as it is a new product.	3,1465	1,15922	157
The number of experts in this field is insufficient.	3,7452	1,01213	157
It is a difficult product to apply.	2,9236	1,07143	157
Demand is uncertain.	3,2930	1,09346	157
It is not applicable to mass marketing.	2,6178	1,15767	157

When their answers to perceived negative effects of gastronomy tourism were analyzed, it was seen that the highest score was about the insufficiency of the number of experts in this field. While gastronomy product was also perceived as expensive and risky due to its novelty, they disagreed about its difficulty for application as a tour package or mass marketing.

**Table 10. Support to Gastronomy Tourism**

	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
We support the development of gastronomic tourism in İzmir.	4,4459	0,83509	157
We support more gastronomic tourists to come to İzmir.	4,4968	0,64673	157
Gastronomy tourism will contribute significantly to İzmir's tourism revenues.	4,3631	0,79383	157
Gastronomy tourism has the potential to be an important type of tourism for İzmir.	4,1783	0,96412	157
Gastronomy tourism has the potential to be an important tourism product for our travel agency.	3,9490	1,18644	157

And finally, their overall support for gastronomy tourism development were analyzed with the statements above. Travel agencies support the conditions in which more gastronomic tourists will

come to İzmir and this was agreed most with the highest mean value. They support the development of gastronomic tourism in İzmir; believing that it has the potential to be an important type of tourism for İzmir as well as their agencies. They also agree that gastronomy tourism will contribute significantly to İzmir's tourism revenues

## **Conclusion**

This paper aims to assess travel agencies in İzmir in the context of gastronomy tourism development and their overall approach and perceptions about the topic. In order to fulfil the objective of the study, 157 travel agencies were contacted. Since tourists are no more interested in look-alike tour packages, travel services worldwide are experimenting some remarkable transitions resulting in various transformations one of which is specialization in niche travel products. One of these popular niche travel segments is gastronomy tourism. Destinations such as Hong Kong, Lisbon, Berlin, London and Rome successfully market their gastronomy with food tours. When survey related to travel agencies and their offers in İzmir were analyzed, it revealed that only a small percentage of them offer gastronomic tours and they are also not aware of the gastronomic sources of the region. They also position themselves as the most effective channel in gastronomic product diversification in İzmir. Although they are willing to organize gastronomic tours and use gastronomy tourism for differentiation; they have doubts about the sufficiency of the number of experts in this field as well as their knowledge about the places to be evaluated for gastronomic tourism in and around Izmir. Some of the potential reasons why food is not promoted as a principal or secondary attraction are lack of awareness about the attractiveness of food and knowledge related to local and regional culinary sources, lack of experts in the field, product novelty and risks associated with it as well as uncertainty about the demand for food tours.

The power of travel agencies has grown stronger and strengthened their role in developing package holiday-market. They are the primary actors who can adapt to changes and to new trends in the tourism market relatively quickly and successfully (Tapper, 2001). Besides, they are a significant part of the overall tourism system. There is an ever-increasing international competition based on prices, quality and accessibility where traditional tourism has reached its maturity phase; thus it is necessary to differentiate and revitalize strategies (Klemm and Parkinson, 2001; Trunfio, 2006). The key for the development of the tourism industry is the creation of a competitive tourism product that will best meet the desires and expectations of tourists. Travel agencies must make an effort to enlarge their influence and increase their revenues all along the value chain; therefore, they need to provide additional, novel and also individualized, specific products that best reflect the destination (Espeso-Molinero et al., 2016; Koç, 2005; Paştıou et al., 2014). Creation of gastronomy tours is one of these strategic options in the design and development of novel tourist products based on activities related to food and beverages. All of these efforts shall contribute to deliver value and encourage repeat visits as it will lead to the introduction of unique products and services that will eliminate consumers' indifference and support the promotion of the place.

The importance of food as a main or supporting attraction should not be overlooked by destinations. By properly marketing its resources and attractions, the destination can increase its appeal. Food tourism's potential to become a significant and appealing attraction in a destination involves product development, packaging, positioning, and promotion of culinary attractions; all of which are primary roles of travel agencies in the tourism industry. To match the demands of travelers who seek unique and unforgettable experiences, new tour concepts are required. As a result, the tourism businesses should design tour packages that were previously not offered, as well as services and products that allow tourists to co-create experiences (Dolnicar et al., 2007).

This research depicts the current perceptions of travel agencies in Izmir about gastronomy tourism and their actual gastronomic tourism offers. Future studies may reveal the reasons behind the lack of specialization in this segment and highlight why it has not been initiated up to the present day or may investigate the demand potential of food tourists for packaged tours.

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