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# **CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE GASTRONOMY OFFER OF THE SERBIAN NATIONAL CUISINE RESTAURANTS**

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## **Abstract**

*Tourists are increasingly becoming inclined to experiences that encourage the consumption of dishes typical for a certain region of a particular country. Serbia is abundant in national dishes which are even nowadays prepared in an authentic manner. Every tourist region of Serbia has recognizable gastronomy products as a part of the restaurant offer which is located outside the place of its origin.*

*This paper aims to identify the gastronomy products which represent the elements of the gastronomy offer of the Serbian national cuisine restaurants, and are marketed as Serbian national dishes whose tastes are relished in by both local and foreign tourists.*

*The research is conducted using a representative sample of Belgrade restaurants. By applying a critical analysis of their gastronomy offer, numerous recommendations for the enhancement of the actual situation will be proposed with a view to improving the participation of Serbian national dishes in the gastronomy offer of the Serbian restaurants.*

**Key Words:** *gastronomy offer, national dishes of Serbia, restaurants, Belgrade*

**JEL classification:** *L83.*

## **Introduction**

One of the motives of tourists who want to invest their free time and money in travelling to a particular destination is certainly gastronomy. As gastronomy provides an experience to the tourists, it becomes the purpose of travelling where the simple satisfaction of the physical need to eat

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turns into a motive to visit a region. Tourists turn to new experiences they can have by tasting the local gastronomic products and are ready to spend considerable amounts of money on such products. According to the survey results of the British agency „Enteleca Research and Consultancy” (2000), 72% of visitors to the United Kingdom expressed interest in trying the local food and beverages (page 3).

Taking into account the fact that gastro-tourism has not fully developed in most parts of the territory of the Republic of Serbia, but rather in certain localities, such data could be of importance for setting up the strategy aiming to turn gastronomy into a key factor of visits to a particular destination. According to the Secretariat for Administration/Statistics Sector of the City of Belgrade, in 2017, the capital was visited by over a million tourists, which represents an increase of 16%. More than 862,000 foreign tourists visited Belgrade, which is 18% more than the previous year.

"Tourism in which food plays a primary or supporting role, has good prospects and represents the challenge" to further develop the touristic potential of a particular location (Henderson, 2009). Belgrade as the main centre of tourism has a large number of catering establishments – restaurants, the gastronomy offer of which is based on the national dishes of the Serbian cuisine, as a blend of the nation’s culture and food. This provides tourists with an insight into a segment of the cultural heritage of the country, enhances the attractiveness of the destination and opens up opportunities for the development of gastro-tourism.

The significance of gastronomy in the development of tourism worldwide has been recognized by the WTO (World Trade Organization) the organizer of the forum on gastronomy tourism every second year (WTO, 2012). In recent years, there has been an increasing number of gastro-tourists, both worldwide and in Serbia. They are looking for new tastes, foodstuff produced in protected natural environments and prepared in a traditional manner (Stojanović, 2017).

Presently in Serbia there is no adequate instrument that would serve to measure the perception of tourists and the consumption of local food and beverages. *The Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2016 to 2025* defines gastronomic tourism as a key tourism trend, and the consumption of food and beverages in a tourist

destination is an integral part of the tourism product within gastronomic tourism.

## **Gastronomy**

Gastronomy has existed since ancient times, and its development has been contributed to by the prominent individuals promoting it throughout history. Food and its preparation as an important part of the man's material life and survival, and the existence of his material and spiritual culture, has always been an object of study of different scientific areas, such as archaeology, anthropology, ethnography, history and biology. Gastronomy is „defined as the art of fine eating; culinary techniques used in food preparation” (Vukić, 2011). Another accepted definition is that gastronomy is the study of the relationship between food and culture, of tasting, experiencing, experimenting with, studying and understanding of food (Kivela & Crotts, 2006).

Papers appearing in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century defined gastronomy as „a special branch of human knowledge, as the science of synthesis of all the knowledge on human nutrition within one discipline. Gastronomy should explore and describe the historical development of nutrition, food-related traditions, preparation and serving of food (Vukić, 2011). World Food Travel Association describes the connection between gastronomy and tourism as enjoyment of unique and memorable food (2018).

Through centuries, gastronomic developments were affected by the geographical location of a site, the diversity of flora and fauna, the conditions for the development of agricultural branches, the religious influence. It could be said that the greatest impact on the development of Serbian gastronomy was made by a mixture of gastronomies of different nations who conquered its territory and were present there for a longer period of time. Gastronomy is a significant part of intangible cultural heritage and is becoming increasingly important as an element of attraction in choosing a touristic destination.

### **Relationship between gastronomy and tourism – gastronomic tourism**

In a large number of countries, tourism plays a specific role, contributing to the development of the country, increasing the employment of a great number of people of various professions, and influencing the development of other industries that are interconnected with tourism. The

development of individual gastronomies, that is national gastronomies, has been influenced by a number of factors. Many countries have created a range of dishes designated as traditional and, in the beginning of the first decade of this century there were 198 national cuisines known (Jacob & Ashkenazi, 2006). Tourists' spending on gastronomy products is on the rise, as the sensory experience serves to increase satisfaction and enables them to experience the destination through the offer of the restaurants, and therefore make it their preferential destination (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). According to available data, 39% of tourists in Europe spend about 30% of their money on food during travel (Destination Europe 2020. Conference, Brussels 2014).

Europe is one of the most important tourist destinations in the world, as it is visited by more than a half of all international visitors. In recent years there has been a noticeable increase in the number of tourists visiting destinations in Europe, however the increase varies between destinations. *European Travel Commission (ETC)* has developed the *Destination Europe* brand as part of a strategy to optimize Europe's touristic market positioning, intended to create an effective umbrella for all ETC members while at the same time conveying their distinctive individual characteristics. The brand's three main themes are:

- *Inspiring*: cities, culture, arts, architecture, music, scenic beauty & landscapes and places;
- *Authentic*: history, heritage, pageantry, museums and castles, famous landmarks, traditions, famous personalities;
- *Unforgettable*: warmth, welcome, the people, lifestyle, **gastronomy**, fun, diversity.

The fact that gastronomy is included in the list of brands, and that it is an integral part of the presentation of touristic destinations, is of great importance. Gastronomy as the keeper of a nation's tradition presents its products on the localities of their origin, however they are also promoted in urban areas, such as city tourist centres and capital cities.

Culinary tourism is a term used by some authors in their research, and it is said that culinary tourism is the activity of the individuals exploring foods new to them, using food to learn about new cultures and about a nation's ways of life (Long, 2004).

According to Vukić (2015). "national gastronomy is a branch of gastronomy, and it includes the set of all attributes related to the

consumption, culture and methods of preparing food, reflecting the material culture of a nation. A national cuisine has developed in a certain territory, and is connected to the history, tradition and the customs of people living there." The term "national dishes" refers to those dishes which take the prefix "national" on the basis of their origins and the territory where they are prepared. National cuisines have distinctive features regarding the ingredients, dishes and cookware used, the heat exposure method, i.e. the type of hearth or stove.

The gastronomy offer of a particular restaurant includes a wide range of culinary products. Culinary products may vary greatly in terms of their intended use, origin, complexity, quality and other criteria, which leads to the division of these products into numerous categories (Vukić & Drljević, 2006). As a result, menus nowadays offer a rich selection of dishes. However, a culinary product should not serve merely to fill the empty space on the menu – it should be selected, required, consumed, and it should meet the customer's expectations and requirements (Vukić & Drljević, 2006).

### **Literature review**

Numerous statements and findings indicating that gastronomy plays an increasingly important role in tourism can be found in both foreign and domestic literature reviews. Gastronomy is defined as the study of the comprehensiveness of food, the evolution of nutrition, its qualities and content (Vukić, 2008); still, the development policies and concepts existing so far related to the development of tourism have not assigned an adequate developmental role to gastronomy i.e. to local food, as opposed to its basic merits (Vukić & Portić, 2007).

Gastronomy is also referred to as the art of cooking and good eating, however this is only one part of this discipline. On the other hand, it could be said that gastronomy studies the relationship between culture and food. Someone who is seriously involved in gastronomy is often involved in tasting, preparing, experiencing, experimenting, researching, discovering, understanding, and writing about food, and usually about wine. Gastronomy is very closely connected to a number of other sciences and disciplines, and one can therefore argue that gastronomy is a complex, interdisciplinary activity (Kivela & Crotts, 2006).

The regions in which the wave of technology and globalization did not change the way food and beverages are prepared, including the consumption culture, have become favourable for the development of selective forms of tourism, known under various names worldwide, such as: food and drink tourism, culinary tourism, gastronomic tourism, as well as gourmet tourism (Hall & Mitchell, 2002). This form of tourism aims at attracting tourists to a certain destination so that they meet their primary motive to travel, which is discovering and enjoying the authentic food and beverages. In this way, food and beverages have become an important tool of the tourism industry (Hall & Mitchell, 2000), that can be used to represent a nation through its gastronomy offer and its national dishes.

Food is an essential resource of tourism (Henderson, 2004; Quan & Wang, 2004), taking into account the importance of food and drink as a physiological need of every human being, it is evident that expenses for food and drink in tourism account for one third of total tourist spending of global tourist traffic (Meler & Cerović, 2003). Food can be the main instigator and primary motive that meets a multitude of needs and desires of a tourist (Tikkanen, 2007).

Taken as a separate segment, food has been recognized in the tourism market as (Hall & Mitchel, 2001):

- - part of the local culture, consumed by tourists;
- - part of the tourism promotion;
- -potential component of the local agricultural and economic development, and
- - regional factor affected by consumption patterns and perceived desires of tourists.

Food can be the main motive for visiting a particular destination, and therefore Quan and Wang give four recommendations with the aim of making food an attraction of a particular destination (Quan & Wang, 2004):

- -rural areas could popularize their food heritage;
- -the destinations having plenty of food products could be turned into major tourist attractions;
- - local food could be part of a greater touristic event
- - food or culinary tourism could be used to enhance destination attractiveness.

The gastronomy offer of a particular destination can be provided by various restaurants. Josiam et al compared modern restaurants to ethnic restaurants (Josiam et al., 2004). Mickey's Diner designed to resemble a railroad dining car was the main object of their study. In today's market operation, the main function of a restaurant is not only preparing and serving food and drinks, but also providing a unique experience for the tourists. Following and implementation of trends is of great significance for the success of a restaurant, due to the growing competition between restaurants, especially in big cities. Tourists are more inclined to choose a restaurant with an authentic offer of local food if there is also a unique ambiance.

Gastronomic tourism could present a competitive advantage and be a recognizable brand of a city, country or region. A clearly defined gastronomic identity and heritage can be exploited in crucial processes of differentiation and rejuvenation, helping to convey a unique sense of a place (Fox, 2007).

Literature on restaurants offering national food and drinks has already shown that consumers visiting national restaurants often seek authentic national cultural experiences, and the authenticity of a restaurant crucially affects their overall satisfaction (Gaytàn, 2008; Girardelli, 2004; Roseman, 2006; Wood & Munoz, 2007). Literature also indicates that, in addition to good food, other attributes of the restaurant such as décor, music, uniforms and service, significantly contribute to customers' perception of the authenticity of the restaurant (Ebster & Guist, 2004; Molz, 2004).

It could be said that the concept of authenticity is an important factor in attracting guests to a restaurant (Boyle, 2003; Sims, 2009; 2010). Guests seek "authenticity" hoping to experience not only the authentic dishes, but also expand their cultural knowledge (Lego et al., 2002; Molz, 2004; Sukalakamala & Boyce, 2007). Visitors to the national restaurants evaluate difficult an authentic cultural experience. It is known that if tourists get a positive impression of the national restaurant and its gastronomic offer, as well as of the overall service and ambiance, they are more likely to revisit the restaurant (Ebster & Guist, 2004).

National cuisine of a country can represent the culture and traditions of the nation, and food and cooking styles not only play significant roles in different regions, but also represent features of different countries, and

may even stand as international brands. Such cuisine creates a linkage between food and a nation and facilitates the creation of marketing strategies. Local national cuisine helps tourists gain an authentic cultural experience (Okumus et al., 2007).

Food is an important segment of the overall travelling experience. According to some authors (Getz & Brown, 2006; Long, 2004) consumption of local food found at a tourist destination can represent an important component of the general perception of the travelling experience itself. This indicates that the rich gastronomy offer of a place should include a wide and varied offer of a large number of ethnic and international restaurants, so that the tourists have a choice in accordance with their preferences. Rand and others (Rand et al., 2003) indicate that the key components of food tourism are specialty restaurants, locally/regionally produced food products, special cuisine/food routes, food festivals, special food-related events and the like.

## **Methods**

This paper is based on the research carries out in February 2018. The data used for the analysis were taken from the website <https://belgrade-beat.rs/restorani-i-barovi/srpska> which presented 47 restaurants in Belgrade offering Serbian national dishes. Further analysis was focused on determining the number of restaurants having menus on their respective websites. 12 out of 47 restaurants presented do not have an available website. The next step was the analysis of the number of restaurants having a website enabling tourists to learn about their gastronomy offer in a foreign language. The results show that only 22 restaurants provide information in a foreign language.

Most attention is devoted to analyzing the offer of national gastronomic products on the example of well-known national dishes that characterize the authentic Serbian cuisine. The selection was made in accordance with the data obtained from relevant publications presenting the most popular Serbian dishes (<http://www.travelingserbia.com/>).

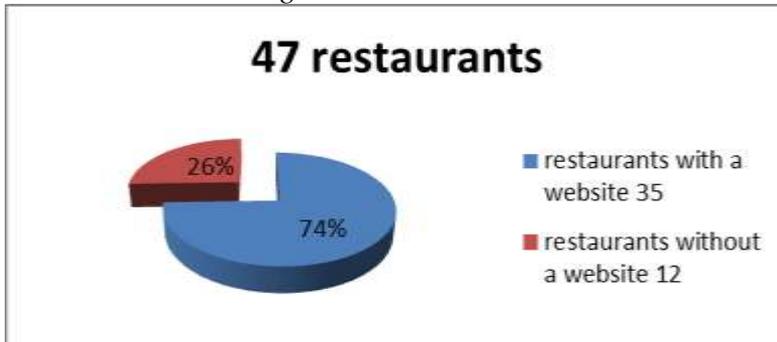
Authentic Serbian national dishes included in the offer of catering facilities in Belgrade were analyzed in respect of their category in the written offers - menus. A significant share in the offer is that of cold appetizers and grilled meat. What is worrisome is the fact that there are almost no ready-made meals, and the poor offer of national treats.

## Results and discussion

Belgrade as the capital and the biggest centre of tourism in Serbia, had over two million overnight stays in 2017, which is an increase of 19% compared to the previous year. There was also a significant increase in the number of foreign visitors, as well as the increase in the overnight stay of foreign visitors of 21% compared to the previous year (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018). The data could be an incentive for a better presentation of Serbian gastronomy, which is an integral part of every guest's visit, to foreign tourists staying in Belgrade.

It is necessary to change the way in which gastronomy is promoted in Belgrade restaurants, with emphasis on the availability of relevant information on the websites of individual restaurants as well as on the website of the Tourist Organization of Belgrade. It is unacceptable for a restaurant officially presented on a website promoting restaurants not to have a website of its own and, according to the statistical data, the number of such restaurants is 12.

Figure 1: *Restaurants in Belgrade with or without a website*

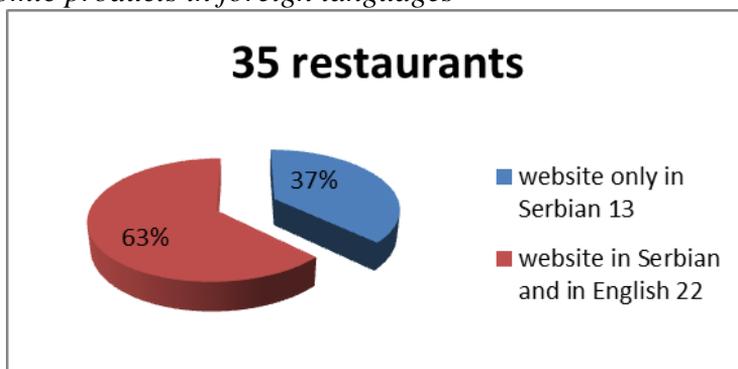


Source: *Authors' statistics*

It is necessary to introduce these restaurants to the good examples of the restaurants having presented their gastronomy offer on a website, as it would certainly contribute to the increase in the number of visits to those facilities. It is known that an increasing number of tourists visits Belgrade every year. That should be a good reason for the catering facilities to present their gastronomy offer on their websites in some foreign languages. Out of the 35 restaurant websites, only 22 provide information in foreign languages, in most cases only in English. Taking into account the fact that there is an increasing number of tourists from the German

speaking countries (Germany and Austria), from China, Russia, an Israel, it is recommended to make the relevant information available in their native languages. This would facilitate the selection of gastronomic products. Religious backgrounds are also considered as determinants affecting food choice and consumption, and if guests are not familiar with the facts regarding a gastronomic product, they are likely to refrain from even tasting it.

Figure 2: *Serbian ethnic restaurants in Belgrade offering their gastronomic products in foreign languages*



Source: *Authors' statistics*

The structure of food offer in the analysed catering facilities of Serbian national cuisine varies, and therefore for the purpose of this research the dishes have been classified into the usual categories of: cold appetizers, soups and broths, hot appetizers, fish dishes, ready-made meals, roasted meat, meals to order and grilled meat, side dishes and stews, salads and desserts, i.e. in the order they are consumed.

By analyzing the structure, it was concluded that there is a significant share in the offer of local dishes served as cold or hot appetizers. The most frequent product is the so-called Serbian cheese with the share of 61.70%, beef prosciutto 57.45%, followed by kaymak 55.32%. The dish most frequently prepared in winter months – *pihtije* (aspic, pork jelly), which has had its own festival in the village of Rumenka for the last 15 years, is offered by an insignificant number of restaurants, and the same pertains to *čvarci* (cracklings). These products of distinctive taste are most often found within the offer of the so-called "Serbian *zakuska*" and that could be the reason why they are less often offered as individual dishes.

Soups and broths are the necessary part of a meal in a Serbian household. They used to be made of vegetables only, and nowadays the restaurants in Belgrade offer only chicken soup with homemade noodles. Hot appetizers most frequently offered to tourists are *proja* (Serbian cornbread) and breaded peppers stuffed with cheese. *Gibanica* (filo pastry cheese pie) which has been prepared in Serbia since ancient times, and savoury pies filled with cheese, nettle, potatoes, mushrooms and the like, are included in the offer of only a few restaurants. These dishes should be included in the gastronomy offer of restaurants in order to preserve the tradition of their preparation.

Less than a half of the catering facilities offer *prebranac* (baked beans), which is a unique dish from this region in terms of its preparation. The offer of river fish dishes is dominated by trout, despite the fact that our country is abundant in other high-quality species of river fish (zander, carp, catfish). *Sarma*, as the ready-made meal highly appealing to tourists in Serbia, can be found in only a few restaurants in Belgrade. Similarly, the so-called *svadbarski kupus* ("wedding cabbage"), the dish having its own festival in the village of Mrčajevci, is not even included in the offer of these restaurants.

The dishes prepared "*ispod sača*" (literally, under cover or lid) are traditionally cooked in a covered earthenware pot placed on a previously heated surface and surrounded by burning charcoal. It is a special heat treatment method known since ancient times, which now has a better share in the offer. Most of the dishes prepared in this way contain meat, especially lamb or veal. Another authenticity of Serbian cuisine are grilled dishes. A large number of restaurants include these in their offer, both for their memorable taste and the easiness of heat treatment.

Serbia is well-known as a producer of vegetable crops, and tomatoes and peppers are the most common. These are used for the preparation of authentic salads found in the offer of almost all restaurants in Belgrade. *Ajvar*, a Serbian brand, is also included in the offer of a significant number of Belgrade restaurants.

The authentic Serbian desserts, whose traditional method of preparation has been preserved since the old days, is something Serbian cuisine could boast about. Desserts and treats such as *orasnice* (walnut cookies), *suva pita sa orasima* (walnut pie) and sweet pies (apple pie and cherry pie) are typically offered in ethnic restaurants in Belgrade. However, the

traditional Serbian dessert *vanilica* (shortcrust pastry biscuits sandwiched together with jam) can be found in only one of these restaurants, which is far from enough, and *knedle sa šljivama* (plum dumplings made of potato dough), a dessert that has also been part of our cuisine for a very long time, are offered in only a few of these facilities. Therefore, we can conclude that the desserts typical of Serbian national cuisine are not sufficiently represented in these restaurants.

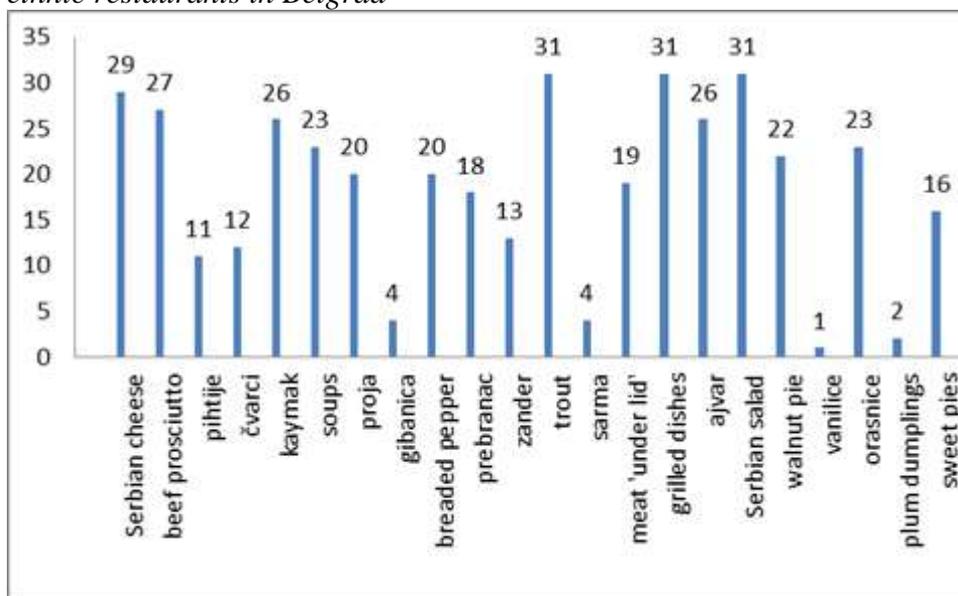
The gastronomy offer should be further extended to include a number of other authentic desserts originating from or traditionally prepared in Serbia. One such example could be "*Moskva šnit*" (layers of egg white and walnut sponge, filled with egg yolk and butter cream mixed with pineapple, peach and cherry, and topped with almond leaves), an original gâteau created in the Moskva hotel in Belgrade more than forty years ago. The dessert is known even beyond the borders of our country. Another traditional dessert that should be included in the restaurant offer is "*Vasina gâteau*" (layers of walnut sponge filled with walnut and orange juice cream flavored with orange zest, and decorated with Italian meringue). In addition to *vanilice*, our homemade cookies typically served on all festive occasions, two other sweet dishes can be offered: "*starinske štangle*" (old-fashioned bars - walnut pastry topped with meringue of egg whites and sugar) and "*oblade silvester*" (waffles Silvester - thin waffles filled with whipped egg whites mixed with honey, chopped walnut and raisins).

Pastry desserts are another characteristic feature of the national Serbian cuisine. In the province of Vojvodina, namely, in the district of South Banat, people traditionally prepare *strudel* from leavened dough rolled up with poppy seed, walnuts or carob filling. The dessert is very popular and has its own festival in the village of Dolovo near Pančevo. It certainly deserves to be part of our gastronomy offer. *Salčići* (pork fat puff pastry), a dessert traditionally prepared in our region for a long time, is not included in the offer of a single restaurant. *Doughnuts* are made of yeast dough, prepared in accordance with the traditional recipe, and could also be included in the offer of Serbian ethnic restaurants.

A varied and rich gastronomy offer is certainly the most prominent feature of the Serbian national cuisine. Traditional dishes prepared for a long time in this region should be included in the offer of our restaurants, so that domestic and foreign tourists could enjoy the authentic Serbian meals.

The share in the offer of traditional Serbian dishes is shown in the following figure:

Figure 3: *The share of certain gastronomy products in the offer of Serbian ethnic restaurants in Belgrad*



Source: *Authors' statistics*

## Conclusion

Gastronomy offer is an important segment in the promotion and placement of a tourist destination. Food as part of a destination's identity can attract a wide range of foreign and domestic tourists, as local cuisine can bring to life cultural experience, cultural identity, communication and status (Bessière, 1998; Frochot, 2003). Authentic identity of food, along with the culture and tradition of the territory where it is prepared, can be turned into a recognizable image and brand of any region, used efficiently in promoting of and differentiation between destinations. It is a well-known fact that food plays an important role in attracting tourists to a particular destination, as it reflects the regional culture and lifestyle.

In case of any tourist destination and locality, it is good if there is a high-quality, varied offer of hotels and restaurants, especially national and specialized restaurants, which, in addition to the attractiveness of the local resources and the variety of other facilities, make a place recognizable and popular among tourists. This can sometimes be a decisive factor for

potential tourists to choose a particular destination, as such an offer cannot be found anywhere else (Čavić, 2015).

The research results presented in this paper indicate that there is a variety of Serbian national dishes in Belgrade restaurants, however their share in the offer is unsatisfactory, as authentic Serbian dishes are not sufficiently present on the menus of these facilities. The recommendation of the authors is that it is necessary to standardize the gastronomy offer, whereby all the traditional and authentic dishes of the Serbian national cuisine would be included in the offer of our restaurants.

Belgrade, as the capital of the Republic of Serbia, is very attractive and appealing, especially to foreign tourists. In recent years, there has been an increasing number of tourists coming to Belgrade from numerous foreign countries. A rich gastronomy offer, including national Serbian dishes better presented and promoted on official websites of tourist organizations and Serbian national restaurants, could attract an even larger number of domestic, as well as foreign tourists, who would come here to taste Serbian national dishes.

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