

IF PEOPLE WOULD WANT THEM, WHY DO NOT THEY EXIST? INTEREST IN GASTRONOMIC THEME TOURS IN HUNGARY

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Abstract: The growing interest of travelers in local cultures, historical heritage, natural landscapes, and traditions has created new opportunities and has particularly favoured the expansion of thematic routes. The aim of our study was to examine how familiar the Hungarian population is with various thematic tours and routes, as well as to identify the consumer attitudes and expectations associated with them and to assess the actual demand for such initiatives. The research primarily focused on gastronomy-based thematic routes, which, according to international literature and experiences, significantly contribute to conveying the value of cultural and natural heritage while enhancing the diversification and competitiveness of tourism offer. Given the exploratory nature of our investigation, we applied a questionnaire survey, placing our questions into an omnibus-type online survey after evaluating the available options. The online survey conducted in 2024 provided a database with a sample size of 1,000 respondents, representative of the Hungarian population by gender and age groups (in 15-year cohorts). Our survey confirmed that there is a significant demand among the Hungarian population for gastronomic thematic routes built around traditional local foods. These not only enhance the uniqueness of tourism experience but also contribute to the economic strengthening of rural areas, sustainable development, and the reinforcement of local identity. Such tours provide opportunities for local producers and service providers to become directly involved, thereby strengthening community cooperation and the local economic cycle. In addition, participants can gain authentic, experience-based impressions that, in the long term, can increase the tourism competitiveness of destinations. Our research confirms that thematic routes—particularly those with a gastronomic focus—represent one of the most promising directions for the future development of domestic tourism.

Keywords: thematic tours, gastro-tourism, wine tours, gastronomic heritage, rural development

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most widely available types of thematic tours is the local gastronomy heritage-oriented type, whose popularity can be explained by the tendency today that is shown by the appeal of rich experiences, the growing demand for authentic experiences (Gheorghe et al., 2014; Park & Widjanta 2022; Liutikas, 2023). Mention must also be made in this regard of the increasing popularity of products featuring cultural and natural resources as well as the premium placed on cultural tourism (Puczkó & Rátz, 2011). Although traditionally, gastrotourism has been seen as part of cultural tourism, it has come to be generally accepted as an independent product category, owing to its position and growth potential in tourism. In many countries, gastrotourism and the thematic tours that are based thereon play an important role in rural tourism development (Gheorghe et al., 2014; Liutikas, 2023; Vilela da Mota et al., 2024).

They are particularly successful in Germany (Pentz, 2024), where over 250 tours have been identified in our previous investigations (Gonda & Pentz, 2023). The positive effects of the German practice inspired a representative survey in 2024, which undertook to analyze the Hungarian population's awareness of the various types of such tours and the demand for them. On the basis of our previous research and the literature of the field, we set up three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: There is a marked familiarity in Hungary of the various types of thematic tours.

Hypothesis 2: There would be a strong demand for the development of thematic tours as people would be interested in the services they offered.

Hypothesis 3: Gastronomic theme tours are especially attractive, and thus their development would be entirely reasonable.

After presenting the most relevant literature about the theme, the article details our research methodology and the concrete results, also assessing our hypotheses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The causes of the growing interest in gastrotourism

The diversity and differentiation of the tourist product offer is a key condition for competitive tourism — its existence is an

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indicator of the presence of quality gastronomy (Gyurkó et al., 2024). Today, gastrotourism is among the most trendy tourism products. It would be no exaggeration to claim that never before has there been a wider and more diversified gastronomy offer (Ellis et al., 2018; Vilela de Mota et al., 2024; Sutiadiningsih et al., 2024; Kar et al., 2024). The reasons are as follows:

a) By the second half of the 20th century, tourism had become a mass phenomenon. Not only did it become a part of the lifestyle of developed nations, but it began to shape the quality of life. Annually, well over a billion international cross-border visits are made, with domestic trips many times over this number. A need for a lifestyle ensuring wellbeing persists while travelling as well. A desire to achieve authenticity is especially important for tourists, as are a need for quality products, a search for hand-made goods, a respect for long-standing ways of doing things, and a quest for quality experiences (Gheorghe et al., 2014; Diti et al., 2015; Gonda et al., 2021; Park & Widyanta, 2022). All of these traits exert a strong influence on the global trends of culinary tourism (Global Report on Food Tourism, 2012).

b) Another reason can be seen in the way that people engage in more prudent dietary behavior while traveling, with some rejecting cheap mass-processed foods, preferring instead locally produced artisan foodstuffs and experiences related to food and cuisine (Su et al., 2020; Park & Widyanta, 2022). Tourists seek fresh, local, and good quality products that bring them closer to experiencing the cultural heritage of the locality (Kastenholz et al., 2021).

c) Changes in the demographic characteristics of households also have a significant impact on the gastronomic offer. Generally, women are employed, and thus more and more people are choosing to work in hospitality, which boosts supplies and results in the growth of gastrotourism (Rojas-Rivas et al., 2020).

d) Finally, we must mention globalization as a factor in the development of gastronomy. Multiculturalism appears in gastronomy as well, driven mainly by the growth of international tourism, immigration, and the wide availability of television channels and the internet; finding exotic dishes and unique services presents no problems whatsoever.

The terms *culinary tourism* and *gastrotourism* are both used in the literature. In our view, they denote similar meaning. In Hall & Sharples's (2003) definition, culinary tourism and gastrotourism are regional recreational or entertainment tour experiences, involving visits to primary and secondary food producers, gastronomic festivals, food trade shows, various events, farmers' markets, cooking shows, tastings of quality foods, and many other related tourism activities. Based on the literature we can extend this definition by saying that gastronomy tours are embedded in a special way of life involving an intellectual interest in becoming familiar with gastro-cultural heritage (Ramos-Truchero, 2024). The magnetism of gastronomy goes far beyond the mere consumption of food and beverages; it is connected to culture, heritage, the local population and environs, whatever the aim of the travel may be (Ellis et al., 2018; Cordova-Buiza et al., 2021).

Consumer trends influencing the development of gastrotourism

Sustainable gastronomy is a trend welcomed in many countries, with projections indicating its ever-growing importance as a factor in the decision-making process of potential tourists. The tendency is seen as significant whereby essential resources are used with care, raw materials and the ecosystem are being taken into account considerably, and sound employment practices and environment protection are in place, affecting the development of culinary tourism (Muangasame & Park, 2019; Zhang et al., 2019). People are driven by several motives to better focus on quality products. Today's tourists are much more civilized than what was generally the case twenty years ago.

They tend to be more sophisticated and knowledgeable, due to the wide access to online information. They have become more exacting, paying extra attention to environment issues, following a healthy routine, and more bravely diverting from mass tourism itineraries as they seek out unique and authentic destinations. Research has shown that a larger portion of families' domestic budgets is spent on gourmet dishes prepared in the home or enjoyed at a restaurant.

Wine tourism has emerged in recent years as a strategic activity with the potential to drive long-term value creation for firms, communities, and entire regions, functioning as a multidimensional leverage to promote sustainable development by integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions into business models and territorial strategies (Bole, 2024; Gao et al., 2024). Tourism, a rapidly growing global sector, significantly boosts the economy, particularly in rural areas, by creating jobs and increasing local incomes. It also fosters local goods production and infrastructure that benefits the local population (Dancsokné et al., 2023; Vasvári et al., 2025).

Health and ethical factors are also taken into account by more people during purchases. The immense popularity of products labelled "Fair Trademark" shows that this is no mere theory anymore: consumers are actually willing to pay more for goods with that logo. The need inherent in this process has driven many producers to pay more attention to the quality of foods (Quan & Wang, 2004). In addition, the importance of gastronomy trademarks appears in the realm of tourism safety as well. Health safety is a fundamental concern in the European Union's tourism development strategies, which focus almost exclusively on food and restaurants as the importance of healthy, quality foods and beverages is emphasized, together with the preference for knowledge about the provenance of foodstuffs and for local produce (Kaszás & Keller, 2022).

Consumer choice is another area where individualism has a strong effect. Today, when most goods are uniform and available widely, people seek what is unique by choosing fresh and good quality foods to better reflect their personalities. Also of note is how more open parents have become to their children's eating proclivities: families tend to be more indulgent, letting the children select what and where they would like to eat. According to research by Quan & Wang (2004), over a third of tourists' summer vacation expenses are for food, which proves that local cuisine is an integral part of the vacation experience. Tourism products reported are alternately called food, gastro, and culinary tourism. In a similar vein, depending on the situation, tourist trips having to do with food are called gastronomy, culinary, or food tours (Quan & Wang, 2004).

With the emergence of the "experience economy," culinary experiences have become increasingly important in tourism. According to Pine & Gilmore (1998), consumers no longer pay for basic services only but for the totality of the experience.

As far as food is concerned, they are willing to pay extra for value added by such experiences that open doors to the local culture, creativity, and the locale in general. In particular, tourists' food experiences are often contrasted with everyday or simple dining, as people seek the authenticity and distinctiveness of local dishes and gastronomy. Food and gastronomy can be seen as creative industries in their own right, helping to stimulate innovation by engaging consumers in co-creation, encouraging connections between global and local cultures, creating food narratives along the way.

In this regard, gastrotourism is a form of creative tourism (Richards, 2018; Lőrincz et al., 2023; Csapó et al., 2022), which enables tourists to develop their ingenuity as they interact with the locals and their creative way of life. The main domains of current innovation in food, gastronomy, and tourism include providing creative tourist experiences (e.g., cookery and food literacy courses), organizing entertainment events related to foods (e.g., sausage and wine festivals), setting up new and creative food tours, and informing about exotic new cuisines (e.g., the new Asian cuisine of Singapore).

Thematic tours in the culinary offer

Although thematic tours are often labelled as tourism products, they can be established for a variety of reasons: sometimes they are designed as a completely new product, but they can simply be a means of displaying existing (often repositioned) attractions (Piskótí & Nagy, 2021). They may string together natural or artificially developed attractions all related to a single concept, which can be accessed by some form of transportation. With sustainability in mind, they are designed to be educational and fun at the same time (Puczkó & Rátz, 2011).

Tours can be product- or theme-based (Rogerson, 2007; Lourens, 2007). Product-based tours aim primarily to strengthen the marketing and sale of the flagship product, whereas theme-based ones aim not only to communicate the image of the destination but also to present it in each service provided during the trip (e.g., accommodation, hospitality, and souvenirs). During the development of the touristic itinerary, a theme is being presented via a series of activities and attractions, encouraging businesses to provide auxiliary products and services (Meyer et al., 2004; Clarke, 2005). Tourism managed in this manner is effectively a market-driven development of participating destinations (Lourens, 2007). The way the concept is formed generates a cooperation in less developed regions and establishes a partnership across communities and neighboring regions, contributing to economic growth by way of tourism (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004).

Tourists who engage in local cuisine on an emotional level are more likely to experience profound joy, develop a deeper attachment to the destination, and experience enhanced overall well-being. The multisensory nature of food—encompassing its taste, aroma, and presentation—triggers strong emotional responses, thereby reinforcing the pleasure and satisfaction derived from gastronomic experiences (Khan et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2023).

Gastronomy tours go back almost a hundred years. For example, the first German wine tour was established in 1935, becoming a template for the numerous wine tours that have cropped up around the world. In Austria, the oldest national thematic wine tour is the one in South Styria, a 25 km tour which was started in 1955. A few decades ago, professional tourism managers rediscovered that by combining touristic attractions and foods they can help potential visitors gain new and authentic experiences, new perceptions and values, and so it was that gastronomic thematic tours were established one after the other, some in Hungary as well. The first Hungarian, in 1994, was the Villány – Siklós wine tour.

According to the Global Report on Food Tourism (2012), the main point in a gastronomic tour is to combine a series of touristic attractions, packaged in a convenient form, with the tourists staying in the location for a longer period, experiencing all of this as an attraction in its own right. The range of gastronomic tour offers can be diverse, with several forms established. They tend to focus on some subdivision of gastrotourism, such as wine, coffee, or cheese tourism, or they can be based on the general cuisine of the destination in question. Luckily, food producers have realized that they can realize higher profits if, with the help of thematic tours, their goods are made part of the concept of integrated rural tourism or the total rural tourism experience (Kastenholz et al., 2012). The entire rural destination could benefit from a richer, sensorially more appealing, meaningful, intense, authentic, and memorable tourism experience, where food experiences play a special role. Such experiences can even be extended by the consumption of special foods at home after the vacation. Food experiences can enhance the attractiveness and distinctiveness of the rural destination as well as support the local food production chain. The cultural landscape and winemaking are closely linked, as they bring together natural environment and human activity. Vineyards are often protected as part of a living cultural landscape. Wine traditions are rich and varied, depending on region and country (Jezierska-Thöle et al., 2025).

There is no doubt that gastronomic tours have become one of the most advanced products in this area as they can contribute to the repositioning of destinations that have lost some of their competitiveness as a result of demand and regional shifts taking place after the pandemic (Gyurkó, 2022). Food tourism has emerged as a significant economic mechanism that supports sustainable local economies by implementing policies that promote local production and consumption, thereby contributing to the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals (Fernández & Irimia-Díeguez, 2025).

Research by Tóth-Kaszás et al. (2018) has provided evidence, on the example of a Hungarian – Croatian cross-country thematic tour, that local products have a vital role to play in tourism, and agro- and gastronomy and closely related event tourism could be a particular breakthrough opportunity. A gastronomy tour is a system presenting an all-embracing and thematic, usually branded, tourism offer, featuring an array of wares or venues, such as workshops and restaurants, revolving around a specific product or food, or a gastronomic event or activity, usually of premium caliber. The tour may inform of other, historically significant sights as well, boosting tourism development in the entire area.

It is believed that the development and promotion of thematic routes could bring significant benefits to Hungarian tourism as well, since the country's rich cultural and natural heritage provides an excellent foundation for this.

METHODS

Our research investigated the extent to which the Hungarian population is familiar with different thematic routes and the attitudes towards these types of routes. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, we deemed the questionnaire survey method to be most appropriate. We devised an omnibus survey, with items finalized after evaluating the available options. A market research firm specializing in the field made available a 2024 online survey database of a sample size of 1,000 respondents, representative for the Hungarian population for gender and age (with 15-year cohorts).

Table 1 presents the demographic data for the study.

Table 1. Demographic data of the online questionnaire survey, n=1000 (Source: own editing)

Gender			Age		
	Number	% (n=1000)		Number	% (n=1000)
Male	475	47.5%	18-35 years	256	25.6%
Female	525	52.5%	36-50 years	278	27.8%
			51-65 years	232	23.2%
			66 years and older	234	23.4%
Type of settlement			Highest level of education		
	Number	% (n=1000)		Number	% (n=1000)
Capital	104	10.4%	Doctoral degree	41	4.1%
Major city, between 100,000 and 500,000 inhabitants	344	34.4%	Master's degree	167	16.7%
Medium city, between 25,000 and 100,000 inhabitants	160	16.0%	Bachelor's degree	314	31.4%
Small city, between 10,000 and 25,000 inhabitants	111	11.1%	Secondary school	364	36.4%
Small city, less than 10,000 inhabitants	92	9.2%	Vocational school	64	6.4%
Village, more than 1,000 inhabitants	126	12.6%	Eight grades of primary school or less	50	5.0%
Small village, less than 1,000 inhabitants	63	6.3%			

As far as the non-representative demographics, respondents with tertiary education are over-represented in our sample. Whereas the 2023 figure for that level of education for the Hungarian population was 19.1% (KSH, 2023), in our sample the combined higher educational cohorts made up 52.2%. In terms of types of settlement, the sample is slightly under-represented for villages and slightly over-represented for cities. In 2024, the KSH (Central Statistical Office) reported that 29.8% of the population lived in villages, while in our sample the corresponding number was only 18.9%. For city dwellers, KSH reported a 52.6% population, while in our sample that number was 57.1% (KSH, 2024). Overall, however, in view of our research objectives, with the representativeness in gender and age, the deviation in terms of type of settlement and educational level does not skew the data in a way that would impede the analysis.

We included two main items in the questionnaire, the first being *Have you heard of the following tourism collaborations, theme tours?* Respondents were asked to answer yes or no to each of the four thematic tour types under investigation: pilgrimages, wine tours, European cultural tours, and green tours. The other item type was presented as a block of statements, inviting respondents to show their range of agreement on a four-step Likert-scale with our attitude statements. The language that was presented to them before the actual statements was as follows: *A thematic tour combines sights and experiences connected to a particular theme (e.g., wind tours, plum tours, and castle tours). How much would you like to go on theme tours in your free time?* The four steps of the Likert-scale were strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. In the analysis, first we assessed the frequency of responses, using descriptive statistical methods. This was followed by investigating whether there were statistically verifiable differences across the various demographic groups, using background analysis, conducted for each of the four demographic characteristics shown in Table 1. As part of the background analysis, to test statistical significance, Chi-square tests were performed, taking into account the non-metric nature of the demographics, setting significance level at 5% (Sajtos & Mitev, 2007). In interpreting the results, below we present only those deviations that can be considered significant at the pre-established threshold ($p < 0.05$). IBM SPSS 25 software was used for analysis, and Microsoft 365 Excel for displaying the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We investigated the extent to which the Hungarian population was familiar with the four types of thematic tours identified. As can be seen in Figure 1, awareness of pilgrimage tours and wine tours is very high, with 89.3% of the population having heard of the former and 81.3% of the latter. Familiarity with European cultural tours and of green tours falls well short of those two levels, with 52.9% of Hungarians having heard of European cultural tours and 50.1% of green tours.

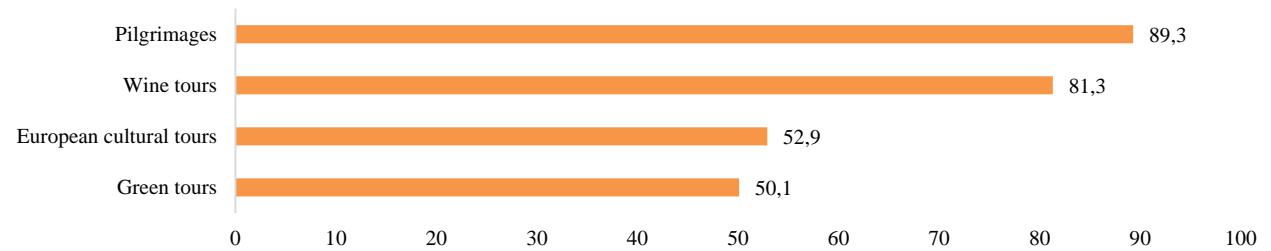


Figure 1. Familiarity with types of theme tours: "Have you heard of the following tourism collaborations, theme tours?" (%) (Source: own editing)

The results of the Chi-square tests revealed several significant differences in the awareness of each thematic road type across the demographic groups. As for familiarity with wine tours, significant differences were found for educational level ($p=0.009<0.05$), age groups ($p=0.004<0.05$), and gender ($p=0.01<0.05$). The details can be seen in Figure 2. In terms of educational level, respondents with vocational school education were found to be least familiar with wine tours (67,2%), as opposed to higher education graduates who were most familiar with them.

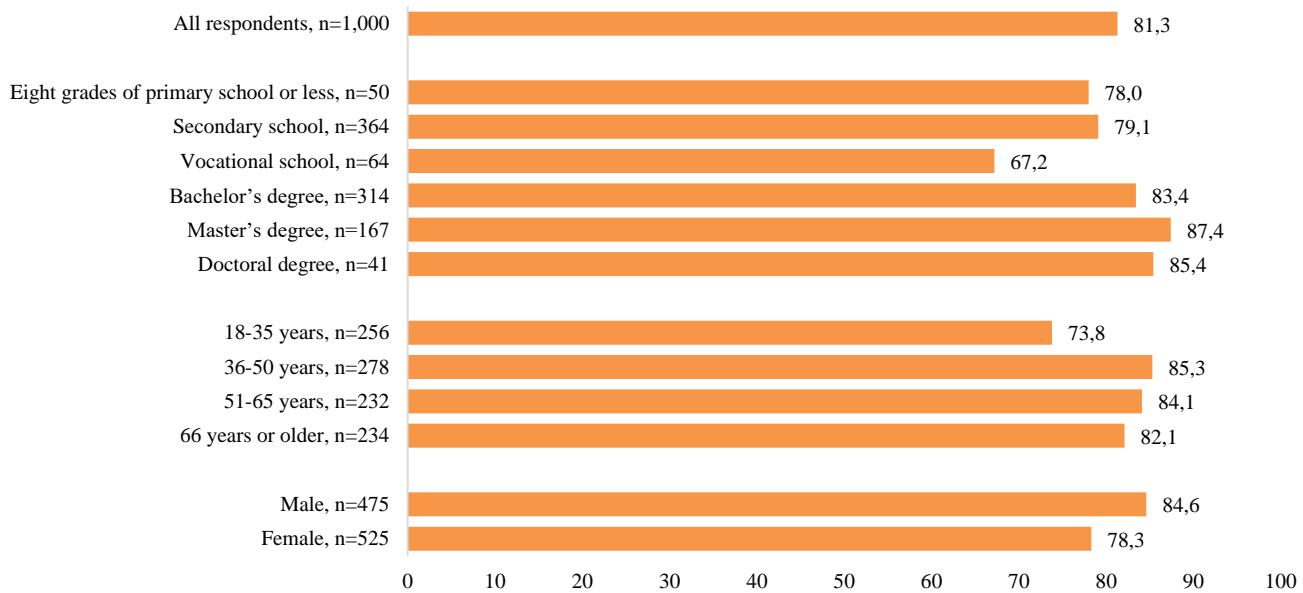


Figure 2. Background analysis of wine tours: "Have you heard of the following tourism collaborations, theme tours?" (%) (Source: own editing)

Regarding age groups, 73.8% of the youngest respondent cohort (18-35 years) heard of wine tours, with the other age groups being more familiar with them. As for gender differences in familiarity with wine tours, 84.6% of male and 78.3% of female respondents heard of them. Of the two lesser-known thematic tour types, only for green tours were we able to reveal significant differences among the demographic groups. No such result can be reported for European cultural tours, however, and thus we can state that their familiarity is not affected by gender, educational level, or settlement type. Significant differences were, however, found in the Chi-square tests for green tours for settlement type ($0.046<0.05$) and age ($p=0.022<0.05$) (Figure 3). Interestingly, familiarity with them was least common among respondents from the capital (36.1%). The proportion was higher for all the other settlement types.

Analyzing familiarity with tours according to age group, respondents between 36 and 50 years old tended to have heard of them the least (42.8%), whereas those between 18 and 35 years the most (55.5%).

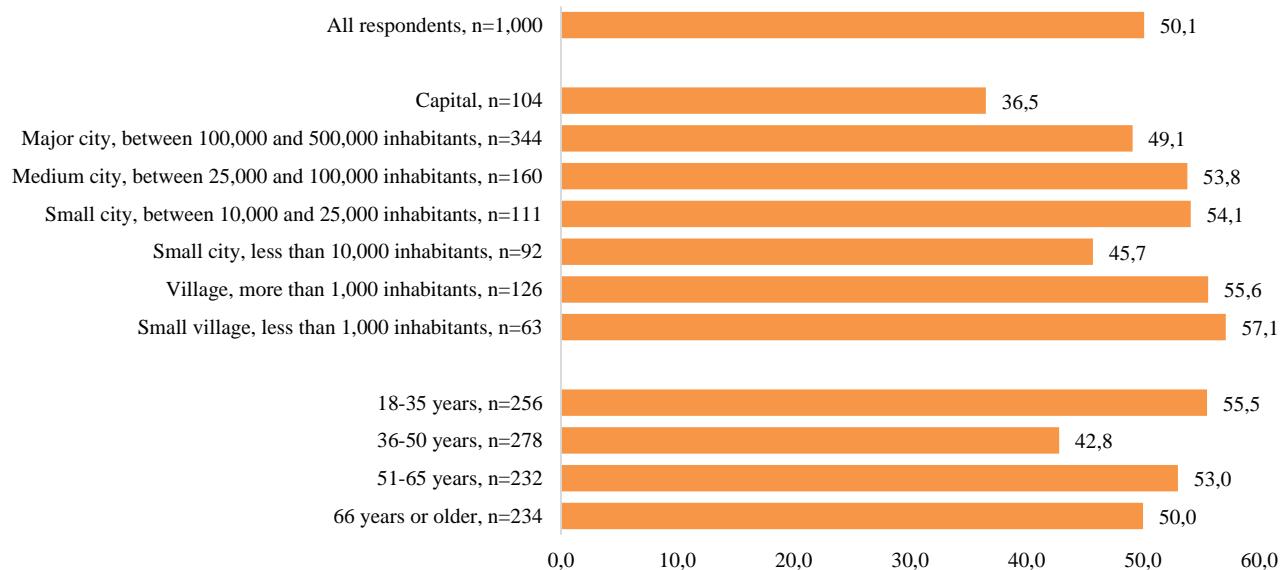


Figure 3. Background analysis of green tours: "Have you heard of the following tourism collaborations, theme tours?" (%) (Source: own editing)

Regarding the thematic tours under investigation, we also measured the degree of respondents' agreement with seven attitude statements that we formulated. The results appear in Figure 4. The highest levels of agreement were found for the items *I would be interested in going on a landscape and nature theme tour (panoramic and riverside trips, etc.)* and *I*

would like to see many theme tours as part of the Hungarian tourism offer, both yielding absolutely high numbers, with 91.4% of respondents indicating positive attitudes (combined agree and strongly agree responses) for the former, and 92.1% for the latter. Agreement levels were somewhat lower for the following three statements: *I would be interested in going on a cultural and historical theme tour (castle trips, scenes of the life of historical figures, etc.), I would be interested in going on a gastronomic theme tour (cheese tour, etc.), and I enjoy combining spending my free time with learning or acquiring a special skill*. The statements that yielded the lowest levels of agreement were *I would be interested in going on a wine tour* and *I would be interested in going on a pilgrimage*.

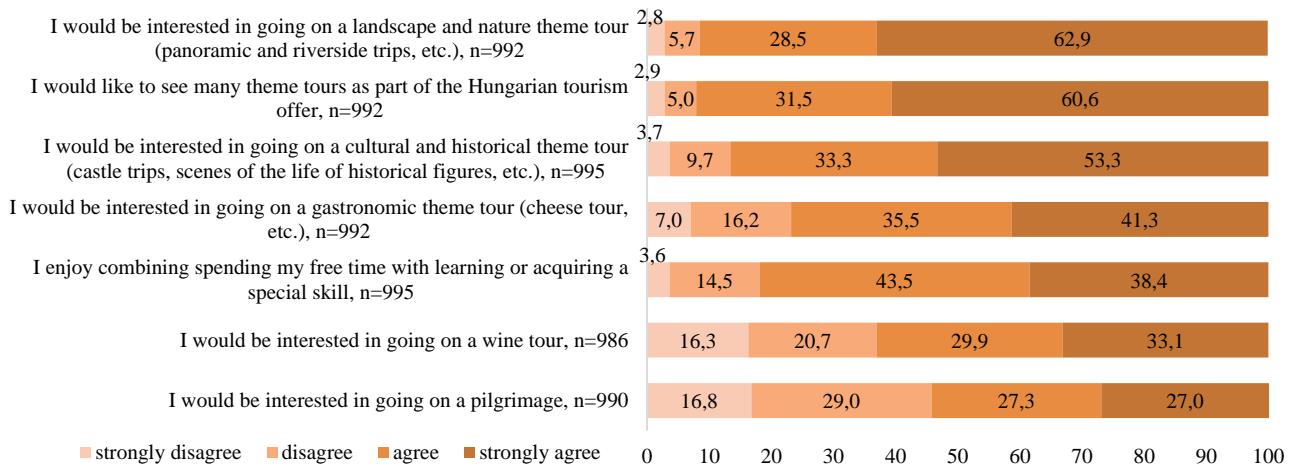


Figure 4. Degree of agreement with attitude statements related to thematic tours:
“How much would you like to go on theme tours in your free time?” (%) (Source: own editing)

The background analysis of attitude statements with Chi-square tests revealed significant differences for each of the seven items for the various demographic groups. For the statement that yielded generally high level of agreement, *I would like to see many theme tours as part of the Hungarian tourism offer*, significant differences were recorded for both educational level ($p=0.029<0.05$) and gender ($p=0.001<0.05$). The opinions of respondents with primary education showed marked variance when compared with the opinions of respondents with higher levels of education, as the degree of agreements in the case of the former group was markedly lower (as regards the strong agreement answers).

As for gender, difference was found when considering the degree of strong agreement. According to the results, more women than men would like to see many theme tours as part of the Hungarian tourism offer (Figure 5).

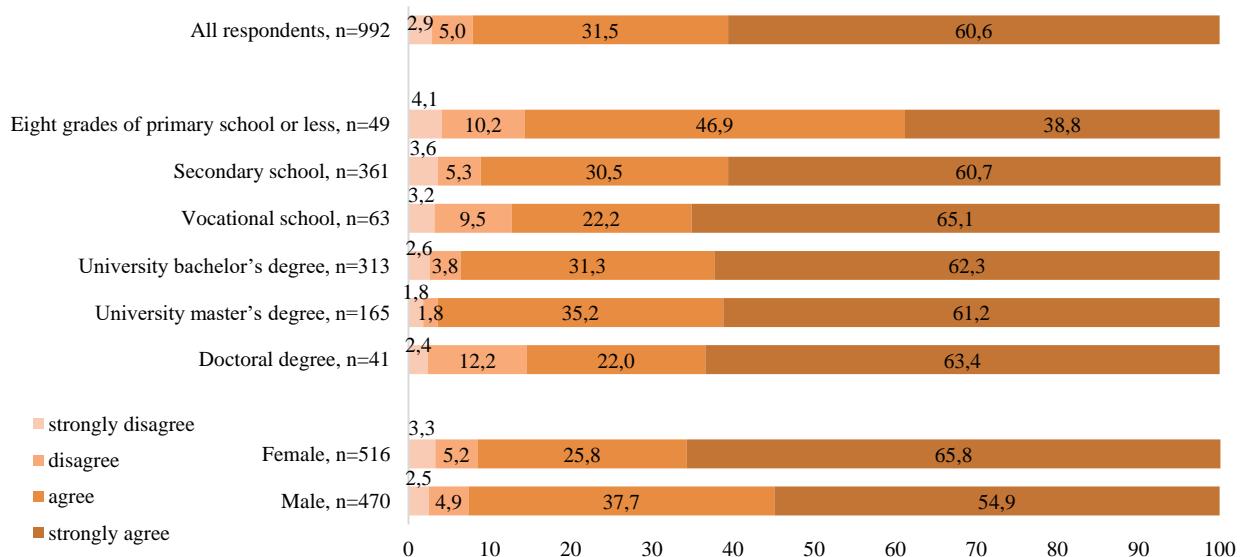


Figure 5. Background analysis of responses to the item “I would like to see many theme tours as part of the Hungarian tourism offer” (%) (Source: own editing)

The Chi-square test revealed significant differences for the statement *I would be interested in going on a gastronomic theme tour (cheese tour, etc.)* for age groups ($p=0.016<0.05$) and gender ($p=0.000<0.05$) (Figure 6).

Regarding the degree of agreement, it was the age groups of 18 to 35-year olds and 36 to 50-year olds who would be most interested in such theme tours. The two older cohorts showed lower levels of interest in them. Only slight differences were found in terms of gender, with women agreeing with this statement somewhat more than was the case for men.

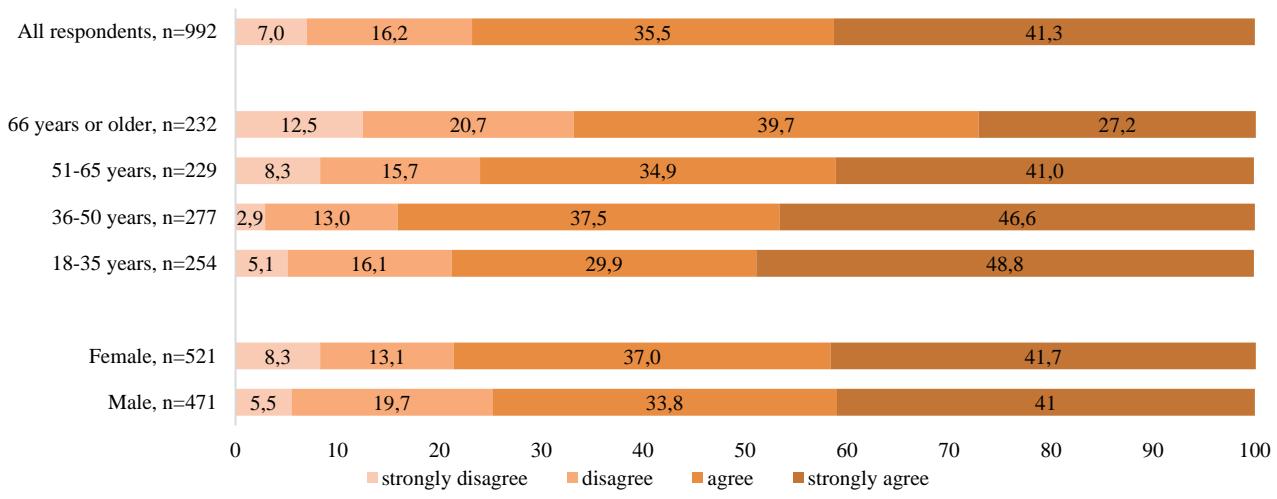


Figure 6. Background analysis of responses to the item
“I would be interested in going on a gastronomic theme tour (e.g., cheese tour) (%) (Source: own editing)

As for the statement *I would be interested in going on a wine tour*, the Chi-square tests yielded significant differences for age groups ($p=0.000 < 0.05$) and gender ($p=0.011 < 0.05$). As can be seen in Figure 7, people in the youngest age group showed most interest in these tours, the group for whom we found least familiarity previously in our study. Interest in them is in inverse proportion to age, with the oldest age group (66 years and older) reporting the lowest degree of agreement. Men would be more likely to go on wine tours than would women.

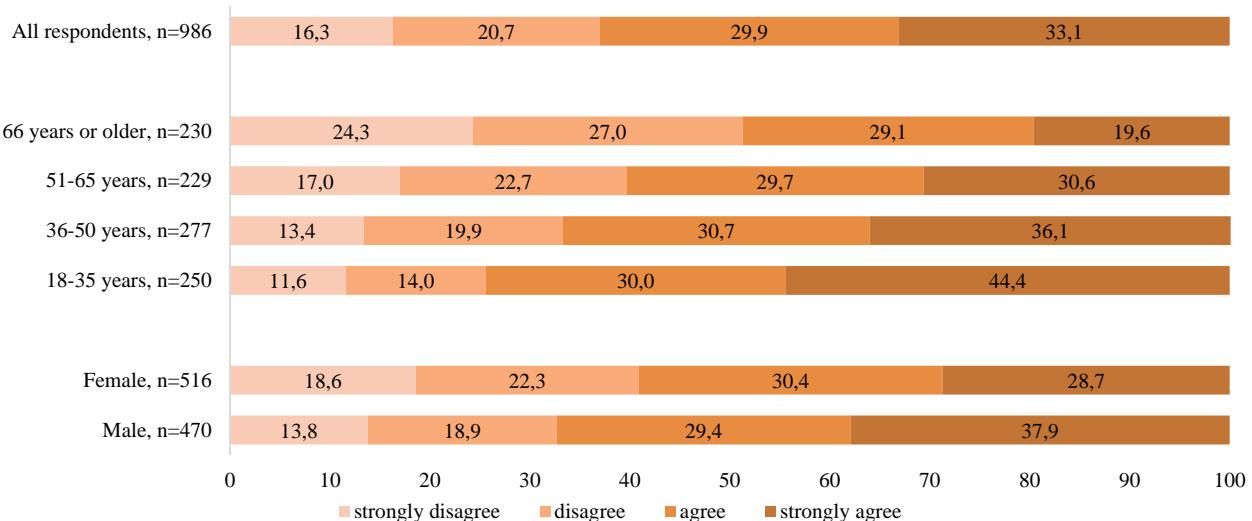


Figure 7. Background analysis of responses to the item “I would be interested in going on a wine tour” (%) (Source: own editing)

CONCLUSION

Our representative survey has provided evidence of a significant demand for gastronomic tours revolving around the theme of traditional local foods. In our view, organizers of such trips can be successful if they manage to valorize gastronomic heritage and if they make it attractive for tourists. This practice would help create a unique product that would differentiate the region from competitors and meet consumer demands of tourists who seek variety, new perceptions, and authentic experiences. However, any creation or value proposition to boost gastronomy-focused travel motivations must be underpinned by sustainability principles and practices and organized around an effective system of public – private partnership. The two approaches are co-dependent, and they may benefit not only direct service providers, such as restaurants and the food industry, but also other operators as well: they could improve the local employment situation, promote better utilization and local circulation of resources, and have a positive impact on rural development. We also hold that for these objectives and because of their positive effects, it would be worthwhile to implement government measures to support the organization and operation of thematic trips. As the results of our study have shown, there is substantial demand for them among the Hungarian population.

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