

‘NURTURING WHO WE ARE’: THE LOCAL BRANDING OF FOOD TOURISM IN MENORCA BIOSPHERE RESERVE (SPAIN)

Marta CARVAJAL-APARICIO 

University of Girona, Faculty of Business and Economic Sciences, Girona, Spain, e-mail: martacarvajalaparicio@gmail.com

Nela FILIMON 

University of Girona, Department of Business, Girona, Spain, e-mail: nela.filimon@udg.edu

Francesc FUSTÉ-FORNÉ* 

University of Girona, Department of Business, Girona, Spain, e-mail: francesc.fusteforne@udg.edu

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Abstract: This paper examines sustainable food tourism development within UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, based on the Menorca Biosphere Reserve brand and its producers, experience providers and restaurants. The paper explores how local culinary practices and sustainable business strategies contribute to placemaking, through community cohesion and destination branding. Drawing from a content and thematic analysis of 21 business narratives and social media storytelling, combined with a case study of La Casa del Gelato, this research identifies three key themes: heritage and tradition, environment and sustainability, and craftsmanship and quality. Results demonstrate that food brands effectively serve to integrate local resources and sustainability principles, enhancing both the environmental and socioeconomic aspects of the region through the use of local ingredients, the creation of authentic customer experiences, and the implementation of eco-friendly practices. This paper provides theoretical insights into the study of the relations between food tourism and sustainable development and offers practical recommendations for small food businesses that aim to support sustainable tourism in protected areas.

Keywords: gastronomy, Mediterranean, placemaking, regional development, sustainable food tourism, food experience

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INTRODUCTION

Food plays a pivotal role in shaping the identity of a destination (Cordova-Buiza et al., 2024; Kim and Iwashita, 2016; Lin et al., 2011) and influencing the overall tourist experience (Martin et al., 2021; Quan and Wang, 2004). Food forms a crucial aspect of tourism placemaking (see Friedman, 2010; Lew, 2017), where culinary heritage and traditions are valorized to attract visitors seeking authentic experiences (see, for example, Everett, 2012; Fusté-Forné, 2022; Kőmives et al., 2024; Park et al., 2023; Slocum, 2021). This process involves the protection and promotion of local food through events and markets, and the creation of food networks (Nilsson, 2016; Rachão et al., 2019), highlighting the strategic importance of local culinary infrastructure and the sustainable development of food tourism (Brozović et al., 2024; Ginés-Ariza et al., 2024). This infrastructure includes producers, experience providers, and restaurants that recognize the value of local food, and contribute to the economic, environmental, and social development of the place. In this sense, the collaboration among local food-based stakeholders is integral to achieving these objectives.

Hence, this paper focuses on local food-based stakeholders that are part of the culinary infrastructure of the Menorca Biosphere Reserve brand (MBRB), which includes products and services that establish a strong brand for creating a unique place-based identity and promoting the destination’s attributes (Wilkinson et al., 2022) while preserving the unique character of the place (Smith, 2015) through sustainable tourism experiences (Zhang et al., 2019), that is, food experiences, in this case. The brand is promoted as “an emblem of sustainability that prioritises those local products and services that are based on criteria that favour the Menorcan environment, identity and culture” (MBRB, 2024a). In addition, the brand “guarantees that when you choose any brand-certified product or service, you are fostering positive impact on an environmental, cultural, social and economic level on the island of Menorca” (*ibid*). The research explores the practices of local food-based stakeholders that drive this sustainable food tourism development, and how, and why they also contribute to the protection and promotion of the environmental and cultural attributes of the destination and to the well-being of the local community.

Menorca is one of the Balearic Islands, an archipelago located in the western Mediterranean Sea. UNESCO declared Menorca a biosphere reserve in 1993, “in recognition of the high level of compatibility between the development of economic activities, the consumption of resources, and the conservation of heritage and landscapes on the island, a practice still maintained today at an exceptional level. Menorca is an intensely humanized territory, with an extremely rich tradition of rural landscapes. It is home to a remarkable diversity of Mediterranean habitats that host endemic plant and animal species exclusive to the island, some of which are in danger of extinction” (UNESCO, 2023).

* Corresponding author

After the inclusion, in 2019, of the surrounding marine area (Figure 1), Menorca became the largest marine biosphere reserve in the Mediterranean (Menorca Preservation Foundation - MeP, 2024). Following UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Program, launched in 1971 (UNESCO MAB, n.d.), the terrestrial and marine areas are each one organized in three main zones, according to their preservation interest. Thus, in case of the terrestrial area (Figure 1), the core area (the most important one) stands for 5% of the surface, followed by the buffer area (38.5%), and the transition area, which accounts for the remaining 56.5% of the surface, respectively (MBRB, 2024b). Environment, social welfare, tourism, culture and economy are the five guiding pillars considered by MBRB managers (MBRB, 2024c), all oriented towards building and preserving an equilibrium between economy, nature, and the cultural heritage, in line with the idea of "all-round sustainable tourism" (Clark and Chabrel, 2007; Ilbery et al., 2007). In this fashion, the island's vision on tourists (e.g., they are the main source of revenue for the island) deserves a special mention, tourists being considered an active part of it, same as the inhabitants (MBRB, 2024c). Thus, being kind to and aware of their impact on the environment, showing respect to the cultural heritage of the island, supporting the local products and enjoying the local customs, are some of the issues included in the 'ten commandments of travel', a decalogue meant to minimize the impact of tourists on the island (The Menorca Tourism Promotion Foundation, 2024). Therefore, while visiting the island, the tourists are automatically committed to and learn about the local culture and identity, the sense of community built in the island along its history, the environment and sustainable practices in place, becoming part of Menorca's Biosphere Reserve brand and its meanings (Botha, 2023).

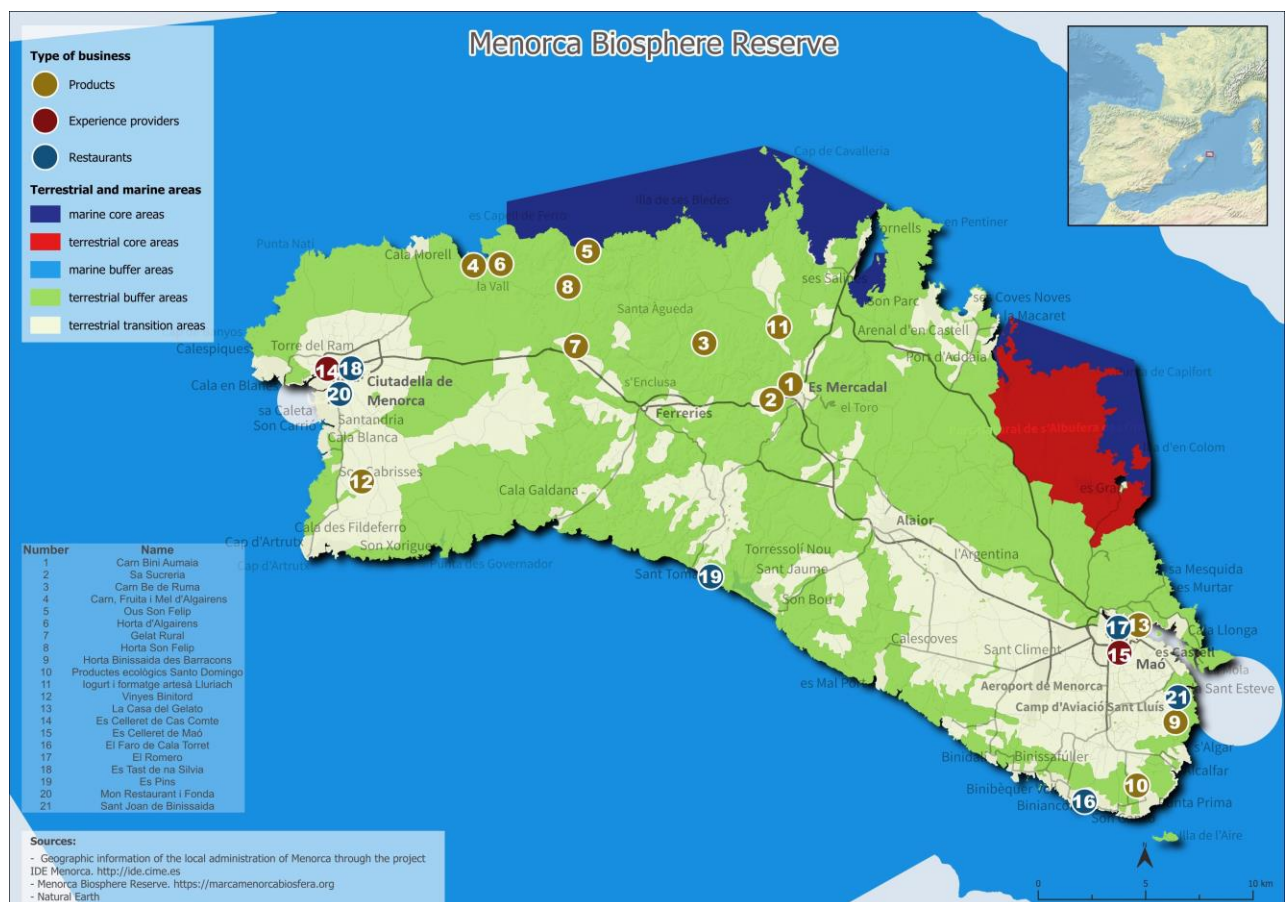


Figure 1. The map with the territorial location of the business types analyzed in the Menorca Biosphere Reserve (Source: Own source)

Schultz et al. (2018) investigated the meanings associated to the Biosphere Reserve concept that emerged from the field work analysis of eleven UNESCO Biosphere Reserves around the world (e.g., from Spain were included Menorca, La Palma and El Hierro), in period 2012-2015. The study found that the interpretation of the Biosphere Reserve concept, offered by the interviewed participants, was different in each location. This was explained, among others, by the local 'contexts with different histories, ecologies and politics' (p. 85) of the Biosphere Reserves analyzed (Botha, 2023).

In the same vein, Ivancsón Horváth et al. (2023) analysed Hungarian nature reserves and found that decision-makers' lack of knowledge and familiarity with the concept of sustainability was often the main barrier to making right decisions on sustainable tourism development in these areas. Moreover, as suggested by Maxey (2007: 59), sustainability is a social and political construct. Hence, all stakeholders involved with Biosphere Reserves should be considered, as their perceptions, practices, and experiences, could contribute to enlarging the 'standards around the Biosphere Reserve concept's definition' (Schultz et al., 2018: 76), leading to specific implementations of sustainability solutions (Botha, 2023; Issakov et al., 2023; Kratzer, 2018). In this line, while previous research has explored the relationships between land resources and tourism in Menorca (Marcos-Valls et al., 2020; Pérez-López, 2013), there is a lack of studies that build on the relationships between food and tourism in the context of the Menorca Biosphere Reserve,

and its contribution to the “all-round sustainability” (Sims, 2009). Biospheres and nature reserves, as protected landscape, are a source of sustainable development in tourism (Bokova, 2017; Ivancsóné Horváth et al., 2023).

In this sense, previous research has scarcely analysed the role of food experiences in protected areas, where few examples have focused on geoparks (Fusté-Forné, 2023) and national parks (Hjalager and Johansen, 2013). Also, Weber et al. (2023) have published to date the only study of the Swabian Alb Biosphere Reserve, in Germany, with the objective of exploring the value of regional food for sustainable development through the regional brand ‘Albgemacht’. The aim of this study is to explore how local communities define their place in the architecture of the destination and, as a result, how the destination plays a role towards a sustainable tourism development, from the perspective of local food-based stakeholders (Kalenjuk Pivarski et al., 2023; Stalmirska, 2024). This is a new contribution to theory and research based on the case of the Menorca Biosphere Reserve brand as a placemaking strategy, which is also in line with recent tourism research (see, for example, Muñiz-Martinez and Florek, 2023; Yu and Spencer, 2023) which has a growing focus on food. After the introduction and theoretical context of the paper, we describe the materials and methods, and analyse the results. Later, we present the discussion and conclusions, the theoretical and practical implications, and the limitations and future research.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology adopted in this study is qualitative and comprises two main phases. The first, it is based on a content and thematic analysis of the digital businesses narratives of the stakeholders involved in the Menorca Biosphere Reserve brand. More precisely, we focus on the websites (Baggio, 2003; Lee, 2020) of 21 businesses (producers, experience providers, and restaurants), included in the Menorca Biosphere Reserve brand (Table 1), to identify how these food-based stakeholders present their products and services, their marketing strategies, and their approach to food tourism in a protected area. Related to other indicators, although the information was not available in all cases, a dominant feature of the businesses analysed is their small size (with 0-10 or less than 25 employees) and the limited society juridical form, with few cases of civil societies or community of goods (Empresite, 2024). In addition, the analysis of their social media storytelling allows understanding how the businesses use social media to promote their identity and highlight the sustainability aspects of their food products and services. As explored in previous research, on one hand, social media provide a valuable platform for stakeholders to communicate their brands’ values, which are especially relevant for local food businesses (Fusté-Forné and Filimon, 2021), and on the other, also serve to build a destination branding (Hunter, 2012; Lund et al., 2018). In particular, the analysis includes the 300 posts published since the businesses opened their accounts on Instagram until July 1, 2024. Therefore, the study relies on the analysis of the images published in two steps (Hunter, 2015), that is, a content analysis, to classify the images based on the topics they portray, followed by a semiotic analysis, to discuss the meanings embedded in the topics and identify broader themes (Michael and Fusté-Forné, 2022; Wegerer and Volo, 2021). Findings are presented in the results section.

Table 1. List of producers, experience providers, and restaurants in the Menorca Biosphere Reserve brand (Source: Own source)

First phase: Type of business	Name of the business (specialization)
Products	1. Carn Bini Aumaia (meat)
	2. Sa Sucrieria (pastries)
	3. Carn Be de Ruma (meat)
	4. Carn, Fruita i Mel d’Algaiarens (meat, fruits and honey)
	5. Ous Son Felip (eggs)
	6. Horta d’Alagaiarens (vegetable farm)
	7. Gelat Rural (ice-cream)
	8. Horta Son Felip (vegetable farm)
	9. Horta Binissaida des Barracons (vegetable farm)
	10. Productes ecològics Santo Domingo (ecologic products)
	11. Jogurt i formatge artesà Lluriach (yogurt and cheese)
	12. Vinyes Binitord (vineyard)
	13. La Casa del Gelato (ice-cream)
Experience providers	14. Es Celleret de Cas Comte (cellar and typical Menorcan products)
	15. Es Celleret de Maó (cellar and typical Menorcan products)
Restaurants	16. El Faro de Cala Torret
	17. El Romero
	18. Es Tast de na Sílvia
	20. Mon Restaurant i Fonda
	19. Es Pins
	21. Sant Joan de Binissaida
Second phase: La Casa del Gelato – The interview	
1. When and how/why was the business founded?	
2. How would you define your business’ identity? Which are your business’ values?	
3. How is your business influenced by being part of a Biosphere Reserve? Which elements of the environment have a greater influence? Why?	
4. Are you developing a sustainable product? Why? What relationship do you have with the producers/restaurants/agents in the area? And with the landscape?	
5. What does participate in the Menorca Biosphere Reserve brand bring to you? What is the collaboration between the participants like? Does it contribute to local sustainable development and has an economic, environmental and social impact?	
6. What are the elements of your brand that make you authentic? How do you help protect this identity? How do you promote yourself?	

In Figure 1 we observe the map of the island of Menorca with the land and sea area of the Menorca Biosphere Reserve, and the territorial distribution of the products' provider businesses included in Table 1. For those located either in or close to the terrestrial buffer areas, for example, special requirements apply to ensure the preservation of the natural resources and environment (e.g., soil, biodiversity, landscapes, etc.). The restaurants are also shown in Figure 1, and they are mainly located in the terrestrial transition areas, which endured more transformations and where urban centers are usually concentrated terrains. The second phase of the methodology involves a case study (Botha, 2023; Yazan, 2015) with one of the producers (La Casa del Gelato), a small-size business, with the focus on an in-depth interview with the owner and the analysis of its social media narrative on Instagram, rather than data saturation (Botha, 2023; Mandal, 2018). The interview was performed in May 2024, in Spanish, and was recorded, prior consent.

The owner was informed about the guiding ethics (e.g., preservation of personal identity) and her permission to cite excerpts of the interview was granted. Given that no pilot interview was run, the interviewer first explained the goal and coverage of the study to ensure she was knowledgeable about and had a clear understanding of the issues to be discussed. The duration was an hour. The interview, which is useful to capture in-depth details from the participants (Bryman, 2012) to explore the narratives attached to a particular topic (Holstein and Gubrium, 2016), aimed to gather detailed information on the perspectives of the relationship between food and tourism, the contribution to sustainable tourism development, and the challenges faced in the context of a Biosphere Reserve. The questions included in the interview are given in Table 1, and the methodology steps in Figure 2.

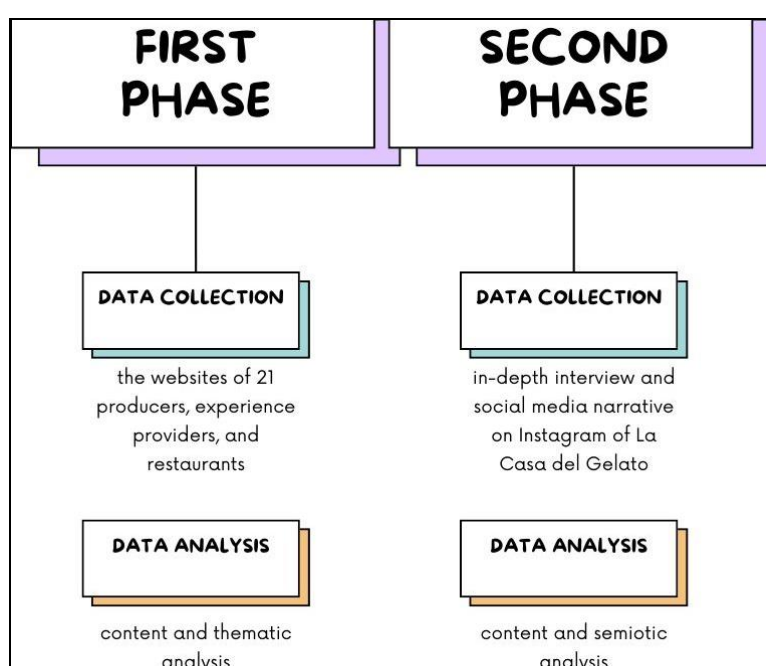


Figure 2. The methodology steps (Source: Own source)

The combination of the content and thematic analysis of the websites of all the businesses that conform the brand, with a case study, which includes an in-depth interview and its social media analysis, provide all together a more robust understanding of the role of sustainable food tourism and food culture in the Menorca Biosphere Reserve. Figure 2 shows the methodology steps for the two phases. In this fashion, the themes, illustrated with textual examples in the next section, reflect how Menorcan businesses integrate tradition, sustainability, and quality into their narratives, and highlight their commitment to preserve the cultural heritage, the environment, and further enhance the artisanal excellence of the place. This approach is also observed for La Casa del Gelato and it is enhanced through the quotes from the interview with the owner, and the visual storytelling strategy of her business on Instagram, which revolves around three recurrent topics: raw food, people with ice-cream, and informative posters. Each topic is analyzed below, with a connection to the broader themes of tradition, sustainability, and quality, which emerged from the analysis.

RESULTS

This section is divided into three sections that explore the place-based narratives of Menorcan businesses that participate in the Menorca Biosphere Reserve, and La Casa del Gelato' storytelling, based on its identity and its digital marketing strategy.

Place-based narratives of Menorcan businesses. Heritage and tradition

The business narratives highlight the importance of both the preservation and the transmission of culinary and cultural traditions across generations. This reflects a profound respect for historical legacies and a focus on keeping ancient techniques and recipes alive. The companies emphasize their family and local roots and present themselves as guardians of Menorca's cultural heritage. For example, Sa Sucreria emphasizes the intergenerational transmission of recipes and artisanal techniques that have defined the identity of their products over the years. "An ancestral recipe passed down

through generations has made our ‘ensaimadas’ (Menorcan artisanal pastries, with a flat snail-shape, made with sugar, flour, eggs, lardy fermented dough and covered with powdered sugar), a reference for taste, quality, and tradition. Located in Es Mercadal, a small town in the center of the Island of Menorca, Sa Sucreria is recognized for the quality of its sweets. Since 1875, five generations of master artisans endorse and give name to the best representation of Menorcan pastry products” (Sa Sucreria, 2024). In a similar line, Mon Restaurant i Fonda reveals that “The return to the original is a commitment that goes beyond the kitchen; it is a pledge to recover a gastronomic and architectural legacy” (Mon Restaurant i Fonda, 2024), which illustrates how the restaurant is committed not only to traditional cuisine but also to the recovery of historical architectural elements, which are a source of authentic experiences for the visitors.

Environment and sustainability

This theme highlights the companies’ commitment to sustainable practices and respect for the natural environment. The narratives reflect a focus on regenerative agriculture, efficient use of natural resources and biodiversity protection. The businesses present themselves as models of sustainability, which seek to harmonize their economic activities with environmental conservation. For example, Horta Binissaida des Barracons: “At Binissaida, we follow the principles of regenerative agriculture and permaculture exemplarily: an edible forest, an orchard of fruit trees and vegetables, mobile chicken coops, or an olive grove designed with keyline design are some of the components of this agroecological system. Maintaining a living soil, stimulating high biodiversity both cultivated and wild, working with adapted species, or making efficient use of rainwater are the premises on which this innovative farm model is based, aspiring to be an example in Menorca” (Agro Xerxa, 2024). This narrative shows a strong approach to sustainability, incorporating various agroecological practices to maintain soil health and biodiversity.

Ous Son Felip is another producer that emphasizes the scale and scope of the company’s commitment to sustainability through the balance between agricultural production and environmental conservation: “Over 1000 hectares of centuries-old forests, organic and regenerative agriculture, farm animals, and a sustainable project aim to create a balanced ecosystem and pay homage to Menorca as a Biosphere Reserve” (Son Felip, 2024).

Craftsmanship and quality

Menorcan companies also focus on the superior quality of their products and dedication to artisanal and handmade offerings. This reflects a commitment to excellence, where each product is made with care and attention to detail. Creativity and innovation also play an important role to offer unique products that highlight the potential of local ingredients. Vinyes Binitord say that “We strive for excellence in making the best wine. We are creative and do things in the calm that settles on the island” (Binitord, 2024). The company emphasizes its pursuit of excellence based on local products which are shaped by the tranquility of Menorca. This passion for ingredients of quality and culinary creativity is also manifested by other businesses such as the restaurant El Romero: “Fish and vegetables, sea cuisine, or plant-based cuisine, it doesn’t matter; we are excited by the quality of the ingredients and all the potential they can express on the plate” (El Romero, 2024).

La Casa del Gelato’s personal storytelling. Heritage and tradition

The narrative of La Casa del Gelato also emphasizes a deep-rooted connection to tradition and cultural heritage. The owner, originally from Italy, moved to Menorca seeking a change in life and driven by a desire to create an authentic, family-oriented business. This decision shows the importance of personal history and familial roots, which are central to the identity of La Casa del Gelato. The respect for tradition is evident in their commitment to preserving traditional gelato-making methods and rejecting artificial flavors. The owner remarks that “We removed all artificial flavors to dedicate ourselves to classic, traditional gelato because we come from a culture where food and gastronomy are very important” and emphasizes the abundance of quality raw materials available on the island: “Menorca offered this in abundance”. This respect for tradition is also reflected in the owner’s deep connection to the land, inherited from her farming background which highlights the intrinsic value of respecting and nurturing the earth. “My contact with the land comes from when I was born. I’m a farmers’ daughter. My father used to say, ‘everything starts with the land’... the land is where our food, our strength, our roots come from, and we must respect it. And Menorca fits perfectly with this”.

Environment and sustainability

La Casa del Gelato’s engagement with environmental stewardship is another defining aspect of their business model. The owner’s early adoption of organic farming practices demonstrates a long-term vision for sustainable development: “We were among the first in the late ‘90s and early 2000s to take care of organic farms because we understood then and understand now that everything starts with the land”. This aligns with the broader philosophy of treating the land well to yield the best results, and it reinforces the interconnectedness of sustainable practices with high-quality produce.

This focus on local sourcing and seasonal ingredients further emphasizes sustainability. The business uses local fruits, a strategy which contributes to the reduction of transportation emissions and supports the local economy: “First we start with the raw materials, all the fruits that I transform into gelato are those of each season, they are fruits from Menorca”. This practice ensures fresh and high-quality ingredients, while also minimizing the environmental impact. The narrative also highlights the benefits of operating in a small, protected territory like Menorca, which facilitates a close cooperation among the local producers: “Our raw material is km0, and this reduces transport costs, and we all help and know each other, we live in a small place”. This business philosophy also fosters a collaborative environment where sustainable practices are more easily implemented and maintained.

Craftsmanship and quality

La Casa del Gelato's commitment to quality is not just about sourcing the best ingredients but also about attention to detail in the production process. The owner's focus on a single product, 'gelato', allows for a deep expertise on its quality: "I sell only gelato; I want people to try the best gelato on the island". The relationship with local producers and the careful selection of ingredients are crucial elements of their craftsmanship, as mentioned above. The owner emphasizes the importance of using local milk, renowned for its quality, to ensure the authenticity of their gelato and also the value of the food chain from land to table: "It is a product of quality, starting with the milk from Menorca, which is considered one of the best in Europe. This must be valued; we have it here. If I go to Madrid and change the milk, it will not be the same". This shows the importance of local resources in maintaining the product's integrity. Moreover, the narrative reflects a broader philosophy of sustainability that goes beyond the mere product to include packaging and waste management. In this sense, she highlights the use of eco-friendly packaging, such as cardboard containers and compostable materials (for example, rice straws), and the need to educate customers about the importance of eco-friendly practices.

La Casa del Gelato's visual storytelling on Instagram. Raw food

The posts featuring raw food, such as pears, lemons, peaches, and oranges, highlight the origin of La Casa del Gelato's ingredients, also explored above. This visual representation reinforces brand's commitment to using high-quality, local, and seasonal produce, a practice aligned with the theme of environment and sustainability. Based on the communication of raw ingredients, the brand emphasizes its dedication to ensure the authenticity and the natural origin of its products. In this sense, these images visually communicate the connection between the land and the final product, reinforcing the idea that quality starts with the best ingredients. The colors of the fruits (for example, the yellow of the lemons, the orange of the peaches, and the orange or/and the green of the pears) symbolize freshness and health, and also emphasize the aesthetic quality of the produce. The recurring portrayal of raw food visually narrates La Casa del Gelato's commitment to using local and seasonal ingredients. This not only highlights sustainable business practices but also connects back to the owner's heritage and respect for the land, as expressed in the interview: "We understand that everything starts with the land". The fruits symbolize the starting point of their product journey, linking the raw materials to the final products.

People with ice-cream

The images of hands holding ice-cream serve to humanize the brand, creating a direct connection with the consumers. These posts acknowledge the delight and experience of enjoying gelato, aligning with the theme of craftsmanship and quality. The moment of consumption conveys the product's appeal and the satisfaction it brings to customers. The hands holding ice-cream emphasize the human side of the brand, and the variety of the backgrounds, often featuring the shop's environment (located in front of the sea), to emphasize the connection to Menorca and its unique environment. These images strengthen the narrative of La Casa del Gelato's commitment to delivering a high-quality, and enjoyable product. They reflect the owner's focus on creating positive customer experiences, where the visual portrayal of happy customers enjoying the product enhances the brand's image as a provider of authentic, high-quality gelato. For an experience product, like gelato, not only the taste and hence, the quality of the ingredients is important but also, the experiential attributes (e.g., color, shape) of the gelato can be used as a marketing strategy to create a "compelling experience for the consumers" (Brakus et al., 2014).

Informative posters

Posts featuring posters with information about new product releases, festivities, or brand promotions are also relevant for the brand's communication strategy. These posts not only inform but also engage the audience, to create a sense of community and involvement. They align with the themes of environment and sustainability, and heritage and tradition. They aim to highlight local culture and sustainable practices. In particular, the content about new products or events emphasizes both the innovation and the tradition, showing brand's commitment to evolving while staying true to its roots. Announcements of festive events connect the brand to local culture and community activities. These posts highlight the brand's active role in the community and its efforts to educate customers about sustainability: "Educating the customer is important to complete the sustainability approach", as the owner states.

DISCUSSION

The products, experience providers, and restaurants that have adhered to the Menorca Biosphere Reserve brand and, in particular, the case of La Casa del Gelato, a business affiliated to the brand, they all provide insights into the role of small businesses in promoting sustainable tourism within UNESCO Biosphere Reserves. The results can be summarized along three main lines, given hereafter.

First, the emphasis on local and seasonal ingredients aligns with previous research findings that show the role of culinary heritage and local food practices in shaping destination management and marketing (Andersson et al., 2017; Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Stalmirska, 2024). Based on the raw food pictured in their Instagram posts and the emphasis on the quality of the local produce, La Casa del Gelato exemplifies how businesses can leverage local resources to create a unique and appealing product that supports both environmental sustainability (Hjalager and Johansen, 2013) and local economies (Giampiccoli and Kalis, 2012) in protected areas. The commitment to using Menorcan milk and seasonal fruits reveals the importance of km0 practices, which foster a deeper connection between the business and the local community (Noguer-Juncà and Fusté-Forné, 2023) and informs the broader goals of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, to balance conservation with sustainable development through tourism (Bokova, 2017).

Second, the visual storytelling that highlights people enjoying ice-cream reflects the concept of placemaking, where the interaction between tourists and local products enhances the sense of place (Kastenholz et al., 2016; Sims, 2009; Tsai, 2016). The personal touch in the interviews, where the owner discusses the connection to the land and the commitment to traditional methods, reinforces the authenticity of the experience offered, in line with the topics identified as part of the content and thematic analysis. This also aligns with previous studies that highlight the significance of authenticity in tourism placemaking (Cassel, 2019; Lew, 2019; Mou et al., 2024). The idea that “a gelato is more than just a gelato” encapsulates the business’s philosophy that every product is a representation of its values and connection to heritage and tradition, environment and sustainability, and craftsmanship and quality.

Third, the sustainability practices used by the businesses, in general, and by La Casa del Gelato, in particular, stand as a platform to promote an eco-friendly behavior among customers. This is critical in the context of Biosphere Reserves, where maintaining the ecological balance while promoting a sustainable use of the local natural resources (UNESCO, 2023), is a very pressing goal. The business’s involvement in local ecological farming and the emphasis on the cooperation with the local community, also reflects a model of community-based placemaking, where local stakeholders work together to enhance the destination’s sustainability (Roxas et al., 2020). This cooperation is crucial in island territories like Menorca, where they are more vulnerable to impacts of tourism (Arbulú et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

This paper presents a new and timely approach to how the unexplored relationships between food, tourism, and destination placemaking in UNESCO Biosphere Reserves are informing a sustainable tourism development strategy (Lew, 2019; Marsden, 2013) and tourist experiences (Esau and Senese, 2022; Fusté-Forné, 2022). In this sense, the analysis of the businesses’ social media narratives reveals a holistic approach to sustainable food tourism within the Menorca Biosphere Reserve. Results highlight the importance of having a good knowledge and understanding of the diversity of the local culinary heritage, and the historical and cultural connections of each business involved. The integration of high-quality local ingredients, the emphasis on offering authentic customer experiences (Sims, 2009), and the active promotion of sustainable practices, also illustrate how small businesses, in particular, can contribute to the broader goals of sustainable tourism and community cohesion, as a source of ‘nurturing who we are’. Results also show the need for a close collaboration between the local stakeholders in the food sector (Everett and Slocum, 2013; Roy et al., 2017), and between them and the destination’s managers, to ensure sustainable tourism development (Cortese et al., 2021; Ivancsó Horváth et al., 2023; Noguer-Juncà et al., 2021) from a broader perspective, which encompass more stages of the value chain, such as packaging and waste management. All in all, sustainable food tourism practices, and the high quality of the tourist experiences provided, are rooted in the symbiosis of the local food businesses, whatever the nature of their activity (producers, experience providers, restaurants), with the Biosphere Reserve.

Theoretical and practical implications

This study reinforces the importance of food tourism in placemaking and destination branding and highlights how local and authentic culinary practices are a foundation for sustainable tourism development. It adds to the existing literature based on a case study that demonstrates the practical application of the relationships between sustainable tourism, community involvement, and environmental stewardship. For practitioners, this study also offers a story line of how small businesses can effectively contribute to sustainable tourism in a Biosphere Reserve.

The narratives’ emphasis on local ingredients and sustainability practices through which the businesses care about culture and nature, can serve other businesses in similar contexts. Furthermore, the use of visual storytelling on social media as a tool for engaging customers and promoting brand values is an effective strategy that can be widely adopted, especially in the food sector where there is potential to adopt and implement social media marketing strategies (Pucci et al., 2019) to increase food knowledge of current and potential customers (Platania and Spadoni, 2018) and inform the development of (food) tourism (Duarte et al., 2013). Findings also add to existing literature on sustainable food geographies, showing that food stakeholders have an important role in achieving “all-round sustainability” in tourism destinations and, in particular, in Biosphere Reserves. As gatekeepers of local culinary heritage, food-based stakeholders can actively participate in the construction of a sustainable food cultural capital of a destination.

As for tourists, local food experiences can be used as part of their ‘learning for sustainability’ (Schultz et al., 2018) process at a tourist destination, with positive effects for them and the local community (Sims, 2009).

Limitations and future research

One limitation of this study is its focus on a single brand (in particular, the food sector of the brand), which may not fully capture the diversity of approaches to sustainable tourism within the Menorca Biosphere Reserve. In addition, while the case study of La Casa del Gelato provides a specific approach to the identity of one of the businesses which reinforces the results, this may also introduce biases related to their own self. Future research could expand on this study based on a larger sample of businesses (beyond the food sector) within the Menorca Biosphere Reserve or other UNESCO Biosphere Reserves. Comparative studies could provide a broader understanding of how and why different geographical contexts influence the implementation of sustainable tourism practices. In addition, longitudinal studies could examine the long-term impacts of these practices on local people, places and practices.

Future research could also explore the relationship between food producers and consumers (tourists) to assess consumers’ satisfaction and how they can contribute to a brand’s placemaking and loyalty. Moreover, research on food

tourism and/or food-based stakeholders within a Biosphere Reserve could also be analyzed using theoretical frameworks such as the protection motivation theory (Rogers, 1975), suitable for sustainability studies in Biosphere Reserves (Botha, 2023). The analysis could help identify, for example, the predictors of food sustainability-oriented behavior in a Biosphere Reserve. Finally, future research could investigate the “experiential attributes” (Brakus et al., 2014) of food products and how they contribute to promote the local identity, culture and sustainability of the place.

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