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CULINARY CATALYSTS: DECIPHERING THE ROLE OF SUSTAINABLE RESTAURANTS IN THE JOURNEY TOWARD GREEN DESTINATION STATUS: THE CASE OF URLA, İZMIR, TÜRKIYE

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Abstract: Sustainable destinations are increasingly relies on integrating localized eco-friendly practices across key service sectors. Gastronomy plays a pivotal role in reinforcing destination sustainability and regional brand equity. This study examines the strategic role of gastronomy in positioning Urla as a recognized green destination. Specifically, the contribution of Michelin Green Star awarded restaurants to the overall environmental, social, and economic sustainability performance of green destinations is analyzed theoretically and empirically through the case of Urla. The conceptual integration of sustainable tourism governance and gastronomy is established through an extensive literature review and a theoretical framework. A qualitative case study design is employed to conduct an in-depth evaluation of Urla, a region that serves as a prominent exemplar of sustainable culinary tourism. Consequently, sustainable restaurant practices, localized supply chain operations, and green destination criteria are systematically evaluated through qualitative content analysis. This methodological structure allows for a comprehensive assessment of how regional gastronomic actors align with broader environmental governance and sustainability frameworks. The findings reveal that sustainability practices within the gastronomy sector significantly enhance the environmental, social, and economic performance of the destination. Michelin Green Star awarded restaurants serve as benchmark models that accelerate eco-innovation, circular economy integration, and local heritage preservation. Consequently, strengthening the synergy between sustainable tourism policies and gastronomic practices is critical for fostering long-term destination resilience and sustainable regional development.

Keywords: green destination, sustainablity, sustainable tourism, gastronomy, Michelin Green Star

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INTRODUCTION

With consumers' increasing enginarı coğrafi işareti. Available online: https://itb.org.tr/Sayfa/141-urla-sakiz-enginari-cografi-isareti (Access date: 03.20.2026). environmental awareness (Jankovic et al., 2024; Tiwari, 2025), the growing sensitivity of international institutions and organizations to climate change (Chan et al., 2018; Naser & Pearce, 2022), and the increasing efforts of businesses to adapt to this (Liu & Zhen, 2024; Paudel et al., 2024), sustainable management and business models have become more visible at all scales. In the study by Lyulyov et al. (2024), the green brand strength of countries was calculated using multidimensional and objective metrics such as green growth, migration, tourism, green foreign direct investment, governance effectiveness, and human development index, by examining destinations on a country basis. The findings show a general increase in the green brand values of all countries examined during the analyzed period; and as of 2020, Germany, France, Spain, the Netherlands, and Sweden are in the leading positions in the index.

In conclusion, the research indicates that environmental sustainability has now become a central component of national brand identity and international prestige. Wang et al. (2026) analyzed the construction of zero-carbon tourism cities within the framework of a four-part stochastic evolutionary game model, examining the role of uncertainties in stakeholder interactions on strategic choices. The research reveals that the system formed by local governments, tourism businesses, tourists, and the local population only achieves stability through a combination of "strict control and active participation."

It was found that global uncertainties exert significant pressure, particularly on the rate of tourist participation, while policy-oriented stances of local governments are more resilient to these fluctuations.

When examining studies on green tourism in the literature, it is generally observed that the focus is more on consumers' attitudes towards green products or the green performance of businesses. For example, Türkan & Gönül (2025), in their study evaluating articles focusing on "green tourism" using bibliometric analysis, examined studies in

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the Dergipark and Google Scholar databases and stated that only 7% of the studies focused on destinations, with the vast majority focusing on hotel managers (26%) and hotel customers (16%). In the study conducted by Li et al. (2024), a systematic examination of the sustainable tourist behavior (STB) literature using bibliometric and qualitative analysis methods reveals that this field has a dynamic and developing structure, gaining momentum especially since 2015.

The research findings show that a large proportion of existing studies (61.6%) focus on the environmental sustainability dimension and environmentally friendly intentions, while the social and economic sustainability pillars are not sufficiently represented in the literature from the perspective of tourist behavior. While the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) stands out as the most widely used framework in theoretical terms, methodologically, survey-based quantitative approaches are dominant, and a lack of experimental field studies has been identified.

In their study conducting a bibliometric analysis on green tourism, Dangwal et al. (2022) grouped the research areas into five main clusters. The first cluster, socio-environmental-economic research, focuses on the capacity of green tourism to provide economic well-being to local communities while preserving cultural integrity and ecological balance, centering on the "triple balance" approach. The planning, policy, and management cluster examines the "top-down" structuring of green transformation, focusing on government energy policies and the regulatory roles of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs). The implementation and practice cluster, representing the operational dimension, addresses green hotel management processes and analyzes the impact of ethical risks such as "greenwashing" on brand image. Vargová Dzurov et al. (2025), in their research on quality management and sustainability initiatives in the Slovak tourism sector, reveal the decisive role of environmental practices and service quality on visitor satisfaction and destination loyalty. The study observes that mixed models integrating service quality and environmentally friendly policies increase the competitiveness of the destination; It has been found that financial incentives and strategic environmental policies, in particular, are a critical motivator for businesses to adopt green practices.

Empirical findings from Indonesia by Vicente (2024) demonstrate that digital green marketing strategies and tourists' intrinsic environmental beliefs directly trigger responsible travel behaviors, and these behaviors are the primary determinants of increased intention to revisit eco-destinations. A study by Rocio et al. (2023) subjects the sustainable tourism management literature from 1996 to 2023 to a systematic bibliometric analysis using the Web of Science database and VOSviewer software. The research findings identify that the literature is structured around four main thematic clusters: general tourism management and ecosystem services, resource efficiency (energy/water) and green hotel practices in the hospitality industry, sustainable development indicators and ethical governance, and social impact and community-based engagement. A study by De Bruyn et al. (2023) analyzes thirty-two years of sustainable tourism literature from 1990 to 2022 using a large dataset of 6,326 publications from the Scopus database.

Within this framework, the sustainable development and planning cluster examines the integration of tourism with strategic management models and global development goals; the climate change and environmental impact cluster focuses on minimizing aviation emissions, carbon footprint, and ecological degradation.

The community-based tourism and social sustainability theme prioritizes the well-being of local communities, social inclusion, and the preservation of cultural heritage; while the economic growth and competitiveness cluster analyzes the impact of sustainable practices on the economic success and market power of destinations. Finally, the consumer behavior cluster represents the human-centered dimension of the literature by investigating behavioral dynamics such as tourists' eco-friendly choices, ethical consumption patterns, and the intention-action gap.

When examining studies on green tourism, it is generally observed that studies focus more on the hotel industry or consumer behavior, while the number of studies addressing destination management is smaller. One such study, by Labarca et al. (2025), analyzes the contribution of the green economy to the sustainability of tourist destinations. The methodology is structured in stages, starting with documentary research, continuing with a literature review of the theoretical aspects of the green economy and the sustainability of tourist destinations, and concluding with an analysis of the contributions of the green economy to the sustainability of these destinations. The results show that the green economy contributes to the sustainability of tourist destinations through efficient use of resources, promotion of renewable energies, sustainable waste management, sustainable transportation, sustainable agriculture and food, sustainable construction and building, ecotourism and responsible tourism, investment in natural capital, and environmental awareness. The study concludes that the green economy constitutes an alternative for the development and sustainability of tourist destinations. When examining studies on green tourism destinations, the work of Ljubisavljević & Radović-Stojanović (2024), which analyzes Zlatibor, a green destination, stands out.

In their study, they emphasize the impact of private initiatives and government incentives on sustainable tourism development, stating that these factors enabled Zlatibor to be included among the top 100 green destinations in the world. Furthermore, Hidayat et al. (2020) conducted a study that deeply examined the concept of "Green Destination Tourism" in Pulesari Tourism Village in Yogyakarta from an Islamic economics perspective. Aziz & Niazi (2025) analyze the impact of green destination brand value on tourists' environmentally conscious behavior within an empirical model. The research, conducted with 701 participants in green-certified destinations, reveals that green destination awareness, image, quality, and loyalty are key determinants in shaping tourists' responsible behavior.

The findings confirm that perceived destination trust plays a key mediating role in this relationship, while perceived green value strengthens the influence of brand components on behavior.

Sukosyah et al. (2025) reveal that an environmentally friendly destination image and tourist satisfaction significantly influence tourists' intention to revisit. Furthermore, both perceived green value and tourist satisfaction function as partial

mediators, strengthening the relationship between destination image and revisit intention. These results highlight the importance of building a strong green image and increasing visitor satisfaction to enhance loyalty. Research by Tok et al. (2024) shows that handwritten fonts used in green tourism marketing have a more positive impact on tourists' enjoyment expectations, willingness to pay, and booking intentions regarding green destinations and sustainable products, compared to typed fonts. The underlying mechanism of this effect is defined as "perceived greenness"; it is emphasized that handwriting symbolizes human labor and a non-industrial process, leading consumers to perceive the relevant product or service as more environmentally friendly.

However, it was found that the advantage created by this visual cue was only valid in the context of green products, and that a similar effect did not occur in services that were not environmentally focused, such as luxury travel.

Furthermore, it was determined that tourists with high environmental awareness were less influenced by the persuasive effect of handwritten fonts because they focused on the content and detailed information of the message rather than the visual elements. A study conducted by Laachach & Alhemimah (2024) using the Morocco example examines the factors determining tourists' intentions to choose sustainable destinations, revealing that travel motivation, knowledge of sustainable tourism, and positive environmental attitudes have a significant and positive impact on this intention. The findings of the model, developed based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), confirm that the effect of travel motivations on environmental attitudes differs according to gender (modulatory role), and that moral reflectiveness acts as a critical bridge strengthening the link between environmental attitudes and sustainable travel intentions. A study conducted by Khatoon & Choudhary (2024) on 550 tourists visiting the Ladakh region of India analyzes the impact of social media functionality on green destination image using an empirical model.

The study confirms that social media functionality is a multidimensional structure consisting of seven main dimensions: identity, chat, sharing, presence, relationship, reputation, and group. The research findings reveal that overall social media functionality has a significant and positive impact on green destination image;

The study specifically reveals that the dimensions of "sharing," "presence," and "conversation" (interaction) are the most critical components in this process. Consequently, the study emphasizes that visual content such as reels, photos, vlogs, and stories offered through social media are a strategic tool for tourism managers in building tourists' perception of green destinations and promoting sustainable travel practices.

In Kıldırgıcı's (2024) research, it was determined that the perceived green brand satisfaction of tourists visiting Alanya has an impact on the consumer-based green destination brand value, and that the consumer-based green destination brand value significantly and positively affects tourists' attitudes towards green destinations.

The studies we have examined so far do not seem to be directly related to culinary culture or green cuisine. It can be said that the increasing demand in gastronomy tourism in recent years has reshaped destinations in line with these demands. In particular, it is foreseeable that environmentally conscious restaurants focused on the local culinary culture of destinations will be effective in developing sustainable strategies in those destinations.

In this context, unlike other studies, this research will evaluate the role of green Michelin-starred and sustainably labeled restaurants in the success of Urla, a green destination, as a case study.

A green destination refers to a tourist location that prioritizes environmental sustainability and promotes practices that protect the natural environment (Aziz & Niazi, 2025). The concept of a green destination exhibits a dynamic structure evolving at the intersection of environmental sensitivity, social well-being, and economic sustainability in the global tourism literature. The Green Destination Awards demonstrate compliance levels with the Green Destinations Standard (assessed by an independent auditor) recognized by GSTC. Audits are conducted every two years and result in a Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum rating. The Green Destination Standards are a tool for measuring, monitoring, and improving the sustainability profile of destinations and regions.

Destinations worldwide can adapt their sustainability management systems and actions to the requirements of the Green Destinations Standard and have their efforts recognized. The geographical scope of the standard is global: it can be applied to any destination. The conceptual scope of the standard refers to a destination's tourism sector. Therefore, the impacts addressed and the relevant stakeholders must be related to the tourism sector.

The Green Destinations Standard consists of 84 criteria (75 mandatory, 9 optional) covering 6 main themes: Destination Management, Nature and Landscape, Environment and Climate, Culture and Tradition, Social Welfare, Business and Communication (Green Destinations, 2025).

The sustainability guide prepared by Urla Municipality (2025) offers a strategic framework for accommodation and gastronomy businesses in the region to ensure operational efficiency by protecting natural and cultural values. The guide; The document centers on resource management practices such as energy efficiency and water conservation, as well as circular economy approaches such as eliminating single-use plastics and composting food waste (Urla Municipality, 2025). Suggesting collaboration with women's cooperatives and utilizing local gastronomy to strengthen the local economy, the document also defines the preservation of traditional architectural elements and regular reporting of sustainability performance as fundamental responsibilities for businesses (Urla Municipality, 2025).

Furthermore, Urla Municipality has published visitor conduct codes. The Urla Natural Area Visitor Conduct Code offers a sustainable visitor management framework based on ten fundamental principles aimed at protecting the region's biological and cultural heritage. This includes emphasizing that visitors should bring their own waste, minimize plastic use, and only use designated walking paths to protect the ecosystem. Restrictions such as noise control, not interfering with animals, and not mixing chemicals into the water are implemented to protect wildlife and water resources.

This guide, which includes rules such as prohibiting the lighting of fires for fire safety and respecting archaeological values, is supported by emergency reporting lines and aims to ensure that natural areas are passed on to future generations in a healthy state. With these guides, Urla Municipality provides a roadmap for both visitors and businesses to implement sustainable behaviors and practices. To promote sustainable tourism and protect cultural heritage in Urla, the goal is to establish a "Festivals Association" that highlights local culinary delights and traditional elements The calendar within this structure begins with the March 9th Traditional Herb Festival, symbolizing the arrival of spring, continues with the geographically protected Artichoke Festival at the end of April, and the long-standing August 14th Grape Harvest Festival. This year, for the first time, a 9-day "Harvest Festival" is planned to span the last three weeks of September, expanding the culture of viticulture; while the Olive and Art Festival on November 26th aims to integrate ancient agricultural heritage with art This series of festivals, coordinated by GastroFarm Urla, aims to strengthen the district's identity as a gastronomic tourism destination by supporting local producers (Urla Municipality, 2025).

Michelin Green Star restaurants that adopt sustainability practices in gastronomy could be sustainability ambassadors and promoters (Huang et al., 2025). These restaurants strengthen the local economy by collaborating with local producers and contribute to the sustainability of regional agriculture (Richards, 2023). Furthermore, sustainable gastronomic practices enhance the brand value and international recognition of the destination (Bessière, 2013).

The Urla example demonstrates the relationship between the presence of Michelin Green Star awarded restaurants and the destination's Green Destination certification. This shows that sustainability practices in gastronomy can be used as a strategic tool in destination management (Green Destinations, 2025).

Urla, a district of Izmir, is home to three different Green Star certified restaurants. It is believed that the factor that has brought the region to the forefront of gastronomy in recent years, and which enabled the region to win three Green Star awards—a distinction held by only approximately 450 restaurants worldwide—is essentially the same: the production of local ingredients using the most appropriate and sustainable methods, and the creation of unique dishes using these high-quality materials (Michelin Guide, 2026).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Urla district center is 38 km from İzmir. The Aegean Sea is located to the north and south of Urla. The dominant vegetation in the district, which is 65 meters above sea level, consists of wild olive, olive, strawberry tree, laurel, myrtle, and maquis. The terrain is mountainous and hilly. The mountains are covered with degraded coppice forests. It has all the characteristics of the Mediterranean climate, with hot summers and mild and rainy winters (Urla District Governorship, 2026).

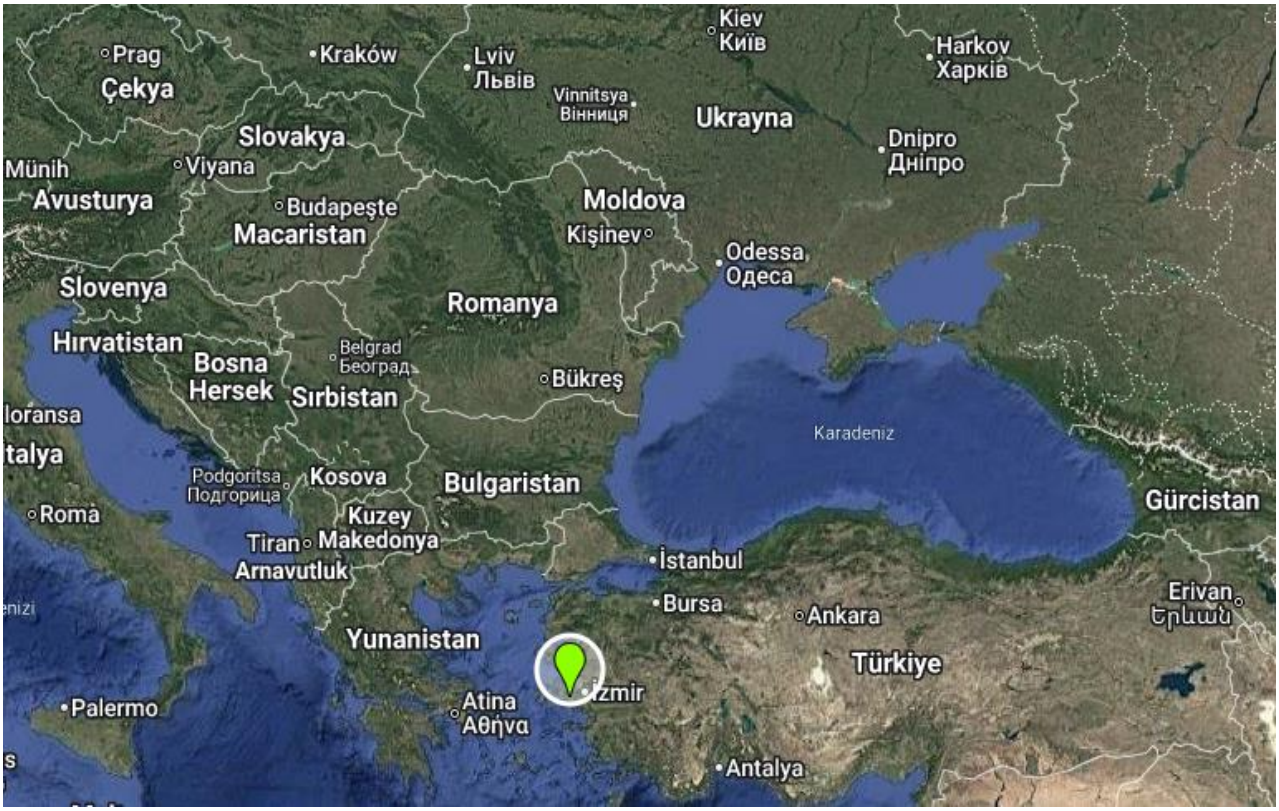


Figure 1. Urla district (Source: Google Maps)

As a result of its geographical features, Urla is a holiday destination preferred by both domestic and foreign tourists. Interest in Urla has increased with activities carried out within the context of rural tourism, called "return to nature," and the arrangement and diversification of local products specific to the area to serve tourism (Koday & Akbaş, 2020).

The most important gastronomic product is Urla Sakız artichoke. Which is received a geographical indication from the Turkish Patent Institute in 2017 (Figure 2). Besides artichokes, there are okra fields, small vegetable and fruit greenhouses, and excellent seafood. Another important gastronomic asset of the region is viticulture and winemaking. The area is home to numerous vineyards and wine producers with a wide variety of grapes, all connected by a wine route.



Figure 2. Urla Sakız Artichoke (Source: İzmir Ticaret Borsası, 2026)

This study is structured according to the case study design, one of the qualitative research methods. Urla's "Green Destination" status forms the focus of the study because it is a process already registered and documented by international organizations. A case study is an empirical research method that examines a current phenomenon in depth within its real-life context. In the research, the role of high-end gastronomy businesses in building the sustainability identity of the Urla destination is examined with a holistic approach within the context of the "Green Destinations Standard V2" criteria.

The "criterion sampling" technique, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used to determine the study group of the research. As the main criteria, the businesses were determined to be operating in the Urla district of İzmir and to be leading actors in the field of gastronomy whose sustainability practices have been registered by international authorities (Michelin Guide, EcoCOOK, etc.) (Michelin Green Star or Sustainable Restaurant Certificate). Accordingly, Vino Locale, Od Urla, Teruar Urla, and Hiç Lokanta, with its pioneering practices, constitute the study group of the research.

This study is structured using a holistic multiple case design, a qualitative research method. Multiple case designs allow research results to be confirmed across different cases and provide a more reliable foundation for findings (Yin, 2018). The focus of the research is the role of high-end gastronomy businesses in building the sustainability identity of Urla, which has been internationally recognized as a "Green Destination". In this context, based on the "Green Destinations Standard V2" criteria, four different businesses (Vino Locale, Od Urla, Teruar Urla, and Hiç Lokanta), each with its own unique operational processes but sharing a common sustainability denominator, are examined analytically. Each business is treated as a separate case in the analysis process, and the data obtained are interpreted from a holistic perspective using the "inter-case synthesis" method.

Document analysis was chosen as the data collection technique in this research. Document analysis involves analyzing written materials containing information about the phenomenon or phenomena targeted for research. The dataset used in the research consists of sustainability manifestos, corporate policies, environmental impact statements, and Sustainability Reports published on the official websites of the relevant Green Destinations businesses. These collected secondary data were examined using the content analysis method, one of the qualitative data analysis techniques. In the analysis of the data, the main parameters (destination management, nature and climate, social welfare, cultural heritage, etc.) determined in the "Green Destinations Standard V2" document recognized by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) were accepted as the basic units of analysis.

To enhance the reliability and validity of the data, the "data triangulation" technique was applied; official institutional reports, sectoral statements, and international audit outputs were compared to conduct a consistency analysis. Descriptive analysis and content analysis techniques were used together in the analysis of the obtained qualitative data. The analysis process was carried out with a deductive approach. Raw data obtained from the corporate documents of the businesses were first coded within the framework of the 6 main themes defined by the Green Destinations Standard V2 (destination management, nature and landscape, environment and climate, culture and tradition, social welfare, business and communication). Then, these codes were matched with the relevant standard criteria using a matrix technique, and the macro-level contributions of the restaurants to the sustainability of the destination were systematically interpreted. In this matrix, the sustainability criteria applied by Michelin-starred restaurants were matched with the green destination certification criteria. The aim is to systematically reveal the impact of sustainability practices in gastronomy on the green certification of the destination.

The flowchart below illustrates each step of our research methodology, from data collection to final analysis (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Methodological flow chart

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings obtained as a result of the document analysis conducted within the scope of the research reveal the multifaceted roles and strategic importance of high-end gastronomy businesses in the branding process of Urla destination with its "Green Destination" vision. The corporate policies and operational data of Michelin Green Star titled businesses and Hiç Lokanta, which stands out with its pioneering sustainability-focused practices, examined based on the "Green Destinations Standard V2" criteria, show that these actors go beyond being merely commercial food and beverage establishments. The findings are presented below within a holistic framework, addressing ecological environmental impact management, strengthening local supply networks, innovatively protecting cultural heritage, and corporate measurability that overcomes greenwashing traps. The matching of the restaurants' practices with green destination criteria can be summarized in the matrix in Table 1.

Table 1. The matching of the restaurants' practices with green destination criteria

Green destination Criteria	**Applications**			
	Hiç Lokanta	**Od Urla**	**Teruar Urla**	**Vino Locale**
Nature and Ecosystem *(Criteria 2.1, 2.4)*	Protecting the Hiç Olive Forest through organic farming.	-	Maintaining an inventory of endemic plants/animals and making annual donations to TEMA Foundation.	Protecting centuries-old olive trees and the surrounding natural environment.
Environmental Impact Measurement *(Criteria 2.2)*	-	-	Publishing a comprehensive sustainability report and carbon footprint measurement.	-

Water Consumption and Harvesting *(Criteria 3.5)*	Rainwater harvesting system and 70% water savings in the olive oil facility.	-	Using walk-in shower cabins, setting regular water-saving targets.	Reducing water use in general operational processes.
Waste and Zero Plastic *(Criteria 3.8, 3.9)*	Full "Zero Waste" policy, elimination of single-use plastics, and plant-based composting.	Utilizing every part of food products (zero organic waste).	Use of compost machines, elimination of composite and single-use materials.	Producing compost and vermicompost and returning it to farmers.
Emissions and Energy *(Criteria 3.12, 3.16)*	Absorbing 26.8 tons of CO2 annually thanks to the forest and using 100% solar energy.	-	Greenhouse gas tracking (83.20 kgCO2e/occ) and energy-efficient equipment	-
Low-Impact Transportation *(Criteria 3.14)*	-	Using only electric vehicles to welcome guests.	-	-
Culture and Tradition *(Criteria 4.4, 4.5)*	Preserving traditional olive oil culture through the "Urla Cuisine" concept.	-	Offering geographical indication products such as Mastic Artichoke and Erkence Hurma Olive.	Applying Anatolian preservation techniques such as pickling, drying, and tarhana production.
Support for the Local Economy (*Criteria 5.12, 5.13)*	Establishing a narrow local procurement radius of 60 km.	Preventing farmers from abandoning agricultural production through guaranteed purchasing agreements.	Sustainable cooperation with local fishermen and small producers.	Making advance payments to regional farmers through annual agreements.
Local Employment *(Criteria 5.14)*	-	Serving as a source of motivation through employment opportunities provided to local producers.	Achieving a 91% local employment rate within total staff.	Employing village residents and providing internship opportunities for high school students.
Human Rights / Accessibility *(Criteria 5.4, 5.6)*	-	-	Providing 43% female employment and improving accessibility for people with disabilities.	-
Standards / Certification (Criteria 6.2)	Obtaining EcoCOOK Certification and ISO (22000, 9001, 1002) certificates.	Green Michelin	Green Michelin	Green Michelin

As can be seen, these restaurants, through their internal waste management, local development, and cultural preservation strategies, are critical stakeholders in raising Urla's Green Destination scores (especially those below Theme 3 and Theme 5) at the macro level. When the research findings are examined, it is seen that high-end gastronomy businesses in the Urla destination assume a "catalyst actor" role extending from the micro to the macro level.

Tourism businesses, traditionally perceived as resource consumers, have transformed into active resource conservators in this example. Sustainability practices have not been limited to micro-level steps such as energy saving or waste separation within the kitchen; businesses have undertaken macro-level environmental responsibilities by sharing the role of public authorities. For example, Hiç Lokanta's olive grove, protected according to organic farming principles, functions as a carbon sink for the destination. Similarly, Teruar Urla directly provides data for the conservation of regional biodiversity by reporting terrestrial mammal species. In a socio-economic context, it has been determined that businesses have increased supply chain resilience and established local networks. The social welfare criteria included in Green Destination standards have been taken beyond a mere purchasing policy by these restaurants and transformed into a holistic regional development model. Businesses view local suppliers not merely as a source of products, but as strategic "stakeholders" whose presence is essential for the sustainability of the destination's gastronomic identity.

This approach clearly demonstrates the catalytic effect of gastronomic actors in rural development. For example, Od Urla offers a sustainable business plan and provides motivation to local farmers who are about to abandon their businesses and production by creating production circulation. Vino Locale contributes to the financial empowerment of local producers by making annual agreements and upfront payments with farmers in the region.

Teruar Urla directly supports the regional economy by providing 91% local employment. The research's findings on cultural sustainability show that the culture and tradition dimension of the Green Destinations standard is not approached by businesses with a static museum mentality, but rather by integrating traditional heritage into dynamic culinary operations through innovative methods. Food preservation and zero-waste goals are achieved not only through modern technological solutions but also by adapting traditional preservation methods from Anatolia's nomadic culture to high gastronomy. For example, Vino Locale incorporates centuries-old survival traditions such as pickling, drying fish, noodles, and tarhana into its menu as a reflection of sustainability. With a similar vision, Hiç Lokanta focuses on promoting and passing on Urla's rich traditional olive oil-centered culinary heritage to future generations through its "New Urla Cuisine" concept, which updates it to meet today's needs. Finally, the findings reveal that businesses have overcome greenwashing barriers in terms of institutionalization and measurability. Sustainability claims have ceased to be empty marketing rhetoric and have become verifiable according to international standards, supporting the

destination's global competitiveness. Businesses have adopted a "scientific sustainability" model based on concrete data, documentation, and calculations, rather than intuitive environmental awareness. Teruar Urla has begun greenhouse gas reduction efforts per occupied room. All three restaurants hold Michelin Guide Green Star certification, one of the world's most prestigious rating organizations. Hiç Lokanta not only adheres to standards documenting the efficient use of resources, but has also successfully completed the "Sustainable Restaurant Certification" process, specifically designed for the food and beverage sector by the Swiss-based EcoCOOK Certification.

Based on the information above, the role and interaction of green Michelin-starred restaurants in the process of destinations becoming green destinations can be modeled as follows:

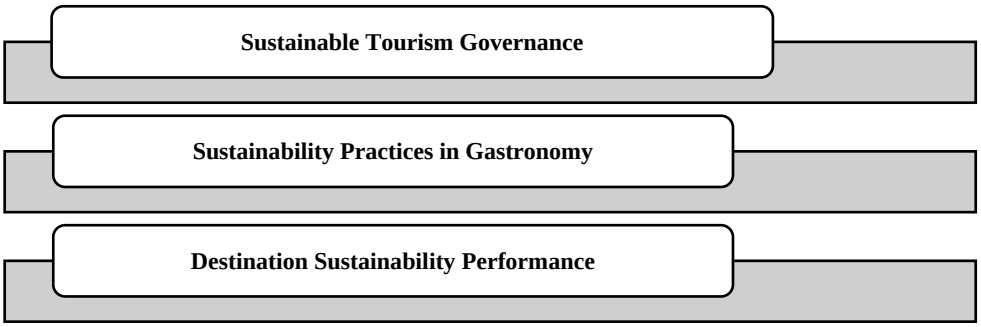


Figure 4. Green destination-gastronomy interaction model

In this model, sustainable tourism governance and sustainability practices in gastronomy interact with each other. Successful sustainable practices in gastronomy improve the environmental and economic performance of the destination, while sustainable tourism policies support the widespread adoption of these practices in the gastronomy sector.

The model includes three main components:

1. Sustainable Tourism Governance: Environmental policies and practices, local people's participation in decision-making processes, economic development strategies.

2. Sustainability Practices in Gastronomy: Concrete sustainability activities that restaurants and food and beverage businesses can adopt.

3. Destination Performance: The level of environmental, social, and economic sustainability resulting from the interaction between these components.

For example, restaurants that have received the Michelin Green Star award support agricultural sustainability by increasing the use of local products and also contribute to the green image of the destination. Destination management, in turn, supports the activities of these restaurants, thereby achieving sustainable tourism goals.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have revealed that Michelin Green Star restaurants positively influence sustainability performance in green destinations. Michelin Green Star and sustainability-focused restaurants in Urla are seen to be in high alignment with Green Destinations standards through their corporate policies and are considered to play a pioneering role in regional development. In other words, these restaurants support local producers within the economic dimension, an important aspect of sustainability, and implement practices that increase the well-being of the local population. Furthermore, these businesses educate stakeholders in the supply chain, measure their carbon footprint with transparent data, and adapt cultural heritage to modern gastronomy. The concrete, auditable, and transparent sustainability practices of these restaurants are of great importance in the formation of the "Green Destination" brand for the Urla destination.

The study develops a model that integrates two areas (sustainable tourism governance and sustainability in gastronomy) to enhance the sustainability performance of destinations. The model's fundamental assumption is that sustainable gastronomic practices increase social and economic benefits while reducing the destination's environmental impact.

The study shows that restaurants in a destination can make a significant contribution to meeting the criteria for a region to be considered a green destination. While it is not normally expected that restaurants and gastronomy sector stakeholders will be effective in all green destination criteria, the presence of Green Michelin-starred restaurants and sustainability-focused restaurants in the destination, and the practices of these businesses, can be said to play an accelerating, catalytic role in the process. The findings of our study are consistent with the findings of Wang et al. (2026). Wang et al. show that in the construction of zero-carbon tourism cities, the system created by local governments, tourism businesses, tourists, and the local population achieves stability through a combination of the active participation of all stakeholders.

This study is limited to the practices of Michelin Green Star restaurants and sustainability-focused restaurants in the green destination certification process. The practices and impacts of other stakeholders in the green destination process can be examined in future studies. For future research, it is suggested that the findings of this qualitative case study be supported by quantitative data. In particular, quantitative field studies measuring the sustainability perceptions of local farmers and the local population involved in the supply chain will contribute to a multi-dimensional analysis of the issue. A study investigating the perceptions of the local population regarding Michelin Green Star restaurants could also be among

the suggested studies. Furthermore, applying a similar methodology to national or international regions with different Green Destination status will allow for a comparative examination of the role of gastronomy in destination sustainability.

A future study could investigate the extent to which this process in the food and beverage sector affects visitor satisfaction. Vargová Dzurov & Matušíková (2025) also have findings on this in their study focusing on Slovakia. Whether these effects exist in the Urla region could be examined.

Despite its practical and theoretical contributions, this study is subject to several limitations.

First, the study's empirical focus is strictly limited to Michelin Green Star restaurants and sustainability-focused culinary businesses operating in the Urla destination. The findings may not fully reflect the practices or operational constraints of non-certified or conventional food and beverage businesses within the same area.

Secondly, the data collection relies primarily on qualitative document analysis and secondary qualitative indicators. Consequently, direct quantitative measurements of environmental outputs) were not incorporated into the empirical evaluation.

And finally, as a qualitative single-case study, the generalizability of the proposed framework to other regional or international green destinations with differing governance structures, geographical constraints, and socio-economic dynamics remains limited.

In conclusion, it is particularly important to emphasize that destination managers need to develop policies, strategies, and implement measures to support and disseminate sustainable practices in the gastronomy sector. Another point to highlight is that restaurants should increase their environmental and social responsibilities to contribute to the destination brand. As a suggestion for future research, a comparative examination of the impact of gastronomy in different green destinations and testing the generalizability of the model with quantitative measurements could be considered.

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