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## Article

# Characteristics of Traditional Food Products as a Segment of Sustainable Consumption in Vojvodina's Hospitality Industry

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**Abstract:** One can observe the sustainability of traditional food products (TFPs) consumption in terms of their market, production, and technical characteristics. These characteristics must be acknowledged by the management section of a catering facility responsible for purchasing and consuming these products. Consequently, this research was conducted among the management of catering facilities (chefs, managers, and owners) in Vojvodina (northern region of Serbia) from 300 different facilities. The research was conducted using a questionnaire. The data acquired were statistically processed using the non-parametric Mann–Whitney and Kruskal–Wallis tests and presented in this paper. Special attention was given to differences in perceiving the characteristics of TFP of Vojvodina (TASQ) as seen from the socio-demographic aspects of the respondents and the characteristics of catering facilities. The research deduced that the sensory quality of a product, menu diversity, freshness, local production, price, and seasonality are the prominent characteristics that affect the TFP's choice of purchase and consumption. The least essential characteristics are organic production and brand. The differences in perception of the characteristics were based on the respondent's age, education level, and working position, as well as catering offer (domestic, national, international, and combined) and the location of a catering facility (urban/rural).

**Keywords:** traditional food; traditional products; catering; hospitality; sustainability; food characteristics; consumption; Vojvodina



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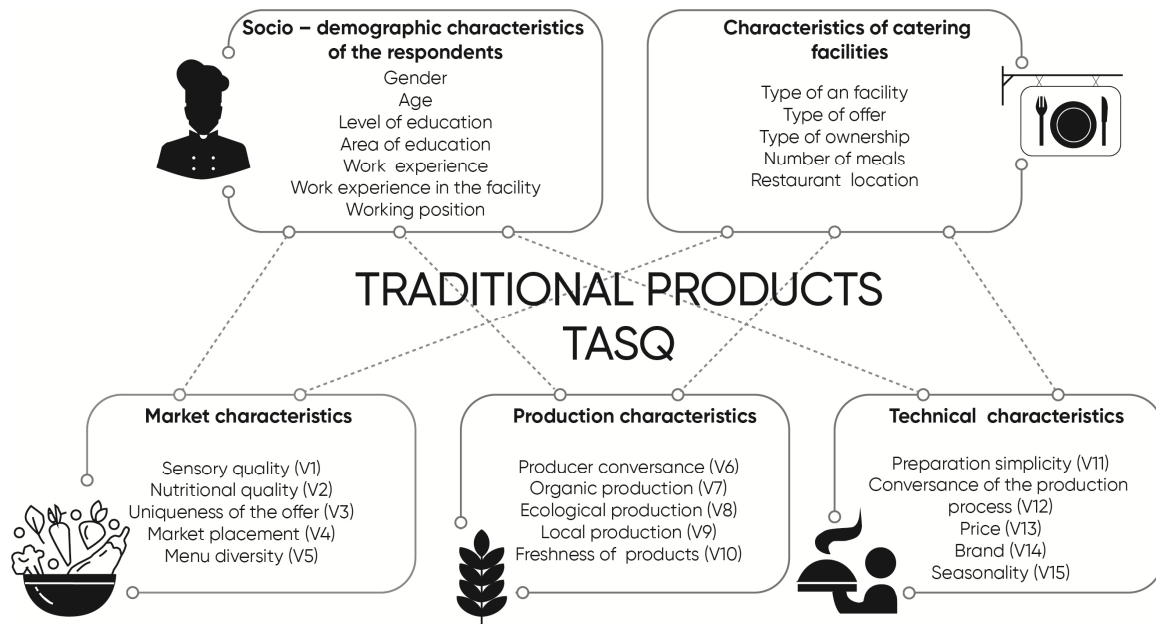
## 1. Introduction

Traditional food products (TFPs) are a part of the heritage and culture of every nation [1–4]. In recent years, TFPs have been in great demand and present in the catering facility offers [5,6]. They are mostly observed from the aspect of ecological, economic, and social factors [7–9]. At the same time, their market, production, and technical characteristics are of great importance. Therefore, successful sustainability of TFP consumption requires constant interventions from different participants in the economy, varying from operational to managerial positions. Surely, the sustainability of TFP consumption in catering facilities is affected by the perception of their characteristics by the management sector of each facility [10].

The research on socio-demographic characteristics of local cuisine producers [10] and consumers are available, as opposed to the poor availability of the research on caterers. The hospitality industry is an important part of the food consumption chain; thus, it is necessary to popularize the researches focusing on catering workers as a link between producers and consumers. Certain academic and empirical research has been conducted

in the area of sustainable food chain management [11,12]. The focus was on the final part of this food chain (the consumer), which is certainly of utter importance [13]. Consumers define different ways of food consumption and affect the sustainability of the entire food chain supply [14].

Therefore, the subject of this paper is the sustainability of TFP consumption in catering facilities in Vojvodina (northern Serbia) (TASQ—traditional and standard quality, [15]) seen from aspects of their market, production, and technical characteristics but also from the aspect of socio-demographic characteristics of persons deciding about their acquisition (the management) and the characteristics of catering facilities (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Research structure. (Author: Đerčan, 2022).

Tsolakis et al. [16] clearly define that TFP are characterized by the features that significantly affect the sustainability of their consumption, including the short expiry date, seasonality, special production conditions, storage and transportation of products, compatibility with legal terms concerning food safety, unevenness of products quantity and quality during the year, the need for expensive equipment due to higher efficacy, and the lack of storage capacity.

Therefore, this paper aims to collect data about the importance of specific TFP characteristics which influence their consumption and sustainability in the catering market. Namely, it aims to establish whether there are differences in regard to their perception by the management sector or to the characteristics of catering facilities. Specific objectives based on the literature review refer to establishing TFP characteristics that are of great importance in recognizing essential characteristics in the further planning of supply activities based on demand, as well as in emphasizing the sustainability of these products in the catering market.

The task of the paper is to provide answers to the following questions:

- Q1: Which characteristics of TFP are important for selection and consumption in catering facilities?
- Q2: Are there differences in the perception of TFP characteristics and consumption in catering facilities depending on the socio-demographic characteristics of the management that chooses them? What are these differences?
- Q3: Are there differences in perception of the TFP characteristics and consumption in catering facilities depending on the characteristics of the catering facility in question? What are these differences?

In addition to the introductory section that provides basic information about the research, the literature review deals with the concept of traditional products, after which the importance of sustainability of traditional food products consumption in the hospitality industry is reviewed. All the features of TFP included in the research are shown, namely market, production, and technical features. Through the methodology of the work, a detailed plan for conducting the research and reaching the desired results was given, which is shown and discussed in detail further in the work, after which relevant conclusions were drawn.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Traditional Products

Traditional food products (TFPs) are products that are acquired through processing, and can be with or without a label of origin [3,17]. In order to consider specific food products as traditional, their production process has to be carried out in a specific area, which can be national, regional, or local. It has to be authentic for its recipe, raw material origin, and the plenary production process. A TFP must have existed on the market for 50 years and been part of gastronomic heritage [18].

Guerrero et al. [19] conducted research among TFP consumers in six European countries: Italy, France, Spain, Belgium, Poland, and Norway. They clearly state that these are the products that are simple to prepare, which are passed down from generation to generation, and are famous for their sensory and nutritional properties. They are unique to a certain area, region, or country.

What makes a product traditional are the methods of production or specific geographical labels. Products can be marked with specific labels that protect their geographical origin. However, there is a high number of products that are considered traditional but have no labels or marks. Therefore, there have been numerous initiatives to label all traditional and authentic products, which would guarantee their quality and authenticity [20]. In Vojvodina (northern Serbia), these products are labeled with TASQ (traditional and standard quality) in order to create an image of the appropriate nutritional and sensory quality of the TFP, as well as safety and standardized quality. Brands present a warranty of TFP quality in Vojvodina, whose aim is to build consumers' trust [21]. The consumers of TFPs provide an essential contribution to improving food quality in developing countries. Products of plants and animal origin produced on local farms and fields are consumed locally and nationally, creating a unique ethical commitment to bringing healthier and more natural food habits [22].

### 2.2. Sustainability of Traditional Food Products Consumption in the Hospitality Industry

Sustainable food supply chains present an essential aspect of food purchase and the successful business of catering facilities. However, there are numerous challenges in the sustainability implementation of a traditional food supply. Interested parties should identify and give priority to sustainability issues in planning and developing a successful food supply network [23].

The research conducted in Serbia by Ćirić et al. [24] showed that the majority of food producers think that products that have a geographical label of origin could be seen as traditional; however, they are not represented enough in the offer of catering facilities. The research showed that almost 80% of the respondents consider that meals prepared with such products are not present enough in the catering that facilities offer. Even though the usage of local and TFPs have been a topic of interest lately, the majority of the products that mass deliverers use are imported or come from mass producers [25].

The producers of TFPs face significant challenges in terms of safety improvement and practicality of their products while trying to improve their position in the global food market [19]. The greatest challenges the producers of TFPs face are world climate changes (droughts and floods), an increase in population number, which leads to greater food demand but also settling of the areas which were used for food production, the limitation

of resources such as arable land and freshwater, different political decisions, and a rise in prices of primary derivatives and groceries [26].

### 2.3. Market Characteristics

Market characteristics of food products refer to sensory quality, nutritional quality, uniqueness of the offer, market placement, and menu diversity [10]. Each characteristic is special in its own way. The sensory quality of food is one of the most important reasons why people choose the food they eat. Sensory characteristics such as appearance, taste, and texture affect the consumers' behavior and their reaction to the food served. Based on these characteristics, food can create an increased desire for consumption or can make the meal unappetizing [27]. The differences in food of different cultures can lead to a different perception and appreciation of sensory characteristics of food products [28]. However, the caterers must be familiar with those differences and adjust them to the consumers. Balogh et al. [29] claim that consumers appreciate the characteristics of certain food products, thus assigning positive sensory values to every product that is defined as traditional and authentic. Consumers deem TFP attractive and desirable due to their special flavor and unique appearance [20].

Aside from improved sensory characteristics, the usage of TFP is connected with consumers' perception of better nutritional quality and health benefits. Cayot [30] states that a TFP can be specific because it is beneficial to health, thanks to its natural ingredients and zero additives, but also unhealthy, due to its large percentage of fat. However, numerous studies have shown that even though TFPs are seen as healthier and safer than commercial products, this aspect of TFPs does not necessarily affect food choices [20,31].

The uniqueness and authenticity of the offer are one of the key strategies for the successful business of a catering facility [32], which is stipulated by the purchase of these products. Researchers have shown that food prepared with authentic ingredients, prepared by unique recipes and methods of preparation, plays an important part in attracting customers who seek a unique gastronomic experience [33].

Regarding product placement on the market, it must be pointed out that the current food market is very competitive. Being different from your competitors is imperative for the producers and distributors of food products. Product traits such as quality, ethical production, and rationality are becoming more important to consumers. This enables smaller food producers to find their place on the market [34].

Retail chains are the first to place organic and TFP on the EU market. The main reason for this is the consumers' desire for safe and quality products with unique proof of origin and safety guarantees [35]. Consumers today have greater expectations when it comes to methods of meal preparation and ingredients used. However, a significant number of facilities still present the same or similar meals in their offers [32]. Successful menu planners balance between different flavors, colors, shapes, and other sensory characteristics because diverse menus lead to greater satisfaction of the customers [36].

### 2.4. Production Characteristics

Production features of TFP worth mentioning are being familiar with the producers, organic production, ecologic production, local production, and product freshness [10].

Familiarity with the producers, especially when people have trust issues with food producers, present an important aspect of production characteristics. The entire system of production and transportation of products from farms to plates in restaurants has become an essential part of the business of catering facilities because it demonstrates unique proof of great quality food production, which appears safe [37]. Consequently, small, local organizations have to further investigate and develop to overcome all issues in improving the performance of sustainable chains, and developing better and more efficient strategies for TFP purchase [38].

Organic food demand has increased in recent years in all parts of the world [39]. This rapid increase in demand for such food threatened to lead to the fraud and deception of

consumers; therefore, it has become necessary to make rules and introduce certificates to protect consumers and producers, as well as catering facilities, through secure and verified distribution channels [40]. This characteristic leads to the following one: the ecological approach to production.

Production that does not harm the environment, also known as sustainable production, refers to fulfilling producers' economic goals while respecting the ecological needs of the environment. Such a type of production, which is a subject of much research and policy-making, is inevitable for the further development of production and prosperity of future generations [41]. The development of sustainable production policies has motivated a growing number of producers to change and adjust their mode of production to reduce their production's negative effects on the environment [42].

The research conducted in Austria and Croatia by Cerjak et al. [43] showed that consumers are aware of the relation of TFPs and environment care. The same research showed that many consumers buy and consume TFP to help local farmers and food producers, which is called production localization. Its goal is to satisfy the needs of residents and local companies in a dynamic distributive network, which could be a significant advantage of local catering facilities by giving extra value to the products purchased [44]. The term TFP itself is connected to the place of production. They are connected through geographical, cultural, and gastronomic heritage, and are part of a culture that is passed down through generations [45].

Today, when sustainable production is one of the burning issues in distribution chains, TFPs are becoming more important due to their characteristics. Their local and organic characteristics reflect two important sustainability components: the ecological component, which refers to careful usage of natural resources and environmental care, as well as the component relating to economic and social care for producers and local residents [46].

The three main reasons why people prefer buying certain TFPs and local products to commercial ones are the freshness of the product, together with hygiene and health benefits [47]. The research conducted by Frash et al. [48] showed that the freshness of the product and flavor are features for which consumers are willing to pay more. Therefore, they cannot be neglected in TFPs.

### 2.5. Technical Characteristics

Technical characteristics are another group of important characteristics for the sustainability of consumption in catering facilities. It is important to mention the simplicity of preparation, familiarity with the production process, price, brand, and seasonality [10].

Sharma et al. [49] conducted research about the criteria for choosing products in restaurants by chefs and managers. They pointed out the simplicity of preparation as an important criterium. The research carried out by Almlı et al. [50] in six European countries showed that consumers perceive TFP as complex to prepare: people spend more time preparing it for their families but still have positive opinions about it.

Familiarity with the production process is another important technical characteristic among consumers, especially when it comes to local and TFPs [51]. Familiarity with the whole process of production is defined by recognition of the production quality system and the final product [52]. The purchase price is an important part of every successful purchase and a catering facility's business. It is important to mention that people share the general opinion that if the product is more expensive, it is of greater quality, which means that the food is more authentic. Apart from that, their opinion is that traditional and authentic products are handmade and prepared with the right ingredients. Thus, the increase in price is actually a reflection of the extra effort made in the production of such food products [53]. However, the higher price of TFPs can be one of the main reasons why these products are not bought, because commercial products are more affordable for most consumers [20].

There is a great number of the same or similar products on the market, and recognizability and differentiation in regard to competition can be a significant advantage for the producers. Product branding can help in product positioning and communication with

consumers. Branding can be one of the ways of giving additional value to the products and distinguishing them from the competition. Some brands can be so authentic that they become a franchise, affecting the consumers' awareness of that particular product and therefore influencing the consumers' decision of buying it again [54].

Food products, especially of organic origin, are characterized by seasonality. This availability, in certain parts of the year only, refers to periods of harvesting or picking of products. The seasonality of traditional and authentic products can be attractive for tourists who seek the authentic experience of a certain place [55]. However, meals that are offered during different periods of a year affect offer-planning in catering facilities.

### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Location

This research took place in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, a northern region in the Republic of Serbia. It is identified as significant by this research because it is the largest producer of agricultural and food products [56]. The research was conducted in catering facilities in this region. Three hundred respondents participated in the research; all of them were representatives of different catering facilities. The facilities were chosen through random sampling with the proportional deployment of the number of employees in catering facilities located in administrative parts, according to the list of the Republican Bureau of Statistics [57]. The deployment of sampled facilities shown on Figure 2 is the following:

- The region of western Bačka, 8%, 24 catering facilities;
- The region of southern Banat, 13%, 39 catering facilities;
- The region of southern Bačka, 42%, 126 catering facilities;
- The region of northern Banat, 5%, 15 catering facilities;
- The region of northern Bačka, 12%, 36 catering facilities;
- The region of central Banat, 6%, 18 catering facilities;
- The region of Srem, 14%, 42 catering facilities.

The management sector of catering facilities, which makes decisions on purchase choices and the use of groceries in meal preparations, participated in this research.

#### 3.2. Methods

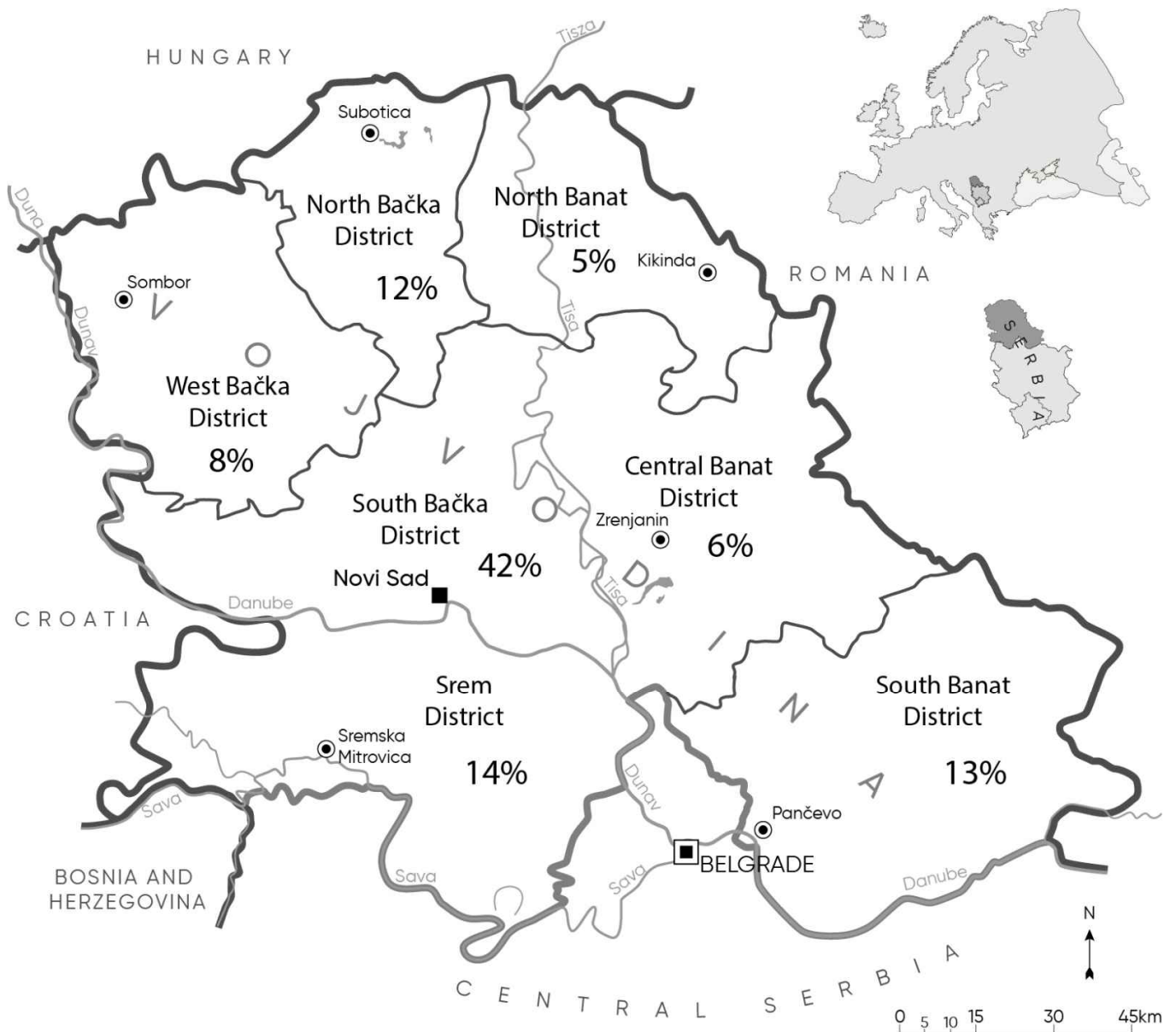
In order to obtain data about the characteristics of TFPs that managers of catering facilities in the AP of Vojvodina prefer, research was conducted through a survey. The questionnaire was based on the research conducted among chefs about local cuisine by authors Curtis and Cowee [10], which was also a foundation for further research on similar topics [48,49,58].

Pilot research for testing the survey and the clarity of its correctness was conducted on the territory of southern Bačka, which is administratively the most developed area in this region, and was followed by this research. The main survey, whose results are shown in this paper, was conducted from February to June 2022. Collecting of the data was conducted in accordance with the respondents and was completely anonymous.

#### 3.3. Statistically Processed Data

The data collected in the survey questionnaire was systematized and processed through the statistical software for social sciences, SPSS v.23.0 (student version: United Kingdom, Hampshire). The first part of the questionnaire consisted of questions about the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and the characteristics of the catering facilities they work in. These data were processed through descriptive statistical analysis. The second part of the questionnaire referred to the characteristics of TFP. In order to determine whether there were differences between the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and characteristics of catering facilities in terms of TFP characteristics, non-parametric techniques of Mann–Whitney and Kruskal–Wallis tests were applied. The Kruskal–Wallis test is used for the comparison of a sustained variable with three or more

groups. After determining statistically significant differences between the groups, the Dunn post-hoc test was used in order to compare central values to conclude which groups were different from each other. Statistical significance is defined as  $\alpha = 0.05$ .



**Figure 2.** The deployment of the sampled facilities. (Author: Đerčan, 2022).

This paper presents and discusses only the results that showed statistically significant differences in the response structure and, most importantly, level of education, working positions, age of the respondents, type of gastronomic offer, and restaurant location.

According to the fact that the use of self-administered questionnaires can create a problem of bias in the obtained results, i.e., common method bias (CMB) [59], Harman's single-factor test was used to determine whether most of the variance could be accounted for by a single general factor. According to the results of Harman's single-factor test, by testing all variables using principal component analysis, the total variance extracted was below 50% (40.979%), proving no substantial bias effects.



## 4. Results

### 4.1. Analysis of Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

In order to comprehensively analyze the data obtained, the starting point was the analysis of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, whose results are shown in Table 1. Based on the results of the descriptive statistical analysis, it can be observed that in this research, 60% were male respondents and 40% were female respondents. According to the age of the respondents, they were divided into three groups, with the largest participation from those who were 41 years old and over (36.7%), followed by those who were up to 30 years old (32%), then those from 31 to 40 years old (31.3%). It can be seen that the respondents had fairly uniform participation in age categories, which provides a good foundation for further analysis.

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents ( $n = 300$ ).

Variables	Categories	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Gender	Male	180	60.0
	Female	120	40.0
Age	Up to 30 years old	96	32.0
	31–40 years old	94	31.3
	41 and higher	110	36.7
Level of education	Secondary school	210	70.0
	High school	47	15.7
	Bachelor degree	41	13.7
	MSc/PhD	2	0.7
Area of education	Hospitality industry, tourism	152	50.7
	economy, law, management	65	21.7
	food technology, agriculture, chemistry	25	8.3
	other areas	58	19.3
Work experience	0–5 years	81	27.0
	6–10 years	78	26.0
	11–15 years	53	17.7
	16 and more	88	29.3
Work experience in the facility	0–2 years	110	36.7
	3–5 years	86	28.7
	6 and more	104	34.7
Working position	Chef	63	21.0
	Deputy chef	105	35.0
	F&B manager	45	15.0
	Owner	87	29.0

The source: Authors' interpretation.

According to the level of education, the greatest proportion was respondents with a secondary school degree (70%), then respondents with higher education (15.7%), followed by respondents with a bachelor's degree (13.7%), while the smallest part belonged to those with MSc and PhD. A little more than half of the respondents (50.7%) stated that their area of education was the hospitality industry and tourism, while 21.7% stated economy, law, or management as their education area. Furthermore, 8.3% stated food technology, agriculture or chemistry, while all other areas made up 19.3%. According to total work experience, the respondents are divided into three categories. The first category, of five years of work experience, included 27% of the respondents; the second category included 26% of the respondents, with six to ten years of work experience. Lastly, the third category included 17.7% of the respondents, with 11–15 years of work experience. The category of 16 years of work experience or more included 29.3% of the respondents. According to the length of work experience in the facility they work in, the respondents are divided into three fairly even categories. Based on the results, the greatest participation belonged to

the respondents who work as deputy chefs (35%), then to facility owners (29%), and chefs (21%), while the smallest participation belonged to food and beverage managers (15%).

#### 4.2. Analysis of the Catering Facility Characteristics

Observing the characteristics of catering facilities they work in (Table 2), it could be seen that half of the respondents (50%) worked in à la carte restaurants, 24.7% in other types of restaurants, and only 2.7% in mass catering restaurants (restaurants that produce a large number of meals, such as worker, student, or hospital canteens, and similar facilities). In regard to the type of offer in a restaurant, more than half of the respondents (51%) have stated that the combined food offer (domestic, national, and international) is present in a restaurant they work in, 21.7% of the respondents marked the international food offer, 17.7% marked the domestic food offer, and 9.7% marked the national food offer. The international food offer is an offer of dishes that are part of the gastronomy culture of some nations but, due to their popularity worldwide, have received the epithet of international. According to the type of ownership, most respondents (90.3%) were employed in individual ownership restaurants, while 9.7% of the respondents were in franchise restaurants or corporative ownership restaurants. According to the number of meals produced daily, the largest proportion belonged to restaurants that produce 100 meals per day (53.7%), while the smallest number were those who produce over 1000 meals per day (0.3%). Most of the respondents (79.7%) stated that they work in restaurants located in city–urban areas, and a smaller number of the respondents (20.3%) work in restaurants located in the country, i.e., rural areas.

**Table 2.** Characteristics of catering facilities ( $n = 300$ ).

Variables	Categories	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Type of a facility	Mass catering restaurant	8	2.7
	À la carte restaurant	150	50.0
	Fast food restaurant	74	24.7
	Other types of restaurants	68	22.7
Type of offer	International food offer	65	21.7
	National food offer	29	9.7
	Domestic food offer	53	17.7
	Combined food offer	153	51.0
Type of ownership	Franchise/corporative ownership	29	9.7
	Individual ownership	271	90.3
Number of meals	100 meals per day	161	53.7
	From 100 to 300 meals per day	117	39.0
	From 300 to 1000 meals per day	21	7.0
	Over 1000 meals per day	1	0.3
Restaurant location	Urban/city	239	79.7
	Rural/countryside	61	20.3

The source: Authors' interpretation.

#### 4.3. Analysis of Characteristics of Traditional Food Products

The results of descriptive statistical analysis of the respondents about TFP characteristics (market, production, and technical characteristics) are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Descriptive analysis of TFP characteristics (5-point Likert scale).

	TFP Characteristics	Mean	SD
Market characteristics	Sensory quality (V1)	4.39	0.90
	Nutritional quality (V2)	4.06	0.94
	Uniqueness of the offer (V3)	4.02	0.95
	Market placement (V4)	4.01	1.07
	Menu diversity (V5)	4.24	0.93
Production characteristics	Familiarity with the producer(V6)	4.04	1.07
	Organic production (V7)	3.53	1.14
	Ecological production (V8)	3.81	1.12
	Local production (V9)	4.17	0.89
Technical characteristics	Freshness of products (V10)	4.58	0.77
	Preparation simplicity (V11)	4.11	0.98
	Familiarity with the production process (V12)	3.86	1.07
	Price (V13)	4.36	0.87
	Brand (V14)	3.47	1.25
	Seasonality (V15)	4.18	0.95

Source: Authors' interpretation.

Based on the results analyses of the market characteristics of TFPs, it can be seen that the respondents claimed that all characteristics are important, given that they agreed with the stated opinions. The highest number of the respondents stated that the sensory quality of a product (mean = 4.39) and menu diversity (mean = 4.24) are the most important. The results indicate that, among production characteristics, the most important characteristics are the freshness of a product (mean = 4.58) and local production (mean = 4.17), while the least important is organic production (mean = 3.53). As the most important technical characteristic, the respondents chose the price (mean = 4.36) and seasonality (mean = 4.18), while the least important was the brand (mean = 3.47).

#### 4.4. Analysis of the Age Influence on the Significance of Characteristics of Traditional Food Products

It was analyzed further whether differences between age groups existed in regard to TFP characteristics (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Kruskal–Wallis test of the difference between age groups and characteristics of TFP.

Statement	Mean			p-Value
	Up to 30 Years Old	31–40 Years Old	From 41 Year Old	
V1	4.208	4.255	4.664	0.001 *
V10	4.453	4.521	4.734	0.048 *
V13	4.147	4.277	4.618	0.001 *
V14	3.750	3.500	3.200	0.013 *

The source: Authors' interpretation. Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; the table shows only the results indicating statistical significance.

The results of the Kruskal–Wallis test showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the age categories of the respondents and their opinion about the sensory quality of TFP (V1), while the post-hoc test confirmed that there was a statistically significant difference between the respondents in the first age category and those who belong to the third age category ( $p = 0.001$ ); statistically significant difference was found between the respondents who were 31 to 40 years old and the group of respondents

older than 41 ( $p = 0.008$ ). Based on the arithmetic mean of responses acquired, the older respondents appreciated sensory quality as an important characteristic of TFP more. There were significant differences in the age groups of the respondents when talking about the freshness of the product (V10). The post-hoc test results showed that statistically significant differences exist only between the respondents who are up to 30 years old and the respondents older than 41 ( $p = 0.018$ ). Based on the results, the older respondents think that the freshness of the product is more important than younger respondents do. The price (V13) and brand (V14) are also characteristics of TFP that differ among different age groups of the respondents. There is a difference, both in the price and brand, between the first and third age groups ( $p = 0.001$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), while a significant difference in regard to the price is also seen between the second and third age groups. The arithmetic mean of the responses refers to the fact that the older respondents did not have a formed opinion about the significance of the brand, while the younger respondents were well-opinionated. On the contrary, the older respondents considered price a more important characteristic than the younger respondents.

#### 4.5. Analysis of Education Level Influence on Defining the Significance of Traditional Food Products Characteristics

In the following research stage, the difference between the level of education and respondents' opinions about TFP characteristics was analyzed (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Kruskal–Wallis test of differences between the level of education and TFP characteristics.

Statement	Mean				<i>p</i> -Value
	Secondary	High	Bachelor	MSc-PhD	
V1	4.486	4.234	4.146	4.000	0.010 *
V5	4.349	4.085	3.853	4.000	0.013 *
V6	4.144	3.808	3.732	4.000	0.041 *
V11	4.268	3.829	3.756	4.000	0.000 *
V13	4.474	4.149	4.000	4.000	0.000 *
V15	4.282	3.915	3.951	4.000	0.013 *

The source: Authors' interpretation. Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; the table shows only the results indicating statistical significance.

According to the results of Kruskal–Wallis test, there was a difference between the level of education and opinions of the respondents about the sensory quality of TFP (V1). The results of the post-hoc test of comparison of average values of the groups showed that there are statistically significant differences in opinions about the importance of sensory quality among the respondents who had a high school degree and those with a bachelor's degree ( $p = 0.018$ ), as well as among the respondents with a high school degree only and those with an MSc or PhD ( $p = 0.021$ ). Based on the values of the arithmetic mean, those who had a high school degree appreciated the sensory quality of the product more than those with a bachelor's degree. There was a statistically significant difference between levels of education and a respondents' opinion about menu diversity (V5), while the results of the post-hoc test showed that there were statistically significant differences between the respondents who are high school graduates and those who are bachelor graduates ( $p = 0.002$ ). The respondents with a bachelor's degree considered menu diversity as a less important characteristic than respondents with a high school degree. When it came to familiarity with the producer (V6), it was established that there was statistically significant differences between the respondents' level of education, and the results of the post-hoc test established that there was a statistically significant difference between the respondents with a high school degree and those with a bachelor degree ( $p = 0.035$ ). The simplicity of preparation (V11) is one of the characteristics of TFPs, and there were differences in the respondents' opinions about it in regards to their education level. In contrast, the biggest differences existed between those with high school degrees and those with bachelor's

degrees ( $p = 0.003$ ) and between those who graduated from high school and those with MScs or PhDs ( $p = 0.010$ ). Price (V13) and seasonality (V15) are characteristics of TFPs that were different in terms of respondents' education level. The biggest differences, both in price and seasonality, existed between high school graduates and bachelor graduates ( $p = 0.001$ ;  $p = 0.027$ ) and between the respondents with high school and those with tertiary education degrees ( $p = 0.005$ ;  $p = 0.020$ ). Based on the arithmetic mean of the responses for both price and seasonality, the respondents with high school degrees saw these two characteristics as more important, compared to respondents with a bachelor's degree.

#### 4.6. Analysis of a Working Position on Defining the Importance of TFP Characteristics

It was analyzed whether there was a difference between the working positions of the respondents and their opinions about TFP characteristics (Table 6), as shown in the text below.

**Table 6.** Kruskal–Wallis test of the difference between working positions of the respondents with regard to TFP characteristics.

Statement	Mean				<i>p</i> -Value
	Chef	Deputy Chef	Food and Beverage Manager	Owner	
V5	4.238	4.462	3.387	4.161	0.005 *
V8	3.381	4.048	3.711	3.563	0.021 *
V11	4.206	4.286	4.091	3.851	0.031 *
V13	4.397	4.509	4.044	4.322	0.044 *
V14	3.825	3.486	3.511	3.172	0.046 *
V15	4.302	4.375	3.978	3.978	0.009 *

The source: Authors' interpretation. Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; the table shows only the results indicating statistical significance.

According to the results of the Kruskal–Wallis test of group comparison, there were statistically significant differences with regard to the respondents' opinions about menu diversity (V5), while the results of the post-hoc test showed that there were statistically significant differences in respondents' opinions about menu diversity among respondents employed as food and beverage managers and those who worked as deputy chefs ( $p = 0.001$ ); furthermore, there were differences between the respondents who worked as deputy chefs and the facility owners ( $p = 0.009$ ), as well as between the respondents who were employed as managers and chefs ( $p = 0.032$ ).

According to values of arithmetic mean for menu diversity characteristics, the deputy chef respondents considered it to be an important characteristic in relation to the respondents who work in other positions. There was also a statistically significant difference based on the working positions of the respondents in relation to their opinion about ecological production (V8). The results of the post-hoc tests showed that there were statistically significant differences between the deputy chef respondents and the facility owners ( $p = 0.013$ ), namely, the deputy chef respondents considered ecological production to be a significant characteristic of TFPs. The simplicity of preparation (V11) is also one of the characteristics of TFPs, and respondents' opinions differed with regard to their working position in a restaurant. The biggest differences exist between the deputy chef respondents and the facility owners ( $p = 0.019$ ); namely, those who work as deputy chefs thought this was a significant characteristic.

The price (V13) is also one of the characteristics of TFP, and respondents' opinions differed with regard to their working position in a restaurant; the most significant differences exist between the deputy chef respondents and food and beverage managers ( $p = 0.005$ ), then between those who work as chefs and F&B managers ( $p = 0.026$ ). The statistically significant difference with regard to working positions is seen in the respondents' opinion

about a brand, while the results of the post-hoc test showed that there was a statistically significant difference in opinion on the brand between chef and facility owner respondents ( $p = 0.029$ ). Seasonality is also a characteristic of TFP where the respondents' opinions significantly differed in relation to their working position; it was established that statistically significant differences exist between the deputy chef respondents and the restaurant owners ( $p = 0.007$ ), then between those respondents who work as deputy chefs and food and beverage managers ( $p = 0.038$ ). If one perceives the values of arithmetic mean, it can be concluded that chefs give the greatest importance to seasonality as a TFP characteristic.

#### 4.7. Analysis of the Type of Gastronomic Offer on Defining the Significance of Traditional Food Products Characteristics

The text below analyzes whether there is a difference between types of restaurants' gastronomic offers with regard to the respondents' opinions about TFP characteristics (Table 7).

**Table 7.** Kruskal–Wallis test of differences in the type of gastronomic offer of restaurants with regard to characteristics of TFPs.

Statement	Mean				<i>p</i> -Value
	International Food Offer	National Food Offer	Domestic Food Offer	Combined Food Offer	
V1	4.154	4.517	4.604	4.392	0.007 *
V4	3.719	4.035	4.339	4.019	0.012 *
V5	3.937	4.482	4.339	4.281	0.029 *
V8	3.625	3.931	3.472	3.974	0.011 *

The source: Authors' interpretation. Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; the table shows only the results indicating statistical significance.

The results of the Kruskal–Wallis tests showed that there was a statistically significant difference in the type of gastronomic offer in restaurants where the respondents are employed and their opinion about TFP sensory quality (V1), while the post-hoc tests established that a statistically significant difference existed only between the respondents who were employed in restaurants with an international offer and those who worked in restaurants with a domestic food offer ( $p = 0.007$ ). Namely, according to the values of arithmetic mean, the respondents who employed in restaurants with domestic food offers appreciated the sensory quality more as a TFP characteristic. Market placement (V4) is one of the characteristics of TFP whose importance was perceived differently in relation to the gastronomic offer of restaurants that the respondents were employed in. The results of the post-hoc tests showed that statistically significant differences existed between the respondents employed in international food restaurants and those who worked in domestic food restaurants ( $p = 0.006$ ). The respondents employed in restaurants with international food offers considered this characteristic less important than respondents who worked in domestic food restaurants. Based on the Kruskal–Wallis test, it was established that there was a difference between the type of gastronomic offer in restaurants where the respondents were employed and their opinion about menu diversity (V5). The post-hoc analysis showed that there were statistically significant differences between the workers in international food restaurants and the workers of national food restaurants ( $p = 0.010$ ), and also between the workers of international food restaurants and the workers of domestic food restaurants ( $p = 0.028$ ). Ecological production (V8) was the only TFP characteristic that the respondents had statistically different opinions about with regard to the gastronomic offer of the restaurants they work for. The results of the post-hoc test showed there was a statistically significant difference between the respondents who work in combined food restaurants and those who work in domestic food restaurants ( $p = 0.003$ ). The respondents employed in domestic food restaurants consider this characteristic less important with regard to the respondents who work in combined food restaurants.

#### 4.8. Analysis of a Location of Catering Facilities on Defining The Significance of Traditional Food Products Characteristics

The Mann–Whitney test was used to establish whether there was a difference in the respondents' opinions about TFP between those who worked in urban restaurants and those who worked in rural area restaurants (Table 8).

**Table 8.** The Mann–Whitney test of differences in restaurants' location in regard to TFP characteristics.

Statement	Mean		p-Value
	Urban-City	Rural-Country	
V1	4.322	4.656	0.006 *
V4	3.958	4.229	0.044 *
V10	4.532	4.754	0.015 *
V13	4.021	4.525	0.042 *

The source: Authors' interpretation. Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; the table shows only the results indicating statistical significance.

The results of the Mann–Whitney test showed that the respondents employed in urban and rural areas had different opinions about the importance of sensory quality (V1); those who worked in rural areas consider sensory quality an important TFP characteristic compared to those who worked in urban areas. The results also showed that there are statistically significant differences in opinions between those who worked in urban and rural areas regarding the importance of market placement (V4); the residents of urban areas thought this feature is less important. The freshness of the product (V10) was one of the characteristics about which workers in urban and rural areas had significantly different opinions. Namely, those who worked in rural areas considered this characteristic more important than those who worked in urban areas. The results showed that the workers of urban and rural areas had significantly different opinions about another characteristic of TFP, the price (V13). Namely, employees in rural areas considered this characteristic more important than the respondents from urban areas.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. The Preferences of Characteristics of Traditional Food Products

The first research question (Q1) was: Which characteristics of TFP are important for selection and consumption in catering facilities? The research showed that the sensory quality of the product and menu diversity were important for the respondents. Former research has shown that sensory quality is an essential characteristic for the consumers when choosing a certain meal or product [27], which was proved by this research. Menu diversity is certainly one of the key factors used to attract customers of different tastes and gastronomic experiences [32]. The freshness of a product and local production are of utmost importance for caterers in Vojvodina. Frash et al. [48] confirmed in their research that freshness is one out of two characteristics that consumers are ready to pay for more. According to the data obtained, as Kumar et al. [44] stated, local products are seen as a significant advantage to catering facilities, which increases the value of the offer and business. It is surprising that organic production is less important, which, according to Aprile et al. [46], belongs to one of the most important components of ecological sustainability, in addition to economic and social care for consumers [39,46].

Observing technical characteristics of TFPs, price and seasonality stood out among the caterers. Caputo et al. [20] explained that the higher price of TFPs is one of the decisive factors when buying with regard to commercial products (Caputo et al., 2018). Seasonality, i.e., availability of the product during the year, is also an important characteristic because it affects the creation of the offer and planning of the meals that are produced from them. Interestingly, the least important characteristic of TFP was brand, even though researchers clearly stated that the brand helps products become a part of the consumers' choice [54].

### *5.2. The Influence of Socio-Demographic Characteristics on Defining the Importance of TFP Characteristics*

The second research question (Q2) was: Are there differences in perception of characteristics and consumption of TFP in catering facilities depending on the socio-demographic characteristics of the management? What are these differences? The results observed in terms of age, level of education, and working positions in restaurants were the characteristics that stand out. The research showed that, according to age groups, there are significant differences in sensory quality, the freshness of a product, and price, which were especially pronounced in older respondents, while the brand as an important feature is more expressed with younger respondents. Regarding the level of education, it was noticed that those with a high school degree only appreciated sensory quality and menu diversity more, compared to those with a bachelor's degree, which is surprising. One should also mention the simplicity of preparation, price, and seasonality as important differences in the response structure.

Chefs and deputy chefs are seen as potentially important partners in attempts to promote the food of certain places [60]. Observing differences in the response structure with regard to the job position of the respondents, opinions about menu diversity, ecological production, and simplicity of preparation were made. More precisely, deputy chefs consider them more important characteristics compared to the respondents who work in other positions. It is significant to mention price and brand as well, but also the fact that chefs give greater importance to seasonality as TFPs characteristic than other co-workers.

### *5.3. Influence of the Characteristics of Catering Facilities in Defining the Importance of Characteristics of Traditional Food Products*

The third research question (Q3) was: Are there differences in perception of characteristics and consumption of TFP in catering facilities depending on characteristics of the catering facility? What are those differences? Observing the response structure and characteristics of catering facilities, significant differences in type of gastronomic offer and the location of the facility were ascertained.

Significant differences are ascertained according to the type of gastronomic offer of the restaurant the respondents work in and their opinion of the sensory quality of TFP. The management sector of a domestic food restaurant appreciates sensory quality and market placement more. Significant differences were ascertained in regard to menu diversity and ecological production. Surprisingly, the respondents employed in domestic food restaurants considered the ecological approach less important than respondents who are employed in restaurants with combined food offers.

The respondents employed in urban and rural areas had different opinions about the importance of sensory quality. The employees in rural areas consider sensory quality to be an important characteristic of TFP, unlike the management sector in urban areas. Similar differences were noticed with market placement, the freshness of the product, and price. The results show that for the employees in the hospitality industry in rural areas, these characteristics are more important when choosing TFP in regard to the management sector of the urban regions. These are positive results for rural areas because catering facilities help revitalize the economy, stimulate tourism, and promote sustainable development of a country's gastronomic tourism [28,61].

## **6. Conclusions**

Previous research has shown that the sustainability of TFP consumption is conditioned by the purchase of these products in catering facilities, which was the basis for creating and conducting this research. By conducting research among 300 catering facilities in the territory of Vojvodina, it was concluded that there are differences in the perception of TFP features by management, but that there are also certain differences in recognizing important features depending on the characteristics of catering facilities. By conducting the research among the management of catering facilities in Vojvodina, it can be concluded



that sensory quality and menu diversity are important characteristics in the selection of these products. The freshness of products and local production, price, and seasonality are highlighted among the features. By observing the characteristics of the respondents (chefs, deputy chefs, food and beverage managers, and owners), particularly their age, level of education, and of course, job position, it was noticed that the response structure was directed towards the sustainability of consumption of these products, which also affects touristic and catering offer. Sensory quality, product freshness, and price were more important to the older respondents, while brand was an important feature for the younger respondents. The respondents with high school educations only valued the sensory quality and variety of the menu more than those respondents who graduated from university, as well as the simplicity of preparation, price, and seasonality. The variety of the menu, the ecological production process, and the simplicity of preparation were the standout features for the deputy chefs. The chefs attached the greatest importance to seasonality, compared to other colleagues.

The research implemented in Vojvodina clearly stated that the type of gastronomic offer, observing the origin of recipes and meals that are offered in catering facilities (international food offer, national food offer, combined food offer), together with the location of the facility (urban/ rural) significantly influence the recognition of certain characteristics of TFPs, and therefore the sustainability of consumption in the entire chain. Catering facilities from rural areas attach much greater importance to sensory characteristics of food, freshness, price, and placement on the market than facilities from urban areas.

Research limitations refer to acquiring data about the exact quantity of purchase and consumption of a TFP in its catering facility's offer. These limitations are a consequence of a lack of mechanisms for precise control of the purchase and consumption of TFPs inside the facilities. There are also limitations of types of TFP that are being or are not being purchased for its catering facilities from different groups of agricultural, food, and gastronomic products, i.e., foodstuffs of vegetable and animal origin. Further research would provide additional value to TFPs in Vojvodina by conducting qualitative research on the management of catering facilities. Qualitative research could provide more detailed data about the reasons for food choices, as well as other valuable data related to procurement, consumption, and sustainability in the catering offer.

This survey would also be important if conducted among consumers inside catering facilities. Survey research would establish the main reasons for their facility choice and food choice from the facility's offer, as well as detailed focus and importance on TFP.

The theoretical implications of this work are reflected in obtaining information from the researched and presented literature about the key characteristics of TFP for their procurement and consumption, that is, participation and recognition in the hospitality market. Practical implications of this paper's results are reflected in the acquired data that give insight into the significance of certain TFP characteristics, especially when seen from the socio-demographic point of view of the respondents and characteristics of catering facilities. The results shown can help the improvement of the TFP market, primarily in the territory of Vojvodina and the surrounding area, thus supporting the creation of sustainability in the entire supply and consumption chain, which can be applicable in other areas that have not utilized fully the potential of their TFPs, as well as in TFP's marketing activities.

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