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Article

Enhancing Regional Tourism Potential through Gastronomic Festivals and Events: A Case Study of the Samarkand Region

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Abstract: This article provides a theoretical and empirical analysis of the role of gastronomic festivals and events in enhancing regional tourism potential, using the case of the Samarkand region. The aim of the study is to reveal the mechanisms through which gastronomic events influence the local economy, the socio-cultural environment and the tourist brand of the region, and to develop recommendations for improving the system of organising such events. The study employs analysis of open statistical data and official sources, a case study (the "Samarkand Osh" gastronomic festival), comparative analysis and SWOT analysis. The findings show that gastronomic festivals enhance regional tourism potential through four interconnected channels — economic, socio-cultural, branding and infrastructural mechanisms — smoothing the seasonality of tourist flows and increasing average tourist expenditure and length of stay. The author proposes a conceptual model for improving the mechanisms of organising gastronomic festivals, which can be applied in the practice of planning and managing gastronomic tourism in the Samarkand region.

Keywords: gastronomic tourism, gastronomic festival, event tourism, regional tourism potential, Samarkand region, "Samarkand Osh" festival, place branding, tourism exports, national culinary heritage.

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1. Introduction

In the 21st century, tourism has become not only one of the leading sectors of the global economy but also an important factor in the competition between regions. In recent decades, tourist demand has changed significantly: a shift is observed from traditional "sightseeing" tourism towards "experiential" tourism based on feeling, participating and gaining experiences. It is precisely within this process that event tourism and gastronomic tourism have emerged as the most rapidly developing directions attracting both scholarly and practical attention. As D. Getz argues, festivals and special events are a strategic tool for attracting tourist flows, reducing seasonality and shaping the image of a destination [1], [2]. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), in turn, recognises gastronomy as a tourism resource that showcases cultural heritage and regional identity and generates direct income for local economies [3].

Food and national cuisine are integral parts of the tourist experience. C. M. Hall and L. Sharples interpret gastronomic tourism not as mere eating but as the consumption of experiences based on learning about a product's origin, preparation and cultural context [4]. Using the case of

the Cornwall region (United Kingdom), S. Everett and C. Aitchison substantiate that food festivals serve to preserve regional identity, support local producers and promote sustainable development [5]. In this sense, a gastronomic festival is a complex phenomenon that combines the features of both event tourism and gastronomic tourism.

Tourism in Uzbekistan has entered an unprecedented growth phase in recent years. While 2.7 million foreign tourists visited the country in 2017, this indicator reached 6.7 million in 2019 and 10.1 million in 2024 [9], [17]. Tourism services exports exceeded 3 billion US dollars in 2024, and the sector's share in GDP approached 5%. The "Uzbekistan – 2030" strategy defines tourism as a strategic sector of the economy and establishes its diversification — that is, the development of gastronomic, ecological and event tourism alongside cultural and pilgrimage tourism — as a priority task [12].

The mechanisms of organising gastronomic tourism are understood as an interconnected set of organisational and economic tools covering the planning, financing, marketing, coordination of participants and evaluation of the effectiveness of festivals and events. The insufficient development of precisely these mechanisms is the reason why, in many regions, rich gastronomic resources are not fully transformed into tourism products. Indeed, a festival does not generate tourist flow by itself; only through careful planning, quality service, consistent marketing and cooperation among stakeholders does it become a tool that enhances regional tourism potential. Therefore, the systematic organisation and management of gastronomic festivals is today one of the most pressing scientific and practical problems of Uzbekistan's tourism.

Samarkand region holds a special place in this process. Samarkand, a pearl of the Great Silk Road, hosted the 25th session of the UNWTO General Assembly in 2023 and was recognised as a "World Capital of Cultural Tourism" [8], [13]. At the same time, Samarkand possesses a rich culinary heritage shaped over centuries — Samarkand plov (osh), Samarkand bread, tandoor dishes, dried fruits and winemaking traditions. This heritage forms a solid resource base for gastronomic tourism [6]. Nevertheless, the region's tourism still relies mainly on architectural monuments, i.e., "object tourism"; the mechanisms for systematically organising gastronomic festivals and events have not yet fully taken shape.

It should be noted that Samarkand plov, together with other Uzbek plov varieties, has been recognised worldwide within the value "Palov culture and traditions", which was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2016. This creates a solid cultural and legal foundation for promoting Samarkand's cuisine internationally and transforming it into a tourism product through festival events.

The first-ever "Samarkand Osh" gastronomic festival held on 1–3 August 2025 [14], [15], along with plans to organise events such as "Navruz Gastro", the "Kebab Festival" and the "Silk Road Bazaar", are among the initial steps aimed at filling this very gap. However, the long-term effectiveness of these initiatives depends on how well the mechanisms for organising, financing, marketing and monitoring them are designed.

The aim of this study is to substantiate, both theoretically and empirically, the role of gastronomic festivals and events in enhancing regional tourism potential, and to develop scientifically grounded recommendations for improving the mechanisms of their organisation. The scientific novelty of the study lies in the fact that the impact of gastronomic festivals on regional tourism potential is modelled as a holistic mechanism — through four interconnected channels — and enriched with empirical evidence based on the most recent open data of Samarkand region. The practical significance of the work is that the proposed recommendations can be applied in the activities of regional tourism development bodies, event organisers and local entrepreneurship.

The theoretical foundations of the concept of event tourism are well elaborated in the international scholarly literature. D. Getz defines event tourism as "the systematic planning, development and marketing of festivals and special events as tourist attractions" and classifies events by scale into mega-events, hallmark events (which become symbols of a region), major and

local events [2]. In their later research, D. Getz and S. Page summarise the development of scholarly knowledge on event tourism, placing particular emphasis on the issues of destination competitiveness, collective identity and the measurement of economic impact [1]. These approaches make it possible to view a festival not merely as a cultural phenomenon but as a managed tourism product.

In the field of gastronomic tourism, the conceptual framework proposed by C. M. Hall and L. Sharples is of great importance. By classifying tourists according to their level of interest in food, they show that for the "gastronomic tourist", food becomes the primary motivation for choosing a destination [4]. UNWTO's guidelines for the development of gastronomy tourism recommend festivals and gastronomic events as effective tools for promoting local products, developing rural areas and preserving cultural heritage [3]. The empirical study by S. Everett and C. Aitchison demonstrates that food festivals play a positive role in the local community's sense of identity and in strengthening local economic chains [5]. These works illuminate not only the economic but also the socio-cultural function of gastronomic festivals.

In the studies of Uzbek scholars, gastronomic tourism has begun to be examined as a relatively new but rapidly developing direction. Analysing the historical roots and cultural-economic significance of Uzbek national dishes, M. Yolchiyeva and A. Yoldoshev argue that promoting the country's culture through dishes such as plov, manti, lagman and bread forms the core of gastronomic tourism, and they propose shaping each region's cuisine as a separate brand [6]. A. Eshtaev's monograph comprehensively studies Uzbekistan's tourism potential and its development prospects, substantiating the need to diversify the tourism product [11].

Among the works devoted to tourism in Samarkand region, the study by N. Rahimova, N. Mansurova and Z. Raximov, "Analysis of the tourist potential of Samarkand region", holds an important place; it assesses the region's natural, historical-cultural and infrastructural resources and identifies the factors for increasing tourist flow [7]. G. Norbutayeva describes the process of Samarkand acquiring the status of "World Capital of Cultural Tourism", emphasising the city's transformation into an international tourist centre and the significant role of major international events in this [8]. D. Akhmedov and Y. Raximberdiyev describe the "new era" of Uzbekistan's tourism, analysing the record indicators of 2024 and infrastructure reforms [9], while G. Sodiqova substantiates the need to study the experience of foreign countries — including France's cultural and gastronomic tourism model — within the framework of the tourism development strategy [10].

The analysis of the existing literature shows that international studies have thoroughly elaborated the theoretical foundations of event and gastronomic tourism, whereas local studies have mainly examined the general potential of gastronomic tourism, national dishes and the cultural tourism of Samarkand city. However, the specific role of gastronomic festivals and events in enhancing regional tourism potential, their impact mechanisms and the system for organising them have not been sufficiently studied empirically and systematically in the case of Samarkand region. This study is aimed at filling precisely this scientific gap.

2. Materials and Methods

The study is based on a descriptive-analytical design that combines qualitative and quantitative methods. Such an approach makes it possible to assess the impact of gastronomic festivals on regional tourism potential comprehensively, through both numerical indicators and substantive description.

2.1 Data sources

All empirical data used in the study were obtained from open (officially published) sources. These include the reports of the Tourism Committee and the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan [17], the publications of the Samarkand Regional Statistics Department on

tourism indicators [16], government regulatory documents [12], [13], materials of the official media on festivals [14], [15], and relevant scientific articles and monographs [1]–[11].

2.2 Research methods

The following methods were used in the work: (1) statistical-economic analysis — studying the dynamics and growth rates of tourist flow and tourism exports; (2) the case study method — an in-depth analysis of the "Samarkand Osh" gastronomic festival held in 2025; (3) comparative analysis — comparing the gastronomic-festival experience of France, Italy and other countries with the conditions of Samarkand; (4) a systemic-structural approach — expressing the relationship between festivals and regional tourism potential in the form of a mechanism model; (5) SWOT analysis — identifying the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the region's gastronomic-festival potential.

2.3 Limitations of the study

The analysis relies mainly on secondary (official statistical and documentary) data. Since some gastronomic festivals (for example, "Samarkand Osh") were organised for the first time in 2025, the possibility of fully quantifying their long-term economic impact is limited. Therefore, the impact of the festivals was assessed through qualitative indicators and indirect proxies (tourist flow, average expenditure, media coverage). These limitations can be overcome in future studies through surveys and field observations.

3. Results

3.1 Gastronomic and festival potential of Samarkand region

The gastronomic potential of Samarkand region consists of three layers: (a) tangible heritage — Samarkand plov, Samarkand bread, tandoor meat, halva, dried fruits and winemaking products; (b) intangible heritage — food preparation rituals, hospitality traditions and family table culture; (c) regional identity — a unique flavour palette formed from the fusion of Persian, Arab and Turkic influences [6]. These resources can be transformed into tourism products through festivals and events. Table 1 systematises the main gastronomic and gastronomy-related festivals and events that are held or planned in the region.

The region's gastronomic diversity is clearly manifested at the district level: Urgut stands out for its bazaar, green tea traditions and national sweets; Kattakurgan and Payariq for their agricultural products and various types of bread; and the foothill areas for honey, dried fruits and dairy products. These local specificities make it possible to create a separate gastronomic event for each district and to combine them into a single regional route. However, so far these resources exist mostly in an unorganised, fragmented state, and the potential to transform them into an integrated tourism product through a system of festivals has not been fully harnessed.

Table 1. Major gastronomic festivals and events in Samarkand region

No.	Festival / event	Time and place	Main content	Scale
1	"Samarkand Osh" gastronomic festival	1–3 August 2025, "Boqiy Shahar" complex	Osh masters' competition, master classes, preparation of 7 tons of plov, concert programme	200+ osh masters, foreign chefs
2	"Navruz Gastro" festival	March, Samarkand city	Spring national dishes (sumalak, green somsa), combined with Navruz celebrations	Local and international
3	"Kebab Festival"	Planned, Samarkand city	National and regional kebab varieties, street food	Regional

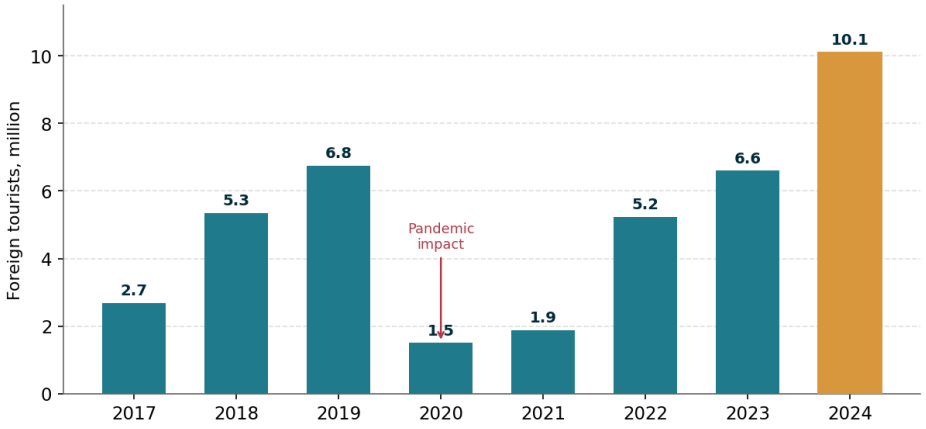
No.	Festival / event	Time and place	Main content	Scale
4	"Silk Road Bazaar" international festival	Planned, Samarkand	Crafts and gastronomy, exhibition of Silk Road dishes	International
5	International Balloon Festival (gastro component)	June 2025, Urgut district	Balloon show combined with a gastronomic exhibition and crafts	International
6	Winemaking and viticulture events	Seasonal, Samarkand (Khovrenko traditions)	Tasting of wine and grape products, degustation routes	Local / niche

Source: compiled by the author based on data of the Tourism Committee and official media [14], [15].

3.2 Dynamics of tourism in Uzbekistan and Samarkand region

To correctly assess the significance of gastronomic festivals, the general tourist context of the region is analysed first. At the national level, the foreign tourist flow increased almost fourfold between 2017 and 2024; after the sharp decline of 2020–2021 associated with the pandemic, the sector recovered rapidly and reached a historic record of 10.1 million tourists in 2024 (Figure 1) [9], [17].

Figure 1. Dynamics of foreign tourist arrivals to Uzbekistan (2017–2024)



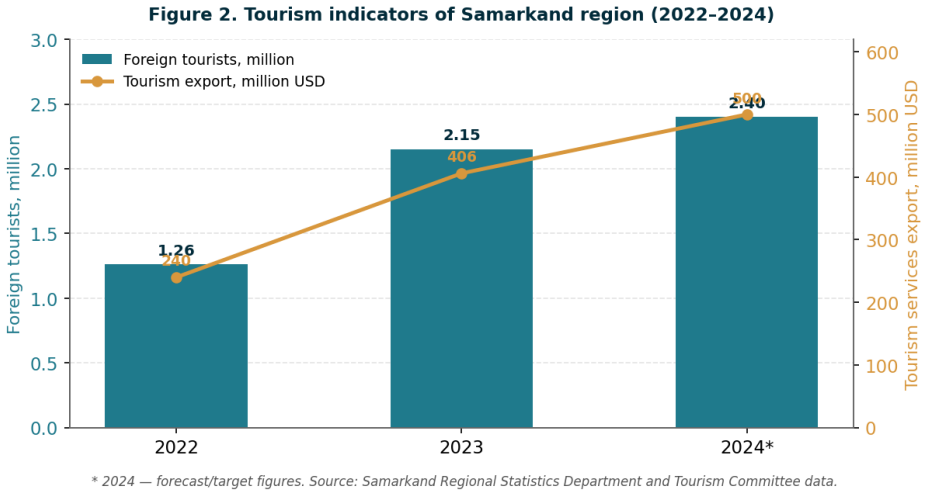
Source: compiled by the author based on data of the Tourism Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Samarkand region is one of the pillars of the country's tourism. The number of foreign tourists visiting the region in 2023 grew 1.7 times within a year, reaching 2.15 million; the number of domestic tourists reached 4.5 million, and tourism services exports amounted to 406 million US dollars [7], [16]. According to the target indicators for 2024, the number of foreign tourists was set to reach 2.4 million and exports 500 million dollars (Figure 2, Table 2).

Table 2. Key tourism indicators of Samarkand region (2022–2024)

Indicator	2022	2023	2024*
Foreign tourists, million	1.26	2.15	2.40
Domestic tourists, million	≈2.6	4.50	≈5.0
Tourism services export, million USD	≈240	406	500
Foreign tourist growth (year-on-year)	–	1.7×	≈1.1×

** 2024 — target/forecast figures. Source: based on data of the Samarkand Regional Statistics Department and the Tourism Committee [7], [16].*



These indicators confirm that tourist demand in the region is high and growing steadily. At the same time, the majority of tourists visit with short (1–2 day) programmes limited to monuments such as Registan, Bibi-Khanym and Shah-i-Zinda. This calls for additional tools to extend the length of stay and increase average expenditure, including gastronomic festivals and events.

3.3 The "Samarkand Osh" festival: a case study

The "Samarkand Osh" gastronomic festival, held for the first time on 1–3 August 2025 at the "Boqiy Shahar" (Eternal City) complex, was an important step towards institutionalising festival tourism in the region. The event was organised on the initiative of the Tourism Committee specifically to develop gastronomic tourism [14], [15]. More than 200 osh masters competed at the festival; master classes by renowned chefs and exhibitions of crafts and desserts were held, and the programme was enriched with concerts by Uzbek pop stars. Particular attention was drawn by the participation of foreign chefs and the preparation of 7 tons of Samarkand plov at the "Boqiy Shahar" complex.

Analysis of the case shows that the festival simultaneously performed several functions: showcasing the gastronomic brand (Samarkand plov), engaging local chefs and entrepreneurs, promoting the region through media coverage, and creating a new experience for tourists unrelated to monuments. The declaration of the festival as "an important step in promoting Uzbekistan as a centre of gastronomic tourism" [15] demonstrates its strategic significance. At the same time, aspects such as the event's one-off character, the ticketing system and insufficient international marketing indicate the need to improve it.

In international practice, festivals based precisely on such a signature dish tend to become the core of a region's brand — Germany's Oktoberfest, Spain's La Tomatina, or various wine and coffee festivals are examples. Such events are repeated annually on a specific date, planned in advance, promoted internationally and attract hundreds of thousands of tourists. The "Samarkand Osh" festival, with its scale (over 200 masters, 7 tons of plov) and unique cultural content, also has the potential to become such a hallmark event. For this, the event must not remain a one-off campaign but be turned into a sustainable tradition, a permanent event in the region's annual tourism calendar.

3.4 Impact dimensions of gastronomic festivals

Summarising the results of the study, the impact of gastronomic festivals on regional tourism potential can be systematised along four dimensions (Table 3). These impact dimensions are interconnected and together increase the tourist attractiveness and competitiveness of the region.

Table 3. Impact matrix of gastronomic festivals

Impact dimension	Manifestation	Assessment indicators
Economic	Growth of tourist spending, income of small businesses and artisans, new jobs, demand for the local food chain	Average expenditure, number of visitors, employed workforce, revenue
Socio-cultural	Preservation and promotion of national culinary heritage, participation and self-identity of the local community, intergenerational knowledge transfer	Number of participating masters, heritage elements, community engagement
Branding (image)	Forming the region's image as a "land of gastronomy", coverage in media and social networks, destination recognition	Media mentions, social media reach, brand awareness
Infrastructure	Hotel occupancy, demand for transport and catering services, development of festival venues and logistics	Hotel occupancy, volume of services, investments

Source: author's elaboration based on theoretical analysis and case study results [1], [3], [5].

An important aspect is that gastronomic festivals make it possible to smooth the seasonality of tourist flows. Traditionally, the tourist flow to Samarkand is high in spring and autumn; by scheduling festivals in the summer or winter months, demand can be stimulated even in the "low season". The holding of the "Samarkand Osh" festival in August corresponds precisely to this strategic logic.

4. Discussion

The results of the study confirm the need to view gastronomic festivals not as random cultural events but as a strategic tool for managing regional tourism potential. Based on the synthesis of theoretical analysis and empirical evidence, the author proposes a conceptual model of the mechanism of gastronomic festivals' impact on regional tourism potential (Figure 3).

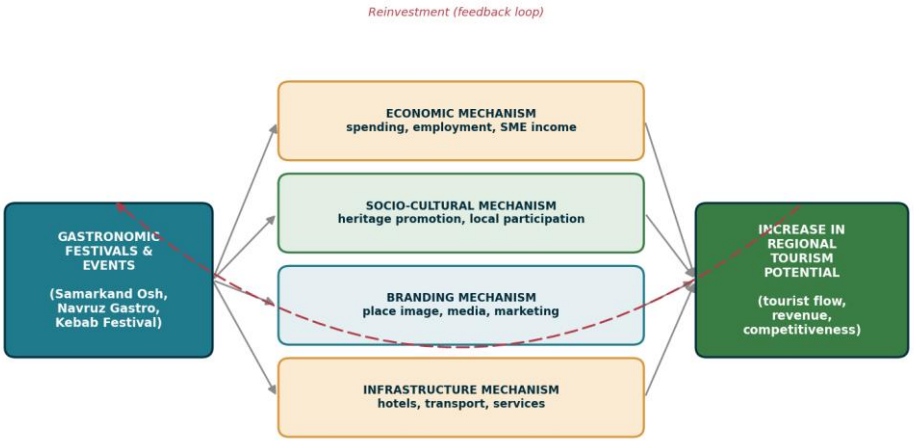


Figure 3. Mechanism of gastronomic festivals' impact on regional tourism potential

According to the model, gastronomic festivals and events lead to an increase in regional tourism potential through four interconnected mechanisms — economic, socio-cultural, branding and infrastructural. This process is not linear: the additional income and tourist flow generated are channelled, through reinvestment, into improving the quality and scale of the festivals; that is, a positive feedback loop emerges in the system. It is precisely this feedback loop that forms the basis

for the emergence of hallmark events (festivals that become symbols of a region) [1], [2].

The results obtained are consistent with international experience. As G. Sodiqova notes, France's "cultural and gastronomic tourism" strategy is based on integrating tourism with culture, history and gastronomy; the regularly held "gastronomy weeks" and wine festivals have turned regions — especially small towns and villages — into tourist centres [10]. The conclusions of S. Everett and C. Aitchison on Cornwall also show that food festivals strengthen local identity and retain economic benefits within the region [5]. This experience is highly relevant for Samarkand, since each district of the region (Urgut, Payariq, Kattakurgan and others) has its own distinctive dish and product that can be combined into festival routes.

At the same time, maintaining balance is important in developing gastronomic festivals. Excessive commercialisation of heritage creates the risk of losing the authenticity of dishes and creating a "staged" culture. Sustainable gastronomic tourism requires engaging the local community not merely as spectators but as key participants and stakeholders. Otherwise, the benefits derived from the festival may flow out of the region and local residents may become alienated [5]. Thus, the mechanism for organising festivals must be based on the principles of social justice and the protection of heritage authenticity.

Digital technologies are an important tool for increasing the effectiveness of gastronomic festivals. Social networks, influencer marketing and multilingual online platforms make it possible to reach an international audience; booking systems and geolocation data provide a basis for measuring the flow of visitors and their expenditure in real time. Such digital tools serve to create a monitoring system that assesses the impact of festivals in an evidence-based manner and improves the quality of organisational decisions [10].

The results obtained are also consistent with state policy. The "Uzbekistan – 2030" strategy defines the diversification of the tourism product and the development of regional tourism as priority tasks [12]. Organising gastronomic festivals within a tourism cluster — uniting government bodies, businesses, educational institutions and the local community around a common goal — can be an effective mechanism for implementing this strategic direction. Here, Samarkand's status as a "World Capital of Cultural Tourism" and its experience of hosting major international events create additional institutional advantages [8], [13].

To view these problems and opportunities holistically, the gastronomic-festival potential of Samarkand region was assessed through a SWOT analysis (Table 4).

Table 4. SWOT analysis of the gastronomic-festival potential of Samarkand region

Strengths (S)	**Weaknesses (W)**
– Rich and unique culinary heritage (Samarkand plov, bread, tandoor dishes) – "World Capital of Cultural Tourism" status and high recognition – Stable and growing tourist flow – Developed hotel and transport infrastructure	– Lack of systematisation and coordination in organising festivals – Weak international marketing and digital promotion – Absence of a statistical-monitoring system to measure impact – Issues of service standards and qualified personnel
Opportunities (O)	**Threats (T)**
– "Uzbekistan – 2030" strategy and state support – Growing global demand for gastronomic tourism – Opportunity to create inter-district festival routes and clusters – Promotion through digital platforms (e.g., gastro-route apps)	– Regional competition (Bukhara, Khiva, neighbouring countries) – Seasonality of tourist flow and external economic factors – Risk of heritage "commercialisation" and loss of authenticity – Excessive dependence on one-off events

Source: author's analysis [7], [9], [10], [16].

The results of the SWOT analysis show that Samarkand region has sufficient resources and an institutional foundation to develop gastronomic festival tourism, but realising this potential requires systematising the organisational mechanisms and eliminating the weaknesses

5. Conclusion

The conducted study substantiated the important and multifaceted role of gastronomic festivals and events in enhancing the regional tourism potential of Samarkand region. The theoretical analysis showed the need to interpret festivals as managed tourism products that lie at the intersection of event and gastronomic tourism. The empirical analysis found that the region's tourist demand is high and growing steadily, but tourism relies mainly on short-term sightseeing of monuments. The "Samarkand Osh" festival case confirmed that gastronomic events can soften this constraint, enriching the tourist experience, reducing seasonality and strengthening the region's brand.

The main scientific result of the study is a conceptual model showing that the impact of gastronomic festivals on regional tourism potential is realised through four interconnected mechanisms (economic, socio-cultural, branding and infrastructural) and a positive feedback loop. This model can serve as a practical tool for planning gastronomic festivals and assessing their effectiveness.

In order to improve the mechanisms of organising gastronomic festivals and events, the following recommendations were developed:

1. A unified festival calendar and cluster. It is necessary to develop an annual gastronomic festival calendar at the regional level and to establish a gastronomic tourism cluster that unites government bodies, entrepreneurs, hotels and the local community.

2. Forming a regional brand. Create a unified "Samarkand — a land of gastronomy" brand, turn dishes such as "Samarkand Osh" into a hallmark of the region and promote them at the international level.

3. Digital marketing and festival routes. Promote festivals through social networks, a multilingual web platform and gastronomic-route applications; create "flavour routes" that combine the dishes of the districts (Urgut, Kattakurgan, Payariq).

4. Public-private partnership and financing. Use a public-private partnership model to sustainably finance festivals and introduce incentive mechanisms for local entrepreneurs.

5. Monitoring and statistics system. Establish a system of indicators (visits, expenditure, employment, media coverage) that measures the economic and social impact of festivals, which will enable evidence-based decision-making.

6. Personnel and preserving authenticity. Train qualified personnel in the fields of culinary arts and gastronomic tourism, while documenting traditional recipes and rituals in order to preserve the authenticity of the heritage.

The consistent implementation of these recommendations will transform gastronomic festival tourism in Samarkand region into a systematic network, serving to further enhance regional tourism potential, increase tourism exports and pass on the national culinary heritage to future generations. In future studies, it is advisable to carry out a quantitative validation of the proposed model by conducting surveys among festival participants and tourists.

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