



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



Gastronomy as a driver of cultural entrepreneurship in the outer islands of the southern Aegean: The case of Rhodes, Kos, Kalymnos, Astypalaia, and Karpathos

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Abstract

This study examines the role of gastronomy as a lever for cultural entrepreneurship in the remote islands of the South Aegean—Rhodes, Kos, Kalymnos, Astypalaia, and Karpathos. The aim is to highlight gastronomy as a strategic tool for strengthening local economies, enhancing tourism development, and fostering sustainable entrepreneurial initiatives. Using a quantitative research approach, the study records tourists' preferences for gastronomic travel, existing entrepreneurial activity, and the prospects for developing new business opportunities that capitalize on local gastronomic heritage. The findings indicate a growing interest in gastronomic tourism, particularly on islands such as Kalymnos and Kos, while also underscoring the need for targeted promotion policies, stronger collaborations between local producers and tourism enterprises, and enhanced digital promotion strategies. Overall, the study demonstrates that gastronomy can function as a catalyst for the sustainable development of remote island destinations, reinforcing local identity and improving the competitiveness of tourism-related businesses.

Keywords: Cultural tourism; Gastronomy tourism; Cultural entrepreneurship; Sustainable development; Island destinations; Cultural heritage

1. Introduction

Gastronomy constitutes a powerful medium for fostering and strengthening social relationships, as shared food consumption in specific places represents a fundamental social practice embedded in various cultural events and social interactions. Beyond the act of cooking, gastronomy encompasses the complex relationship between culture and food, as well as the ways in which consumers actively participate in the gastronomic experience, integrating art and science with a focus on aesthetic and sensory pleasure (Aggelopoulou, 2022).

Gastronomic tourism, as a form of alternative tourism and a subcategory of cultural tourism, is increasingly recognized as a significant driver of local development (Efthimiou, 2020). Tourists engaging in this type of travel seek local flavors, participate in gastronomy-related activities, and explore the history and traditions of destinations, thereby strengthening their connection with local culture while counteracting the distancing effects of modern technology (Manola & Koufadakakis, 2020; Manola & Palanta, 2020). Common activities include visits to vineyards, local production facilities, and cheese-making units, as well as participation in cultural events featuring regional food and beverages (Maniou, 2024; Maniou, Mitoula & Manola, 2024; Maniou et al., 2025). These experiences allow tourists to deepen their understanding of local culinary heritage while enhancing community engagement and supporting the preservation of cultural traditions (Maniou et al., 2024c; Maniou et al., 2024d).

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The tourism sector's competitive nature requires entrepreneurs to develop strategies that enhance profitability and customer satisfaction (Manola, 2022). Tourism enterprises constitute a sustainable source of revenue for the Greek economy (Stefanakis, 2022), and entrepreneurship in tourism is closely linked to innovation, which entails creating products and services that stand out in content, production, and distribution to better serve both current and potential customers (Vlachakis, 2022; Noutsos, 2022).

Gastronomy can act as a strategic tool for tourism development, connecting the cultural identity of destinations with sustainable business activities and providing unique experiences that boost the appeal of islands and strengthen the local economy (Manola, 2022; Stefanakis, 2022; Maniou et al., 2024d). The integration of technological tools and digital platforms enhances the promotion of local products, while cultural and gastronomic festivals create opportunities for cultural entrepreneurship (Maniou & Mitoula, 2025; Maniou et al., 2024c).

Local Cuisine & Products of Rhodes, Kos, Kalymnos, Astypalaia & Karpathos		
Island	Key Local Cuisine	Main Products / Ingredients
 Ródos	Traditional dishes with olive oil, vegetables, legumes, seafood, meat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wine Thyme honey Traditional sweets & baked goods 
 Kos	Mediterranean dishes with fresh vegetables and cheeses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Krasotyri (local cheese) Honey Olive oil 
 Kalymnos	Seafood, local cheeses, citrus-based products	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thyme honey Kopanisti & Mizithra cheeses Local sweet wine "Anama" 
 Kalymnos	Seafood, local cheeses, citrus-based products	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thyme honey Mizithra & Kopanisti cheeses Fresh fish & seafood 
 Astypalaia	Combination of Cypriot & Dodecanese cuisine, seafood, meat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Olive oil Grapes & local wines Macarunes (traditional) Honey 
 Karpathos	Local dishes based on olive oil, legumes, pasta, traditional pastries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Olive oil Grapes & local wines Macarunes (traditional pasta) Honey Choussu Traditional bread 

Figure 1 Local Cuisine & Products

Recent studies further demonstrate the broad potential of cultural entrepreneurship in tourism. Maniou et al. (2025d) show how painting heritage in Athens can be leveraged for cultural tourism, while Pagkalos et al. (2025e) highlight the contribution of literary festivals to mental health and cultural development in Italy and Spain. Maniou et al. (2025f) present literary parks in Europe as entrepreneurial models of cultural tourism, emphasizing innovation in heritage management. Studies by Maniou et al. (2025g-h) illustrate the historical interplay between medicine, civilization, and literature, demonstrating how diverse cultural resources can be mobilized for educational, experiential, and entrepreneurial purposes. (Manola, 2024)

Altogether, the literature confirms that gastronomy, culture, and entrepreneurship are deeply interconnected, supporting sustainable development, enhancing local identity, and providing visitors with immersive experiences that combine tradition, innovation, and cultural enrichment (Maniou, Mitoula & Kostakis, 2024; Maniou et al., 2025d-h).

Lastly, we emphasize the significance of digital technologies in the field of education as well as for training and teaching cultural entrepreneurship. ICTs facilitate education for all, provide new ways to educate instructors effectively, enhance knowledge retention, promote teamwork, increase transparency, develop learner-centered approaches, develop innovative teaching strategies, and speed up knowledge acquisition. Additionally, virtualization, mobilization, artificial intelligence, and new learning settings and worlds to support educational activities and techniques and offer new

instruments for representing knowledge. In particular, ICTs are highly effective and productive in entrepreneurship training, facilitating and improving assessment, intervention, and educational procedures through mobile devices that spread educational activities everywhere [21-22] and through a variety of ICT applications that are fundamental to education [23-28]. While games change education into a multimodal, amiable, and pleasurable interaction [31-32], the use of AI, STEM, and robotics raises educational procedures to new levels of adaptation, invention, and performance [29-30]. Furthermore, the adoption, development, and integration of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and emotional intelligence cultivation [33-38] places mental skills at the center of educational procedures and policies and speeds up and improves educational practices and outcomes even further, particularly in business and cultural entrepreneur training.

2. Opportunities for cultural and gastronomic entrepreneurship

- Gastronomic festivals and events: Promotion of local cuisine and traditional products through themed festivals that attract visitors and strengthen cultural identity.
- Tourism experience packages (Wine & Food Tours): Creating comprehensive experiences that combine gastronomy, local products, and cultural activities, enhancing authenticity and sustainable development.
- International promotion of local products: Promotion of local production in international markets and events, increasing the extroversion and recognition of products.
- Support for sustainable and remote entrepreneurship: Development of actions that combine economic sustainability, environmental protection, and the strengthening of remote areas, creating jobs and strong local communities.

3. Research methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research approach and was conducted through a structured questionnaire distributed to tourists visiting the islands of Rhodes, Kos, Kalymnos, Astypalaia, and Karpathos in May 2025. Convenience sampling was applied, with questionnaires administered in key tourist locations. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions and Likert-scale items aimed at exploring tourists' intentions to organize gastronomic trips, their interest in investing in gastronomic businesses, and their perceptions regarding the development potential of gastronomic tourism. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, allowing for a comparative assessment across the five island destinations.

4. Research results

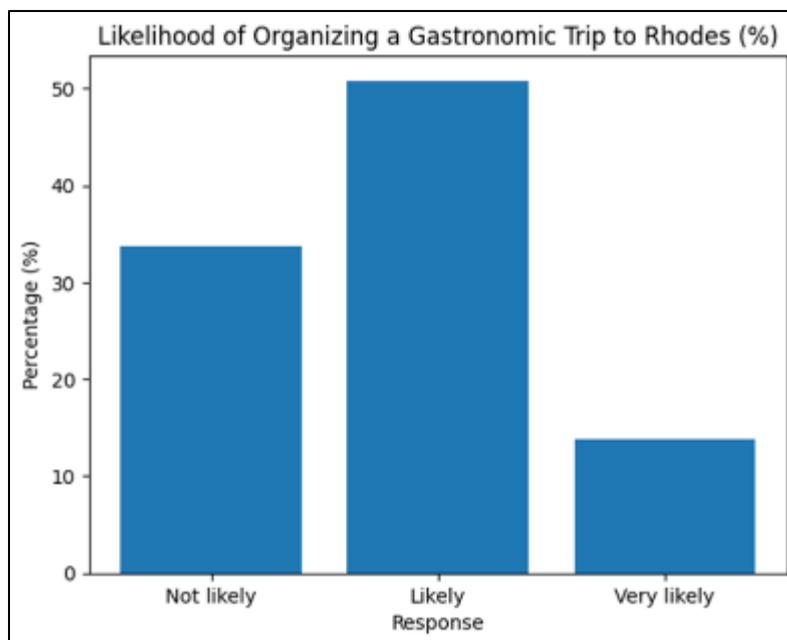


Figure 2 Likelihood of organizing a gastronomic trip to Rhodes (%)

4.1. Likelihood of organizing a gastronomic trip per island-Rhodes

33.8% of participants stated that it is not at all likely that they would organize a gastronomic trip to Rhodes, 50.8% responded that it was likely, while 13.8% described it as very likely. The majority did not reject the idea, but did not consider it a immediate priority.

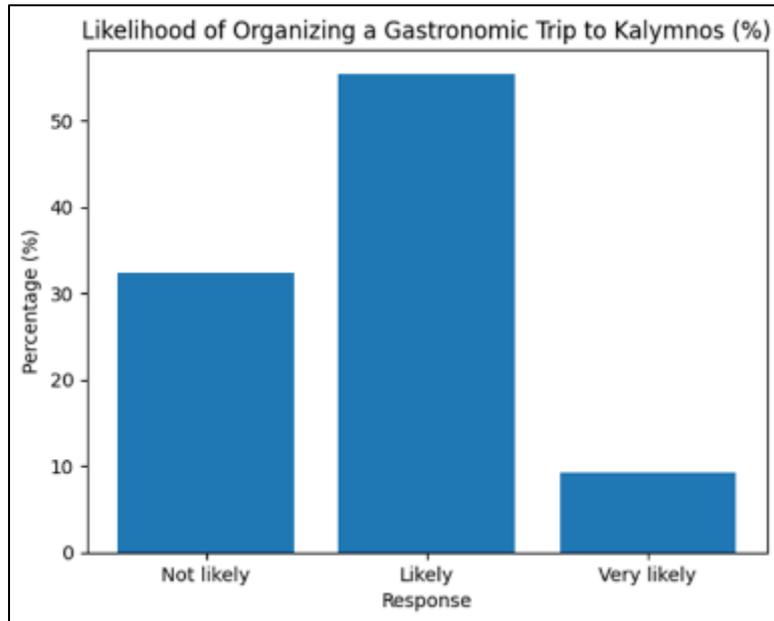


Figure 3 Likelihood of organizing a gastronomic trip to Kalymnos (%).

4.2. Likelihood of organizing a gastronomic trip per island- Kalymnos

For Kalymnos, 55.4% of participants consider it likely that they would organize a gastronomic trip, 9.2% consider it very likely, while 32.3% consider it unlikely or very unlikely. The result shows a positive attitude towards the island as a gastronomic destination.

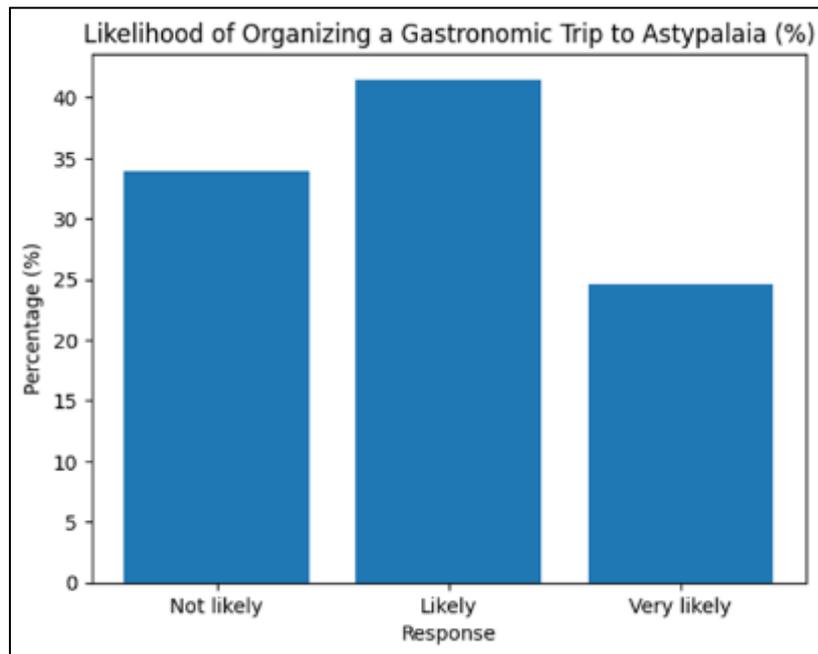


Figure 4 Likelihood of organizing a gastronomic trip to Astypalaia (%).

4.3. Likelihood of organizing a gastronomic trip per island- Astypalea

Astypalea has the highest percentage of "very likely" responses (24.6%) compared to the other islands. 41.5% consider it likely that they would organize a gastronomic trip, which highlights the island as a particularly attractive gastronomic destination.

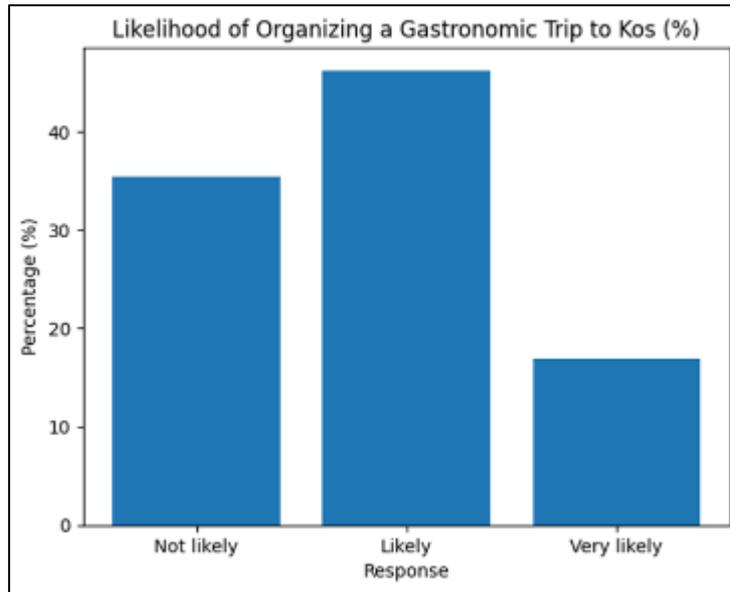


Figure 5 Likelihood of organizing a gastronomic trip to Kos (%).

4.4. Likelihood of organizing a gastronomic trip per island- Kos

In the case of Kos, 46.2% said they are likely to organize a gastronomic trip and 16.9% said they are very likely to do so, with a total of 63.1% positive responses. In contrast, 35.4% consider organizing such a trip to be not at all likely.

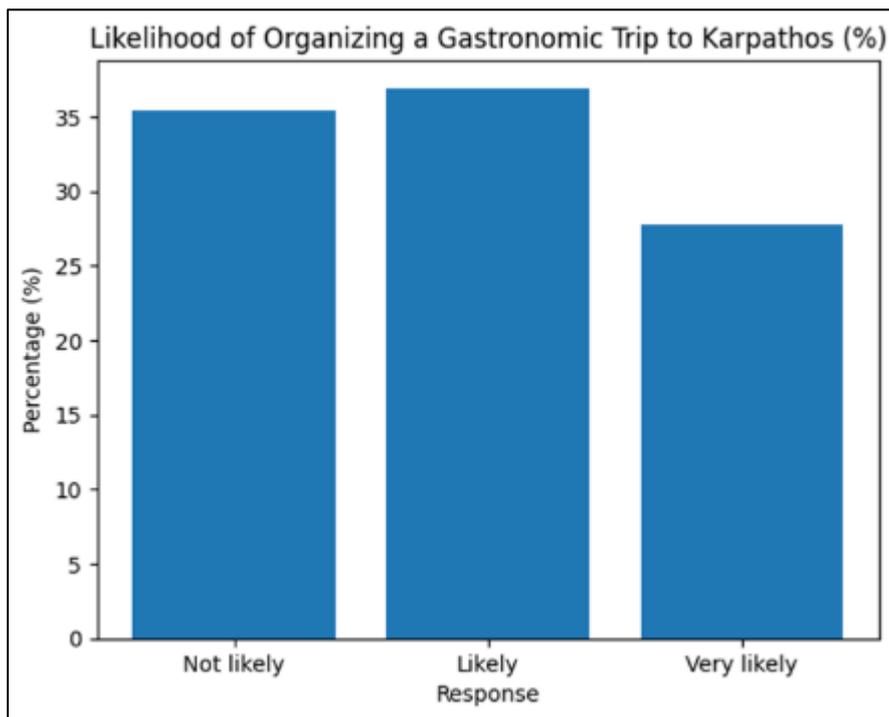


Figure 6 Likelihood of organizing a gastronomic trip to Karpathos (%).

4.5. Likelihood of organizing a gastronomic trip per island- Karpathos

In Karpathos, 36.9% of participants responded that they are likely to organize a gastronomic trip, while 35.4% said it is not likely at all. This result makes Karpathos the island with the lowest prospect of a gastronomic trip according to the survey data.

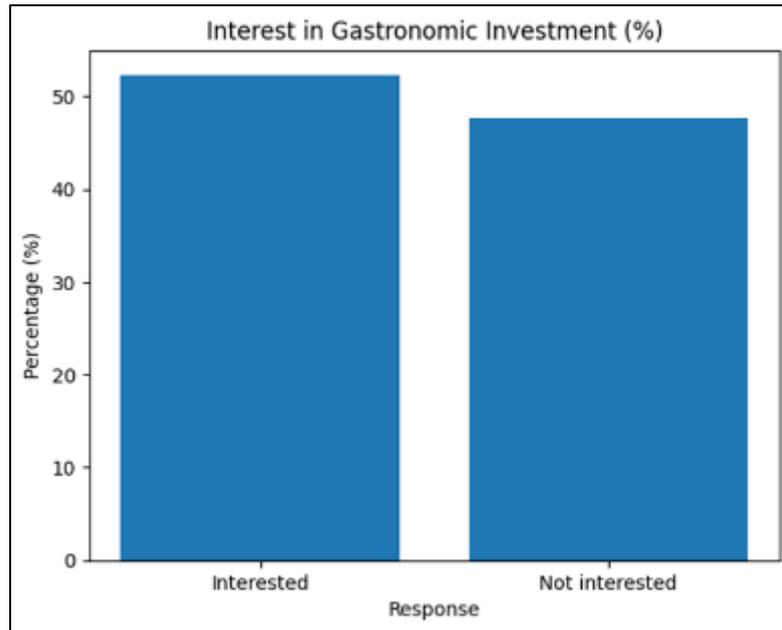


Figure 7 Interest in gastronomic investment in the examined islands (%).

4.6. Interest in gastronomic investment

52.3% of participants said they would be interested in investing in a gastronomic business on one of the five islands, while 47.7% said the opposite. The small difference between the two percentages indicates moderate but real investment potential in the gastronomic sector.

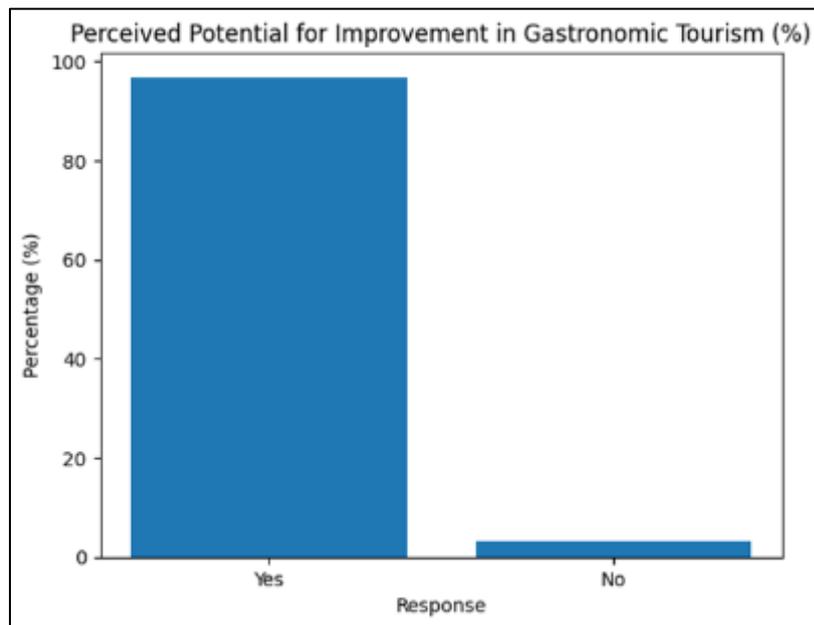


Figure 8 Perceived potential for improvement in gastronomic tourism (%).

4.7. Room for improvement in gastronomic tourism

Almost all participants (96.9%) believe that there is significant room for improvement in the field of gastronomic tourism on the five islands, while only 3.1% believe that the sector does not need further development. This finding highlights strong social acceptance for future interventions and strategies to strengthen local gastronomy.

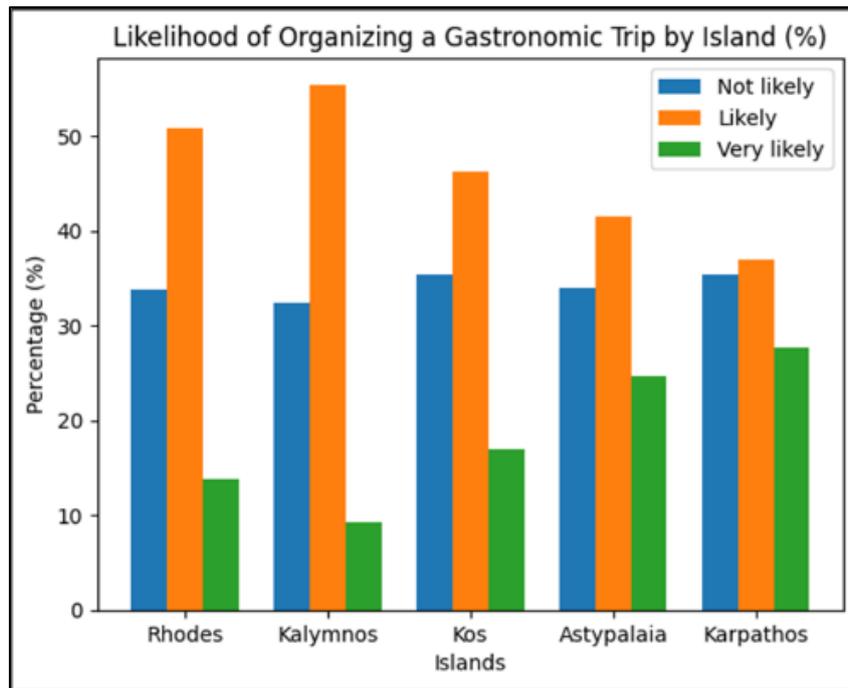


Figure 9 Comparative likelihood of organizing a gastronomic trip across the examined islands (%).

The comparative analysis indicates that respondents express varying levels of willingness to organize a gastronomic trip across the examined islands. Kalymnos records the highest proportion of respondents selecting “Likely,” suggesting a stable but moderate attractiveness as a gastronomic destination. Astypalaia and Karpathos stand out for their relatively higher percentages of “Very likely” responses, indicating stronger niche appeal and potential for targeted gastronomic tourism development. In contrast, Rhodes and Kos present more balanced distributions, reflecting broader tourism profiles where gastronomy may function as a complementary rather than primary travel motive. Overall, the findings highlight differentiated gastronomic tourism potential among the islands, underscoring the need for tailored development strategies.

5. Conclusions

This study highlighted the decisive role of gastronomy as an element of cultural heritage and a dynamic lever for cultural entrepreneurship in the remote islands of the South Aegean. The findings of the study show that, although the majority of tourists still prefer leisure and relaxation trips, there is a growing interest in gastronomic experiences, especially on islands such as Kalymnos, Kos, and Astypalea. The variation in percentages per island highlights uneven levels of recognition and promotion of local cuisine, suggesting the need for targeted strategies per destination. At the same time, interest in gastronomic investments, although moderate, indicates real prospects for the development of business initiatives that utilize local products and traditional practices. A particularly important finding is the almost universal recognition of room for improvement in gastronomic tourism, which reinforces social acceptance of future interventions. Overall, gastronomy can act as a catalyst for sustainable development in remote islands, strengthening local identity, diversifying the tourism product, and enhancing the resilience of the local economy.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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