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Digitalisation Strategies and Sustainable Well-being in Italian Provinces: A PoSet Approach

S. Buttier, Università degli Studi di Firenze

Abstract

Starting from the assumption that the climate change is currently affecting negatively the tourist sector and considering the necessity to find some sustainable forms of tourism, the enogastronomic tourism appears as a solution.

This study starts from the awareness that climate change and global warming are nowadays threatening the planet and its tourist attractions. Among these, mountain destinations tend to suffer from snow scarcity and extreme weather-related phenomena such as floods. This provokes an evident loss of tourist flows in these locations that are generally snow-reliable and weather-dependent. Hence, the study highlights the necessity to change perspective and shift the attention to another alternative and sustainable type of tourism, able to face a potential reduction of visitors and attract a new segment. It is the case of the enogastronomic tourism which is gaining more and more popularity. Beyond its experiential and evocative activities linked to local culture and territory, it turned out to be an effective dynamo of sustainable forms of tourism. This article aims at outlining the case of the Valle d'Aosta region: after a short description of its resources and its current touristic situation, the final in loco research made use of five interviews to analyse the already-existing offer and demand of the enogastronomic tourism in this destination. Moreover, this study continues with some considerations about potential improvements to undertake and criticalities to cope with. In particular, it shows how Valle d'Aosta might become a region with an enogastronomic vocation linked to sustainability through the implementation of diversified services, a focused promotion and communication of the destination and a better cooperation between the private and the public sector.

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Affiliations and attributions

Sophie Buttier, Department of Economics and Management, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Firenze, Italy. E-mail: sophie.buttier@edu.unifi.it. Design of Sustainable Tourism Systems (DSTS), Italy

1. Introduction

The main focuses of this research are three: sustainability, enogastronomic tourism and the Valle d'Aosta region. Each one of them will be analysed throughout the study following a linear logic starting from sustainable tourism, then its bond with enogastronomic tourism and finally the case study involving the application of these two components to a mountain destination.

It is a matter of fact that climate change and global warming are nowadays threatening the planet and consequently its tourist attractions. Almost everyone is aware that we are putting in risk our planet by neglecting it and adopting some irresponsible behaviours. Since the 80s the concept of sustainability arose thanks to the Brundtland Convention in 1987 by underlining the urgency to act for the defence of the Earth. From that moment on, doing well by doing good became the motto of all those companies that wanted to follow the sustainability principles from the environmental, social and economic point of view. In fact, a new way of conceiving business activities was born: pursuing one's objectives by not endangering the planet and instead benefitting it with its inhabitants. Among these industries, tourism is one of those that was involved the most: in particular, its relationship with climate change is ruled by a one-to-one correspondence. In fact, the first influences the second and vice versa: tourism contributes to pollution with its activities and climate change causes the deterioration of touristic attractions by hindering its development. In this connection, if we look especially at mountain destinations, that will be the main characters of this work, we will be able to observe that they are currently suffering from snow scarcity and extreme weather-related phenomena such as floods. Therefore, this will lead to deleterious consequences on the touristic nature of these destinations, which are generally snow-reliable and weather-dependent, and will be likely to provoke an evident loss of tourist flows.

Hence, the necessity to change perspective and shift the attention to another alternative and sustainable type of tourism, able to face a potential reduction of visitors and attract a new touristic segment might be the winning strategy. Enogastronomic tourism has the potential to become the new effective dynamo of sustainable forms of tourism. In fact, the advantages of developing this activity in a specific place concern especially its sustainable vocation. Since its nature is unavoidably linked to the origins, traditions, culture and geography of a territory, it allows to give a wider space to imagination for the creation of touristic offers that could be respectful of the sustainability values. In this connection, it is important to remember that sustainability does not only make reference to the environmental dimension but also to the social and economic one. Going more into depth, the chosen case study to analyse this issue is the Valle d'Aosta region: a short description of its territory and culture and a more detailed analysis of its touristic dynamics was carried out in order to give prominence to the potentialities and criticalities of the local offer. Moreover, its vocation with sustainability was investigated in order to understand whether it could be possible or not to apply it in the wine and food sector. Eventually, the following *in loco* research and SWOT analysis were able to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the valdôtain¹ tourism industry by paying attention to the opinions and points of view of both private and public actors. Starting from these data, we were able to get to some conclusions about the possibility of the Valle d'Aosta region to become a fully accomplished enogastronomic destination with a sustainable vocation.

¹ From this moment on, this term will be used in this work to design the adjective relative to what is from Valle d'Aosta.

2. Sustainability and Sustainable Tourism

In 1987 the Brundtland Convention of the United Nations gathered in order to discuss some topics related to sustainability and eventually published the “Our Common Future” report. In this context, the main personalities defined for the first time the concept of sustainability: “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The already-mentioned convention did not only make reference to the environmental aspect, but also to the economic and social ones. In fact, while the first makes reference to the Anthropocene², the protection of the biodiversity, the preservation of the environment and the regulation of the human interaction with the ecosystem, the second and the third look at different areas. Economic sustainability refers to the possibility to preserve the environment and its society from the impact of economic activities. Especially, it is about creating economic growth without any other secondary effect and making a wise use of the economic resources (Caso, 2007). This pillar is linked to the third principle of sustainability: the social one. This points out the importance of being able to improve employment, alleviate poverty and reduce social inequalities. Unavoidably, the behaviour of businesses affects the quality of life of people, that is why they should carry out social responsibility: firms should operate in order to achieve an equitable sharing of resources and wealth all around the world (Willard, 2002). Consequently, we call triple bottom line the intersection of these three pillars of sustainability in business operations. Firms are this way able to measure their environmental, economic and social impact rather than just focusing on generating profits. In this perspective, a more recent concept was born aligning very well to this context: the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). It includes all the pillars of sustainability and establish responsible development as main objective (Willard, 2002). It is defined as “the extent to which firms integrate on a voluntary basis social and environmental concerns into their ongoing operations and interactions with stakeholders” (Godoz-Diez et al, 2011).

Undoubtedly, tourism is one of those sectors of economy that are mostly involved and engaged in the sustainability matter. In fact, tourist resources are fundamental for the delineation of a tourist strategy and therefore they need to be protected and preserved. However, as mentioned before, climate change and irresponsible behaviours are putting these attractions at risk. It is not just a matter of environmental issues, such as emission of gases in the air or the sea level rise but also other phenomena such as mass tourism: on one side tourism boosts the conservation of the heritage, on the other side mass tourism is a threat for it. Precisely for those reasons, it was necessary to think about a type of tourism that could be more sustainable and respectful of the environment, the economy and the society. The World Tourism Organization (1988) describes it as a form of “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”. It is in fact an activity aiming at guaranteeing the preservation of the ecosystem, the respect of socio-cultural features and the involvement of local people in the local economy. The key is maximizing the benefits while minimizing the costs. The first engagement towards sustainable tourism was in 1995 during the World Conference on Sustainable Tourism held in Lanzarote. Here the Charter for Sustainable Tourism was drafted for the first time and established sustainability as an essential base to develop tourism. Four years later, the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism highlighted these topics by listing a set of principles in order to develop responsible tourism.

Ecotourism is considered the highest expression of sustainable tourism. Characterised by a focus on

² “the most recent period in the earth’s history when human activities have a very important effect on the earth’s environment and climate”

education, it is “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education” (International Ecotourism Society, 2015). Many of the ecotourism destinations include mountain areas and National Parks. It seems in fact that here sustainability is even more effective in the creation of job opportunities and wealth, conservation of cultural and natural heritage and revitalization of depopulated areas. Furthermore, mountainous locations are even more threatened by climate change and this put in risk their touristic attractivity. It is exactly here that the consequences of the global warming are visible the most. According to the report of The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2022), the Alps are currently the most vulnerable area in Europe from this point of view because of temperature increases and extreme weather phenomena. As a result, in summer there is a lack of hydration while in winter precipitations are abundant and snowfalls exponentially decrease. As a result, these conditions will determine the concentration of snow activities in the higher areas of mountain where an acceptable snow covering rate persist with a consequent pressure on financial and environmental resources (Elsasser & Messerli, 2001). This would also entails a “holiday migration” of urban residents to mountain destinations where they can find a milder climate during the warmer seasons (Pröbstl-Haider et al., 2015). Consequently, the demographic growth in these areas might lead to various problems in terms of resources and expenses. Let's not forget also the drawbacks of a potential mass tourism in these locations, which might lead to injurious repercussions on the ecosystems conservation.

Hence, it is important to remember that tourism cannot be weather-dependent in these areas because otherwise this system would fail. Instead, in order to cope with a potential lack of visitors, it would be more interesting to shift the attention to another type of tourism taking advantage of several resources that have not been fully exploited till now. Mountain destinations are much more than beautiful landscapes, there are hidden gems to exploit to widen the touristic offer. Moreover, in the Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle model (2006) the already-mentioned destinations are to be considered located in the stagnation phase. As a consequence, this means they need to rejuvenate instead of declining: the adoption of sustainable tourism models or the change of the target market might be a winning strategy. By starting from this assumption, the enogastronomic tourism represents a good alternative.

3. Food and Wine Tourism

Nowadays, the globalisation is progressively carrying out a process of homogenisation at 360°, which means that cultural and touristic trends too are being involved. Consequently, it is a consolidated tendency the one that aims at the valorisation of those distinctive and authentic cultural aspects that make a destination special and unique. It is about the paradox of globalisation: since globalisation is directed towards uniformity, some destinations try to maintain as far as possible what is local and makes them different from the rest, in order to escape this process. It is a sort of opposition against homogenisation which, unexpectedly, instead of only levelling out culture, it highlights its specificities (Montanari, 2006). One of the main aspects of this paradox is food: since it is one of the highest expression of culture, the tourist system exploits it in order to stick to authenticity and provide a territory-linked offer. In 1825 Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin once said: “Dis-moi ce que tu manges et je te dirai ce que tu es”. That is to say, what and how we eat is in fact one of the strongest interpretations of culture, hence, the enogastronomic tourism developed exactly around this concept.

In fact, gastronomy has always been linked to tourism and used as a tourist marketing tool. The reason lies in the World Food Travel Association surveys which reveal that the 53% of leisure tourists are also

food travellers of food enthusiasts (2020). In fact, according to the scholar Hudson, food and wine fulfil perfectly the functions of both push and pull factors: on one side, gastronomy represents an important attraction of the final destination, on the other side, it pushes people to travel away and try different food other than the one of the generating area (Hjalager & Richards, 2002).

Besides, food fits all the four categories linked to travel motivation elaborated by McIntosh in 1995. In fact, it involves all the five sensory perceptions (physical motivator), it is one of the most characteristic aspects of a culture (cultural motivator), it carries out the sociability function and catches social approval and admiration (interpersonal motivator and status and prestige). Gastronomy is a motivator at 360° and this explains the importance of its inclusion and valorisation in the touristic offer.

Before describing more in depth the method of this research, it is necessary to give a clear definition of food and wine tourism: “a type of tourism activity which is characterized by the visitor's experience linked with food and related products and activities while travelling” (Committee on Tourism and Competitiveness, UNWTO, 2001). This concept makes reference to a wide range of activities such as tasting and buying traditional products, visiting production places or tasting museums, appreciating small artisanal shops, harvesting, undertaking thematic tours, following cooking classes, participating to local festivals. In addition to this, within this category of tourism, we find the subcategory of wine tourism or enotourism: it is about all those experiences related to the appreciation and interest about the world of wine. Some examples are tastings and the purchase of wine, the visiting of vineyards and cellars and some others which can be considered less traditional: wine routes, wine therapy, wine-based body treatments, bicycle tours among the vineyards. Depending on the degree of interest, education and skills, Steve Charters (2002) divided the wine tourist into: wine lover, wine interested and curious tourist. This classification could be adopted in general for the enogastronomic tourist.

Another utmost aspect to consider is evidently sustainability. In fact, the renowned necessity of present times to be responsible under every perspective of human life cannot be neglected anymore. In this connection, tourism especially feels this pressure as its unsustainable activities may lead to deleterious repercussions for the planet and its inhabitants. As a result, several forms of responsible projects were developed recently and particularly in the context of food and wine tourism. In fact, whether managed properly, the enogastronomic tourism would allow to cope with and succeed in challenges such as the reduction of the impact of production processes on the Earth, society and economics, the establishment of more direct networks of production and sale in loco, the creation of a cohesive system made up of the actors of a place by guaranteeing advantages for the community (Garibaldi, 2023).

The application of sustainable practices and behaviours to the enogastronomic tourism are several. First, this activity adds 25% of economic benefit to the destination by generating new incomes, diversifying the touristic offer and the rural economy itself (Garibaldi, 2023). A further aspect is the creation of new job places: this would lead to the generation of wealth, the reduction of social disparities, unemployment and the alleviation of poverty. It is also not to forget that, with tourism there is also the revalorisation of local resources through its protection and safeguard (Garibaldi, 2023). Moreover, one of the biggest challenges of sustainability applied to this type of tourism is climate change. However, although agriculture is being threatened by global warming, enogastronomic tourism enhances the discovery of traditional and diverse methods to experience the territory. That is to say, different responsible agricultural procedures and old know-hows might be applied by ensuring safety and quality (Garibaldi, 2023). Furthermore, the reduction of the food supply chain represents an advantage too. It is also interesting to talk about food and wine

tourism as reviving instrument or saving instrument as Sara Roversi³, claims: a tool giving back life to depopulated rural places and revitalizing old traditions by instilling a sense of social belonging to its community. Connected to this topic, food and wine tourism are likely to bring back to life numerous rural spots that were abandoned during the industrialisation era, by attracting urban tourists back to experience the calm and quiet of rural places. In fact, cities are now being too crowded and the presence of tourists increases what the scholar Doxey called irritation index (1975): a measure to calculate the attitude of local people towards tourists by passing through some steps such as euphoria, apathy, annoyance and antagonism. The strict contact of residents and tourists worsens their relationship, consequently the irritation index increases and residents go living away. Last but not least, this type of tourism might have a good influence on dietary behaviours of people by learning them how to choose quality products, how to cook them properly and how to nourish oneself by encouraging healthier food habits. Linked to this, some other health activities comprise hiking or biking among the vineyards, yoga or meditation.

Undoubtedly, enogastronomic tourism is one of the strongest drivers of tourism economy in Italy. It is claimed that in 2023 this type of tourism contributed to the national GDP for 40 billion of euros. In fact, the last Italian enogastronomic tourism report in 2025 (Rapporto sul Turismo Enogastronomico Italiano 2025), underlines the growing interest of foreign tourists towards Italian culinary tradition, by noticing a growth of 20% in comparison with 2016. Moreover, the same report underlines the high levels of inclination of tourists to come to Italy to live an enogastronomic experience: from 56% for Germans to 81% for Austrian and Swiss people. In fact, it seems that the percentages connected to the visitors' will to undertake culinary experiences in Italy largely overcome 50%

With its massive quantity of PDO and PGI products⁴, the Bel Paese has been able to conquer the heart of several food enthusiasts. Starting from the revitalization and transformation of old rural estates into multifunctional agriturismi (Mangialardi, 2011), to the birth of the Slow Food movement in 1986, to the creation of the Strade del Vino, Cantine Aperte and many more touristic proposals, the Made in Italy stood out among the world enogastronomic offers (Croce & Perri, 2017).

4. The Valle D'Aosta Region

The next part of this study is focused on the description and analysis of a precise destination: the Valle d'Aosta region. Located in the north-west of Italy and surrounded by the highest European peaks, its geographical, social, cultural and historical assets shaped a very original region with promising touristic perspectives. The Monte Bianco, the Monte Rosa, the Cervino and the Gran Paradiso are just some of those giants that compose the perfect frame for a mountainous destination. The Dora Baltea river is the spinal column of this region and splits it into two areas: adret, on the left orographic side and mostly sunny, and the envers, on the right orographic side where sun is less present (Janin, 1996). It is extended

³ Sara Roversi is an activist in the field of food sustainability. Founder of the Future Food Institute, she tries, through her activity, to increase awareness on this topic thanks to education, innovation challenges and research projects. She leads conference panels, collaborates with food organizations and her attempt is to enhance the transition towards a more sustainable food system.

⁴ **Protected Designations of Origin** and **Protected Geographical Indications**. They belong to the European Certification System, whose aim is to recognize and protect food products according to their origin and traditional productions. The former makes reference to products realised in a specific place, region or country and whose qualities are due precisely for the peculiar environment. In this case, all the production phases are undertaken in this geographical area. The latter indicates all those products originated in a specific place, region or country whose characteristics depend on the geographical environment. However, in this case, at least one of the production phases takes place in this area.

for over 3260 km² and according to the ISTAT surveys of 2024 it has 122,877 inhabitants. They are considered a peculiar population, jealous of their traditions and conservative for what concern their autonomist aspiration. In fact, their boundless love for their land is also expressed through their peculiar culture and language, the patois, a local franco-provençal dialect (Favre, 1996).

Apart from the peculiar population and the cultural and linguistic particularism present in the area, tourism is here focused mainly on naturalistic attractivities: the mountain paths leading to breathtaking views, waterfalls, skiing facilities or adventure parks.. In fact, the first hints of tourism here are identified when the Piedmontese nobles went to Courmayeur to enjoy their thermal waters. However, the real turning point was the opening of the skiing facilities in Breuil-Cervinia in 1934-1939 (Josienne, 2022). Moreover, sustainability is fortunately a consolidated principle in this region: several projects and initiatives linked to social, economic and environmental responsibility has been developed and are still being developed now both in the private and the public sector. Some examples are the numerous National Parks (Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso, Natural Park of Mont Avic, Espace Mont Blanc, Natural Reserve of Mont Mars), Tourscience (a new initiative to find ecotourist solutions in the area of Espace Mont Blanc), Alpine Green Experience (a platform for tourist operators with the aim of conservating the alpine ecosystem threatened by car emissions), Green Vallée d'Aoste (a project financed by the European Union in order to create a partnership with local agricultural and artisanal businesses), the sustainable nature of Chamois and the label "Perla delle Alpi" and many more. It is then clear how this fact can be considered an added value for the destination.

However, though mountain tourism is the king of this sector, it is passing through a series of obstacles placed by climate change. Here food and wine tourism is present but still to be further developed. In fact, it is mainly linked to wider touristic offers proposing wider tours, and just a small part of them is dedicated to enogastronomic experiences. It is substantially about agritourisms, tastings, visits of the production places and enogastronomic events: very traditional culinary experiences. That is to say, the offer appears to be quite fragmented, sometimes scarce and with a non-unexhaustive communication and promotion. A small digression must be dedicated to agritourisms, in fact, although the offer is characterised by fragmentation, a consistent variety of agritourisms is present. They are the main spokespersons of the valdôtain traditions and gastronomy. Generally, what they produce ends up directly in the dish of the consumer without passing from a longer supply chain. The product maintains all its qualities and can be tasted in a traditional place. In fact, the framework where people taste products in agritourisms is what makes them special: the direct contact with producers, the small and intimate location, the distance from chaotic cities. Here agritourisms are the main dynamo for the development of rural areas and enogastronomic tourism. Everything started with the achievement of the PDO denomination to the Fontina cheese. This event pushed entrepreneurs and producers to restructure those old buildings that were used to be the houses of their ancestors in higher alpine pastures (Berzieri, 2003; Berzieri, 2006). Furthermore, it is to be mentioned that among the enogastronomic offer of Valle d'Aosta there are several enogastronomic events dedicated to various occasions: some are directly focused on some products such as cheese, wine, bread, dishes or cold cuts while others are included in some other wider events. They are fundamental since they allow to have some revenues and tourist flows also in periods of the year which are not the peak seasons. That is why it is important to focus on these events, called *eventi del gusto*, and boost their promotion (Zappone, 2022).

In addition, other problems threaten the touristic sector, such as the current difficulty in the transport system, which is experiencing a period of stuck waiting for restructuration to finally end.

5. Data and Methods

The objective of this study can be resumed into three main points:

1. Assessing the feasibility of the Valle d'Aosta region to become a destination with an enogastronomic vocation, that is to say, which are the prerequisites that are present or are missing in this context.
2. Providing an overview on the already-present touristic offer in Valle d'Aosta and consequently suggest some improvements. With respect to this, the private and the public sector points of view are fundamental to understand how the same topic can be perceived differently depending on the perspective it is seen.
3. Assessing whether in this destination it is feasible to enhance enogastronomic tourism by involving sustainability projects and initiatives. It is about analysing the relationship of the destination with sustainability and assessing whether there is the real feasibility to undertake responsible initiatives to make the tourist sector greener.

Starting from a general consideration of the tourism sector in Valle d'Aosta, an analysis from the general to the particular leads to some specific considerations on the segment of the food and wine tourism.

A preliminary phase of the research concerned the selection of four main products of the valdôtain gastronomy: PDO Fontina, PDO Lard d'Arnad, wine and IG Génèpy. Indeed, they were considered to be among the most symbolic ones in the cuisine of this region. Cheese, for example, is almost always present in valdôtain dishes and represents that flavour that makes them unique and recognisable. Wine too is iconic for a region that has always consumed it since ancient times and made around it a real cultural fact. Finally, lard, together with other local cold cuts, is and will always be a PDO pride for the Valle d'Aosta for its prestige and its numerous successes. In fact, this lard is the only one in Europe with the PDO denomination.

Further, the methodology chosen for this research was the interview: direct, never impersonal and always unique, it allowed to delve into the modus pensandi and the perspective of interviewees. In fact, several and often different considerations emerged from every interlocutor, giving progressively a wider overview on the subject. Through this approach, the candidates were given the possibility to express themselves on several topics such as the current situation of enogastronomic tourism in Valle d'Aosta, its potentialities and criticalities, sustainability issues etc.

Preliminarily, interviewees were contacted either by e-mail or telephone in order to ask for their availability and explain the purpose of this research. Particularly the producers were chosen in different areas of Valle d'Aosta in order not to avoid any area and attempt giving a complete and comprehensive framework of the region as far as possible:

- The Azienda Agricola e Agrituristica Prasupiaz of the Jeantet family in Cogne, they produce the PDO Fontina cheese (Jeantet Bruno)
- The Salumificio Maison Bertolin of the Bertolin family in Arnad, they produce the PDO Lard d'Arnad (Alexandre Bertolin)
- Da Emy SS Agricola of Emilia Berthod and her daughter Ambra Tomasoni in Valsavarenche, they cultivate Génèpy plants (Emilia Berthod)
- Grosjean Vins of the Grosjean family in Quart, they produce wine (Hervé Grosjean)
- The tourism council member for the Valle d'Aosta region (Giulio Grosjacques)

In this connection, it is necessary to point out that different questions were posed to the producers and to the last interlocutor, who represented the Valle d'Aosta Region from the public and administrative point of view. Furthermore, while the interviews to producers were run personally, the last one was carried out by e-mail.

The speakers were selected, besides their profession, also to analyse the nature of their activity linked to sustainable initiatives, their projects, their attitude towards sustainable practices, the relevance of their activity of the touristic panorama and on the territory in general. Family's firms, entrepreneurship's examples to follow, eco-friendly solutions and the principle of doing well by doing good were at the centre of the discussion.

Starting from the producers, they were asked four main questions aiming at acknowledging their reality, profession, sustainable projects, touristic initiatives and personal opinions:

- 1) Who are you? What do you do for a living? What is your job about? What do you produce? What do you organise for tourists?
- 2) Did you encounter any difficulty due to the climate change in your production sector? If yes, how did you overcome it?
- 3) Do you implement any strategy in your business in order to be sustainable? If yes, which one and why?
- 4) Which are the criticalities that might hinder the development of the enogastronomic tourism in the Valle d'Aosta region? What do you suggest in order to improve it?

Conversely, as mentioned before, Giulio Grosjacques answered different queries dealing with the current situation of the Valle d'Aosta region in terms of tourism in general and enogastronomic tourism, the strengths to leverage, the weaknesses to cope with and some final personal considerations:

- 1) In which phase of tourism can we find the Valle d'Aosta destination?
- 2) What about the development of enogastronomic tourism?
- 3) What do you think is important to leverage in order to develop further the enogastronomic tourism?
- 4) Which are the criticalities that might hinder the development of the enogastronomic tourism in Valle d'Aosta? What would you propose to manage them?
- 5) Is it really feasible and convenient to leverage enogastronomic tourism in this region? Is it worth it to position it as a destination with an enogastronomic vocation?

These questions were aimed at giving a comprehensive overview on the situation, lifestyle and thoughts of these professionals in this sector. Moreover, they aimed at observing how the public and the private sector may develop very different perspectives on the same topic. In fact, it would be incorrect to gather internal stakeholders under the same category without really analysing their particular context of action. In fact, it is known that it is in these little realities that the real essence of a place is to be found: what is authentic and real is privileged in current tourism trends. Moreover, it is being observed how enogastronomic tourism is always more often being linked somehow with the surrounding context: its cultural aspects, its history, traditions and legends linked to it. It naturally appears clearer how strong is the bond between producers and their context with enogastronomic tourism (Scarpato R., 2002).

Further, another focus of the study was the sustainability issue linked to enogastronomic tourism. As pointed out at the beginning of this article, this study starts from the desire to imagine an alternative to mountain tourism that might be sustainable in time and favourable for the destination. Clearly,

sustainability is a key factor. For this reason, the second part of interviews was more aimed at analysing the potentiality and development of responsible behaviours and initiatives in this geographic area. Naturally, this represented and essential and unavoidable step for the development of this study. The qualitative data extrapolated by the research allowed to divide the information into 7 main thematic clusters:

- The demand and the description of the segment
- The attachment to the homeland
- Climate change and sustainability
- Personal considerations of the interviewees
- The point of view of Grosjacques Giulio
- SWOT analysis of Valle d'Aosta as an enogastronomic destination
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Starting from this, the observation of this information from several points of view and the analysis of the backgrounds made it possible to develop numerous outcomes that will be listed in the next section of this article.

A further helpful method in order to clarify ideas and outline the current and future situation of tourism and enogastronomic tourism in Valle d'Aosta was the SWOT analysis: a tool of strategic planning used by firms for evaluate strengths (S), weaknesses (W), opportunities (O) and threats (T) of a business or a project (Sarsby A, 2006).

6. Results and Discussion

For what concerns the outcomes, what immediately stands out is the fact that both the public and the private sector agree on the possibility of Valle d'Aosta to become and affirm itself as an enogastronomic destination. Naturally, this goal might be achieved in the future by focusing on some improvements and some corrections on the current system.

The survey made it possible to clearly identify the description of the demand. It is important to know who will be the future consumers in order to know the design of the offer tailored on their demographic, socio-cultural characteristics and preferences. They are mainly people aged between the 35 and 50 years old. These data are also confirmed by the Report on the Enogastronomic Italian Tourism 2023 (Rapporto sul Turismo Enogastronomico Italiano 2023) that shows the ages of enogastronomic tourists. However, there seem to be more present younger customers interested in this sector: Millennials and Generation Z. That is why the use of technology is nowadays essential in order to communicate and get closer to these generations. (Garibaldi, 2023). Emilia Berthod⁵ is particularly fascinated by the power of communicating and teaching to younger people: she thinks that, by being the future members of society, it is important to teach them the importance of enogastronomic tourism and tourism for a territory. Briefly, this has much to do with social and economic sustainability: teaching younger generations the value of short supply chains and products instead of for example buying souvenirs in a multinational firm.

⁵ The interviewee who produces the Génépy, a typical valdôtain herb which is later transformed into a liqueur.

Similarly, also the nationality of tourists is important in order to identify a segment to address to. In Valle d'Aosta the enogastronomic tourists come mainly from the surrounding areas in Italy and foreigners mainly from France and Switzerland. The possibility of attracting farther tourists is currently up to each single company: who invests in promotion succeeds in attracting also extra-Europeans customers. For example, Grosjean Vins has a consistent flow of US tourists thanks to the massive promotion of their activity and word of mouth.

Furthermore, there is another important value to be prioritised: the vocation for sustainability of Valle d'Aosta. From the individual, to society, to authorities: sustainability at 360° and care for the environment are deeply rooted in this area and represent a consolidated principle. As a matter of fact, it is way more than that: an immediate consequence of the great sentiment of affection and gratefulness that bonds this community with its homeland. In fact, for what concerns the importance of maintaining a strict contact with the terroir, Bruno Jeantet of the Azienda Agricola e Agrituristica Prasupiaz states that "*tourism and agriculture should go at the same pace*"⁶. Agriculture is the expression of the human action on the territory, source of every local value. It is not a casualty that the already mentioned interviewee repeated the word "territory" several times. Unfortunately, Bruno Jeantet really knows the meaning of its words, in fact, he was one of the main actors touched by the big flood that destroyed Valnontey in June 2024: numerous landslides took apart almost two-thirds of the pastures where he had spent fifty-six summers. Bruno declared sadly: « *I have lost 60 years of work. I don't know how I will manage this, I need to reinvent my life again.* ⁷ ». No one better than his family knows what climate change can cause and how sustainability and preservation of territories are relevant. Hence, the Valnontey example shows how the mountain ecosystem tends to be fragile in the face of climatic events: "*It is increasingly recognised that the value of the mountain landscape for tourism depends not just on the presence and quality of tourism infrastructure, but also on the quality of the mountain landscape*" (Scott, 2006).

Moreover, if we look at food and wine tourism it is possible to notice how the preservation of plant and animal species is fundamental. For this reason, each one of the candidates had the possibility to describe the sustainable initiatives they carry out in their activities: photovoltaic systems, thermal solar installations, the avoiding of air conditioning in wine cellars, the creation of artificial lakes or wells where to source water, organic certifications, the procurement of energy from the CVA (the valdôtain firm producing hydroelectric energy) or the installation of hydroelectric turbines, the adoption of cardboards made of recycled paper, the use to electric vehicles to trade. Furthermore, there are other choices that are considered sustainable, some examples are favouring and preserving animals' wellbeing or not applying fertilizers or chemical substances to cultivations. A further interesting responsible action is supporting other local businesses by combining one's own products with those of other producers. For instance Hervé Grosjean from Grosjean Vins purchases cheeses and cold cuts from other valdôtain producers in order to combine them with its wines during tastings. This way, he is able to simultaneously promote various businesses and the territory. In fact, he states that '*It is necessary to cooperate [...] collaboration instead of competitiveness*'⁸. Mutual promotion is felt as an essential value together with the valorisation of the terroir and its fruits.

Likewise, since sustainability is made of millions of different shades, Emilia Berthod by Da Emy SS Agricola appreciates chiefly its historical and educative dimension. Through her visits she tries to raise

⁶ The quote was translated from Italian to English keeping it faithful to the original.

⁷ The quote was translated from Italian to English keeping it faithful to the original.

⁸ The quote was translated from Italian to English keeping it faithful to the original.

awareness not only on the Génépy she produces, but also on the territory where it grows and the reality of small mountain businesses. Her purpose is to show students and visitors those small underpopulated mountain villages, such as hers, where the authentic culture is still alive and from where a cultural and tourist revolution could start. These tiny communities are the starting point for the promotion of the terroir and its products, and the value arising from these experiences cannot be neglected. Besides, she states that who works in contact with tourists needs to know well the territory where they operate in order to communicate it the best way possible. Moreover, by making reference to the enogastronomic fairs, Emilia Berthod from Da Emy SS Agricola expresses her affection for these areas and her intention to promote them by affirming that *'Fairs are not only a way to make money, but rather a way to promote the territory, its flavours and its knowledges, and all this is not convertible into money'*⁹.

However, every cloud has a silver lining: although climate change is undoubtedly deleterious for the planet, Hervé Grosjean acknowledges that it could bring some advantages in the wine industry. In fact he affirms that, in a selfishly perspective, higher temperatures and dried spaces may benefit vineyards by making wines more structured, extractive and alcoholic. In addition, higher areas of mountains would become a resource in order to exploit them for vines. Furthermore, from the touristic point of view, warmer temperatures assure the lengthening of summer seasons and the deseasonalization of the demand. In this connection, Hervé's opinion is also supported by some studies that foresee that rural tourism will be adopted as an alternative to seaside tourism when temperatures will raise (Gomez-Martin et al., 2014). For what regards the reasons why the interviewees undertake these sustainable methodologies, outcomes shows that the main motivation is ethical. Besides that, some other reasons are firstly following the audiences preferences towards new sustainable trends and secondly economic convenience.

A further result are some personal considerations about the congruence between some aspects of the current valdôtain touristic offer and the current touristic trends of preferences. That is to say, authenticity and traditionality are nowadays two pillars in tourism: tourists are attracted by what is local and true, not by a staged reality. Throughout the years, the Valle d'Aosta region has been developing a touristic offer focused exactly on these aspects, by attempting to transmit tourists the real essence of these territories and trying to insert them into a real valdôtain experience. In this context, the relationship between the visitor and the producer is way more direct and they are given the possibility to interact and exchange ideas.

Two examples can be given in this sense. The first is about the visits lead by Emilia Berthod in her fields, her village and her house: Bois du Clin, where she lives, counts no more than 10 inhabitants and represents a perfect example of old valdôtain village where there used to be several people before urbanisation. Her house as well is an example of a typical valdôtain house characterised by all those antique instruments that our ancestors used to produce dairy products, cook, live in general. Every time she really attempts piercing the stage of touristic activities and letting visitors penetrate into reality. Similarly, Alexandre Bertolin of Salumificio Maison Bertolin guides its guests to the tasting of traditional cold cuts and wines from the Valle d'Aosta region by giving them the chance to make this experience in a typical and authentic valdôtain tavern: the Crottein. Here the atmosphere is special and it seems that the clock stopped a long time ago. To sum up, the enogastronomic tourists does not only look for a merely enogastronomic experience: they are eager to come into contact with the local culture and traditions thanks to gastronomy. It is important to remember that food and wine is still a form of cultural tourism and can have a strong power of conveying the real essence of a destination. That is why the offer should involve a format made

⁹ The quote was translated from Italian to English keeping it faithful to the original.

up of strong links between the gastronomy and the local culture. The purpose is the achievement of the paesaggio gastronomico: a framework where the touristic experience is only a part of the whole. It is a complex system of environment, people culture, tradition, projects and politics which are interconnected and allow tourists to be involved in such a manner they feel co-creators of the experience (Garibaldi, 2020).

Another outcome is summarised by the viewpoint of Grosjacques Giulio, the Regional Council member responsible for tourism. He is the representant of local authorities in Valle d'Aosta. He claims that their values are mainly of hope that the food and wine sector will face a shiny future in this region and the engagement of the public sector in implying policies in this direction. Since he recognises that this type of tourism still needs to be enhanced, numerous of the already-mentioned policies are the result of investments of the Agricultural and Tourism Departments. At the same time, he states that the improvement of collaboration among the different actors is pivotal. In fact, in his opinion *"this system is composed by elements that are all fundamental for the growth and development of the enogastronomic tourism in Valle d'Aosta. All those who are involved become main characters: producers of the supply chain, catering and hospitality entrepreneurs. Among them we cannot neglect the several agritourisms and the merchants proposing local products to hosts".*¹⁰ Thus, the involvement of everyone in tourism is the key. It is about what the scholar Federica Burini calls territorial governance : the process of participation and coordination between private and public actors, businesses, local communities and association in order to design projects able to make eco-social development thrive (Burini, 2023). Similarly, communication and promotion are indispensable as well in order to convey the right touristic message about this destination. For this reason, he made reference to the *marchio ombrello* strategy ¹¹: an initiative gathering under the same structure the touristic promotion of all the region.

Table 1. SWOT analysis of the Valle d'Aosta region as enogastronomic destination.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The precious culinary tradition and high quality products (PDO, DOC, PAT, GI) Stunning landscapes, high peaks, mountain chains The ancient history and culture of a border region (the Roman past, monuments, legends, traditions, dialects etc.) The geographic position: in the middle of the continent Tourism operators can speak at least both Italian and French Escape from the chaotic urban life, calm, peace Low polluted area, fresh air Safety Mass tourism is still not very developed The excellent formation at the regional hotel high school (École Hôtelière de la Vallée d'Aoste) and the regional University Great awareness among local people about the importance of preserving the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not as known as other competitors Low service differentiation in comparison with competitors (customization, innovative services, service quality etc.) The scarce transport system, hard accessibility(limited to buses or private cars, highway is expensive) Low education of people working with tourists about the enogastronomic delicacies of the region, scarce information about it Seasonality, presence of peak seasons Scarcity of funds directly oriented to the enogastronomic tourism Low collaboration between the single producers A great presence of small companies not supported by the public sector

¹⁰ The quote was translated from Italian to English keeping it faithful to the original.

¹¹ This strategy was literally named "*umbrella brand*"

<p>territory. Sustainable projects and strategies. National Parks.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Several investments of the Region for the development of tourism (ex. il marchio ombrello) 	
<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Repositioning the Valle d'Aosta region as an enogastronomic destination Gain recognition as enogastronomic destination in Italy and Europe, invest in communication, promotion, advertising campaigns of local authorities and local tourism institutions Plenty of awesome places to spread the tourist fluxes Enlarge the offer with differentiated services for tourists Provide an enogastronomic education to all those people that work with tourists in order to transmit the value of the valdôtain food and culture Deseasonalization of touristic activities thanks to the enogastronomic tourism Encourage single producers to come together and help each other to valorise the valdôtain product, projects of co-marketing Incentivize the cooperation between the private and the public sector Look at small enterprises in order to help them grow Improve infrastructures 	<p>THREATS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The competitors: mainly mountain destinations as Piedmont or Trentino-Alto Adige, Haute Savoie in France and Switzerland Climate change, increasing temperatures Risk of high levels of the Irritation Index if mass tourism increases Change in preferences of customers, social and cultural changes, fashions

Source: author's elaboration

As already stated before, every actor of this territory agrees on the potentiality of the Valle d'Aosta region to develop its enogastronomic sector till turning into an enogastronomic destination. Hence, it is important to emphasise the resources present in the area: natural beauty, cultural and historical assets, enogastronomic delicacies. In fact, the SWOT analysis highlights the plurality of favourable factors that would possibly lead the region to become an attractive enogastronomic destination: geographical, cultural, and culinary features are just some of them. In addition to that, there is an excellent tourist academic formation for younger students which allow the sector to be provided by several professionals.

Nonetheless, not all outcomes could be considered positive. In fact, there are some weaknesses and threats that were stressed by the interviewees and by the following SWOT analysis in the whole tourism sector: the inefficiency of the transport system which makes accessibility to the region difficult, the scepticism of elderly people towards innovation, the scarce communication and improvable visibility, some disagreements between the public and private sector. The latter makes reference to different perspectives of the internal private stakeholders and the public authorities. In fact, interviews draw attention to their discrepancy on the way they perceive the food and wine tourism development: while the public sector does not glimpse any obstacle for this tourist segment to expand, the private sector does not feel a real support of the Region and foresees several barriers in this direction. In this respect, all the four producers admitted in the interviews that a possible solution could be found in coming together and develop some forms of co-marketing instead of seeking for the support of authorities they do not rely

on. Still, they in fact see a further difficulty within the same collaboration among private producers too. Unfortunately – they claim – this fragmentation is a threat for the sector: it is not only about being profit-oriented, it is about communicating a territory. In fact - as Emilia Berthod states – thinking too competitively is likely to damage the development of the destination: cooperation and competitiveness can coexist. Conversely, the regional council member stressed the importance of synergies between the private and public sector in order to focus on investments in the same direction. However, although they do not always have the same opinion, they do agree upon the relevance of a pure cooperation from which it will derive common wealth and success for the enogastronomic tourism. Eventually, what can be deduced by the interviews is that the solution is to be found in the tendency in the middle of these two modi pensandi: what Roberta Garibaldi calls a co-creation of a product or a service. It is basically about, on one side, favouring collaboration between the public and the private actors, on the other side, underpinning co-marketing initiatives between the private producers (Garibaldi, 2019).

Moreover, there is a crucial point that needs to be underlined: services differentiation and customization. As the interviewees had the chance to notice, the demand is made up of a million of different segments of tourists with different preferences and necessities. However, the producers know that in this region differentiation is a sort of weakness. In fact, the offer does not always match with the demand. Therefore, flexibility must be crucial and being too generic may be risky: customizing every offer ad hoc is fundamental. In fact, some visitors might prefer ordinary experiences (eg. tastings, visits to production areas) while others might favour extraordinary ones (eg. Activities involving the five sense and conveying a sense of self-achievement) (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner, 2014). Nevertheless, if on one side we must not forget this aspect, on the other side it is necessary to remember that the enogastronomic tourism is made of “omnivorous” consumers, seeking to make experience of a wide variety of different activities. Further, there are other weaknesses which appear to be intrinsic to the sector itself as for instance seasonality which has always characterised mountain tourism: the presence of peak seasons is likely to become a problem. In fact, this tendency does not let other periods of the year to be exploited from the touristic point of view, by not guaranteeing a constant revenue all along the year to tourist actors (Josienne, 2022). That is exactly one of the pivotal points of this research: trying to fill those gaps by including or developing an already touristic segment. The purpose is deseasonalizing tourist flows through enogastronomic tourism.

In summary, the destination owns a wide range of potentialities and strengths that can be emphasised to make enogastronomic tourism thrive. Although the SWOT analysis shows a multiplicity of weaknesses and threats, the right strategies in the right directions are likely to overcome the difficulties and trace the path for success. It is evidently an ongoing process which requires time and efforts, but finally through these improvements everyone would end up benefitted: local economies, the destination image and the final tourist. It is mainly a matter of raising awareness on this fact and trying to involve stakeholders as much as possible. Briefly, it is about promoting and highlighting strengths while trying to work on vulnerabilities.

7. Conclusion

At the final part of this research it is possible to draw three main conclusions starting from the three main objectives of this study. In fact, the three analysed thematic spheres were: the sustainability, the enogastronomic tourism and the Valle d'Aosta region case study.

For what concerns sustainability, it is more than evident that it is one of the main values in this region. Starting from the numerous ecotourist areas and National Parks to the wide range of initiatives carried out both at a private and public level, sustainability is broadly present. Its principles are felt by the population as an expression of affection towards their territory and importance to preserve it against the threats of climate change. Nowadays the touristic dimension needs to be intertwined with the sustainable one from every perspective and Valle d'Aosta is not an exception, in fact, it can praises various ecological and responsible tourist projects. Therefore, it is possible to state that all the prerequisites to design sustainable tourism are present and are already working.

Secondly, the sustainable aspect was linked with a particular source of tourism: the enogastronomic one. As underlined all along the research, it is necessary to look for a type of tourism that has the most minimum negative impact on the territory from the environmental, social and economic point of view. Climate change is todays threatening several areas of the planet and Alps are among the weakest ones. The necessity to find a type of tourism able to preserve the assets and enhance responsible development is urgent: food and wine tourism has been identified as a possible solution. In the face of global warming, this type of tourism, accompanied by the natural one, might contribute conserving and valorising the alpine territory. The article showed how the sustainable vocation of this type of tourism can be perfectly combined with the business-oriented activities of numerous firms. Giving value to the terroir, promoting it, adopting organic production techniques, hiring local workers, cooperating with them, adding value to the destination in order to create wealth are just some of the advantages.

In this connection, the case study that was taken into consideration was the Valle d'Aosta one. The main aim was trying to assess whether it was possible to reposition this region as an enogastronomic destination. From what emerged from the study, also thanks to the interviews, it is possible to claim that the Valle d'Aosta has all the possibilities and resources to become such destination and gain a position among the enogastronomic panorama of Italy. The sustainable vocation together with its unique beauty, landscapes, traditions, history and especially its culinary art make this region a very valid one in this sector. Moreover, it is not to be forgotten that the union of its population and the love valdôtain people feel towards their homelands make them perfect candidates to be involved in the tourist industry. In fact, also thanks to the interviews, it is possible to claim that tourism is one of those tools helping people to convey their attachment to their origins by caring, protecting, conserving and developing their territory and people. In this context, it is not only about the geographical territory, but also traditions, culture, social welfare and the economic well-being.

However, the in loco research showed also how the possibility to reposition the Valle d'Aosta has to fulfil some steps of improving the local offer and fixing some weaknesses intrinsic of the sector. In fact, the interviews demonstrated that some obstacles and difficulties need to be overcome by a great engagement in this sense. Drawbacks are more than one but it is feasible to improve each one of them and attribute a higher value to positive assets. The key stands in between working on weaknesses and valorising strengths, by following initially a defensive strategy and finally an offensive one. For example, the

improvement of the relationship between the private and the public sector might be the start of the already-mentioned upgrade. Likewise, working on deseasonalization and the hard transport accessibility of the region are favourable for the sector as well. In other words, it is about applying a territorial governance made up of shared responsibility and horizontal cooperation, by directing the efforts towards a stronger customization of the offer, still considering the enogastronomic tourist omnivorous, and towards a more focused communication and promotion of the destination.

Which are those concrete strategies that could be adopted in this regard? Definitely, the governance of the Region should help producers by incentivizing them to shift to sustainability. Showing them the importance and overall the convenience of adopting ecological and sustainable practices is to be the base of any intervention in the field. Moreover, it is crucial to try to foster collaboration between public and private stakeholders through an assertive and constructive communication, aiming to the common good. That is to say, trying to leave behind personal interests and attempt finding a way to do well by doing good. In addition to these potential strategies, working on local infrastructures is undoubtedly the most basic investment to be achieved, in order to guarantee the regular accessibility to the territory: more affordable highways, a present and modernized railway, more frequent and comfortable buses, a easier access to France could be some examples.

From another perspective, the relationship among producers should be a little improved as well. In this respect, there are numerous possibilities: co-marketing initiatives, supporting colleagues by purchasing their products to enlarge one's own touristic offer, co-branding programs. For example, a producer of cheese, a producer of cold cuts and a producer of wine could cooperate to create a whole package of products to be consumed together to make a real valdôtain experience. In this way they would offer an experience linked directly with the territory by promoting their products at the same time, together. Finally, what is needed is an enlargement of the local offer based on some innovative and technological experiences. In this case, once more, the regional administration could propose local actors some courses for the operators of the sector. For example, some educational paths in order to be updated about the new trends of the enogastronomic tourism, its technological innovations and its digitalisation. As a result, they would be equipped with all the necessary tools to promote their business and move nimbly, and more consciously, in the sector of the enogastronomic tourism.

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