

EXPERIENTIAL TOURISM: THE POTENTIAL OF CUENCA (SPAIN) AS A CREATIVE CITY OF GASTRONOMY

TURISMO EXPERIENCIAL: EL POTENCIAL DE CUENCA (ESPAÑA) COMO CIUDAD CREATIVA DE LA GASTRONOMÍA

Francisco Sánchez-Cubo (Universidad de Málaga, España)*¹

Andrés Lillo-Pradillo (Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, España)²

Juan Antonio Mondéjar-Jiménez (Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, España)³

Abstract

Recently, studies on gastronomic tourism as a generator of experiences have been booming. Concurrently, the potential of the creative industries – e.g., Creative Cities – as tourism resources is gaining momentum. For this reason, this paper jointly addresses the experientiality of gastronomy and the impacts of the UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy designations and analyses the case of the city of Cuenca as a potential gastronomic destination through a theoretical and descriptive approach. Then, the established similarities allow an analytical discourse about the city's current situation and the possibilities for rapid development as a benchmark city in the gastronomic field. As a result of the previous analyses, some steps are suggested to consolidate the city as a culinary pole: improving the accommodation capacity, reinforcing its culinary heritage, and better governance measures to involve the community, among others.

Keywords: creative city, gastronomic tourism, gastronomy, spanish capital of gastronomy, tourist experience

JEL: D91, L38, L83, Z32

* Autor de correspondencia: fsanchezcubo@uma.es

¹ ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0556-7239>

² ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4527-3367>

³ ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4043-6872>

Resumen

Recientemente, los estudios acerca del turismo gastronómico como generador de experiencias se encuentran en auge. Asimismo, el potencial de las industrias creativas y – e.j., Ciudades Creativas, – como recursos turísticos está ganando impulso. Por ello, este trabajo aborda conjuntamente la experiencialidad de la gastronomía y los impactos de las denominaciones de Ciudad Creativa de la Gastronomía de la UNESCO, y analiza el caso de la ciudad de Cuenca como potencial destino gastronómico a través de un enfoque teórico y descriptivo. Tras ello se establecen paralelismos que permiten elaborar un discurso analítico de la situación actual de la ciudad y sus posibilidades para un rápido desarrollo como ciudad referente en el ámbito gastronómico. Asimismo, fruto de los análisis previos se sugieren los próximos pasos a seguir para consolidar la urbe como polo culinario: mejorar la capacidad de alojamiento, reforzar el patrimonio gastronómico y mejorar las medidas de gobernanza para involucrar a la comunidad, entre otros.

Palabras clave: capital española de la gastronomía, ciudad creativa, experiencialidad turística, gastronomía, turismo gastronómico.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, studies addressing issues related to the tourism industry have multiplied exponentially, following the general trend of global scientific production (Marginson, 2022). However, this is also a consequence of the remarkable diversity of fields of study that have emerged as a result of the further development of tourism studies. Thus, there are multiple approaches to general and concrete problems in numerous specific and cross-cutting aspects that affect the tourism industry, directly or indirectly.

In this context of scientific proliferation, the analysis of tourism experientiality seems to be gaining importance within the contemporary currents of study. Modern societies – complex and changing – are more prone to the search for experience as an inherent part of the enjoyment of travel, going beyond the previous limits of getting to know new places or contemplating the destination's resources, seeking to experience unique moments (Kirillova et al., 2017). That means that tourism managers must seek to establish an appropriate context in the destinations they manage, in which the optimal circumstances are provided for genuine tourism experiences to take place and generate loyalty to the destination in tourists (Di-Clemente et al., 2020).

However, this conception of experiences is too broad, so the areas of study need to be specified. Specifically, this work focuses its analysis on the gastronomy of tourist destinations due to the growing interest arising among tourists and potential travellers. This boom seems to be caused by multiple factors, but two stand out. On the one hand, thanks to its visual appeal and taste, which disseminate through social networks thanks to audiovisual content creators or amateur users (Liu et al., 2020). On the other hand, the search for and enjoyment of local gastronomy is a way of connecting with the culture of the tourist destination visited, giving authenticity to the trip. In short, it is the search for an authentic experience, materialised through the typical food consumed by locals – in their establishments of reference – outside the tourist circuits, although it may vary between types of tourists and contexts (Özdemir and Seyitoglu, 2017).

Hence, the above suggests an increasing relevance of the gastronomy within the tourism industry, and its role as a trigger for better tourism experiences is envisaged. Thus, given the

many aspects that may influence the gastronomic tourism experiences, it is crucial to analyse these current trends on tourism experientiality and gastronomic tourism in a transversal and applied manner. Considering this approach, this paper aims to define a study framework that may allow a motivated evaluation of tourist destinations focused on gastronomy. Specifically, this paper addresses the case of the city of Cuenca – 2023 Spanish Gastronomic Capital – and its potential as a Creative City of Gastronomy, given the city’s tendency to offer itself as a gastronomic tourist destination. After the corresponding analyses – i.e., content analyses of information available on official websites, a thorough literature review and descriptive analyses of official databases –, the findings are discussed and presented, and future lines of action and research are suggested.

2. THE EXPERIENTIAL ASPECT OF GASTRONOMY

In studies on gastronomic tourism or gastronomic experientialism, the concept of gastronomy itself is rarely defined, and its definition varies according to the language and dictionary of reference. For example, the Spanish, English and French languages, in their most widely used dictionaries, include the words “*art*” and “*science*” as part of their definitions, along with a positive appreciation of the act of eating or the preparation of food (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Larousse, n.d.; Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.; Real Academia Española, n.d.). However, by linking the concept of gastronomy to the fact of travelling, the definition proposed by the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, n.d.) drops both terms, limiting its scope to the experience travellers find in food and its related activities and products. In this way, it seems that the positive connotation provided by the definitions of gastronomy is diluted in the term “*experience*” without expressly suggesting a quality or authenticity of this, being stated as the “*type of tourism activity which is characterized by the visitor’s experience linked with food and related products and activities while travelling*”.

However, beyond the discussion of the term itself or the agreed definition of gastronomic tourism, the focus should be on the tourists themselves. That is, depending on their involvement with the destination’s gastronomy, their experience would have to be diverse as a result of a different relationship with the environment. Thus, authors such as Cordova-Buiza et al. (2021) or Bjork and Kauppinen-Raisanen (2016) identify, on the one hand, tourists for whom food plays a survival role while, on the other hand, there are those who enjoy it. It further divides the latter into those who succinctly like it and those who find gastronomy a complete experience (Bjork and Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2016). This experience ranges from visiting a standard restaurant to participating in gastronomic activities such as tastings, cooking classes (Di-Clemente et al., 2020) or gastronomic tours (Sánchez-Cubo et al., 2023).

The evident breadth in the range of activities, and consequently of potential gastronomic tourism experiences, causes difficulties in their modelling and measurement. Thus, studies are grouped around the analyses of the memorability of the tourism experience, with an interest in gastronomy (Stone et al., 2022). Starting with the tourism memorability scale proposed by Kim et al. (2012), there have been numerous additions to the dimensions to be covered by the term in its application to gastronomy, ranging from the production of the food and who participates in it to its authenticity or novelty (Williams et al., 2019). Together, all these dimensions emanating from the gastronomic activity make up the memorability of the gastronomic tourism experience which, following the model proposed by Badu-Baiden et al. (2022), is directly related to subjective well-being. In this line, other authors such as Hernández-Mogollón et al. (2020) establish such a relationship with the quality of life of tourists who take part in gastronomic activities.

Thus, of all the academic works that address issues related to gastronomic experientiality, those that consider the environment and the offer as part of the experience stand out for the purpose of this study. That is the importance of “*what*” is offered and “*how*” it is offered to the tourist. For this reason, restaurants, food stalls, markets, fairs and many other permanent or temporary establishments where visitors acquire products for consumption are especially relevant. In particular, their importance lies in the degree of authenticity (Bjork and Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2016) of both the establishment and its products, as they provide a given image of the local gastronomy and substantially influence visitors’ memories and satisfaction. However, enjoying such an authenticity may encounter difficulties as, in some contexts, due to language barriers or the exoticism of the dishes – among other reasons – a local guide may be necessary to make this experience a positive one (Cifci et al., 2021).

All in all, gastronomic experientiality in the context of tourism is presented as a subject of study with multiple edges. Although this makes analyses difficult, it opens a wide range of possibilities in terms of methodology and transfer to society. In this sense, this paper addresses the dimension of the gastronomic offer of cities – through the case study of the city of Cuenca (Spain) – as a showcase of the culinary culture of a territory for potential national and foreign visitors. Specifically, two distinctions are presented that are strongly related to the offer of high-quality and sustained over time gastronomic experiences. These, even conceived as recognitions, are a remarkable marketing tool for the cities that hold them (Rosi, 2014), as they create a positive image in potential consumers before their visit, which will be consolidated and maintained over time after their visit (Sthapit, 2019).

3. CREATIVE CITIES OF GASTRONOMY

The UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) is an alliance of cities seeking to “*promote cooperation with and among cities that have identified creativity as a strategic factor for sustainable urban development*” (UNESCO, n.d.). This denomination suggests that creativity per se is a driver of development. Along these lines, some authors, such as Arcos-Pumarola et al. (2024), argue that creativity has a similar power of attraction to cultural heritage, which would allow its use as a tourism resource. Under this premise, those cities capable of enhancing their creative capacity towards one or several specific areas will see a new tourist attraction emerging. Currently, the UCCN distinguishes seven creative industries: Crafts and Folk Arts, Media Arts, Film, Design, Gastronomy, Literature and Music.

Among these, this paper focuses on the Creative Cities of Gastronomy. Membership of this initiative is based on eight criteria that reflect the constant activity of participating cities to preserve their local gastronomy, protect their culinary traditions, respect the environment and the sustainability of local products, and carry out programmes of education, conservation, and culinary events, among others (UNESCO, n.d.). However, authors such as Rosi (2014) argue that UCCN membership is generally sought as a promotional tool, leaving cooperation between UCCN cities behind. Another criticism of the UCCN, specific to Creative Cities of Gastronomy, is the one put forward by Kinkaid and Platts (2024), who argue that, although economic development motivated by an increase in tourism could be positive, it could also lead to harmful effects such as gentrification (the premises of small entrepreneurs are acquired by investors and replaced by generic restaurants), loss of identity, among others.

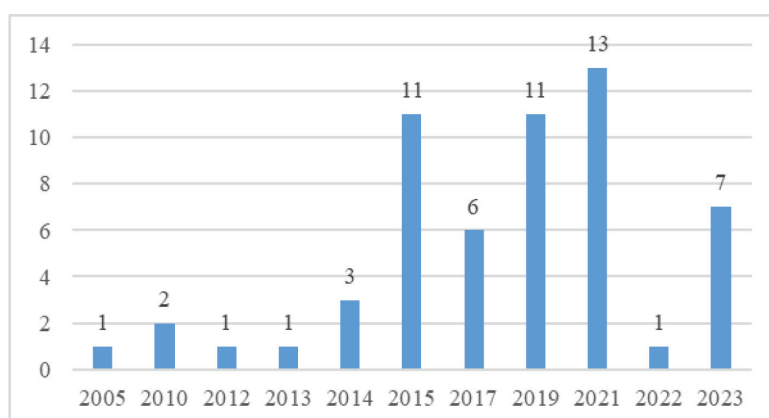
There are currently a total of 57 Creative Cities of Gastronomy, distributed across the five continents: Africa (3), America (14), Asia (26), Europe (12) and Oceania (2). Table 1 shows the division by country (ISO codes) and year of affiliation. The volume of Creative Cities in Asia stands out, although they are evenly distributed

TABLE 1. UNESCO CREATIVE CITIES OF GASTRONOMY

City (Country)	Year	City (Country)	Year	City (Country)	Year
Launceston (AUS)	2021	Portoviejo (ECU)	2019	Ensenada (MEX)	2015
Bendigo (AUS)	2019	Burgos (ESP)	2015	Kuching (MYS)	2021
Lankaran (AZE)	2021	Dénia (ESP)	2015	Bergen (NOR)	2015
Bohicon (BEN)	2021	Rouen (FRA)	2021	Panama City (PAN)	2017
Cochabamba (BOL)	2017	Heraklion (GRC)	2023	Arequipa (PER)	2019
Belo Horizonte (BRA)	2019	Thessaloniki (GRC)	2021	Iloilo City (PHL)	2023
Paraty (BRA)	2017	Hyderabad (IND)	2019	Santa Maria da Feira (PRT)	2021
Belém (BRA)	2015	Kermanshah (IRN)	2021	Saint Petersburg (RUS)	2021
Florianópolis (BRA)	2014	Rasht (IRN)	2015	Buraidah (SAU)	2021
Fribourg (CHE)	2023	Bergamo (ITA)	2019	Östersund (SWE)	2010
Chaozhou (CHN)	2023	Alba (ITA)	2017	Phetchaburi (THA)	2021
Huai'an (CHN)	2021	Parma (ITA)	2015	Phuket (THA)	2015
Yangzhou (CHN)	2019	Usuki (JPN)	2021	Kayseri (TUR)	2022
Macao (CHN)	2017	Tsuruoka (JPN)	2014	Afyonkarahisar (TUR)	2019
Shunde (CHN)	2014	Battambang (KHM)	2023	Hatay (TUR)	2019
Chengdu (CHN)	2010	Gangneung (KOR)	2023	Gaziantep (TUR)	2015
Nkongsamba (CMR)	2023	Jeonju (KOR)	2012	San Antonio (USA)	2015
Buenaventura (COL)	2017	Zahlé (LBN)	2013	Tucson (USA)	2015
Popayán (COL)	2005	Mérida (MEX)	2019	Overstrand Hermanus (ZAF)	2019

Source: Authors form UNESCO (n.d.).

FIGURE 1. NEW MEMBERS OF UCCN – GASTRONOMY (2005-2023)



Source: Authors from UNESCO (n.d.).

across regions within the continent. Figure 1 shows the evolution of the nominations for the 2005-2023 period, with the 2015-2021 period being the one with the highest number of Creative Cities of Gastronomy after more than a decade of low activity.

Nonetheless, beyond the number of cities that are members of the UCCN, it is interesting to know the state of the art about the impacts or differential characteristics that they present within the framework of gastronomic tourism. In this sense, this line of research – together with creativity and innovation – has been an area of proliferation in recent years (Kuhn et al., 2024). Specifically, the general interest in the academic literature lies in identifying the latent dimensions that define the tourism experience of visitors in the Creative Cities of Gastronomy. For example, Yilmaz et al. (2020) identified that the gastronomic image of the destination is defined by four dimensions: gastronomic identity, destination diversity, gastronomic attractions, and skilled labour and agents.

Similarly, Zhu and Yasami (2021) found that these dimensions could be grouped as infrastructure, attractions, organisations, and education. In fact, the education factor, which is mandatory as part of the application requirements, is also studied by Kim et al. (2022), who highlight catering facilities, activities, education and training, and local ingredients and culinary skills within Singapore's gastrotourism image. Sangkaew et al. (2023) state that the food tourist experience is determined by four main attributes: quality of food, service, ambience and fair price, the latter being the most important along with service attributes to enhance the tourist destination's image. Finally, it is worth noting the scale proposed by Soonsan et al. (2023) for measuring local food attributes, including food quality, authenticity and novelty, hygiene, interpersonal relationships, food service providers and food venues, as well as the added value that local food generates for tourists. They all agree on crucial aspects of the culinary offer, such as a quality offer, a sound and diverse gastronomic identity, the need for adequate infrastructure and organisation, and the existence of an educational and academic agenda as essential elements for the success of these cities.

All these indicators make it possible to obtain a comprehensive approach to studying the most relevant elements of the Creative Cities of Gastronomy. Together, they will shape the reputation of the city and its corresponding brand. Proper management of this will positively affect tourists' travel intentions and satisfaction (Jiang et al., 2023), through the leverage of gastronomic resources (Khoo and Badarulzaman, 2014), allowing for returns from derived economic activity (Pearson and Pearson, 2017). However, cities that choose to develop as a gastronomic destination will have to ensure that the returns obtained in the cities are transferred to the rural environments that provide the raw materials and support the cultural identity of the region, alleviating the usual imbalance between rural and urban areas (Forleo and Benedetto, 2020), distributing the benefits in the region (Cartay et al., 2021). Furthermore, within the Creative Cities themselves, a prominent role for local society would be desirable, both as a support for governmental plans (Jamal and Getz, 1995), and as participants in the actions derived from the enhancement of the creative facet of gastronomy, thanks to good governance policies (Guitart-Casalderrey and Casanovas-Ibáñez, 2024).

On the other hand, from the tourist's point of view, it is interesting to revisit the idea put forward in the previous section about the temporality of the trip (Sthapit, 2019). Similarly, Park et al. (2023) identify the key drivers influencing each stage of travel in the Creative Cities of Gastronomy. In the pre-trip stage, available information online and social media are particularly relevant. Existing scientific evidence that demonstrates the importance of the latter (Yu and Sun, 2019) and exposes the multiple shortcomings of the former (Bütün and Öncel, 2019), always taking UCCN Gastronomy cities as examples.

Finally, the characteristics of the tourists themselves must be considered, as the results may differ substantially depending on their socio-demographic characteristics, origin, or knowledge of the destination. Some related examples can be found in works such as Hsu et al. (2022), who identified significant differences between Westerners and Easterners in the city of Macau. In

contrast, Wan and Choi (2022) found no differences between gastronomic and non-gastronomic tourists, although they do highlight the particularity in the perception of Macao's food image by tourists from Hong Kong. However, Stone et al. (2022) and Gálvez et al. (2021) found that the greater the willingness to participate in the culinary culture of the destination, the greater the enjoyment by visitors.

4. METHODOLOGY AND PRESENTATION OF THE RESEARCH SCENARIO

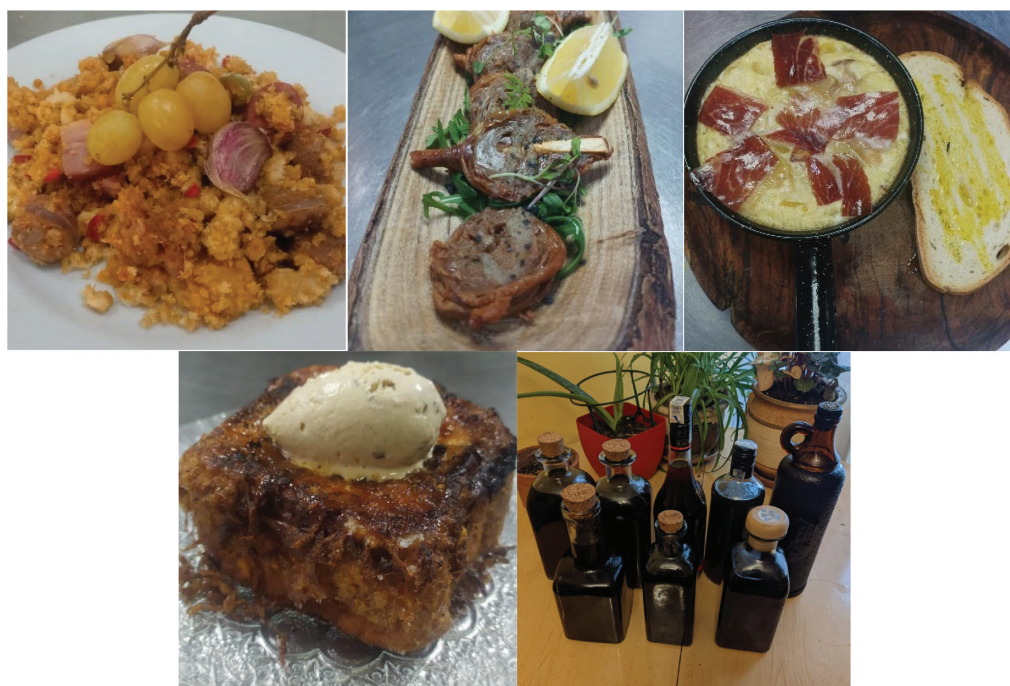
As can be deduced from the prior section, most studies conducted to analyse a Creative City of Gastronomy required running in-site surveys or observing several statistics for the validity period of the distinction. However, this study aims to assess the potential of Cuenca as a Creative City of Gastronomy, which requires a different approach. Therefore, to perform relevant and realistic analyses, the chosen methods are content analyses of information available on official websites, a thorough literature review to establish proper relations with the case study and descriptive analyses of official databases. More specifically, the statistical descriptive analyses use data from the open-access databases of the Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha (2023) and the National Statistics Institute (2024a, 2024b). These data were accessed on 17 March 2024. All databases comprise the latest available data, which correspond to 2023. The hyperlinks to the sources can be found in the reference list.

The city of Cuenca (Spain), a World Heritage Site since 1996 (UNESCO, 1996), is nestled in the Serranía de Cuenca, a mountainous area located between the east of the Iberian Peninsula and the Spanish capital. Its position between the two territories, to which it is linked by highway and high-speed railway, makes this city an ideal destination for weekend getaways. In addition, its complex orography offers spectacular natural landscapes that, beyond its attractiveness, are key to the history of the city, inhabited by Romans, Muslims, Christians and Jews. Of course, these geographical and historical conditions have affected the local gastronomy, resulting in hearty dishes typical of cold climates and with small and large game meat. Examples of typical dishes from Cuenca include – among many others – *migas* (i), *zarajos* (ii), *ajuarriero* (iii), *morteruelo* (iv) or the liqueur *resolí* (v) (Figure 2).

5. CUENCA, GASTRONOMIC CAPITAL OF SPAIN

Given the above scenario, the promotion of tourism in Cuenca revolves mainly around the natural resources of the province of the same name and the gastronomic offer of the city, nourished by the local products of its surrounding municipalities. In this line, Cuenca put itself forward - once again - in 2022 for the distinction of Spanish Capital of Gastronomy (CEG) in 2023, an award given by a jury composed of members of the Spanish Federation of Tourism Journalists (FEPET) and the Spanish Federation of Hotel and Catering (FEHR), representatives of public institutions and experts in gastronomy and tourism, who evaluate a dossier on the suitability of the city to hold the gastronomic capital. This dossier is very similar to the one that must be presented for the candidacy of Creative City of Gastronomy, as it highlights Cuenca's concern for sustainably preserving its local gastronomy, using local products and extolling its products with Protected Designations of Origin or similar – 35 according to the latest data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (2024) –, and carrying out workshops and educational activities, among others. Obtaining this distinction lasts for one calendar year (Voces de Cuenca, 2022) and is intended as a call to gastronomic tourists to visit the city and consume its products. During this period, gastronomic events and activities are organised around the CEG brand (Figure 3).

FIGURE 2. TRADITIONAL DISHES (I-III) AND MODERN CUISINE (IV-V) – CUENCA



Source: Authors (i) and chef Daniel Ojero (Restaurant *Grotte del Huecar*, Cuenca) (ii-v)

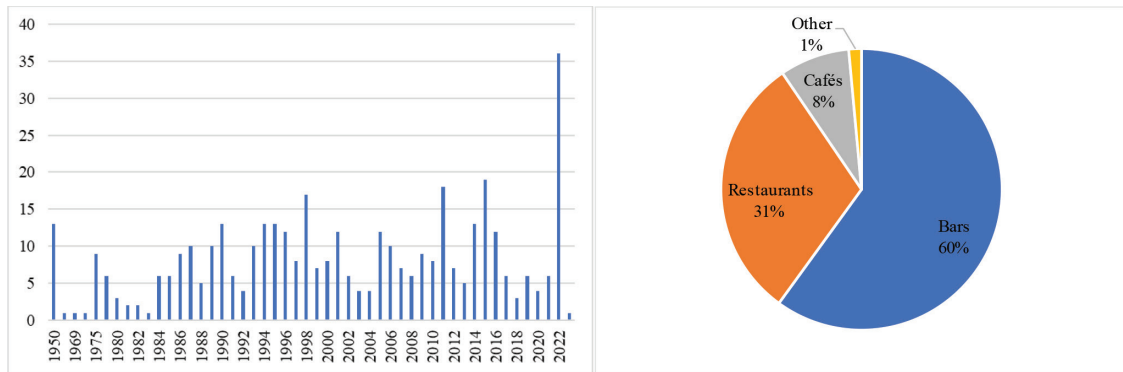
FIGURE 3. LOGO “SPANISH CAPITAL OF GASTRONOMY (CEG)”



Source: Capital Española de la Gastronomía, 2023

However, once the distinction has been achieved, the chosen city aims to experience a substantial increase in visitors, which will positively impact the city’s development and economy. Onwards, as previously stated, a descriptive analysis is performed to illustrate these claims. In the case of Cuenca, Figure 4 shows the evolution of the opening of new catering outlets in the municipality of Cuenca by opening date. It is evident that the trend is relatively constant, except for the 2022 year when 36 new catering establishments opened their doors (18 bars, 11 restaurants, one café and six cocktail bars). Given the above trend, the effect of the CEG distinction is evident in the restaurant offers. The city now has 410 establishments, distributed as shown in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4. OPENINGS OF CATERING OUTLETS IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF CUENCA (LEFT) AND PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF THE CURRENT OFFER (RIGHT)



Source: Authors from Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha (2023).

This high catering offer contrasts with the availability of regulated tourist accommodation (Table 2), which barely totals 1,670 beds in 936 rooms. Moreover, the size of the establishments is remarkably small, and the proportion of medium or high-quality hotels is only 17% of the accommodation on offer. As a result, the city would have severe problems assimilating a sudden substantial increase in tourists.

TABLE 2. HOTEL ACCOMMODATION BY CATEGORY IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF CUENCA

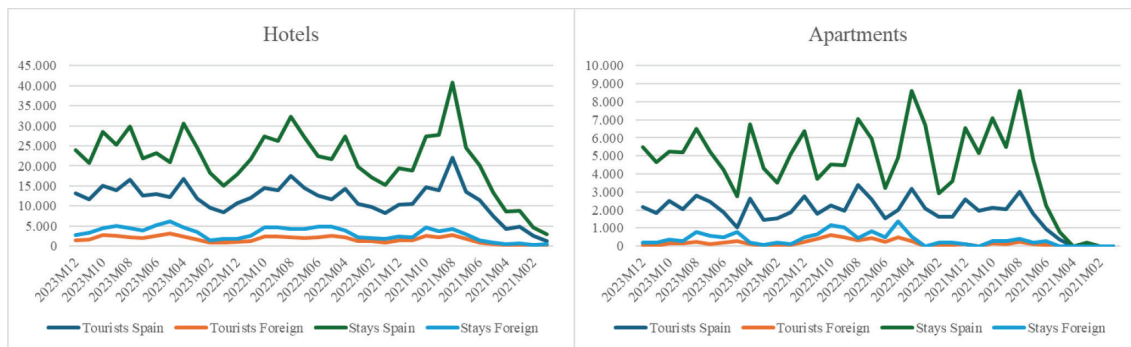
Type	n	1*	2*	3*	4*	Rooms – Mean	Beds – Mean	Beds per room – Ratio
Inns	23	3	20	-	-	14.59	27.32	1.87
Apartment hotels	2	-	1	1	-	23	38.50	1.67
Hotels	14	1	4	4	5	16.43	27.50	1.67
Guesthouses	13	11	2	-	-	26.08	46.69	1.79

Source: Authors from Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha (2023).

However, considering the data in Figure 5, it seems that the GEC did not have a significant impact on hotel and flat demand in 2023, presenting a similar pattern to 2022, with both years showing a notable decrease compared to 2021 in hotel demand. It is also evident that foreign demand (although it represents only 12.6% of tourists) is more stable than domestic demand, which is strongly influenced by seasonal elements (long weekends and winter). Figure 6 sheds additional light on this issue, showing how the average stay coincides with the demand for weekend tourist destinations, being less than two nights in hotels and less than three nights in tourist apartments, even for foreign tourists.

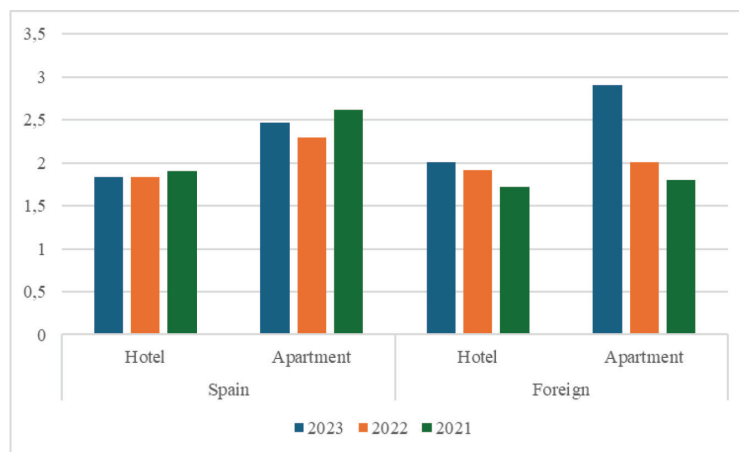
The analysis of the above figures seems to suggest that obtaining the distinction as the Spanish Capital of Gastronomy has not had a significant effect on tourist numbers during the year 2023. Unfortunately, there is no data available for excursionists at the municipal level

FIGURE 5. TRAVELLERS BY TYPE OF ACCOMMODATION IN THE CITY OF CUENCA (2021-2023)



Source: Authors from National Statistics Institute (2024a).

FIGURE 6. AVERAGE TOURISTS STAY BY TYPE OF ACCOMMODATION



Source: Authors from National Statistics Institute (2024a).

that would be used to contrast whether it has had a significant positive effect on them. The geographical situation of Cuenca and its good connectivity with Madrid and Valencia, being also a transit area between both Autonomous Communities, may have influenced the fact that the increase in the number of visitors has fallen on excursionists and has not been reflected in the figures for tourists, overnight stays, and average stay. This hypothesis is emerging as a future line of research of great interest for the city and its economic agents.

6. DISCUSSION: CUENCA, CREATIVE CITY OF GASTRONOMY?

Throughout this work, three elements have been presented which, *a priori*, if they coincide, would have the necessary potential to promote the tourist, economic and social development of a city with a deep-rooted culinary culture. On the one hand, the theoretical framework surrounding the gastronomic experience and its relationship with tourism is shown. On the other hand, it presents the UNESCO Creative Cities Network, the existing cases and the

studies that have analysed some of them. And, finally, the distinction of the Spanish Capital of Gastronomy, its similarities with the Creative Cities of Gastronomy, the recognition it gives to local cuisine, and the capability of the city of Cuenca, as a case study, to assimilate a potential increase in tourism.

Firstly, it is worth highlighting that it would be relatively easy for the city to prepare its candidacy for the Creative City of Gastronomy distinction. Its recent enjoyment of the national CEG distinction would make it possible to take advantage of the momentum achieved with it and its gastronomic image - as well as the extensive dossier already prepared - to present a solid candidacy that would progress in the selective process. The similarities between the criteria of the two distinctions may suggest that the candidacy would be successful. Plus, the support of the economic and social agents (Jamal and Getz, 1995) would allow the consolidation of the plan. However, the main criticism about using this distinction merely as a tool for promotion and not cooperation between cities should be pointed out (Rosi, 2014). In this regard, it should be noted that authors such as Kim et al. (2022) point out that the mere distinction as a Creative City does not lead by itself to the success of the gastronomic tourist destination.

On the other hand, the analysis of accommodation supply raises severe doubts about the city's capacity to accommodate a high volume of tourists in the short term without experiencing a detrimental impact on the city through the proliferation of unregulated accommodation, in line with the concerns of Kinkaid and Platts (2024). Along these lines, it is also worth considering the hypothesis raised in the previous section about the possibility that the increase in demand is limited to excursionists. If this hypothesis were true, the economic impact of these visitors would be limited to consumption in catering establishments and the purchase of souvenirs and typical products, while the use of the city's spaces and resources is identical to that of tourists and locals, displacing the latter from their leisure areas.

However, the number of catering establishments currently operating is high for a city of just 53,512 people registered (National Statistics Institute, 2024b), the equivalent of one establishment for every 130 people. That suggests that, even if there is a sudden and striking increase in consumers, the catering offer could assimilate it, unlike the supply of regulated accommodation. However, the main problems the city could face concerning the gastronomic offer seem limited to two possible consequences. On the one hand, an increase in prices as a result of a higher number of consumers with a greater tendency to consume, and, on the other hand, the possible loss of authenticity and quality due to a rapid and uncontrolled proliferation of new "typical" bars and restaurants, which would significantly damage the experience of tourists and, consequently, lead to a deterioration of the city's gastronomic image.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In summary, this paper has analysed the potential of the city of Cuenca (Spain) as a gastronomy-focused tourist destination through the distinctions between the Creative City of Gastronomy and the Spanish Capital of Gastronomy. While the results of the CEG do not show a notable impact on tourism, studies on cities in the UCCNs of Gastronomy indicate more encouraging results. Considering the similarities of both selective processes and having passed the CEG process, the city of Cuenca could use the resources already employed and the experience acquired during the Gastronomy Capital period to prepare its candidacy for becoming a Creative City of Gastronomy. In the event that the stakeholders involved may opt to finally launch the candidacy, and given the existing materials prepared for CEG, it could be done in the short term.

However, in parallel, the city should adapt to accommodate a potential increase in visitors by improving its accommodation capacity and reinforcing its culinary heritage, increasing the frequency of gastronomic activities and trying, through governance measures, to involve the local population in a communal sense of a distinct gastronomic identity. This set of measures would require acting in the short place, but they could not be seen until the mid-term. Increasing the number of beds in an inland medium-sized Spanish city is not feasible unless local public policies – mostly regarding the reduction of local taxes – opt for supporting entrepreneurs and attracting investors. In this sense, the political commitment at the local, provincial and regional levels would significantly influence the establishment of gastronomic activities towards promoting the traditional cuisine and reinforcing the culinary heritage. While this could be done in the short term, all political parties should agree on a mid-term plan to avoid the effects of elections. In this regard, involving the local community could enhance the political action to jointly support the candidacy for the Creative City of Gastronomy.

Straightforwardly, it is fundamental to improve in the short term the online positioning. That is crucial to attract gastronomic tourists, who interact with the city during their stay and serve as ambassadors once they return, for the sustainable success of the initiatives proposed in this study. In this process, collaboration between the economic and social agents involved is crucial to relaunching a city at risk of depopulation in what is known as “*España vaciada*” – literally, “*Emptied Spain*”.

In fact, this risk of depopulation and economic decline should be considered when weighing up the pros and cons of encouraging tourist activity in the area, as the potential detrimental elements could be less than those produced by not carrying out these promotional actions. Of course, this assertion is a hypothesis that will have to be tested and which, together with the absence of data on excursionists, are the main limitations of this work. The authors identify both limitations as promising future lines of research, jointly with the study of the acceptance of these initiatives by the local population.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization: F.S.C.; Data curation: F.S.C. & J.A.M.J.; Formal Analysis: A.L.P.; Investigation: F.S.C., A.L.P. & J. A.M.J.; Methodology: A.L.P. & J. A.M.J.; Supervision: F.S.C.; Validation: J. A.M.J.; Visualization: A.L.P.; Writing – original draft: F.S.C. & A.L.P.; Writing – review & editing: J. A.M.J.

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