

## BRANDING BARANJA: WINE ROADS AND GASTRONOMIC HERITAGE AS TOOLS FOR DESTINATION MARKETING

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<https://doi.org/10.20867/cromar.29.11>

### **Abstract**

*Purpose* - This paper aims to explore the branding potential of Baranja, a rural region in Eastern Croatia, as a wine and gastro tourism destination. Research focuses on how wine routes and local gastronomy can serve as effective tools in destination marketing strategies to create a unique and recognizable brand identity for Baranja.

*Methodology* - The research employs a mixed-method approach. It begins with a qualitative exploration of Baranja's wine and gastronomic tourism offerings, followed by a quantitative survey targeting visitors to Baranja, aiming to assess their perceptions, motivations, satisfaction levels, and the sense of authenticity connected to wine and gastronomic experiences.

*Findings* - The findings suggest that Baranja holds significant, yet underexploited, potential as a wine and gastronomic destination. Wine routes in Baranja not only connect local wineries but also act as powerful storytelling tools that communicate the region's cultural heritage and identity. When combined with authentic local cuisine, these experiences deepen visitors' emotional engagement with the destination. The synergy between wine and gastronomy enriches the overall tourism offer and provides a solid foundation for sustainable destination branding.

*Contribution* - This study contributes to the literature on rural tourism and place branding by offering a contextualized model rooted in cultural and gastronomic heritage, and by providing practical recommendations for local stakeholders and policymakers. The Baranja case presents a valuable example for other emerging rural regions aiming to leverage their enogastronomic assets.

**Keywords:** Wine tourism, destination branding, Baranja, wine roads, gastronomy, rural tourism

### **INTRODUCTION**

In Europe, rural and agritourism have a long tradition, yet their most dynamic development has occurred over the past fifteen years, driven by structural changes in the agricultural sector. Especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, rural areas have gained renewed popularity as multifunctional visitor destinations perceived as healthy, green, environmentally friendly, and low-density spaces (Yang et al., 2024). While the economic share of agriculture has declined and farms have become more specialized, many have diversified their activities to include tourism. In most EU countries, rural tourism is viewed as part of broader rural diversification aimed at creating new jobs and additional income. In some developed EU member states, rural tourism already generates more employment and income in rural areas than agriculture itself (Bojnec 2010).

Key segments of rural tourism include recreational, cultural, wellness, and business activities, all of which have multiplier effects on local economies (Bojnec, 2010). It encompasses visitor experiences linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle and culture, angling, sightseeing and events (Borić Cvenić et al., 2024). Closely linked to this is gastronomic and wine tourism, both of which play a vital role in enhancing rural destinations. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), gastronomic tourism involves travel experiences centered on local food products and food-related activities, such as visiting producers, attending festivals, and joining cooking workshops. Wine tourism, a subtype of gastronomic tourism, focuses on visits to vineyards and wineries for tasting and purchasing wine (UN Tourism, 2024).

The development of wine tourism supports destination branding by providing tourists with rich sensory and emotional experiences. Beyond wine tasting, visitors often participate in grape harvesting, wine-making activities, or vineyard walking tours (e.g., “Wine & Walk” events). These experiences promote relaxation, learning, and engagement, while authentic and memorable encounters increase visitor loyalty and positive word-of-mouth (Sthapit et al., 2024). To ensure its continued growth, wine tourism requires stronger promotion and integration with gastronomy, the creation of recognizable wine brands, unique winery accommodations, and experiential products for discerning travelers. Equally important are the development of wine festivals and events, and demand segmentation that aligns offerings with visitor expectations (Jovanović et al., 2025).

As a key demand driver, wine tourism strengthens local identity and contributes to the sustainability of destinations. It creates a unique tourism offer that benefits both rural and urban economies. Increasingly, travelers seek authentic experiences and are moving away from standardized, mass-market products lacking local character (Stojković and Dimitrovski, 2024). Local gastronomy, an integral part of the tourist experience, offers insights into a region’s culture and traditions, extending beyond mere nourishment (García-Pérez and Castillo-Ortiz, 2024). In 2023, food-related spending by 1.3 billion international tourists generated approximately USD 502 billion in revenue worldwide (UN Tourism, 2024).

## **1. BARANJA’S WINE AND GASTRONOMIC TOURISM**

The European wine sector is facing changes, such as production problems as a result of climate change, changing consumer habits in favour of responsibly produced products, such as organic wines, which reduces overall consumption and requires new development strategies (Goncalves et. al 2020). In this context, many wineries are opting for diversification, creating specific tourism products and taking advantage of local policies to promote wine tourism. Accordingly, wineries can develop different business models with an emphasis on wine tourism activities and coordinate the development of local and regional wine tourism. Wineries are both producers of industrial products and service providers and often play a key role in the development of rural areas (Camprubi

and Goncalves 2024). Each wine region is characterized by specific natural conditions, production traditions, types of wine and tourist attractions. As a small country in a global context, Croatia has four wine regions, each of which has its own specificities, development opportunities but also potential threats. The Croatian wine industry has not yet realized its full potential. It is characterized by small- and medium-sized family farms, often managed by a single owner acting as manager, technologist, and oenologist, with relatively old vineyards and fragmented plantings (Jelić Milković et al., 2021). In the east of the country, there is a wine region of Slavonia and the Danube region, which includes Slavonia, Baranja and western Srijem (turistickeprice, 2023). The Baranja microregion is becoming prominent precisely through the development of its gastro and eno-tourism that is becoming a catalyst for tourist demand and arrivals to that part of Croatia. Many authors emphasize that enogastronomy can stimulate the development of multifunctional rural areas in Slavonia and Baranja, providing family farms with additional income and contributing to the economic and social strengthening of the region (Čepo et al, 2019; Sudarić et al., 2020).

Baranja, traditionally an agricultural and rural area, has recently emerged as an increasingly attractive tourism destination. Its unexplored potential provides opportunities to shape a distinctive image among visitors. The development of wine tourism is closely tied to the region's long-standing winemaking tradition, reinforcing its branding as the "Land of Wine" – a place representing the harmony of man, sun, and wine (TZ Baranja, 2025).

The main wine-producing settlements are Kneževi Vinogradi, Suza, Zmajevac, Popovac, and Draž. The name *Baranja* itself derives from the Hungarian words *bor* ("wine") and *anya* ("mother"), symbolically referring to the "mother of wine" (TZ Baranja, 2025). The region's northern hill, *Banska kosa*, ideal for viticulture, was recognized by the Romans as *Mons aureus* or "Golden Hill." Fertile soils and a microclimate influenced by the Danube create excellent conditions for grape cultivation. The mixture of porous loess and rich black soil forms the foundation for Baranja's quality wines, while local features such as *sugatori* (wine cellars) and *surduci* (steep vineyard roads) add to its distinct character (Predojević, 2016).

Wine plays a central role in local culture, celebrated through numerous annual events such as "Vinatlon," "Wine & Walk," "Wine Marathon," and "Winter Wine & Walk," which combine wine and gastronomy. Osijek-Baranja County holds the largest share of vineyards in Croatia, with around 100 winemakers along 12 wine routes (Agroklub, 2025). The vineyards, located at altitudes between 150 and 350 meters, predominantly produce full-bodied white wines such as Graševina (Laški Riesling), Chardonnay, Pinot, Sauvignon Blanc, and Traminer. Among red varieties, Frankovka is the most prominent, followed by Zweigelt, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Syrah (Croatian Wineries, 2025).

Renowned wineries include Josić, Kalazić, Kolar, Kusić, Svijetli Dvori, Pinkert, Szabo, and Zajec, mostly situated in Zmajevac, Suza, and Karanac (TZ Baranja, 2025). Traditional Baranja cuisine complements the wine experience with specialties such as

*čobanac, carp on a fork, Slavonian kulen, fish paprikash, and noodles with poppy seeds* (Hrvatska puna života, 2025).

## 2. SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The quantitative research involved conducting a survey to assess respondents' attitudes and perceptions of the tourist experience in Baranja. The survey investigation was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do visitors perceive Baranja as a wine and gastronomic destination?
2. To what extent are wine and gastronomy key motivational factors in choosing Baranja as a travel destination?
3. Are there significant relationships between visitor satisfaction, perceived authenticity of the offer, and specific elements of the tourism experience?
4. In what ways can wine and gastronomy contribute to the branding of Baranja as a unique and recognizable destination?

The questionnaire consisted of 19 questions divided into three sections:

- Perceptions of Baranja as a destination, awareness of the destination's offerings, and key motivational factors influencing destination choice
- Visitor experience and satisfaction (for respondents who had previously visited Baranja)
- Sociodemographic information

The questionnaire was independently developed by the authors. Data were collected using a written online questionnaire, and the sample structure is presented in Table 1. The research sample was a convenience sample, consisting of students and graduates (alumni) of University of Applied Sciences Baltazar Zapresić, as well as employers with whom the University has established cooperation agreements. Additionally, visitors to Baranja were included through the mailing list of the Baranja Tourist Board. The online questionnaire was distributed to 800 addresses, and 264 completed questionnaires were returned, resulting in a response rate of 33%.

**Table 1: Sample distribution by county, gender, employment status, and monthly income per household member**

TOTAL RESPONDENTS		NUMBER	%
County	City of Zagreb	109	41.3%
	Zagrebačka county	65	24.6%
	Krapinsko – zagorska	9	3.4%
	Sisačko – moslavačka	2	0.8%
	Karlovačka	1	0.4%
	Varaždinska	1	0.4%
	Koprivničko - križevačka	3	1.1%
	Bjelovarsko - bilogorska	0	0%

Table 1 (continued)

<b>TOTAL RESPONDENTS</b>		<b>NUMBER</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>County</b>	Primorsko - goranska	3	1.1%
	Ličko - senjska	1	0.4%
	Virovitočko - podravska	1	0.4%
	Požeško - slavonska	4	1.5%
	Brodsko - posavska	0	0%
	Zadarska	9	3.4%
	Osječko - baranjska	34	12.9%
	Šibensko - kninska	3	1.1%
	Vukovarsko - srijemska	11	4.2%
	Splitsko - dalmatinska	6	2.3%
	Istarska	2	0.8%
	Dubrovačko - neretvanska	0	0%
	Međimurska	0	0%
<b>Gender</b>	Male	91	34.9%
	Female	170	65.1%
<b>Employment status</b>	Employed	233	88.6%
	Self-employed	14	5.3%
	Unemployed	4	1.5%
	Retired	0	0%
	Seasonal jobs	0	0%
	Student	11	4.2%
<b>Monthly income per household member</b>	Less than 500 euros	4	1.5%
	500-1000 euros	33	12.7%
	1000-1500 euros	110	42.5%
	more than 1500 euros	112	43.2%

Source: Authors

The survey data were processed using several statistical methods to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Descriptive statistics were applied to summarize the basic characteristics of the sample and respondents' answers. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine differences in the perception of Baranja's recognizability and the perceived importance of various destination elements between respondents who had previously visited Baranja and those who had not. Additionally, correlation analysis was employed to explore the relationships between visitor satisfaction with specific features of the tourism offer and perceptions of the destination's authenticity.

### 3. SURVEY RESULTS

The first part of the questionnaire aimed to explore respondents' overall perception of Baranja, their familiarity with the destination's offerings, and the motivational factors influencing their choice to visit.

To better understand visitors' initial impressions and emotional connections to the region, respondents were asked an open-ended question: "What are your first associations – words, images, feelings – when you think of Baranja?" This question aimed to capture the spontaneous and personal perceptions of Baranja, providing qualitative insight into the destination's image in the minds of potential and actual tourists. A total of 262 respondents shared their associations, revealing the key themes and sentiments linked to Baranja. The categories, along with the corresponding responses and their frequencies, are presented in the table.

Table 2: First associations with Baranja: Category frequencies

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	NUMBER	%
<b>Gastronomy and food</b>	Wine, fine food, gastronomy, kulen, Good food, original nature, red pepper, food, fish, fish stew, cured meat products, Good dishes and good wine, good restaurants, domestic food, kotlovina, Traditional food, carp cracklings, sour wine, catfish perkelt, čobanac, venison, Slavonian delicacies, quality domestic food, sausages	156	60%
<b>Nature and geography</b>	Plain, beautiful landscape, greenery, golden fields and green plains, fields, beautiful nature, enchanting nature, forest, untouched nature, fields, swamps, plant vegetation, lakes, pastures, agriculture, pristine nature, mosquitoes, greenery. Nature Park, Vineyards, Danube, fields and plains, horses, wheat fields, birds, deer roar	148	56.48%
<b>Wine and wine tourism</b>	Wine cellars and vineyards, wine, Kneževi vinogradi (quality wines and food), wineries, Gerštmajer	38	14.50%
<b>Culture, tradition, identity</b>	Tambourines, cultural heritage, folk costumes, slow life, old houses, Hungarians, Folklore, domestic, Folk customs (costumes, dances), bećarac, Šokac	16	6.10%

Table 2 (continued)

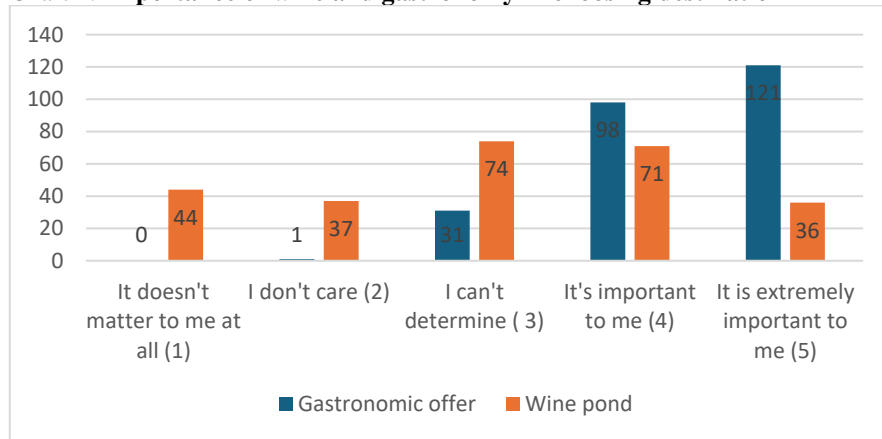
CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	NUMBER	%
<b>People, feelings, emotions</b>	good neighborly relations, family atmosphere, good people, warm, hospitable people, pleasant feelings, joy because my home is there, good people, smile, childhood, hospitality, cheerful company, plump and cheerful people, authenticity, the smell of freshness	20	7.63%
<b>Tourism and activities</b>	rural tourism, restaurant Crna Svinja, hiking, agrotourism, relaxation, hunting tourism, relaxation, desired destination, Baranja hiking bypass	9	3.43%
<b>Geographical names and locations</b>	Kopački rit, Banovo brdo, Batina, Slavonia, Danube, beautiful cities such as Đakovo, Osijek, Croatia, Drava, Banska kosa, Aljmaš, Kneževi vinogradi (quality wines and food), Lonjsko polje	41	15.64%
<b>Agriculture and livestock farming</b>	Agriculture, animals, horses, wheat fields, green plains, fields, Endless fields of agricultural products, Endless cultivated fields, vast fields	39	14.88%
<b>Negative/neutral associations</b>	Poverty, neglect, underdevelopment, remoteness, nothing special None, unexplored beauty, sad, Homeland War, suffering of loved ones	8	3.05%

Source: Authors

The results indicate that gastronomy and nature are the dominant associations with Baranja, highlighting the region's strong positioning as an authentic rural and gastronomic landscape. The frequent mention of local food and wine underscores the importance of Baranja's culinary identity, while references to nature reflect its preserved environment and aesthetic appeal. Emotional associations, such as hospitality and warmth, further suggest that visitors perceive Baranja as a welcoming and genuine destination.

The following question aimed to determine the importance of wine and gastronomy in choosing a tourist destination. Response frequencies are presented in the table.

Chart 1: Importance of wine and gastronomy in choosing destination



Source: Authors

It is interesting to notice that many respondents consider the gastronomic offer to be important or extremely important when choosing a destination, with 83.58% rating it as 4 or 5 on the importance scale. In contrast, the perception of the wine offer shows a more varied distribution, with 40.84% of respondents rating it as important or extremely important, while 30.91% finds it unimportant or cannot determine its importance. It is still a considerable share, given that wine tourism represents a rather specific niche within the broader tourism market, appealing to a more specialized segment of visitors. The next question aimed to assess the importance of various factors influencing the choice of Baranja as a potential travel destination, using a 1 to 5 rating scale.

Table 3: Importance of factors influencing the choice of Baranja as a travel destination

ELEMENTS	1 = it doesn't matter to me at all	2= it doesn't matter to me	3= I can't determine	4= it's important to me	5 = it is extremely important to me
Wine tasting	45 (17.18%)	35 (13.35%)	72 (27.48%)	63 (24.05%)	47 (17.94%)
Enjoying local gastronomy	0 (0.00%)	8 (3.05%)	35 (13.36%)	101 (38.55%)	118 (45.04%)
Nature and landscape	0 (0.00%)	3 (1.14%)	25 (9.54%)	48 (18.32%)	186 (71.00%)
Culture and history	4 (1.53%)	16 (6.11%)	58 (22.14%)	86 (32.82%)	98 (37.40%)

Table 3 (continued)

<b>ELEMENTS</b>	<b>1 = it doesn't matter to me at all</b>	<b>2= it doesn't matter to me</b>	<b>3= I can't determine</b>	<b>4= it's important to me</b>	<b>5 = it is extremely important to me</b>
Active vacation and adventurism	5 (1.90%)	18 (6.84%)	62 (23.57%)	92 (35.11%)	85 (32.44%)
Participation in local events	14 (5.34%)	29 (11.07%)	74 (28.24%)	80 (30.53%)	65 (24.81%)
Authentic local community experience	5 (1.90%)	144 (54.96%)	9 (3.44%)	79 (30.15%)	115 (43.89%)
Children's and family activities	34 (12.97%)	41 (15.65%)	52 (19.85%)	62 (23.66%)	73 (27.86%)

Source: Authors

The most important elements for respondents when choosing Baranja as a destination were nature and landscape (89% rated important or extremely important), followed by local gastronomy (83%) and rest and relaxation (86%). Culture and history were also valued, while the authentic experience of the local community attracted 74%, though with more varied responses. Active leisure and adventure and participation in local events received moderate importance, whereas wine tasting showed a more divided perception, with 42% rating it important or extremely important and a notable share undecided or less interested.

To better understand visitors' awareness of Baranja's key tourism features, respondents were asked to rate their familiarity with various elements of the region's offer.

Table 4: Visitors' familiarity with fey tourism elements of Baranja

<b>ELEMENTS</b>	<b>1 – I am not familiar at all</b>	<b>2 - I am partially familiar, but very superficially</b>	<b>3 - I am moderately familiar, I know basic information</b>	<b>4 – I am well informed; I know most of the important information</b>	<b>5 – I am very well informed; I have detailed knowledge</b>
Wine Road of Baranja	57 (21.75%)	40 (15.26%)	63 (24.04%)	58 (22.14%)	44 (16.79%)
Kopački rit Nature Park	10 (3.82%)	16 (6.11%)	51 (19.47%)	81 (30.92%)	104 (39.70%)
Baranja Wine & Walk	61 (23.28%)	57 (21.75%)	62 (23.66%)	42 (16.03%)	40 (15.27%)

Table 4 (continued)

ELEMENTS	1 – I am not familiar at all	2 - I am partially familiar, but very superficially	3 - I am moderately familiar, I know basic information	4 – I am well informed; I know most of the important information	5 – I am very well informed; I have detailed knowledge
Vinatlon	105 (40.07%)	65 (24.80%)	43 (16.41%)	24 (9.16%)	25 (9.54%)
Wine Marathon	98 (37.40%)	60 (22.90%)	40 (15.26%)	32 (12.21%)	32 (12.21%)
Baranja kulen	10 (3.81%)	8 (3.05%)	31 (11.83%)	70 (26.71%)	143 (54.58%)
Čobanac	8 (3.05%)	17 (6.48%)	30 (11.45%)	65 (24.80%)	142 (54.19%)
Fiš paprikaš	11 (4.19%)	17 (6.48%)	35 (13.35%)	55 (20.99%)	144 (54.96%)
Rural Tourism and Etno Houses (Baranja House, Ivica and Marica, Didin Konak, Piroš čizma)	36 (13.74%)	29 (11.06%)	57 (21.75%)	55 (20.99%)	85 (32.44%)
Perkelt	89 (33.96%)	37 (14.12%)	42 (16.03%)	27 (10.30%)	67 (25.57%)

Source: Authors

Respondents showed the highest familiarity with the natural attraction Kopački rit Nature Park. Traditional Baranja dishes such as *kulen*, *čobanac*, and *fiš paprikaš* were also well known. While rural tourism and traditional houses received moderate familiarity, wine-related events such as Vinatlon and Wine marathon, as well as the Baranja Wine & Walk, had lower recognition levels.

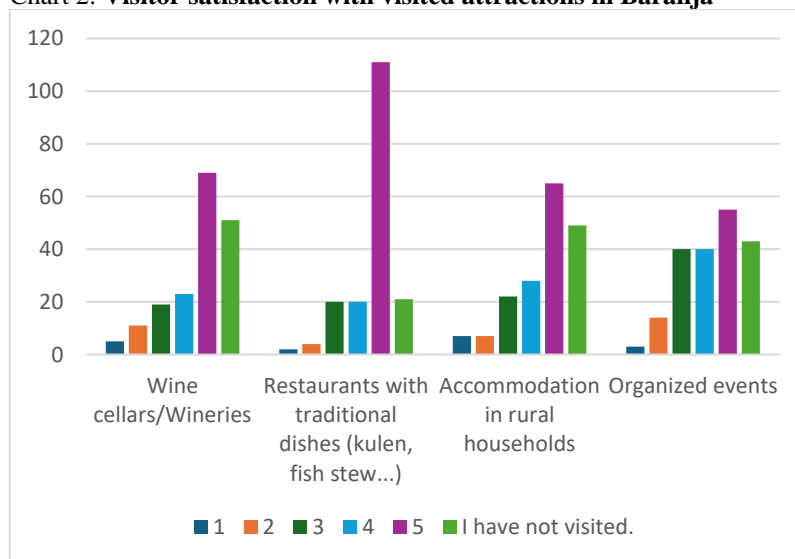
The results show that the most common sources of information about Baranja as a tourist destination are family and friends, cited by 61.8% of respondents. The next most important sources are websites and online portals (43.1%), followed by media such as television and radio (38.2%). Social media platforms like Facebook are also a significant source of information, with 37.4% of respondents indicating them. Only a few respondents stated that they had not heard of Baranja before (0.8%). These results suggest that personal recommendations and family/friend networks play a key role in raising awareness about Baranja, while digital media (websites, social media) and

traditional media also remain important communication channels for destination promotion.

Further question "In your opinion, how recognizable is Baranja compared to other Croatian regions?" aimed to assess the level of recognition and distinctiveness that Baranja holds in the minds of potential visitors, in relation to other regions in Croatia. The results show that most respondents see Baranja as partially recognizable (36%), while 34% find it recognizable but not prominent. Only 6% view it as highly recognizable. A neutral stance was taken by 17%, and 7% consider it unrecognizable, indicating room for stronger branding efforts.

The following set of questions was directed at respondents who had previously visited Baranja, representing 176 individuals, or 67% of the total sample. This subgroup provided insights based on their direct experience of the destination. Among respondents who had visited Baranja, most stayed 2–3 days (42%). A quarter of them visited for just one day (25%), while 27% stayed longer than a week. A 6% of respondents reported stays of 4–7 days. These results suggest that short weekend visits are the most common. The chart shows results of the question regarding visitors' satisfaction with visited attractions in Baranja.

**Chart 2: Visitor satisfaction with visited attractions in Baranja**



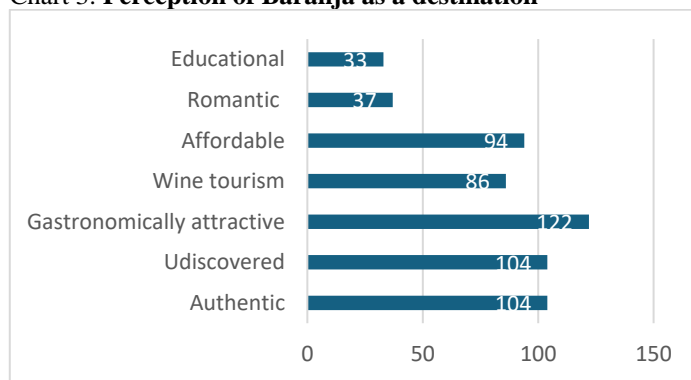
Source: Authors

Traditional food restaurants received the highest satisfaction levels, highlighting gastronomy as one of Baranja's strongest assets. Wineries also scored well, though fewer respondents had visited them. Rural accommodation received mostly positive ratings, but with some moderate and lower scores, indicating room for improvement. Organized events showed the widest range of responses, from very dissatisfied to very satisfied,

suggesting inconsistent quality or appeal. In all categories, a significant share of respondents indicated they had not used or attended certain services, pointing to untapped potential and the need for greater promotion and accessibility of these experiences.

In the following section of the survey, the visitors were asked to rate the perceived authenticity of Baranja through its wine and gastronomy. Most respondents experienced a strong sense of authenticity: 44% felt it was present to a great extent, and 21% rated it as completely authentic. These results highlight wine and gastronomy as key carriers of Baranja's cultural identity, with clear potential for further strengthening through deeper interpretation and promotion.

Chart 3: Perception of Baranja as a destination



Source: Authors

Baranja as a destination is perceived as authentic and undiscovered by nearly 60% of respondents, as well as gastronomically attractive (69.3%). Therefore, the combination of these elements can serve as a guide for further branding and communication of positively rated features toward target markets in Croatia and the region.

It is important to highlight that as many as 95% of respondents indicated that they would recommend Baranja to their friends and family, demonstrating a high level of visitor satisfaction and willingness to promote the destination. This finding confirms Baranja's strong potential as a tourist destination and supports further investment in its development and promotion, as satisfied visitors often represent the most effective form of marketing through word-of-mouth.

Furthermore, respondents were asked to assess the level of authenticity they experienced during their visit to Baranja. Authenticity was defined as the extent to which their experience felt genuine, sincere, and connected to the local culture, people, and traditions — as opposed to being staged or artificially designed solely for tourists. The results show that 82.7% of respondents consider their experience to be very or mostly authentic. Also, participants were asked about their perception of local residents' involvement in Baranja's tourism offerings. Here, 78.4% of respondents indicated that local people are

either very involved or partially involved in the tourism sector. These findings suggest that visitors generally perceive Baranja as a destination where cultural and traditional authenticity is preserved and experienced firsthand. The high percentage of respondents acknowledging local involvement highlights the important role the community plays in creating and maintaining these authentic experiences. Such genuine local participation not only enhances visitor satisfaction but also supports the sustainability of tourism in the region by fostering meaningful connections between tourists and the local population. Finally, respondents were asked an open-ended question about what they would improve regarding Baranja's wine and gastronomic offer. A total of 104 respondents provided answers, which were analysed and categorized into 4 main topics, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Key areas for improvement in Baranja's wine and gastronomic offer

	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Interpretation of comments</b>
1.	Marketing and promotion	Respondents emphasize the need for stronger marketing and promotion of Baranja. Although its wines and gastronomy are highly rated, they remain underrepresented in the media. Greater visibility, influencer collaboration, and strategic branding are recommended to better position Baranja in the market.
2.	Content and offer	Respondents note inconsistent service quality and suggest standardization, more museums, cultural events, and local festivals. This highlights opportunities to develop cultural tourism and enhance the visitor experience.
3.	Gastronomic offer	Gastronomy is seen as a key strength, but respondents suggest expanding the range of traditional dishes and wines. Improved labeling of small family farm products (OPGs) and stronger promotion of traditional cuisine could further enhance the destination's authenticity and identity.
4.	Other remarks	This category includes varied comments—from suggestions to lower organized trip prices to proposals to promote beer alongside wine. Respondents also mentioned opportunities for tasting and buying local products at the Ethnological Center, improving ingredient quality control, and adapting hospitality facilities for tours. While some expressed satisfaction, others noted issues in agricultural production, indicating a need for further quality improvements.

Source: Authors

In addition to descriptive statistics, several inferential statistical tests were conducted to gain deeper insight into the relationships between selected variables. An independent samples t-test was used to compare the perception of Baranja's visibility and recognizability as a tourist destination between two groups of respondents: those who have visited Baranja and those who have not. The results ( $t(261) = 3.162, p = 0.002$ ) indicate a statistically significant difference in perceptions of Baranja's visibility as a tourist destination between the two groups. Based on the mean values, respondents who had visited Baranja rated its visibility higher than those who had not. This finding

suggests that personal experience of visiting Baranja contributes to a more favourable perception of its identity as a wine and gastronomic destination.

An additional independent samples t-test was conducted to compare differences in the perceived importance of specific elements of Baranja as a tourist destination between respondents who had visited Baranja and those who had not. The results are presented in the table below.

**Table 6: Differences in perceived importance of Baranja’s tourist elements between visitors and non-visitors**

<b>Elements of tourist offer</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>p</b>
Wine tasting	2.921	261	0.004
Nature and landscape	0.002	261	0.998
Leisure and relaxation	0.963	261	0.337
Participation in local festivals and events	2.179	261	0.030
Children's and family activities	2.354	261	0.019

Source: Authors

The results reveal a clear distinction between elements universally valued and those appreciated mainly after visiting Baranja. There is no significant difference in the importance of nature and landscape ( $p = 0.998$ ) or rest and relaxation ( $p = 0.337$ ) between visitors and non-visitors. This shows that Baranja’s natural beauty and peaceful atmosphere are widely recognized and form a strong foundation for branding focused on eco-tourism and outdoor activities.

In contrast, wine tasting ( $p = 0.004$ ) and participation in local events ( $p = 0.030$ ) are significantly more important to those who have visited Baranja. These experiences gain value through direct engagement, highlighting authentic wine, gastronomy, and cultural events as key differentiators of the destination. Branding should therefore promote these unique experiences and encourage participation, as firsthand involvement increases satisfaction and loyalty. Strengthening the link between visiting and discovering Baranja’s authentic features can help position it as a destination that blends universally appealing nature with distinctive, experience-based tourism. Finally, a Spearman correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between satisfaction with specific elements of Baranja’s tourist offer and the perceived authenticity of the destination. The results are presented in the table.

**Table 7: Spearman correlation coefficients for satisfaction with selected tourism elements and destination authenticity**

Tourism offer elements	Spearman's rho	p
Restaurants with traditional dishes (kulen, fish stew, etc.)	0.277	< 0.001
Wine cellars / Wineries	0.361	< 0.001
Accommodation in rural households	0.244	0.005
Organized events	0.309	< 0.001

Source: Authors

The strongest correlation was found between satisfaction with wine cellars/wineries and perceived authenticity ( $\rho = 0.361$ ), indicating that wine experiences are the main channel through which visitors see Baranja as authentic. This confirms wine as a key identity marker and strategic focus for branding—emphasizing local varieties, wine routes, tastings, and connections with winemakers.

Traditional cuisine also contributes significantly, with satisfaction in restaurants offering local dishes positively correlated with authenticity ( $\rho = 0.277$ ). Although weaker than wine, gastronomy remains an essential element of the authentic experience. Organized events show a similar correlation ( $\rho = 0.309$ ), underscoring their role as genuine expressions of local culture and community. These should feature prominently in promotional efforts. Rural accommodation, while still correlated ( $\rho = 0.244$ ), shows the weakest link, suggesting that lodging alone does not strongly shape authenticity but can enhance it through local design, homemade products, and host interaction. Strengthening these aspects could improve the overall experience.

High intercorrelations among satisfaction variables (0.63–0.78) indicate that visitors evaluate Baranja holistically—those satisfied with wine are often satisfied with food, events, and accommodation. This highlights the need for an integrated tourism offer. In sum, satisfaction with specific experiences, especially wine and gastronomy, strongly shapes perceptions of authenticity. Branding should therefore build a cohesive, emotionally resonant identity centered on these authentic and memorable experiences.

## CONCLUSION

The research highlights the strong potential of Baranja as an authentic rural destination whose development can be meaningfully grounded in its rich gastronomic and wine offer. Respondents perceive Baranja as an undiscovered and distinctive region with a powerful sense of place rooted in tradition, local community participation, and hospitality. Authenticity emerges as the destination's defining value, supported by the intertwining of cultural heritage, natural beauty, and gastronomy.

To enhance its recognition and competitiveness, Baranja should focus on improving marketing communication, diversifying its gastronomic offer, and ensuring higher

standards of service quality. Storytelling and experience-based promotion can play a crucial role in communicating the destination's identity and fostering emotional connections with visitors.

Future research could further explore how authenticity-driven branding contributes to visitor loyalty and sustainable tourism development, and how the Baranja model might inform similar rural destinations. Although the findings are specific to the Baranja region and based on a convenience sample, they may offer valuable insights for other emerging rural destinations seeking to build authenticity-based gastronomic and cultural tourism strategies.

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