

Krisztina Melinda DOBAY

*“Gheorghe Zane” Institute for Economic and Social Research, Romanian Academy, Iași Branch
dobaykrisztinamelinda@yahoo.com; dobaykrisztinamelinda@ices.acadiasi.ro*

INNOVATIVE LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS IN ROMANIA

ABSTRACT

The goal of creating a resilient food system that provides healthy and affordable options for all can be achieved by practising sustainable agriculture and using innovative production methods and creative ways to provide fresh and nutritious food, while reducing resource use. This means more local food systems, based on short supply chains that will not only make food more accessible, but also ensure a healthier future for families, with choices that support both personal well-being and environmental sustainability. All this requires innovative collective actions that can contribute to reducing social inequalities within local communities, economic well-being, development of entrepreneurship and balanced and sustainable territorial development of rural areas.

A new type of innovative local food system has developed around Local Gastronomic Points (LGPs) in Romania and refers to private kitchens in rural areas that use local ingredients to create unique culinary experiences. These local food systems support the regional and local economy, are based on the concept of short food supply chains, constituting an incentive for capitalising on local potential and a factor in improving the image of communities and developing gastronomic and rural tourism. By connecting agriculture, gastronomy, tourism and local entrepreneurship, these LGPs not only promote sustainable food systems, but also the development of communities by stimulating interactions between different entities, thus generating additional social capital.

Key words: Local Gastronomic Point, sustainable agriculture, short food supply chain, local food systems.

JEL Classification: Q01

1. INTRODUCTION

Local food systems are those in which food production, processing, marketing and consumption take place in a relatively small geographical area. They are closely linked to local agriculture and short food supply chains, namely the production of agricultural and food products that are to be sold in a sufficiently close area to the cultivation area, either directly to final consumers or by involving a minimum number of intermediaries (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2013). These systems are considered to be an immeasurable wealth for the development of sustainable communities because they constitute the main source of fresh food products for

local shops, farmers' markets and restaurants. The impact of these systems on communities is important from several points of view: provide access to fresh food products; increase the level of education regarding the importance of healthy eating; increase the environmental concern at community level (Dobay *et al.*, 2009).

Local agriculture, short food supply chains and, in general, local food systems have the potential to bring together producers and consumers and are based on trust (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2013). They constitute an incentive for the valorisation of local potential and also contribute to the reduction of economic and social inequalities (MARD, 2015).

Local food systems have developed according to the specific requirements of producers and consumers in each area, with a fairly diverse range around the world. In Romania, a country with significant natural and anthropogenic resources, a rich material and immaterial cultural heritage, a rural life rich in traditions, crafts, traditional music and local food and an authentic rural heritage, there are sufficient ingredients for the development of successful rural tourism. At the same time, local gastronomy traditions prevail in rural areas, and much of the daily food is provided from own food production or from purchases from local producers. In this context, innovative local food systems have emerged, specific to our country, some of which are generated by LGPs.

Born from a real need identified by the civil society, namely the desire to formalise some traditional practices of serving meals to tourists in areas with abundant natural resources, in the form of culinary products or gastronomic specialties with local specificity, LGPs represent an incentive for capitalising on local potential and a factor in improving the image of communities and developing gastronomic and rural tourism in Romania, successfully contributing to economic well-being, to the development of the entrepreneurial spirit and to the balanced and sustainable territorial development of rural areas (Dobay & Apetroaie, 2024).

LGPs are models of social innovation through the interconnections they create between different actors of local agri-food systems, while also contributing to the promotion of rural areas.

2. STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

LGPs are units represented by private kitchens in rural areas, where culinary products prepared according to recipes specific to the area are cooked and served, directly to the final consumer, and constitute an efficient way of capitalising on products from the peasant household in family-type public catering units (MARD, NAMZ, 2021).

LGP activity is regulated by the Order of the President of the National Sanitary, Veterinary and Food Safety Agency no. 111/2008, with subsequent amendments and additions.

Unlike restaurants or guesthouses, LGPs offers tourists the opportunity to benefit from traditional local dishes, produced and served directly by family members in their own household, respecting legal hygiene requirements, without affecting consumers' health (MARD, NAMZ, 2021; Dobay & Apetroaie, 2024).

In other words, LGP is a unit for the valorisation of local primary production, located in a rural locality (village, seat of a commune, village component of a commune, including a village belonging to a municipality or city), where food products are prepared and served, according to recipes specific to the area, directly to final consumers, for maximum 15 people simultaneously, in existing premises in private homes, farms, sheepfolds, apiaries, wineries, etc., where one or more activities related to the primary production of agricultural products, fishing, hunting, harvesting or collecting non-timber forest products are carried out, and the food products are prepared from locally available raw materials (MARD, NAMZ, 2021; Dobay & Apetroaie, 2024). Food products may be obtained from primary production on own farm, but also from other local producers authorised/registered for sanitary-veterinary and food safety.

Primary products must come predominantly from a household's own production or from local producers.

The menu contains maximum 2 types of soups or broths, 2 main courses and possibly 2 types of dessert and is specific to the area in which the respective LGP operates.

LGPs can be established by individuals based on the producer certificate and/or the marketing book, and by legal entities, who must register with the Sanitary Veterinary and Food Safety Directorate in the county they belong to and with the Trade Register for activities according to the Nomenclature of Economic Activities – NACE, Rev. 2, with code 5610 – Restaurants (they refer to family-type public catering units – peasant households, units represented by private kitchens within the premises of rural homes respectively).

Income earned by individuals through LGPs is income from independent activities – annual net income determined based on income norms, according to the provisions of Law no. 227/2015 on the Fiscal Code, with subsequent amendments and supplements. For the year 2024, according to Order no. 233 of June 7, 2024, the income norm was 39,600 RON, but there are correction coefficients depending on: age of taxpayers, time spent on the activity, seasonal nature of the activity, location in disadvantaged areas, with specific natural or mountainous constraints, etc. The National Trade Register Office (NTRO) accepted the certificate issued to participants in the professional training courses organised by the National Agency of the Mountain Area (NAMA) for those who wish to establish and operate a LGP, as a document that can be used in the registration process in the Trade Register.

Locally produced food is an essential element for the revitalisation of rural areas, ensuring supply safety and security, with the consumption of food coming from proximity having an important impact on the economic, social and environmental development of rural areas (Valtari, 2008).

The development of local products through collaborative short supply chains offers opportunities for agri-food producers to diversify their crop range, optimise processes, enter new markets and increase farm incomes (EIP-AGRI, 2019).

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

In order to carry out this study, data were extracted and processed from the database of the Register of Local Gastronomic Points in Romania on the NAMA website (<https://azm.gov.ro/punctele-gastronomice-locale-din-romania/>). The list of territorial administrative units (TAUs) with large and very large natural and anthropogenic resources was consulted, in the updated version of Emergency Ordinance 142/2008 (Decision no. 89/2023 for the amendment of annexes no. 1-8 to Government Emergency Ordinance no. 142/2008 on the approval of the National Spatial Planning Plan Section VIII – areas with tourism resources).

For the visual documentation of the study, data from the website <https://ro.wikipedia.org/> were used, searches were conducted on social media platforms regarding LGPs from different counties of Romania, and representative images for the analysed subject were captured.

For the case study, field trips were carried out and interviews were held with LGP owners and customers, as well as with other entities representative for the investigated local food systems.

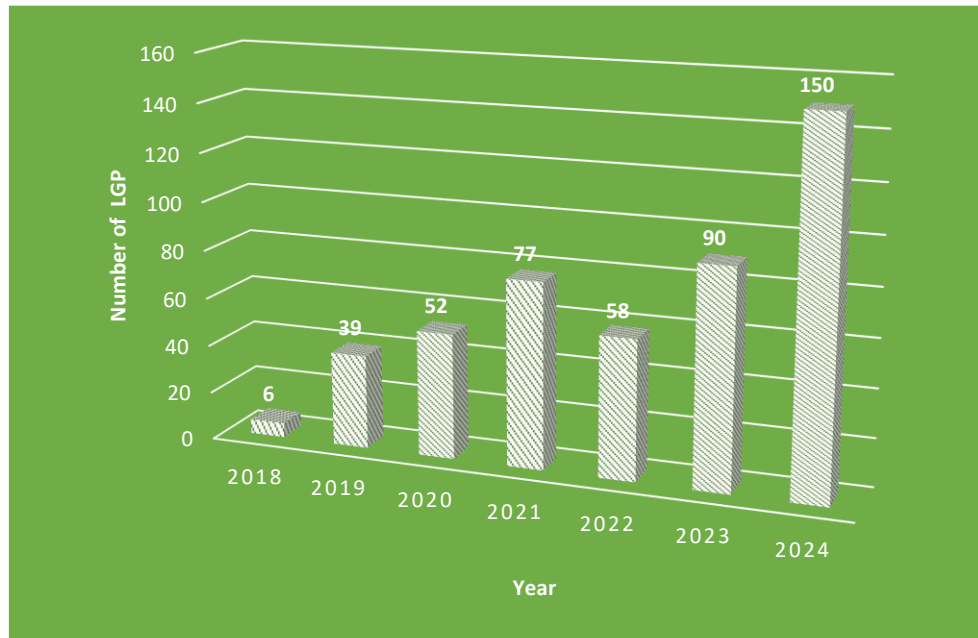
4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

According to data from the Register of Local Gastronomic Points in Romania, 472 LGPs were registered in the period 2018–2024 (Figure 1).

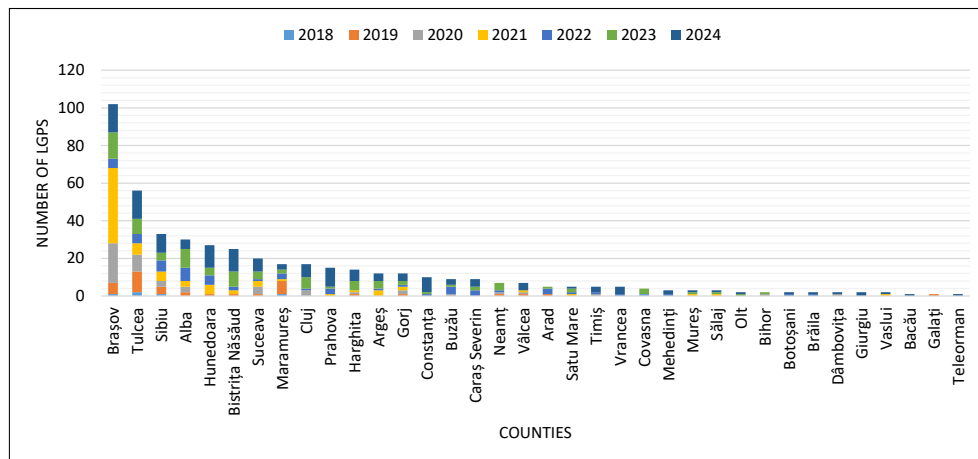
The increasing trend of the registrations can be noticed, as well as the fact that most LGPs were established in 2024, which denotes that both the institutions that validate their establishment, and the owners of farms, households, etc., have begun to understand that LGPs can form the basis of innovative local agricultural systems through which consumers can have direct access to fresh, authentic and healthy food, while also contributing to the development of local communities, as these are practically short food chains.

Regarding the location of LGPs by counties, the data confirm that most of them are in areas where they have been most intensively promoted through knowledge-based networks (Association “Ivan Patzaichin – Mila 23”, Tulcea county, Association “Gastro Local” Vama Buzăului, Braşov county) and through complementary projects at local/regional, national or international level: Via Transilvanica, Taste of Transylvania, Canotca, Flavours of Romania, FOODSHIFT2030 – Laboratory in Braşov, etc. (Dobay & Apetroaie, 2024; Dobay,

2011). Thus, Braşov county stands out with 102 registered LGPs, and Tulcea county with 56 LGPs (Figure 2).



Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Register of Local Gastronomic Points in Romania.
Figure 1. Dynamics of Local Gastronomic Points registrations during 2018–2024.



Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Register of Local Gastronomic Points in Romania.
Figure 2. Registrations of Local Gastronomic Points by counties, in the period 2018–2024.

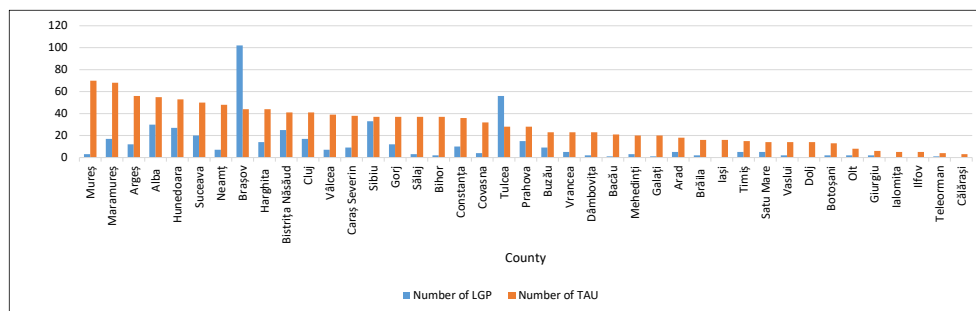
The national average is 11 LGPs per county. There are also counties where LGPs have not been registered yet, such as: Călărași, Dolj, Ialomița, Iași and Ilfov.

Although food is considered to be an important motivation for tourists to travel to a certain destination (Hall & Mitchell, 2005), a causal relationship between the purpose of the trip and the activities of tourists could not be demonstrated and further research into the motivation of food tourism is needed (McKercher & Chan, 2005; McKercher *et al.*, 2008; Lee *et al.*, 2014; Tovmasyan, 2019; Dobay & Apetroaie, 2024).

In Romania, some authors have highlighted the need to pay more attention to the link between destination image and culinary events (Privitera *et al.*, 2018). Regarding the identification of tourist destinations, we consider that the degree of concentration with natural and anthropogenic resources can be an important starting point (Dobay & Apetroaie, 2024). Decision no. 89/2023 for the amendment of annexes no. 1–8 to Government Emergency Ordinance no. 142/2008 on the approval of the National Spatial Planning Plan Section VIII – areas with tourist resources – contains information on localities with high and very high concentration of natural and anthropogenic tourism resources, in each county. From this point of view, we analysed the tourism potential of the counties and the number of established LGPs (Figure 3).

We found that the country average is 29 localities with high tourism potential per county, and the counties with high potential for tourism are: Mureș, Maramureș, Argeș, Alba, Hunedoara, Suceava, Neamț, Brașov, Harghita, Bistrița Năsăud, Cluj, Vâlcea, Caraș-Severin, Bihor, Gorj, Sălaj, Sibiu, Constanța, Covasna, Prahova, Tulcea.

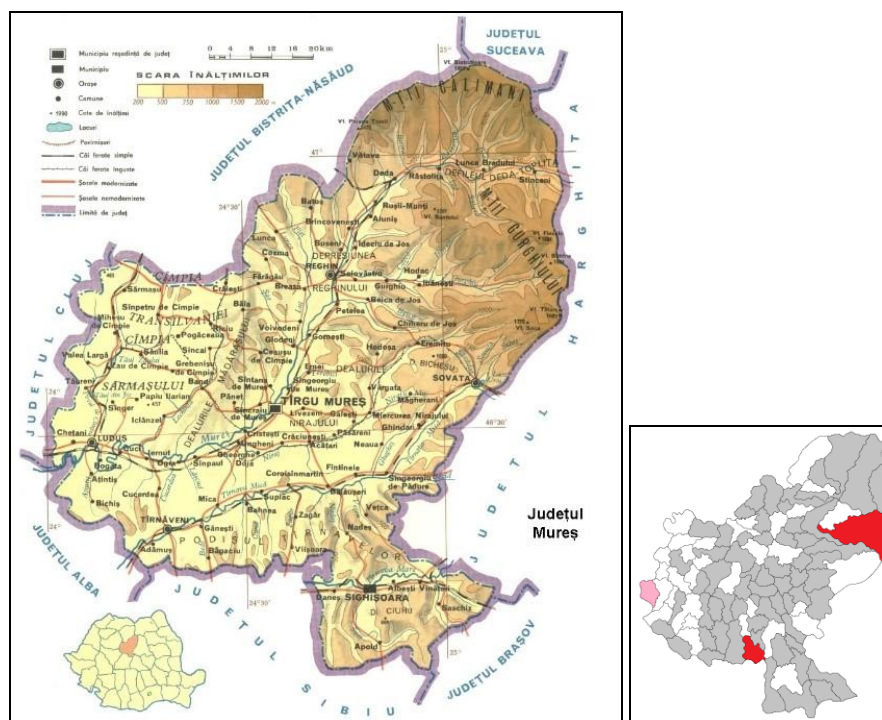
In Brașov and Tulcea counties, theoretically, the share of LGPs is much higher than the tourism potential. For Tulcea county, the explanation could be that this is where the initiative started and that the Danube Delta is a special tourism destination where there are abundant local resources and fewer food industry units. In Brașov county, the development of LGPs was stimulated by the Gastro Local Association. But let's see what happens in other counties.



Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Register of Local Gastronomic Points in Romania and Decision 89/2023.

Figure 3. Local Gastronomic Points and localities with high and very high concentration of tourism resources, by counties, in 2024.

In Mureș county, although there is a great potential for the development of LGPs based on the high and very high concentration of tourism resources, these are very few in number (Figure 4). Thus, Mureș county has 4 municipalities, 7 cities and 91 communes in total. Of these, 3 municipalities, 7 cities and 60 communes have natural and anthropogenic tourism resources with high and very high concentration. From this point of view, it is the county with the greatest tourism potential. However, in the county with the highest concentration of tourism resources, Mureș, only 3 LGPs were established by the end of 2024, of which one outside localities with significant tourism resources, and two in localities with high tourism resources.



Source: Author's processing based on <https://ro.wikipedia.org/>

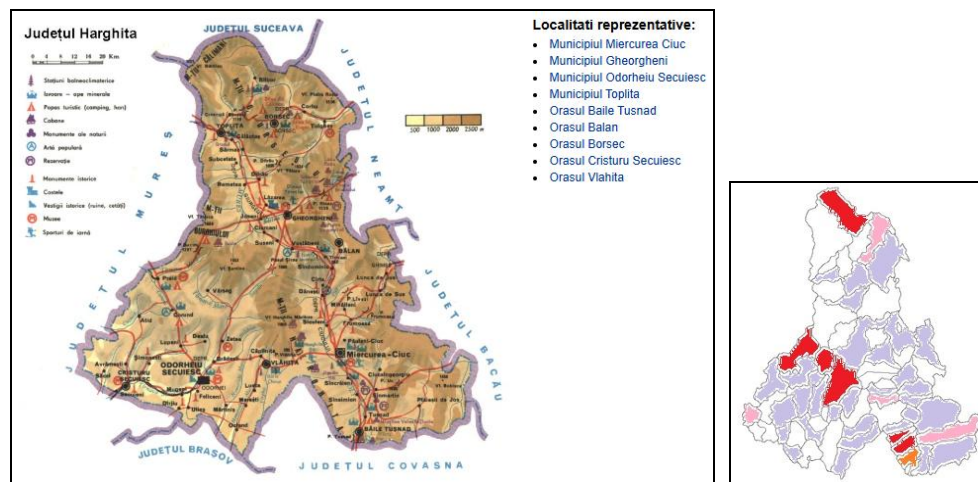
Figure 4. Local Gastronomic Points and localities with high and very high concentration of tourism resources in Mureș county.

Mureș county borders Harghita County on the eastern side, over a distance of 130 kilometers, with the border being described in the north-south direction by the Călimani Mountains, the Mureș Gorge between Toplița and Stânceni, the Gurghiu Mountains up near Sovata, where the largest heliothermic lake in the world is found, close to a very nice salt mine in Praid in Harghita county (<https://ro.wikipedia.org/>).

The area is among the most attractive areas for tourists, and consequently we continued the analysis of the LGPs with Harghita county.

Here the situation is completely different. Of the 4 municipalities, 5 cities and 58 communes in total in Harghita county, 4 municipalities, 3 cities and 26 communes have natural and anthropogenic tourism resources with high and very high concentration. In return, 14 LGPs were established, of which 10 in localities with high and very high concentration of tourism resources (Figure 5).

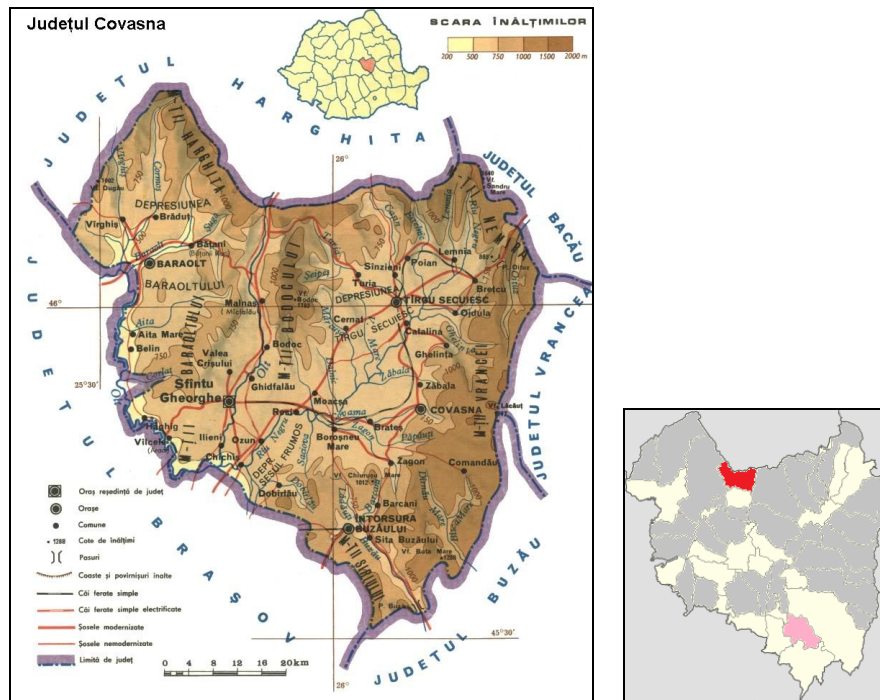
Since we noticed that there are several LGPs around Băile Tuşnad, which is an important balneological and climatic resort, a city located in the southern part of the Ciuc depression, between the Harghita Mountains and the Bodoc Mountains, in the Olt Gorges, at an altitude of 650 m, we wanted to analyse the situation in the county located in the south, namely Covasna county.



Source: author's processing based on <https://ro.wikipedia.org/>

Figure 5. Local Gastronomic Points and localities with high and very high concentration of tourism resources in Harghita county.

Covasna county has 2 municipalities, 3 cities and 40 communes in total. Of these, 2 municipalities, 3 cities and 25 communes have natural and anthropogenic tourism resources with high and very high concentration, which places the county in a good position in terms of tourism potential. However, only 2 LGPs have been established, out of which one LGP is found in a locality with high tourism resources (Figure 6). As we anticipated, one LGP is located near Băile Tuşnad, a city formed by the component localities Băile Tuşnad (the residence) and Carpitus, being the city with the smallest number of inhabitants in Romania (1,372 in 2023). It is located in the southern part of the Ciuc depression, between the Harghita Mountains and the Bodoc Mountains, in the Olt Gorges, at an altitude of 650 m. It is an important spa resort. The other LGP is located outside the areas of major tourism interest.



Source: Author's processing based on <https://ro.wikipedia.org/>

Figure 6. Local Gastronomic Points and localities with high and very high concentration of tourism resources in Covasna county.

CASE STUDY HARGHITA COUNTY

Taking into consideration the findings in the 3 counties, we decided to investigate Harghita county more closely, in an attempt to find out which are the necessary ingredients for stimulating the development of LGPs locally.

The first finding was that there is a common logo for the LGPs in Harghita county that is promoted unitarily (Figure 7) by the Harghita Intercommunity Development Association Visit Harghita, together with the official LGPs logo in Romania.

The second finding was that some LGPs are members of the Gastro Local Association from Brașov county and benefit from its support in promotion. The Gastro Local Association promotes all its members, together with the traditional gastronomy from Romania, through a brand and logo recognised at national and European level (Figure 8). At the same time, it provides consultancy to those local producers who want to open a Gastro Local point, promotes a network based on common values and traditions, which supports the local economy development, the sustainable development of the Romanian village and local tourism, as well as the cultural and gastronomic heritage of the Romanian rural area (<https://gastrolocal.ro/despre-noi>).



Source: <https://visitharghita.com/ro/places/punctegastronomiclocale> and <https://azm.gov.ro/punctele-gastronomice-locale-din-romania-2/>

Figure 7. LGP logo from Harghita county and LGPs logo from Romania.



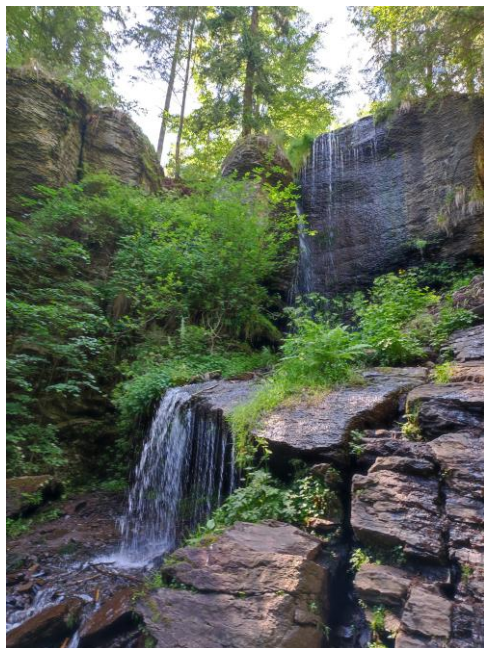
Source: <https://gastrolocal.ro/>

Figure 8. Logo of the “Gastro Local” Association, Vama Buzău, Braşov county.

In Harghita county, most LGPs are promoted as part of complete tourist service offers (packages): accommodation, meals, activities for tourists – relaxation baths, sleigh rides, ATV rides, visiting natural tourism attractions, etc. (<https://visitharghita.com/ro/places/medvebarlang-varsag>); craft activities such as egg painting, gingerbread baking, cheese making, activities and workshops related to medicinal plants (<https://visitharghita.com/ro/places/sasfeszek>); in one LGP located on an animal farm: horse riding, cart rides, nature walks, organisation of horse riding camps, trips to the village or surroundings (<https://visitharghita.com/ro/places/solyommajor-soimosumic>), etc.

We had the opportunity to see how the Medvebarlang Local Gastronomic Point (Bear’s Den) is organised in Vărşag commune (<https://visitharghita.com/ro/places/medvebarlang-varsag>), a locality that has the Vărşag waterfall and the Vărşag Observation Tower within its area (Photos 1 and 2).

Medvebarlang LGP was established in February 2023 out of the desire to provide guests staying at the guesthouse with the opportunity to have a meal. The investment is 100% private and made from own funds. The initiative belongs to a mother with 8 children, who cooks daily for her large family. From here to serving guests outside the household was just a step (Photos 3–6).



Source: Author's personal archive.
 Photos 1–2. Vărșag waterfall and the Vărșag Observation Tower.





Source: Author's personal archive.
Photos 3–6. Medvebarlang Local Gastronomic Point.

The lady's talent is also recognized by renowned chefs from Harghita county, the LGPs being promoted through shows dedicated to traditional Szekler cuisine (<https://szekelykonyhaeskert.ro/>).

Another ingredient for the success of local agri-food systems, short chains and LGPs in Harghita county is Taste of Transylvania, the largest gastronomic festival, organised annually since 2022, which in the year 2024 took place in Boroş holiday village in Lunca de Jos commune, Harghita county (<https://tasteoftransylvania.eu/taste-of-transylvania-2024-all-galleries/>).

There is also a good experience of promoting local products through the Cumsecade/Helyénvalo Food Hub (<https://helyenvalo.ro/home>). The concept of a food hub emerged in the United States in the early 1970s and was defined as “a business or organisation that actively manages the aggregation, distribution and marketing of food products identified, primarily, with local and regional producers with the aim of strengthening their capacity to meet wholesale, retail and institutional demand” (Popa *et al.*, 2021). Food hubs are aggregators of local agri-food products, which perform the function of simplifying interactions between producers and consumers by providing support to small and medium-sized producers in the marketing of their products. They collect agricultural products, promote them and direct them to the final consumer, to HORECA entities or public institutions. At the same time, they also provide professional training, consultancy,

education and financial support services for the commercial activities carried out by the hub (Popa & Lacurezeanu, 2024).

In Romania, in 2017, an initiative was launched to create a network of food hubs, through 5 pilot projects funded by the Romanian-American Foundation (RAF). Each food hub is owned by an NGO with rural development objectives. The Cumsecade/Helyénvalo food hub, owned by the Civitas Odorheiu Secuiesc/Harghita Foundation, was established in 2018 and had a physical store for selling products located in the Odorheiu Secuiesc municipality from the beginning (Photos 7–11). Currently, it collects products from 103 small and medium-sized producers in a radius of 75 km of the Odorheiu Secuiesc municipality (36,522 inhabitants in 2024) and sells products through a physical store and an online store (https://helyenvalo.ro/about_us). The sold products are: fruit and vegetables (available only in the physical store), bakery products, dairy products, meat, artisanal products, teas, spices, etc. (Popa & Lacuzeanu, 2024). Approximately 1300 products are listed and 80% of sales have been through the online store, in recent years, after the COVID-19 pandemic (Popa & Lacuzeanu, 2024). The development plans of the Cumsecade/Helyénvalo Food hub concern the implementation of investments in packaging services (partnership with a Hungarian company for a centre for joint packaging and digital tracking, recyclable packaging, reducing losses according to the circular economy principles) within the framework of a project funded by EIT Food (<https://www.eitfood.eu/what-we-do>).





Source: Author's personal archive.

Photos 7–11. Helyénval store in Odorheiu Secuiesc municipality

In general, cities represent a great potential for agri-food producers involved in food chains operating in urban or peri-urban areas. Close cooperation with cities and consumers can help agri-food producers to create a stable supply chain and ensure a better income, and consumers to have access to fresh, healthy and sustainably grown food. Public food procurements can be also organised in cities, for example

for kindergartens, schools or hospitals, to obtain locally and sustainably produced food (EIP-AGRI, 2019).

Last but not least, we have noticed numerous collective activities carried out in different localities in Harghita county (fairs on different themes, gastronomy school, cultural programmes on gastronomy themes, various contests, etc.), and in the Odorheiu Secuiesc municipality; the desire to have a healthy life by consuming the freshest products possible, locally obtained by using traditional methods, is easy to see everywhere. For example, at restaurants where famous chefs cook, the menu is set according to local seasonal products, and the preparation and serving are done through a modern and attractive reinterpretation of traditionally cooked foods (Photos 12–15).



Source: Author's personal archive.
Photos 12–15. Páva Restaurant.

The Szekler inns in the area are also very popular with locals and tourists. Here, both the preparation and serving of food are traditional, and the resources used are local (Photos 16–19).



Source: Author's personal archive.
Photos 16–19. Gizi Inn in Odorheiu Secuiesc municipality

Moreover, Harghita county will hold the title of Gastronomic Region of Europe in 2027 according to the decision of the International Institute of Gastronomy, Culture, Art and Tourism (IGCAT) (<https://igcat.org/projects/region-of-gastronomy-award/>). The title of Gastronomic Region of Europe recognises communities that, through local cooperation and collective actions, place a special emphasis on their gastronomic heritage, in the spirit of sustainable development and attach particular importance to the preservation and protection of local food, beverages and agricultural products, as well as their cultural and natural values (<https://www.agerpres.ro/agerpres/2024/12/11/visit-harghita-judetul-va-fi-regiune-gastronomica-a-europei-in-anul-2027--1401888>).

Local values are also promoted in a unified manner through photographs representing traditional crafts and activities, which are exhibited throughout the Odorheiu Secuiesc municipality (Photos 20–22).



Source: Author's personal archive.
Photos 20–22. Traditional activities.

The Harghita Intercommunity Development Association (Visit Harghita) initiated the candidacy for the title of European Gastronomic Region 2027 since 2023. The consortium that submitted the candidacy file is formed by the Harghita

County Council, the Harghita Intercommunity Development Association (Visit Harghita), Miercurea-Ciuc, Odorheiu Secuiesc and Gheorgheni municipalities, Sapientia University, as well as several agencies and associations in the area. In the period 6–11 October 2024, an international jury of experts from IGCAT visited Harghita county to evaluate the local gastronomic heritage, community initiatives and efforts aimed at sustainable and long-term tourism. The uniqueness of the cultural values of Harghita county, the natural harmony of the landscape, the close collaboration between local communities, the active participation of over 100 actors representing various sectors, the rich and diversified gastronomic heritage, which reflects the meeting of Romanian, Hungarian, Armenian and Szekler traditions, which will be developed in the spirit of sustainability and innovation, were appreciated. The aim of the consortium from Harghita county that coordinated the submitted candidacy is to create a sustainable food ecosystem, which will support the local economy, protect cultural values and enrich European gastronomic diversity. The Gastronomic Regions of Europe contribute to improving the quality of life of citizens by highlighting the importance of cultural and gastronomic uniqueness, by encouraging gastronomic creativity and innovation, promoting culinary education, circular economy and sustainable tourism (<https://www.agerpres.ro/agerpres/2024/12/11/visit-harghita-judetul-va-fi-regiune-gastronomica-a-europei-in-anul-2027--1401888>).

5. CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen from what is presented in this paper, Local Gastronomic Points are important elements within local food systems. Traditional hospitality, the diversity of local food resources and culinary recipes, combined with the need to develop the short food chains and the high valorisation of local products, represent the necessary premises for the LGPs, which constitute a place of communion and authenticity transmitted through food, contributing to the transition to a more sustainable agri-food system. LGPs are important elements within local food systems that use local ingredients to create unique culinary experiences. With adequate support from the civil society and from the institutions that regulate their establishment and functioning, the Local Gastronomic Points can be a real chance to revitalise rural communities in Romania.

LGPs, as elements of local food systems, are innovative short supply chains, because with the reconfigured social practices, they respond to new societal challenges regarding the development of sustainable local food systems.

Romania has significant natural and anthropogenic tourism resources, a rich tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and a diverse traditional local gastronomy. The secret of success lies in a very good collaboration between all the key actors of

the local agri-food system as we have noticed in the case study presented in this article.

We believe that by promoting examples of good practice in creating innovative local food systems, we can contribute to the development of other local communities in Romania and to facilitate consumers' access to fresh, healthy and sustainably grown food.

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