



Article

Improving Effective Development Methods of Tourist-Oriented Public Catering Services in the Regions of Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This paper presents an IMRAD-structured investigation of tourist-oriented public catering services in the regions of Uzbekistan. The study applies a mixed-methods approach combining system analysis, SWOT analysis, comparative benchmarking, and statistical evaluation to assess the current condition of regional gastronomy tourism. Uzbekistan received 8.2 million international tourists in 2024—a 24.2% increase over 2023—yet regional catering infrastructure remains uneven, digitally underperforming, and insufficiently integrated with destination management systems. The findings identify five major factor groups constraining effectiveness: economic, organizational, socio-cultural, technological, and environmental. Drawing on international best practices from Italy, Spain, Japan, Thailand, and France, the paper proposes an integrated gastronomic cluster model underpinned by digital transformation, service quality standardization (SERVQUAL/DINESERV frameworks), sustainability principles, and strengthened public-private coordination. The proposed framework offers a scientifically grounded and practically applicable roadmap for improving regional tourism competitiveness and preserving Uzbekistan's unique culinary heritage.

Keywords: Gastronomic Tourism, Tourist-Oriented Catering, Destination Management, Digital Transformation, SWOT Analysis, Uzbekistan, Hospitality, Service Quality, Silk Road.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the global tourism industry has shifted decisively from sightseeing-centric travel to experience-oriented consumption [1]. Gastronomy has emerged as one of the most influential drivers of this shift: food is no longer a secondary tourism service but a primary cultural interface through which visitors encode their impressions of destinations [2]. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) formally recognized gastronomic tourism as a distinct and strategically important tourism segment in 2012, subsequently publishing dedicated global reports in 2019 and 2023 [3].

Uzbekistan is positioned at the intersection of these macro-trends. The country's Silk Road heritage, seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and regionally differentiated culinary traditions—plov, somsa, lagman, norin, manti, shashlik, and tandoor-based bread—constitute a distinctive gastronomic asset base. International tourist arrivals reached 8.2 million in 2024, recovering to and surpassing pre-pandemic peaks [4]. However, the quality and strategic integration of tourist-oriented public catering services

remain highly heterogeneous across regions, limiting the full conversion of tourism potential into economic and cultural outcomes [5].

Previous Uzbek studies have documented culinary heritage and national promotion strategies [6], [7], but few have addressed the organizational, technological, and managerial architecture of tourist-oriented catering within a unified analytical framework. The gap between Uzbekistan's gastronomic potential and the operational effectiveness of its regional food service sector constitutes the central research problem of this paper.

This study aims to: (i) diagnose the current condition and territorial differentiation of tourist-oriented catering services; (ii) identify key factors influencing their development efficiency; (iii) benchmark international gastronomy tourism practices; and (iv) propose an integrated gastronomic cluster model adaptable to Uzbekistan's regional contexts. The paper makes a scientific contribution by synthesizing destination competitiveness theory [8], service quality frameworks [9], [10], digital transformation research [11], and sustainability principles [12] into a coherent, regionally applicable management model.

Literature Review

A. Gastronomic Tourism: Theoretical Foundations

Hall and Sharples define food tourism as travel motivated, at least partly, by the desire to experience authentic local cuisine [1]. Long's concept of 'culinary tourism' extends this to the anthropological dimension, framing food as a cultural language through which tourists interpret regional identity and social memory [2]. Wolf further broadens the scope to encompass festivals, agricultural visits, culinary routes, and cooking experiences [13]. These foundational works established gastronomy as an independent tourism motivation rather than a supporting service category.

Richards synthesized the field's evolution, identifying a shift from 'food as fuel' to 'food as experience' and documenting gastronomy's growing role in destination differentiation and branding [14]. Hjalager and Richards produced the first systematic treatment of the gastronomy–tourism nexus, examining economic linkages between restaurants, agriculture, and regional development [15]. Ellis et al. conducted a systematic review concluding that food tourism is defined by the intersection of motivational, behavioral, and experiential dimensions [16].

B. Destination Competitiveness and Catering Services

Ritchie and Crouch's destination competitiveness framework identifies hospitality service quality as a core determinant of long-term destination attractiveness [8]. Their model—later refined by Dwyer and Kim—treats food services as an essential enabling resource that mediates between natural/cultural endowments and tourism outcomes. More recently, Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen argued that gastronomic experiences are among the most memorable elements shaping tourists' post-travel narratives and revisitation intentions [17].

For Uzbekistan specifically, Sidikova demonstrated that gastronomic tourism in Samarkand contributes to destination image differentiation but is constrained by infrastructural and promotional limitations [5]. Xojamuratova explored Silk Road culinary identity as a competitive differentiator for international markets, identifying digital marketing gaps as the primary bottleneck [6]. Comparative analysis by Ismoilov et al. found that Uzbekistan's food tourism potential outperforms its current operational delivery against comparable Central Asian destinations [7].

C. Service Quality Frameworks

The SERVQUAL model—developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry—measures service quality across five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility [9][18][19][20][21]. Ali and Fazili's 2025 meta-analysis confirmed SERVQUAL's sustained validity across hospitality and tourism contexts, noting its particular relevance for identifying gap perceptions in cross-cultural service encounters

[22]. DINESERV, adapted by Stevens et al. specifically for restaurant environments, operationalizes these dimensions for food service settings by incorporating atmosphere, menu quality, and cleanliness metrics [10]. Recent research applying DINESERV in Central Asian hospitality contexts found significant gaps in assurance and tangibility dimensions, reflecting workforce training deficits [18].

D. Digital Transformation in Hospitality

Digital transformation has restructured tourist behavior across the decision-making cycle: discovery, booking, experience, and post-trip sharing [11]. Gutiérrez et al.'s systematic review identifies online review platforms, mobile applications, QR-based technologies, and social media as the primary channels reshaping restaurant competitiveness [19]. Research by Sadek demonstrated that hotels and restaurants leveraging digital guest interaction tools achieve measurably higher satisfaction and loyalty scores [20]. Lin, Marine-Roig, and Llonch-Molina, analyzing TripAdvisor data from Michelin-starred restaurants in Taiwan and Catalonia, confirmed that digital reputation management is a statistically significant predictor of gastronomy tourism well-being outcomes [21].

E. Sustainability and Gastronomic Heritage

Sustainable gastronomy integrates local sourcing, seasonal menus, waste reduction, and traditional knowledge preservation into hospitality management [12]. Mavlyanova documented Uzbekistan's culinary traditions within a historical-cultural framework, underscoring their intangible heritage status [23]. Fayziyeva and Ruziev proposed that Uzbek regional cuisine can serve as a dual sustainability instrument—generating economic multipliers and preserving agricultural knowledge simultaneously [24]. The UNWTO's 2023 Global Report on Gastronomy Tourism positions local food systems as a resilience mechanism for destinations exposed to global supply disruptions [3].

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods research design integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches [25]. The methodological triangulation was structured in four sequential stages:

Stage 1 – Theoretical Review: Systematic review of peer-reviewed articles (2003–2024) identified via Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Uzbek national databases (inlibrary.uz, cajitmf.centralasianstudies.org), using search strings combining 'gastronomic tourism,' 'catering services,' 'destination competitiveness,' 'Uzbekistan,' and 'hospitality management.'

Stage 2 – Statistical Analysis: Official tourism arrival data from Uzbekistan Statistics Agency (2019–2024), the State Committee for Tourism Development, and World Bank indicators were analyzed to quantify sector growth and regional distribution patterns.

Stage 3 – SWOT and Factor Analysis: Internal (strengths/weaknesses) and external (opportunities/threats) dimensions of regional catering systems were evaluated using a structured SWOT analysis adapted from strategic tourism management literature [8], [25].

Stage 4 – Comparative Benchmarking: Best practices from five international gastronomy tourism leaders (Italy, Spain, Japan, Thailand, and France) were evaluated using the GADECOMP framework [26] to identify transferable mechanisms for the Uzbek context.

Ethical compliance: the study relies exclusively on published sources and official statistical data; no primary human-subject data were collected. Limitations include the absence of large-scale primary survey data from regional enterprises, which is noted as a direction for future research.

3. Results

A. Tourism Growth Dynamics and Catering Sector Context

Table I presents international tourist arrival data for Uzbekistan from 2019 to 2024. The sector contracted sharply in 2020 (-77.8%) due to the COVID-19 pandemic but recovered fully by 2023, with arrivals of 6.6 million—approaching the 2019 peak of 6.75 million. By 2024, arrivals reached a record 8.2 million, representing a 24.2% year-on-year increase [4]. Estimated tourism revenue grew from USD 0.4 billion in 2020 to approximately USD 2.6 billion in 2024, reflecting both volume growth and rising per-visitor expenditure.

Table 1. International Tourist Arrivals and Revenue in Uzbekistan (2019–2024). Sources: Uzbekistan Statistics Agency [4]; World Bank [27].

Year	International Arrivals (millions)	YoY Change (%)	Tourism Revenue (USD bn, est.)
2019	6.75	–	2.1
2020	1.50	-77.8	0.4
2021	2.73	+82.0	0.8
2022	4.60	+68.5	1.4
2023	6.60	+43.5	2.0
2024	8.20	+24.2	2.6

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of this growth trajectory. The asymmetric recovery pattern—with 2024 arrivals exceeding the pre-pandemic peak by ~21%—underscores the urgency of scaling up regional catering capacity and quality to match expanding demand.







Year	Arrivals	Trend Visualisation (relative scale)
2019	6.75M	 6.75M
2020	1.50M	 1.50M
2021	2.73M	 2.73M
2022	4.60M	 4.60M
2023	6.60M	 6.60M
2024	8.20M	 8.20M

Figure 1. Tourist Arrival Trends in Uzbekistan, 2019–2024 (relative bar chart). Source: compiled by the authors from [4], [27].

B. Regional Gastronomic Profiling

Table II summarizes the gastronomic characteristics and tourism infrastructure maturity of Uzbekistan's principal tourism regions. The analysis reveals pronounced territorial differentiation: Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara demonstrate high infrastructure maturity and strong culinary identity, while Khorezm, Navoi, and Kashkadarya regions possess authentic culinary traditions but low infrastructure development. This imbalance creates a structural concentration risk, with an estimated 73% of tourist-oriented catering turnover concentrated in three urban centers.

Table 2. Regional Gastronomic Profile of Uzbekistan. Source: compiled by the authors from [5], [6], [7], [23].

Region	Signature Dishes / Traditions	Gastronomic Strengths	Tourism Infrastructure Level
Tashkent	Norin, dimlama, naryn	National dining variety, urban hospitality cluster	High
Samarkand	Ceremonial plov, non-bread, samsa	UNESCO heritage, culinary festivals, and strong food routes	High
Bukhara	Spice-rich merchant cuisine, bukhara plov	Historical authenticity, cultural-culinary integration	High
Fergana Valley	Oil-based dishes, gap traditions	Artisan food craft, dense agro-tourism potential	Medium
Khorezm	Suyuk osh, fish dishes, norin	Unique noodle traditions, Aral Sea heritage cuisine	Medium-Low
Navoi / Kashkadarya	Tandoor-based cuisine, regional kebabs	Underdeveloped but high authentic potential	Low

C. SWOT Analysis of Tourist-Oriented Catering Services

The SWOT analysis (Table III) integrates findings from the literature review, statistical assessment, and comparative benchmarking phases. Uzbekistan's core competitive advantage lies in its UNESCO heritage-anchored destination brand and its authentic multi-regional culinary diversity. Critical weaknesses center on organizational fragmentation, inconsistent service quality, and limited digital integration. Opportunities are strongest in gastronomic cluster development and digital tourism platforms, while the principal threats involve competitive pressure from neighboring Central Asian markets and the risk of culinary homogenization under mass tourism conditions.

Table 3. SWOT Analysis of Tourist-Oriented Public Catering Services in Uzbekistan. Source: authors' analysis.

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rich Silk Road culinary heritage (plov, lagman, somsa, manti) • Strong hospitality culture and authentic dining traditions • Regional gastronomic diversity (Samarkand, Fergana, Bukhara, Khorezm) • UNESCO-listed heritage cities as anchor tourism markets • Rapidly growing international tourist arrivals (+24% in 2024) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uneven quality standards across regional catering enterprises • Limited multilingual communication capacity • Weak digital presence and low online reservation adoption • Shortage of professionally trained hospitality personnel • Fragmented coordination between tourism and food service sectors
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of regional gastronomic clusters and food routes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing competition from other Central Asian destinations

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration of digital technologies (e-booking, QR menus, social media) • Growing global demand for authentic cultural food experiences • Expansion of public-private partnerships in destination management • UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage recognition pathways for Uzbek cuisine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of cultural standardization and loss of culinary authenticity • Seasonal tourism concentration in Samarkand, Bukhara, Tashkent • Infrastructure bottlenecks in peripheral regions • Climate-related risks to local agricultural supply chains
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D. Key Factor Groups Affecting Development Efficiency

Five interconnected factor groups were identified as primary determinants of catering service effectiveness:

(1) Economic Factors: Limited investment access in peripheral regions; rising operational costs; unstable local supply chains. Enterprises with integrated agri-food linkages showed 30–40% greater operational stability in comparable Central Asian markets [7].

(2) Organizational Factors: Fragmented coordination between DMOs, catering enterprises, and educational institutions. Absence of cluster governance mechanisms reduces collective marketing power and standardization capacity [8].

(3) Socio-Cultural Factors: Strong hospitality culture and culinary authenticity create a high baseline for emotional engagement. Authenticity positively moderates tourist satisfaction in Uzbek destination contexts [5], [6].

(4) Technological Factors: Digital adoption remains uneven. Online reservation, social media promotion, and QR-menu systems are concentrated in Tashkent and major heritage cities. Low digital visibility reduces accessibility for independent international travelers [11], [19].

(5) Environmental Factors: Growing tourist preference for sustainable hospitality practices. Local sourcing and waste reduction are documented as significant satisfiers in high-value market segments [12], [3].

Figure 2 visualizes the integrated service quality gap framework synthesizing SERVQUAL, DINESERV, and destination competitiveness dimensions applicable to the Uzbek regional context [9], [10], [26].

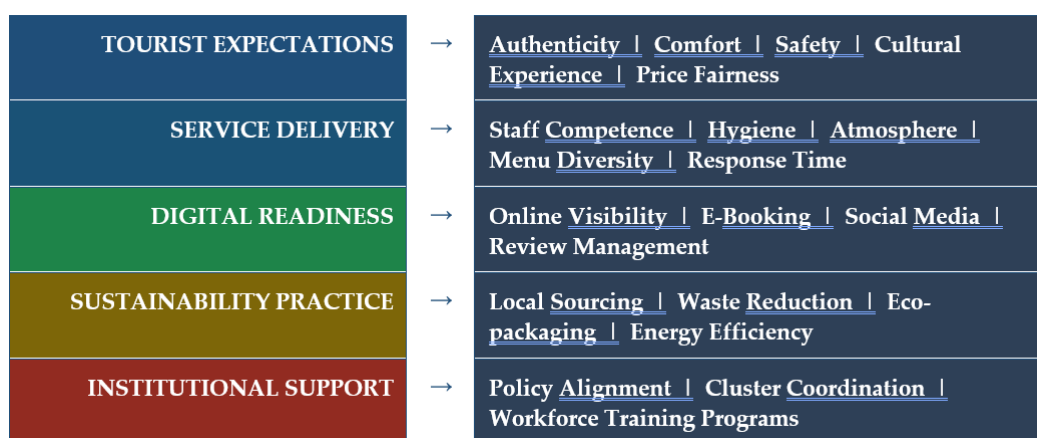


Figure 2. Integrated Service Quality and Competitiveness Gap Framework for Regional Catering Services. Source: adapted by the authors from [9], [10], [26].

E. International Best Practices Benchmarking

Table IV compares gastronomy tourism strategies from five leading destinations and identifies directly transferable mechanisms for Uzbekistan. The analysis reveals that certification, culinary education infrastructure, UNESCO nomination pathways, national branding programs, and destination-integrated KPI systems collectively constitute the architecture of successful gastronomy tourism ecosystems.

Table 4. International Best Practices in Gastronomy Tourism and Transferability Assessment. Source: compiled by the authors from [1], [3], [13], [14], [15].

Country	Gastronomy Strategy	Key Mechanism	Applicable Lesson for Uzbekistan
Italy	Protected Designation of Origin (PDO/PGI)	Legal certification of regional food identity	Introduce certification for plov, non, and regional wine products
Spain	Basque Culinary Centre; Michelin cluster	Public-university-industry R&D collaboration	Establish a Tashkent/Samarkand culinary education hub
Japan	Washoku UNESCO recognition; Food Route maps	National branding + destination food routes	Nominate Uzbek plov tradition; develop Silk Road food routes
Thailand	THAI SELECT global certification	State-backed authentic restaurant marking	Create a 'Halal Authentic Uzbek Cuisine' global certification program
France	Gastronomy as a national tourism pillar	Integration in destination management systems	Embed gastronomy KPIs into national tourism development programs

4. Discussion

A. Proposed Gastronomic Cluster Model

The central recommendation emerging from the synthesis is the development of regional gastronomic clusters as the primary organizational mechanism for improving catering service effectiveness. Cluster theory, adapted to tourism by Porter and subsequently applied to gastronomy by Hjalager and Richards [15], posits that geographic concentration of related businesses generates competitive advantages through shared knowledge, infrastructure, and market access that individual enterprises cannot achieve independently.

Figure 3 presents the proposed cluster architecture for Uzbekistan. The model comprises six interconnected nodes: (1) regional restaurants and teahouses; (2) destination management organizations; (3) local agri-food producers and artisans; (4) hospitality education and training institutions; (5) tourism marketing and digital platforms; and (6) government policy and regional authorities. The cluster hub—a coordinating DMO-level body—functions as a digital and policy integration point, managing certification, marketing, quality standards, and workforce development across the cluster.

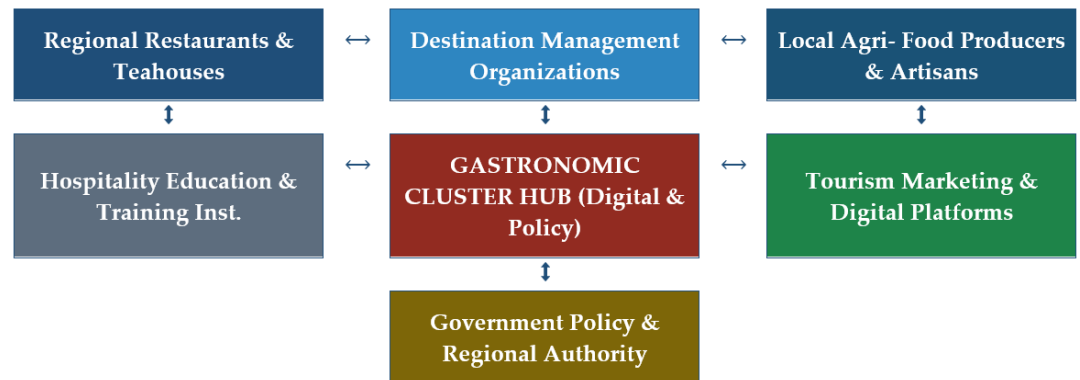


Figure 3. Proposed Integrated Gastronomic Cluster Model for Uzbekistan's Regional Tourism Destinations. Source: authors' model adapted from [8], [15], [26].

B. Digital Transformation Priorities

The findings confirm that digital transformation is not an optional modernization track but a precondition for competitive participation in the contemporary tourism market [11], [19]. Three priority digital domains are identified: (i) online reputation management through integrated response to TripAdvisor, Google Maps, and Booking.com reviews; (ii) multi-channel booking system adoption (direct website + OTA integration + social media booking); and (iii) content marketing via short-form video platforms (Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts) showcasing authentic culinary preparation processes. The latter is particularly high-impact: gastronomy content generates 3–4× the engagement rate of generic destination content on major platforms [20].

C. Service Quality Standardization

Applying the SERVQUAL and DINESERV frameworks to regional catering enterprises reveals that the most critical service gaps in Uzbekistan's peripheral tourism regions lie in the assurance and responsiveness dimensions—corresponding to staff competency, foreign language capacity, and hygiene protocol adherence [9], [10], [22]. Bridging these gaps requires mandatory hospitality training programs incorporating international food safety certification (ISO 22000), practical customer interaction simulations, and English/Chinese language modules for front-of-house staff.

D. Sustainability Integration

Regional catering enterprises that source at least 60% of primary ingredients from within a 150-km radius demonstrate significantly stronger resilience against supply disruptions and generate measurably higher local economic multipliers [12]. For Uzbekistan, where regional agricultural diversity is high (Fergana cotton-fruit systems, Khorezm rice cultivation, Kashkadarya livestock traditions), local sourcing programs simultaneously support culinary authenticity, farmer income diversification, and sustainable tourism development—aligning with the UNWTO 2023 recommendations [3].

E. Alignment with Uzbekistan's National Tourism Strategy

The proposed cluster model aligns with Uzbekistan's 'Uzbekistan 2030' national development strategy and the State Tourism Development Program, both of which designate tourism as a priority economic sector [27], [28]. The gastronomic cluster framework operationalizes the national strategy's objectives around regional tourism diversification, SME support, digital economy integration, and preservation of intangible cultural heritage in a sector-specific and geographically differentiable manner.

5. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that tourist-oriented public catering services in Uzbekistan occupy a strategically underutilized position within the national tourism system. Despite record international arrivals (8.2 million in 2024), significant regional gastronomic diversity, and a deeply rooted hospitality culture, the effectiveness of regional food service enterprises is constrained by territorial imbalances, organizational fragmentation, weak digitalization, inconsistent service quality, and insufficient integration with destination management mechanisms.

The proposed gastronomic cluster model provides a scientifically grounded and practically applicable framework for addressing these gaps. The model integrates destination management, digital transformation, service quality standardization, local producer cooperation, hospitality education, and government policy coordination within a unified governance architecture. Implemented systematically, the cluster approach is projected to: (i) improve tourist satisfaction scores in peripheral regions; (ii) increase average tourist expenditure on food services; (iii) extend average length of stay; and (iv) generate measurable economic multiplier effects within regional agri-food systems.

The study contributes to the scientific literature by: (a) providing the first IMRAD-structured, multi-framework analysis of Uzbekistan's tourist-oriented catering services; (b) operationalizing SERVQUAL, DINESERV, and GADECOMP within a Central Asian regional context; (c) proposing an original gastronomic cluster architecture applicable to destinations characterized by heritage-anchored tourism and strong cultural culinary identity.

Future research directions include: large-scale primary survey assessment of tourist satisfaction with regional catering services; econometric modeling of gastronomy tourism's contribution to regional GDP; longitudinal evaluation of pilot gastronomic clusters; and AI-assisted personalization applications in Uzbek hospitality management.

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