

**GASTRONOMY AS A DESTINATION BRANDING TOOL:
UZBEKISTAN'S COMPETITIVE POTENTIAL IN THE POST-
PANDEMIC TOURISM ECONOMY**

Nasimova Shakhnoza

Silk Road International University

of Tourism and Cultural Heritage, Samarkand, Uzbekistan

Abstract. Drawing on empirical data from a survey of tourists in Samarkand and Bukhara (n=100) and a comparison with the international experience of Italy, Japan, Spain and Turkey, this paper analyses the potential of gastronomy as an anchor element of Uzbekistan's national branding. A gap is identified between the high rating of the epistemic value of Uzbek cuisine (M = 3.57) and its low role in destination choice (M = 3.23). A strategy is proposed for translating the Silk Road "fusion heritage" into a competitive advantage on the post-pandemic experience-tourism market.

Keywords: destination branding, gastronomy tourism, Great Silk Road, competitive advantage, soft power, experience tourism.

Introduction

According to UNWTO (2022), gastronomy tourism is one of the fastest-growing segments of the global industry; for millennials and Generation Z, food is one of the key factors in choosing a destination. Italy, Japan, Spain and Turkey have built recognisable national brands around their cuisine. Uzbekistan possesses a unique resource - the "fusion heritage" of the Great Silk Road, synthesising Persian, Turkic, Mongolian and Arab traditions - yet uses it in tourism branding only fragmentarily.

Materials and methods

A mixed approach was used: (1) quantitative data from Nasimova's study (2025) - a survey of 100 tourists in Samarkand and Bukhara on a 5-point Likert scale, analysed in SPSS 29; (2) a comparative analysis of gastronomic branding strategies of destinations (Italy, Japan, Spain, Turkey) based on UNWTO reports and UNESCO data; (3) secondary analysis of the statistics of the State Committee for Tourism of Uzbekistan for 2016-2022.

Results

The comparative analysis shows that all successful gastronomic brands rely on UNESCO status and the consistent integration of a flagship dish into marketing communication (Table 2). Uzbekistan possesses all the prerequisites for a similar strategy but is still in the initial stage of integration.

Table 2 - Comparative analysis of the gastronomic positioning of destinations

Country	Flagship dish / tradition	UNESCO status	Use in branding
Italy	Mediterranean cuisine, pasta	2010	Central element
Japan	Washoku	2013	Central element
Spain	Tapas, Mediterranean cuisine	2010	Central element
Turkey	Keşkek, Turkish coffee	2011, 2013	Active use

Uzbekistan	Plov, dastarkhan	2016 (plov)	Initial stage (Strategy 2023-2026)
------------	------------------	----------------	---------------------------------------

The dynamics of international arrivals (Fig. 2) demonstrate that after the 2018 visa liberalisation the inflow grew 2.5-fold (from 2.69 to 6.75 million people), and by 2022 recovered to pre-pandemic levels (6.7 million). This growth opens a "window of opportunity" for repositioning the country from an architectural-historical destination to a multi-sensory one, in which cuisine functions as an anchor element.

Discussion



Figure 2 - International tourist arrivals to Uzbekistan (2016-2022)

The central paradox of the research is: 3.57 points for the recognition of gastronomy as a way of learning culture, against 3.23 points for its role in destination choice. Between "recognition" and "behaviour" there is a gap that has to be filled by marketing mediation. Sims's (2009) work shows that authenticity becomes a competitive advantage only through narrative delivery. For Uzbekistan this means: (a) positioning plov and dastarkhan as

national "signature dishes"; (b) using gastronomy as a soft-power instrument (gastro-diplomacy); (c) integrating the culinary theme into digital marketing campaigns targeting millennials.

Conclusion

Uzbekistan possesses an unrealised world-class competitive resource. The strategic use of the Silk Road "fusion heritage" in national branding is capable of moving the country from the category of a "cheap architectural destination" into the category of a high-value multi-sensory destination with a strong likelihood of repeat visits. Implementation requires coordination between the State Committee for Tourism, the UNESCO-listed cities and local small businesses.

References

1. Nasimova, S. The role of gastronomy management in enhancing cultural awareness among travelers: In case of Uzbekistan: master's thesis. - Samarkand: Silk Road International University of Tourism and Cultural Heritage, 2025. - 60 p.
2. Sims, R. Food, place and authenticity: local food and the sustainable tourism experience // Journal of Sustainable Tourism. - 2009. - Vol. 17, No. 3. - P. 321-336.
3. UNWTO. Global Report on Gastronomy Tourism. - Madrid: UNWTO, 2022. - 96 p.
4. Richards, G. Cultural Tourism: Global and local experience. - New York: Routledge, 2012. - 328 p.
5. Richards, G. Tourism trends after COVID-19 // Tourism Review. - 2021. - Vol. 76, No. 4. - P. 812-822.
6. Dekhkhanova, N., Galimova, F. Silk Road culinary heritage as fusion identity // Central Asian Journal of Cultural Studies. - 2024. - No. 2. - P. 28-41.

7. UNESCO. Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. - Paris, 2016.