



ANNALS OF GASTRONOMY AND TOURISM STUDIES

ISSN: 3023-7823

Journal homepage: www.agats.org

Received: 16.08.2026

Accepted: 22.09.2026

Annals of Gastronomy and Tourism Studies, 2026, 3(2), 105-122

Research Article

TASTING KIRKLARELİ: STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS OF A PROPOSED TASTING CEREMONY FOR HARDALIYE, KIRKLARELİ WHITE CHEESE, AND KIRKLARELİ AGED KASHAR CHEESE

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Abstract

Regional gastronomic experiences are one of the key elements that enhance destination attractiveness (Yaşar and Tekeler, 2023). This study examines the contribution of tasting ceremonies featuring Kırklareli's geographically indicated products – Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese – to gastronomic tourism through semi-structured interviews with 10 sector stakeholders determined by purposeful sampling and thematic analysis. The research findings suggest that stakeholders perceive hardaliye, in particular, as offering a strong alternative to wine tasting through its 'non-alcoholic wine' -a participant-generated characterization-identity, and that this ceremony could strengthen the destination image and hold niche marketing potential. It is further suggested that overcoming structural problems such as inadequacies in geographical indication controls and 'geographical indication inflation', and integrating these ceremonies into existing tourism packages, could be perceived by stakeholders as offering competitive and regional development potential for Kırklareli, an outcome not directly measured in this study.

Keywords: Geographical Indication, Kırklareli, Tasting Experience, Gastronomy Tourism

Introduction

Gastronomy tourism is regarded as an area in which tourists' desire to experience local culinary culture is gaining increasing importance among their travel motivations (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Yaşar and Tekeler, 2023). Today, the gastronomic experience is no longer limited to the consumption of food and beverages; it is treated as a multi-sensory experiential process in which taste, smell, visuality, and narrative elements are integrated (Baydeniz, Kılıcı, and Çelik, 2023). In this context, tasting processes and ritualized tasting ceremonies enhance the authenticity and attractiveness of destinations by offering visitors the opportunity to experience local products in a systematic and meaning-laden framework (Vannini et al., 2010; Zhang, 2020). When evaluated within the framework of the experiential marketing approach, such tasting activities are stated to build an emotional bond between tourists and the product/destination and to contribute to the formation of gastronomic memory (Mostafa and Kasamani, 2021; Gao and Shen, 2024).

Geographically indicated products are accepted as important gastronomic elements representing production knowledge, quality, and cultural heritage identified with a particular locality (Kan and Gülçubuk, 2008; Demirarslan and Esen, 2024). In this context, the province of Kırklareli stands out

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DOI: 10.69527/agats.2026.28

with products holding geographical indication registration, such as “Kırklareli Hardaliyesi,” “Kırklareli White Cheese,” and “Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese” (Turkish Patent and Trademark Office, 2017; İçli and Anıl, 2022; Şahiner and Yuceer, 2024). Hardaliye, a traditional and non-alcoholic beverage produced through grape-based lactic acid fermentation, stands out as a distinctive element of Thracian culinary culture (Coskun, 2017; Bayındır and Öncel, 2019). Kırklareli White Cheese and Aged Kashar Cheese, on the other hand, are characterized by their region-specific milk composition, production techniques, and long ripening processes, and owing to these features they offer a strong sensory profile (Çakmakçı and Salık, 2021; Aşkın, 2020). The geographical indication status of these products not only provides quality assurance; it also plays a strategic role in terms of regional development, support for local producers, and the preservation of gastronomic heritage (Cei, Defrancesco, and Stefani, 2018; Poetschki, Peerlings, and Dries, 2021).

The aim of this study is to reveal the potential, in terms of gastronomy tourism, of a tasting ceremony in which hardaliye, white cheese, and aged kashar cheese -Kırklareli’s geographically indicated products- are presented together. In the literature, these products have predominantly been addressed from a food-engineering and product-composition perspective (Atmaca, Demiray, Akdemir Evrendilek, Bulut, and Uzuner, 2023; Aydoğdu, Yıldırım, Halkman, and Durgun, 2014; Çekal, 2025; Coskun, 2017; Coşkun, Arıcı, Çelikyurt, and Gülcü, 2012; Faikoğlu, Yavaş, Gürbüz, and İstek, 2016; Kılıç, Ağdaş, Karahan, and Çakmakçı, 2016; Çaşkurlu, 2023; Metin, Pehlivanoglu, Servi, and Arıcı, 2023; Şahiner and Yuceer, 2024) and studies evaluating them in the context of the consumption experience and tasting ceremony appear to be limited. Aiming to fill this gap, this research seeks to qualitatively examine stakeholder perceptions regarding the potential of presenting geographically indicated local products through a ritualized tasting process on destination attractiveness, product awareness, and the perception of the gastronomic experience. By linking geographical indication research with the experience economy and authenticity frameworks, this study contributes theoretically to the experiential gastronomy and destination marketing literatures, while practically offering local producers and tourism businesses stakeholder-based insights into the perceived potential and structural challenges of developing a Hardaliye and Kırklareli Cheese tasting ceremony as a gastronomy tourism product.

Conceptual Framework

Geographical Indication

Geographical indication is defined as a type of sign that identifies the quality and reputation of products connected with a specific geographical area (Dokuzlu and Söyler, 2023; Demirarslan and Esen, 2024). These signs highlight the characteristics that products possess as a result of being grown or produced in a particular region, and a registered geographical indication guarantees that the product has been produced in accordance with specified standards, thereby providing consumers with assurance and access to an accurate, reliable, and quality product (Yaylacı and Mertol, 2021; Ünsalan, 2024). Geographical indication registration helps standardize and brand a locality’s distinctive product, thereby preventing unfair competition and enabling the knowledge specific to that product to be passed on from generation to generation (Gündoğdu, 2006; Kan and Gülçubuk, 2008).

In this way, geographically indicated products can be distinguished from their counterparts (Cui, Ma, and Zhang, 2025). A geographically indicated product gains recognition in the market through this trust and quality assurance, and empirical evidence indicates that geographical indication protection can increase product recognition and improve export performance and competitiveness in international markets (Agostino and Trivieri, 2014).

Geographical indications are regarded as a value that can serve as the “locomotive” of rural development (TOBB, 2021). Geographical indications, which add value to the product, raise producers’ incomes and contribute to the revitalization of the local economy (Poetschki, Peerlings, and Dries, 2021).

In this study, Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese, which are among the geographically indicated products of Kırklareli province, will be addressed.

Kırklareli Hardaliyesi

Hardaliye is a traditional non-alcoholic beverage specific to the Thrace region, particularly the Kırklareli locality, produced by subjecting ripe grapes to lactic acid fermentation together with black mustard seed and sour cherry leaf (Coskun, 2017; Metin, Pehlivanoglu, Servi, and Arıcı, 2023). Dark-colored, aromatic grape varieties grown in the region -such as Papazkarası, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Öküzgözü- are generally preferred in production, thereby giving the beverage its characteristic intense color and flavor profile (Turkish Patent and Trademark Office, 2017), which manifests at the end of fermentation as a dark ruby-red color, sweetish and slightly astringent (pungent) flavor, and fruity aroma (Çaşkurlu, 2023). Owing to the presence of lactic acid bacteria and its richness in grape-derived polyphenols, hardaliye is regarded as a functional beverage with high nutritional value and antioxidant capacity (Amoutzopoulos, Löker, Samur, Çevikkalp, Yaman, Köse, and Pelvan, 2013; Çekal, 2025).

Hardaliye's official recognition as a regional product came after an application made by the Kırklareli Chamber of Commerce and Industry in 2013, and on 28 December 2017 the Turkish Patent and Trademark Office registered Hardaliye under the name "Kırklareli Hardaliyesi" as an indication of source and placed it under geographical indication protection (Turkish Patent and Trademark Office, 2017; Çekal, 2025).

Kırklareli White Cheese

Kırklareli White Cheese is a long-established brined white cheese variety of Thrace that has been produced since the 18th century; it is traditionally obtained from a mixture of sheep's milk (30–45%), goat's milk (25–45%), and cow's milk (15–30%) from animals fed on the endemic grasses growing in the region's pastures (Çakmakçı and Salık, 2021; İçli and Anıl, 2022). Kırklareli White Cheese's characteristic features arise from being pasteurized within the lowest pasteurization temperature range and from the use, as rennet, of rennet taken from young animals that have not yet begun grazing on grass (Aşkın, 2020). Ripened in brine in tin containers for at least 6 months, Kırklareli White Cheese has a white color and a slightly porous structure, and with its distinctive aroma, pronounced saltiness, and mildly acidic flavor profile it is among Turkey's most widely consumed cheese types (Çakmakçı and Salık, 2021).

Having obtained geographical indication registration as a designation of origin in 2020, Kırklareli White Cheese's production method and quality standards have thereby been placed under official protection, and the preservation of the product's traditional characteristics and the economic gain of the region's producers have been secured (İçli and Anıl, 2022).

Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese

Kırklareli Aged Kashar is known as one of the traditional aged kashar cheeses of the Thrace region (Marmara region, Kırklareli). Although sheep's milk is ideally preferred in its production, cow's and goat's milk are also used in recent years owing to the decline in the sheep population (Şahin, 2013). After the produced cheese undergoes initial salting, fermentation and ripening take place in a milky brine at 50–52 °C for 2–3 days; it is then rested at 4–6 °C for at least 60 days to reach full ripeness (Şahin, 2013; Şahiner and Yuceer, 2024).

In terms of geographical indication registration, Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese's application as a designation of origin was filed on 05.02.2022 and it was registered on 11.07.2023 (Şahiner and Yuceer, 2024). Through this, local producers create a product with high added value and contribute to Kırklareli's cheesemaking prestige at the national/international level (Çakmakçı and Salık, 2021).

Tasting Ceremonies

Tasting ceremonies are social activities based on the systematic evaluation, within a ritualized process, of the sensory characteristics of particular beverages (such as tea or wine) or foods (Zhang, 2020). These processes generally involve steps that engage senses such as smell, taste, and vision together (Ker, Chiang, Lee, and Chen, 2025).

Tasting ceremonies are regarded in many cultures as an expression of social identity and tradition (Zhang, 2020). For example, in the special tea variety known as “rock tea” in China’s Wuyi Mountain region, three different aromas of the fresh leaves -under the lid, during brewing, and at the bottom of the cup- are described by expert local masters using distinctive idioms (Xiao, 2017). Wine tastings held at vineyard houses or festivals likewise offer participants a sensory experience alongside narratives about the region’s historical and cultural heritage (Margaça, Calderon-Monge, and Sánchez Garcia, 2024). In this context, tasting ceremonies are activities that strengthen social bonds and reinforce a region’s cultural identity. In addition, tasting ceremonies can be considered an important part of experiential marketing strategies (Gün, 2024). In experiential marketing, businesses focus on offering visitors emotionally and sensorially rich experiences (Mostafa and Kasamani, 2021). Activities that incorporate elements such as taste, smell, and visuality (tasting events, for example) connect participants with the product or brand emotionally, going beyond traditional advertising (Gao and Shen, 2024). Such activities aim to leave participants with unforgettable memories, thereby strengthening brand loyalty (Trivedi and Jena, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

Experience Economy and Authenticity

According to the experience economy approach developed by Pine and Gilmore (1998), following agricultural products, goods, and services, experiences constitute the fourth and highest tier of economic value; when businesses use service as a stage and the product as a prop on that stage to immerse the consumer in a memorable and personal experience, they can create higher economic value. When this approach is applied to the field of gastronomy tourism, experiencing a product - not merely purchasing it, but engaging with its production process, its story, and its consumption ritual- stands out as an element that increases the perceived value of both the product and the destination.

Authenticity, another concept closely related to the experience economy, refers to tourists’ pursuit of genuine, sincere, and locality-specific experiences at the destinations they visit (MacCannell, 1973). Wang (1999) introduced the concept of “existential authenticity” into the literature, arguing that this pursuit is related not only to the objective reality of the object but also to the subjective/existential meaning the individual constructs during the experience. In this context, what strengthens the perception of authenticity is not merely that a geographically indicated product is registered, but that the narrative of its production process, its historical bond with the locality, and its consumption ritual (such as a tasting ceremony) are conveyed to the visitor.

In this study, coding and theme generation were carried out inductively and were data-driven; the Experience Economy and Authenticity frameworks were not used to shape this process but were instead applied afterward, as interpretive lenses through which the findings were understood as reflecting both a multi-sensory experience offered to the consumer and an authentic narrative device specific to the locality.

Literature Review

Studies available in the literature related to Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese were examined. The information obtained on these studies is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Studies Related to Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese

Author(s) and Year of the Study	Title of the Study	Subject of the Study
Atmaca B., Demiray, M., Akdemir Evrendilek, G., Bulut, N. and Uzuner, S. (2023)	High-Pressure Processing of Traditional Hardaliye Drink: Effect on Quality and Shelf-Life Extension	The inactivation of microorganisms in hardaliye beverage through high-pressure processing, along with its quality characteristics and shelf-life extension, was examined.
Kılıç, G. B., Ağdaş, K., Karahan, A. G. and Çakmakçı, M. L. (2016)	Effect of Lactobacillus plantarum AK4-11 and Different Grape Varieties on the Properties of Hardaliye	Effects of grape variety and a Lactobacillus plantarum AK4-11 starter culture on hardaliye's pH, brix, color, and phenolic compound content.
Coşkun, F., Arıcı, M., Çelikyurt, G. and Gülcü, M. (2012)	Changes Occurring at the End of Storage in Some Properties of Hardaliye Produced by Using Different Methods	Physicochemical, microbiological, and sensory changes in hardaliye after one year of cold storage, by production method.
Çekal, N. (2025)	Evaluation of National Beverage Hardaliye in Terms of Nutrition and Health	Nutritional composition, health benefits, and functional-food potential of hardaliye.
Aşkın, B. (2019)	Historical Development and Geographical Characteristics of Kırklareli Cheese	Historical development, traditional production, and geographic-ethnographic characteristics of Kırklareli white and aged kashar cheeses.
Aşkın, B. (2020)	Some Properties of Kırklareli Ripened White Cheese: Ripened White Cheese	Chemical composition, fatty acid profile, and volatile aroma components of Kırklareli ripened white cheese.
Şahiner Ö. and Yuceer, Y. (2024)	Volatile Component Profile, Physicochemical and Sensory Properties of Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese	Physicochemical properties, volatile compounds, and sensory profile of Kırklareli aged kashar cheese.
Coskun, F. (2017)	A Traditional Turkish Fermented Non-Alcoholic Grape-Based Beverage, "Hardaliye"	Hardaliye's traditional production method, nutritional value, and functional properties were introduced.
Faikoğlu, F.; Yavaş, H.; Gürbüz, O. and İstek, N. (2016)	Research About Phenolic Compounds of Turkish Traditional Drink Hardaliye	Phenolic compound profiles of Tekirdağ-region hardaliye samples, determined by HPLC.
Aydoğdu, H.; Yıldırım, Ş.; Halkman, A.K. and Durgun, T. (2014)	A Study on the Production and Quality Criteria of Hardaliye; A Traditional Drink from Thrace Region of Turkey	Laboratory-scale hardaliye production, with evaluation of microbiological and chemical quality criteria.
Bayındır, M.S. and Önçel, S. (2019)	Evaluation of the Traditional Production of Kırklareli Hardaliye from the Viewpoint of Cultural Heritage in Gastronomy	Hardaliye's traditional production methods were examined from the perspective of gastronomic cultural heritage.
Çaşkurlu, S. L. (2023)	Hardaliye Production Process And Effects Of Production Factors On Quality	The effects of raw material selection and production conditions on hardaliye quality were investigated.
Metin, B.; Pehlivanoglu, H.; Yıldırım Servi, E. and Arıcı, M. (2023)	Bacterial Dynamics of Hardaliye, a Fermented Grape Beverage, Determined by Highthroughput Sequencing	The bacterial communities in hardaliye fermentation were analyzed using 16S rRNA high-throughput sequencing.

An examination of the table above shows that the studies related to Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese are quite limited. Moreover, the majority of these studies have been conducted in the field of food engineering and have focused on the chemical composition of the products in question. In this context, in addition to the scarcity of studies on these products in the literature, no study has been found -within the literature reviewed

for this study- regarding the consumption of these products and the transformation of this consumption into a ceremony.

Method

Research Problem

Gastronomy tourism is an important factor that tourists take into consideration when choosing a tourist destination (Ullah, Khan, Saeed, Zada, Xin, Kang, and Hu, 2022). Indeed, individuals have begun to travel to the regions where local foods are produced, and regional flavors have become a critical element in the promotion and preference of tourism destinations (Pamukçu, Saraç, Aytuğar, and Sandıkçı, 2021). In this context, it is observed that geographically indicated local products also increase visitor participation and provide significant economic benefits for the production regions (Matviichuk, Lepkyi, Dashchuk, Sydoruk, and Mezentseva, 2022).

Considering the process described above, it is thought that a tasting ceremony in which Kırklareli's geographically indicated traditional beverage hardaliye is presented together with the region's own Kırklareli White Cheese and Aged Kashar Cheese could be an innovative approach for promoting the region's local products and attracting tourists. Nevertheless, the contribution to gastronomy tourism of presenting hardaliye and Kırklareli cheeses in the form of a tasting ceremony is a topic that has not been academically examined. This research aims to reveal, through a qualitative approach, the role of this tasting ceremony in promoting Kırklareli's local products and its capacity to increase the destination's touristic attractiveness. In this context, it seeks to answer the question: "How do local food and tourism-sector stakeholders perceive the potential contribution of a tasting experience combining Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese to product awareness and Kırklareli's attractiveness as a gastronomy tourism destination?"

Participants and Sampling

The population of the research comprises stakeholders in Kırklareli who are able to offer views and assessments regarding the experience of a hardaliye and local cheese tasting ceremony. In the gastronomy tourism literature, it is stated that more than one stakeholder group plays a role in the development of destinations, and these stakeholders are generally classified as local residents, tourists, local governments, and tourism businesses (Song, Zhu, and Fong, 2021). The research sample, on the other hand, was determined from within this population using the purposeful sampling method, which makes it possible to select participants able to provide the information most appropriate to the study's purpose and research questions. Purposeful sampling is based on the deliberate selection of individuals who can offer in-depth and rich data relevant to the research problem and who can contribute direct experience and knowledge on the subject (Baltacı, 2019).

This study focuses on food and tourism sector stakeholders:

- In particular, restaurant and café owners in the food and beverage sector, as well as hardaliye and

cheese producers/business operators were included in the study. These stakeholders provide information about the feasibility, marketing, and economic effects of such a tasting ceremony. In qualitative research, sample size is not bound by strict numerical limits; data collection continues until no new idea or theme emerges, that is, until theoretical saturation is reached (Song, Zhu, and Fong, 2021). Therefore, rather than being fixed in advance, the number of interviews was determined based on field data, and data collection was concluded at the point where informational repetition began.

Data Collection Method

In this qualitative study, data were collected using the interview technique.

- **Semi-structured in-depth interviews:** Data were collected between March and April 2026. One-on

one interviews were conducted with the identified stakeholders. Interviews were conducted with cheese producers, hardaliye producers, and wine house owners/staff conducting wine tastings in Kırklareli, as these individuals were considered to have direct knowledge of the research topic. Ten interviewees were contacted, none of whom declined to participate; interviews were conducted face-to-face and by telephone. The interviews followed a semi-structured format; while there was a core set of questions, participants' answers allowed for probing further with new questions, enabling each participant to convey their own experiences and suggestions in detail. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission, and ethical rules were applied throughout the data collection process, with participant consent obtained and confidentiality ensured. The interview questions were prepared in line with the research problem and finalized based on expert opinion; during data collection, non-leading, open-ended questions were asked, and the topic was probed further with deepening questions when necessary, with each interview lasting approximately 30–45 minutes. Data collection was concluded after the tenth interview, as responses and the themes emerging from them began to repeat, indicating that theoretical saturation had been reached. Indeed, in a study conducted within the scope of the International Urla Artichoke Festival, semi-structured interviews with festival stakeholders were successful in revealing the concrete effects of the initiative in question (Türköz Bakırcı, Bucak, and Turhan, 2017). Similarly, in this research the interview method is intended to provide in-depth insight into the potential benefits and challenges of the hardaliye tasting ceremony.

Interview Questions

Five interview questions were planned for use in the study. In the process of planning the interview questions, studies in the literature covering topics related to geographically indicated products or hardaliye were reviewed first. As a result of this review, no interview-question set that would meet the requirements of the study could be found. Consequently, the interview questions were created based on the studies reviewed as source material. To determine whether the questions created were appropriate, the opinions of three experts who had previously conducted studies on geographically indicated products, Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese were obtained. As a result of the opinions received, the interview questions determined were judged to be appropriate and sufficient. The interview questions are listed below:

- S1.** Do you have any knowledge about Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese? If so, could you share your knowledge?
- S2.** Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese are products that have received geographical indication. Do you think that these products having received geographical indication has an effect on their recognition?
- S3.** Do you think that increasing the recognition of Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese would make Kırklareli a more attractive touristic destination?
- S4.** Do you think that a tasting ceremony held with Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese would attract the interest of tourists and local residents?
- S5.** Do you think that a tasting ceremony held with Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese could be an alternative to the wine tasting ceremonies held at wine houses?

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used in the research, thereby yielding in-depth themes from the data.

Thematic Analysis: Common points in participants' narratives were identified through thematic analysis and combined under conceptual themes. In the thematic analysis process, the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed: familiarization with the data (reading and note-taking), generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This systematic approach was intended to enable deep engagement with the data and to reveal latent meanings. Coding and theme generation were carried out inductively and were data-driven; the Experience Economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) and Authenticity (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999) frameworks were not used to shape this process but were instead applied afterward, as interpretive lenses through which the already-identified themes were discussed.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, the codes generated by the author were subsequently reviewed by two independent experts with prior research experience on geographically indicated products and Kırklareli's local gastronomic heritage, and the coding scheme was revised in line with their feedback. With respect to researcher reflexivity, the author resides and works in Kırklareli and has prior familiarity with the geographically indicated products examined in this study; however, interpretations were grounded directly in participants' own statements rather than in the researcher's prior knowledge, in order to minimize potential interpretive bias. Consequently, the findings obtained through thematic analysis were discussed in light of the relevant literature, leading to a comprehensive conclusion regarding the possible contributions of the hardaliye tasting ceremony to gastronomy tourism.

Findings

Demographic information regarding the participants interviewed within the scope of the research is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Role/Status
P1	Male	34	Bachelor's Degree	Restaurant-Wine House Operator
P2	Male	33	Bachelor's Degree	Dairy/Cheese Producer
P3	Female	46	Bachelor's Degree	Vineyard House Operator
P4	Male	27	Master's Degree	Dairy Manager
P5	Male	40	Master's Degree	Hardaliye Producer
P6	Female	32	Bachelor's Degree	Hardaliye Producer
P7	Male	36	High School	Hardaliye Producer
P8	Male	43	Bachelor's Degree	Dairy Manager
P9	Male	32	Bachelor's Degree	Wine House Operator
P10	Female	35	Bachelor's Degree	Wine House Operator

This section presents the answers participants gave to the interview questions in detail, in line with five main themes (*Product Knowledge and Definition, Gastronomy Tourism and Destination Management, Being Part of Everyday Life, Geographical Indication Implementation and Perception Issues, Strategic Potential of the Tasting Ceremony*) and their associated sub-themes (*Destination Attractiveness and Experiential Tourism, Branding, Geographical Indication Inflation, Consumer Awareness, Oversight and Unfair Use, Integration with Different Events, Marketing Audience Potential*), classified within the scope of the effect that a tasting ceremony to be created with Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese would have on Kırklareli's touristic recognition and image. These themes were determined based on the responses given by interviewees and on similar or shared statements. In this context, the participants' in-depth insights are presented in detail below, in line with the identified main and sub-themes.

Product Knowledge and Definition

Participants' knowledge of the products converges on production methods, raw materials, and the products' distinguishing characteristics. In this context, P1 explained Kırklareli hardaliyesi in terms of its production method and distinguishing feature with the statement, *"So the process is the same as wine until the mustard seed is added after the grapes are harvested. Afterwards, fermentation is stopped and a non-alcoholic beverage is obtained. It's a probiotic beverage."* Similarly, P2 explained Kırklareli White Cheese with the statement, *"It is made only from cow's milk, or from mixed milk, which also means blended milk. It's a somewhat fatty cheese. It is rested for at least six months. Its main distinguishing feature is the use of milk from animals grazed on the pastures of the Kırklareli region."* while P4 explained Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese with the statement, *"It gains its characteristic quality from the use of milk from animals in the region."* While no specific definitional phrase was used for the cheeses, several participants (P1, P3, P4, P9) used the term *"non-alcoholic wine"* when referring to hardaliye. Seven of the ten participants were able to provide detailed information about at least one of the products in question (P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P10). In this respect, it can be said that the majority of participants had knowledge about the products addressed in this research.

Gastronomy Tourism and Destination Management

This main theme addresses the process by which local products are transformed into a tourism output in two sub-dimensions:

Destination Attractiveness and Experiential Tourism: Participants state that local products belonging to a particular region, in particular, create the potential to add attractiveness to that region (P5, P6, P7, P8). The reason for this may be considered to be that, today, tasting a dish or product on-site is regarded as an element of attractiveness. It can be said that P5's statement, *"As I said, people travel to many cities for different experiences. Likewise, people go to Europe for wine tastings. We too have a geographically indicated grape. We have a unique product that could be brought out through the proper marketing of this grape. Hardaliye is very valuable in this respect."* and P6's statement, *"Nowadays people travel to places not only to sightsee, but also to taste and experience the region's local flavors, and I think that promoting products like hardaliye, white cheese, and aged kashar more could help Kırklareli attract more attention in terms of gastronomy."* support this view. These accounts indicate that participants perceived the proposed tasting experience as potentially contributing to Kırklareli's tourism attractiveness.

Branding: One of the topics most frequently mentioned by participants is branding. While some participants address branding through geographical indication (P6, P8, P10), others address it directly through product recognition and product marketing (P1). For example, P10, noting that geographically indicated products could be used as an advertising tool, adds, *"This is actually something that could happen through the efficient advertising of the products we're talking about and through implementing branding processes."* P1, on the other hand, addresses the branding process independently of geographical indication, using, specifically for hardaliye, the statement, *"There's the matter of branding. For instance, everyone talks about branding when it comes to Bozcaada wines, Süryani wine. They've branded it very nicely."* Taking these statements into account, it can be said that, whether or not geographical indication is involved, the recognition of local products and the region to which they belong can be achieved by creating a branding strategy specific to these products. Creating, through branding, the idea that local products should be consumed or experienced particularly in the region where they are found can pave the way both for the region to gain touristic value and for its cultural values to be embraced.

Geographical Indication Implementation and Perception Issues

This main theme addresses, in four sub-dimensions, the difficulties experienced and the shortcomings observed in geographical indication practices.

Consumer Awareness: Some participants state that geographical indication increases product recognition and, accordingly, can be used as a tool for attracting interest for both the product and the destination (P6, P7, P8, P10). P6 explains this with the statement, *“Yes, I’m sure that this region being geographically marked will be very beneficial in terms of recognition. Because a geographical indication shows that a product truly belongs to that region and meets certain quality standards. This creates trust in the eyes of the consumer. It’s also very useful in terms of promoting the products, because people are now curious about where things come from and research accordingly. That’s why geographical indication is one of the most important factors increasing the value and recognition of these products.”* P7 explains it with the statement, *“I think obtaining geographical indication increases the recognition of products. People place great importance on labels and recognition, and trust them a great deal. Because geographical indication shows that a product belongs to a particular region and maintains quality standards, it increases both consumer trust and recognition.”* and P10 explains it with the statement, *“It can be used as an advertising tool. The consumer also buys with peace of mind. This is actually something that could happen through the efficient advertising of the products we’re talking about and through implementing branding processes.”* P5, on the other hand, explains the matter using the statement, *“Since I know what geographical indication is, it has an effect from my point of view, but this is more about who wants it promoted to whom, and how. Most of my friends don’t even know what geographical indication is. So we need to explain and show these people what geographical indication is before explaining the products’ recognition.”* In this context, it can be noted that, when planning a tasting ceremony to be created with Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese, in addition to stating to the participants attending the ceremony that these products are geographically indicated, it is also necessary to provide information about what geographical indication is and why it matters. Participants having knowledge about geographical indication is important in terms of geographical indication being usable as a promotional and marketing tool.

Oversight and Unfair Use: Another issue participants raised regarding geographical indication concerns oversight and unfair use (P1, P2, P4, P8). After using the statement, *“Even the list of producer firms currently registered under Kırklareli White Cheese at the Turkish Patent Institute is very limited. As things stand, only Firm A and Firm B hold the packaging permit. There should also be Firm C.”* P2 goes on to say that almost all cheese producers currently operating in Kırklareli produce Kırklareli White Cheese and use the geographical indication stamp, yet according to the Turkish Patent Institute’s website only the three firms mentioned above are authorized to produce in this way. P4, meanwhile, uses a statement supporting the problems raised by P2, saying, *“In our country, in order to stamp a product with a geographical indication, you need to apply to the Turkish Patent Institute and complete certain processes. But once you complete these processes and start using the geographical indication stamp, there’s no oversight or anything like that.”* Accordingly, the fact that firms other than those officially authorized to use the geographical indication stamp can still sell products using the stamp indicates a lack of oversight, which in turn can damage the trust placed in geographical indication.

Geographical Indication Inflation: Some participants think that geographical indication has lost its distinguishing feature as a result of being granted to too many products (P1, P8). P1 expresses this, saying, *“I mean, for instance, obtaining a geographical indication isn’t a very difficult thing anymore. Nowadays an indication of source or a geographical indication is granted to all sorts of things.”* while P8 explains the matter in somewhat more detail: *“In addition to being one of those who thinks the geographical indication process isn’t carried out or managed very properly in our country, considering that the cheeses of a considerable number of provinces in our country (for example İzmir, Edirne, Çanakkale, Kars...) are geographically indicated, I don’t think geographical indication can add extra value, especially in the cheese category.”* In this context, it is thought that, in the tasting ceremony planned to be held, it would be healthier to build a marketing strategy that draws not merely on the products being “geographically indicated,” but on the products having characteristic features and a cultural story.

Being Part of Everyday Life

Participants were divided regarding the local-resident market: some viewed the tasting experience as a mechanism for increasing local awareness and belonging, whereas others regarded tourists as the more viable target audience because local residents already routinely consume these products. Participants mention that, for local products to be characterized as a touristic value, the region must first be integrated into the social and economic life of that region (P2, P4, P6, P7, P8, P9). Some participants state that a tasting ceremony composed of local products can be used as a tool not only for tourists but also for building a sense of belonging and raising awareness among local residents regarding their own products (P7, P8, P9). P8 explains this with the statement, *“On the assumption that not every individual living in the region in question may know these products, I think that not merely promoting the products by name, but holding a tasting event, will add extra value.”* while P9 explains it with the statement, *“There are still people among the public who don’t appreciate the value of these products; a tasting ceremony could be good for raising public awareness about these products too.”* P7, evaluating this process also as an employment opportunity, offers the assessment: *“A tasting ceremony held with these products will attract the interest of both tourists and local residents. While supporting local residents, I think it’s important for tourists to gain various experiences. As a business plan, I think various concept events should be planned and turned into a tradition.”* In addition, another group of participants states that local residents already use the products in question in their daily lives, and that for this reason, if such a ceremony is to be created, it should be designed with tourists in mind (P2, P4). P2 explains this with the statement, *“I think that effective promotion and good content will attract the interest of tourists rather than the local residents in the region. Because the local residents already have detailed knowledge of a good kashar cheese or a good white cheese, both in terms of price and where to find it.”* while P4 explains it with the statement, *“Frankly, I don’t think local residents will be very interested. Local residents already know these products and consume them at home. If we’re talking in touristic terms, the situation changes. Besides domestic tourists, a great many tourists come here, especially from the Balkans. Holding a tasting event for these tourists will, of course, help the products become known.”* In this context, it is thought that the tasting ceremony in question would be an application that attracts interest and provides gains for both local residents and potential tourists. By enabling residents to gain knowledge about their own products and by enabling potential tourists to become acquainted with and experience local products, this ceremony is perceived by stakeholders as holding the potential to increase both regional awareness and destination attractiveness.

Strategic Potential of the Tasting Ceremony

With this main theme, the feasibility of the tasting ceremony was evaluated through two sub-themes.

Marketing Audience Potential: Most participants state that there is marketing-audience potential specifically for Kırklareli hardaliyesi (P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8, P10). In response to the question *“Do you think that a tasting ceremony held with Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese could be an alternative to the wine tasting ceremonies held at wine houses?”*, P2 answers with the statement, *“Of course, as an alternative to tastings held at wine houses, activities of this kind could also attract the more religiously conservative segment, and also could be offered as an option to a segment that wants to consume alcoholic drinks other than wine but can’t find them at tastings.”*, P3 with, *“I’m not sure about the white cheese and aged kashar, but it could be an alternative for hardaliye. There are a lot of people in the country who don’t drink alcohol, and there’s no alternative for them. I think the number of people who prefer it for both cultural and religious reasons could be quite high.”*, and P7 with, *“Actually, tasting ceremonies held with these products could offer an experience that is an alternative to wine tastings. In particular, they could bring the many segments who, due to alcohol sensitivity, therefore stay away from grapes and the lovely flavor notes they offer, both together with a deep-rooted historical story and closer to the vineyards.”* Evaluating the matter in this context, it is thought that, more than

Kırklareli White Cheese and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese, it is Kırklareli Hardaliyesi being a non-alcoholic product, and creating a tasting ceremony from these products, that could attract the interest of an audience who does not attend wine tasting ceremonies because they choose not to consume alcohol.

Integration with Different Events: Participants recommend that, rather than being a stand-alone activity, the ceremony be included in existing touristic packages (P1, P2, P4, P5, P8). P4 uses the statement, *“I don’t know whether a ceremony held with just these three products would attract interest on its own. But if it could be worked into a tour, it might be better, at least at the beginning. For instance, if it were added to weekend tours, or, I don’t know, done at the places tourists go to eat, then it could be effective.”* P1 and P8, on the other hand, evaluate integration with different events within the scope of broader-scale events. P8, with the statement, *“I even think that holding the event in question for tourists, especially in the high season, or first participating in an event such as “regional product days” held in various major provinces and then holding a similar event in Kırklareli, could create, through its being an attractive event on its own, an attractiveness factor that would draw people from the surrounding provinces.”* mentions that it could have a positive effect for tasting ceremonies to be held at large-scale events in major cities — where both local residents and tourists participate — before being held in touristic tours that appeal to a more limited audience. Similarly, P1, with the statement, *“If a festival were held in Kırklareli featuring hardaliye, aged kashar, and white cheese — or to which other geographically indicated products could also be added — at a certain time all of these products could both be promoted and people could get to touch these products.”* thinks that holding a festival in Kırklareli specifically, where both product and culture promotion could be carried out, could help promote Kırklareli’s gastronomic values and, accordingly, that the tasting ceremonies planned to be organized could attract interest. In this context, it is thought that, for a tasting ceremony planned to be created with Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese to become an attractive element for both local residents and tourists, the products found in the region must first be promoted, and this promotion supported through different events.

Conclusion and Discussion

Overall, the findings suggest that a tasting ceremony held with Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese is perceived by stakeholders as holding potential to enhance destination attractiveness and to be viewed favorably in relation to destination image — a perception rather than a demonstrated outcome, since destination image itself was not directly measured in this study. This perception is consistent with the literature emphasizing local foods as a core component of destination attractiveness (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016), and aligns with research suggesting that geographically indicated local products can increase visitor interest and strengthen a destination's recognition in gastronomy tourism contexts (Pamukçu, Saraç, Aytuğar, and Sandıkçı, 2021).

Participants' characterization of hardaliye as a "non-alcoholic wine" — and their suggestion that this identity could appeal in particular to non-alcohol-consuming or religiously conservative segments — can be interpreted through Vannini, Ahluwalia-Lopez, Waskul, and Gottschalk's (2010) and Zhang's (2020) work on how ritualized tasting experiences build emotional and social bonds with a product. This interpretation also resonates with Pine and Gilmore's (1998) experience economy approach, which holds that businesses can generate higher perceived value and competitive differentiation by staging experiences that immerse consumers sensorially and emotionally; from this perspective, hardaliye's non-alcoholic identity may be understood not merely as a production characteristic but as a potential strategic differentiator capable of positioning the proposed ceremony as a niche alternative to wine tasting. While this study did not measure brand loyalty or competitive outcomes directly, this interpretation is broadly consistent with research linking experiential marketing to brand experience and loyalty through sensory and narrative elements (Mostafa and Kasamani, 2021; Gao and Shen, 2024).

Stakeholders' emphasis on the geographical-indication status of these three products may itself be interpreted as a resource for marketing the proposed ceremony, echoing the broader literature's emphasis on geographical indications as sources of economic added value and branding differentiation for producers (Poetschki, Peerlings, and Dries, 2021). At the same time, the oversight problems and the sense of "geographical indication inflation" raised by participants point to a structural risk that could weaken this perceived branding potential. Indeed, the literature indicates that as the range of certified and non-certified quality labels in the market expands, the quality assurance conveyed by geographical indications can lose distinctiveness and effectiveness in the eyes of consumers (Fernández-Zarza, Amaya-Corchuelo, Belletti, and Aguilar-Criado, 2021), and that oversight problems in geographical indication practices can, in some cases, escalate into open conflict among producer groups (Rinallo and Pitardi, 2019). Participants' insistence that the products' distinctive features and cultural narrative — rather than the geographical-indication label itself — should be foregrounded is also consistent with authenticity theory: tourists' pursuit of experiencing a product's cultural context (MacCannell, 1973) is, per Wang (1999), inseparable from the subjective and existential meaning they construct through the experience. Presenting hardaliye, white cheese, and aged kashar through their production story and attachment to place, rather than through the geographical-indication label alone, may therefore strengthen how authentic the ceremony is perceived to be. Strengthening oversight mechanisms for geographical indications (Dokuzlu and Söyler, 2023) thus appears important not for any demonstrated increase in sales or competitiveness, but for sustaining the perceived reliability of Kırklareli's geographically indicated products, on which stakeholders believe the ceremony's marketing appeal would depend.

Participants' shared view that the ceremony would attract more interest when embedded within festivals or tours than as a stand-alone offering echoes prior evidence on the role of local product festivals in shaping regional gastronomy tourism (Türköz Bakırcı, Bucak, and Turhan, 2017), and points toward integration into existing programs as a more sustainable path for building interest among both residents and tourists.

Taken together, these interpretations suggest that a tasting ceremony built around Kırklareli's geographically indicated products is perceived by stakeholders as holding potential both as a niche alternative to wine tasting and as a means of enhancing the destination's gastronomy tourism appeal — a potential stakeholders view as more likely to be realized where geographical-indication oversight is strengthened and the ceremony is integrated with existing tourism structures, rather than as an outcome already demonstrated by this study.

Recommendations and Limitations

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations have been developed:

- It is recommended that oversight mechanisms for the geographical indications of Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese be strengthened in cooperation with the relevant institutions (the Turkish Patent and Trademark Office, the Kırklareli Chamber of Commerce and Industry) and that the list of registered producers be shared transparently with the public.
- It is recommended that, at the initial stage, the tasting ceremony be implemented not as a stand-alone activity but by gradually integrating it into festivals and tours organized in Kırklareli and in neighboring provinces with similar characteristics (Edirne, Tekirdağ, Çanakkale). Providing participants, within the scope of the ceremony, not only with information that the products are geographically indicated but also with information about what a geographical indication means and why it matters, could help raise consumer awareness and support the effectiveness of the geographical indication as a marketing tool.
- Basing the marketing strategy not solely on the products' geographical-indication status, but also on characteristic features such as hardaliye's "non-alcoholic wine" identity and its

cultural story, is expected by stakeholders to strengthen differentiation in the face of geographical indication inflation.

- Involving local residents in the ceremony process as producers, guides, or participants may support both local belonging and awareness.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research is based on the perceptions of a limited number of business-side stakeholders (n=10) selected through purposeful sampling; local residents, tourists, and local government representatives — who are also recognized as key stakeholder groups in destination development — were not included, which restricts the transferability of the findings to the broader stakeholder ecosystem. Second, the tasting ceremony discussed in this study is a proposed and hypothetical concept rather than an implemented and tested tourism product; consequently, participants' views reflect anticipated rather than experienced outcomes, and actual visitor behavior and satisfaction may differ once such a ceremony is realized. Relatedly, outcomes referenced throughout the study — such as destination image, tourist demand, sales, regional competitiveness, and employment generation — were not directly measured; where such outcomes are discussed, they should be understood as stakeholders' anticipated potential rather than empirically demonstrated effects. Third, data were collected exclusively through semi-structured interviews at a single point in time, without complementary methods such as participant observation, pilot implementation, or quantitative verification, which limits the depth of triangulation. Fourth, as with all qualitative thematic analyses, the coding and interpretation process involved a degree of researcher subjectivity; although the analysis followed the systematic steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), the findings should be read as one plausible interpretation of the data rather than an objective or generalizable measurement. Finally, the geographical and product-specific scope of the study — limited to Kırklareli Hardaliyesi, Kırklareli White Cheese, and Kırklareli Aged Kashar Cheese — means that the findings cannot be directly generalized to other geographically indicated products or destinations.

In light of these limitations, future studies employing quantitative or mixed-method designs — directly measuring the perception and satisfaction levels of domestic and foreign tourists participating in the tasting ceremony, and ideally following an actual pilot implementation of the ceremony — would help validate and extend the present findings, which are based solely on the views of sector stakeholders.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used Claude (Anthropic) in order to translate the manuscript from Turkish into English. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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