



Evaluation of Local Cheeses within the Scope of Sustainable Gastronomy Tourism: A case from Niğde **

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Abstract

With this study, it's aimed to reveal and promote the forgotten local cheeses, which are thought to have potential in terms of gastronomy tourism. In the study, document review and semi-structured interview techniques, which are qualitative research methods, were applied, and content analysis was performed as a data analysis method. The study was limited to Niğde province and the participants were selected by snowball sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods. At the end of the preliminary interviews, final interviews were held with 10 participants. The interviews were recorded and the findings were written down and the local cheeses of Niğde province [(Niğde Blue Cheese, Niğde White Cheese, Niğde Cappadocia Cave Cheese, Tabal Cheese, Niğde Log Cheese, Niğde Jar Cheese, Niğde Moldy Tulum, Niğde Leather Tulum, Niğde Fresh Cheese and Niğde Tulum Cheese were revealed and listed. As a result of the interviews, most of the participants stated that Niğde cheeses don't contribute much to sustainable gastronomy tourism; but they have a serious potential, and expressed local cheeses are preferred mostly by middle-aged and older individuals. In addition, at the end of the study, suggestions were made by evaluating the contributions of these local cheeses to sustainable gastronomy tourism.

Article History

Received: 25.04.2025

Accepted: 23.09.2025

Keywords

Sustainable gastronomy
tourism

Local cheeses

Niğde

Article Type

Research Article

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** This study was produced from a project accepted in the 2023/2 Term within the scope of Tübitak 2209-A University Students Research Projects Support Program

DOI: 10.21325/jotags.2025.1710

INTRODUCTION

Having a history of ten thousand years, Niğde province has significant attractions for tourists with its natural beauties, cultural assets and thermal resources. Local foods also play a key role in attracting tourists to the destination as they reflect people's lifestyle and culture (Karim and Chi, 2010). It is emphasized that the relationship between food and tourism is very fundamental and that local products have a bigger share in people's destination selection (Şengül and Çılgınoğlu, 2023). Each geographical region has its own culinary culture. The province of Niğde is home to a number of local products. The main foods of Niğde cuisine encompass Niğde tava (traditional food cooked in a stone oven), bor söğürme (a meal with special ribs), köfter (a dessert with unfermented grape juice), mangır soup, oğma soup, Niğde tahinlisi (a type of bread with tahini), cevizli erişte (walnut noodles), papara (a meal of bread and mince), bossulu (a meal of mutton), ayva ve üzüm boranası (quince and grape borana), orta dolması (stuffed rack of lamb), tirit (a meal with lamb shank and homemade phyllo), mazaklı (meatballs), yaprak ditmesi (a meal of grape leaves), fertek halkası (a type of bread), halvater (a dessert with molasses), paluza (a dessert with grape molasses and starch), halka dessert (a dessert in a ring shaped), stuffed apricots (Niğde İl Kültür ve Turizm Müdürlüğü, 2025). Geographical indication products of Niğde include Bor söğürme, Niğde tahinlisi, Niğde tava, Niğde kelle söğüş (a dish made from lamb's head meat), and Darboğaz cherry. Therefore, it is judged that Niğde province has a major potential in terms of sustainable gastronomy tourism with its unique local flavors as well as its natural attractions.

The importance of local products in sustainable gastronomy tourism is an undeniable fact. Local products accentuate the region in terms of sustainable tourism, contribute to the promotion and economy of the region, and make the location a preferred region (Şahin Perçin and Keskin, 2019). Local food products produced by reflecting the unique characteristics of the region have always been an interesting element for destination visitors. These products have encouraged the flow of tourists towards destinations and caused an increase in spending limits by allowing tourists to spend more time in the region (Genç and Akyürek, 2022). In this sense, local products create many positive outcomes within the scope of sustainable gastronomy tourism. For example, the products provide for the development of the region, for individuals in the region to gain economic, social and psychological benefits, and for the region to be recognized nationally and internationally. Moreover, they help local food and beverage producers diversify their products and increase the number of their activities, and in this sense, by increasing the number of businesses, they help reduce unemployment and create new jobs in the region.

It is evident that there are many studies on cheeses in the literature. Nonetheless, when this study is restricted to Niğde province and takes into account secondary data sources, no research on cheeses from Niğde province and their evaluation in the context of sustainable gastronomic tourism has been found in the literature. Therefore, it is thought that this study will fill this gap by bringing to light the local cheese types from Niğde. The limitations of this study are that it covers the concept of cheese from the local products of Niğde and the region, and the research questions include:

*"What are the local cheese types of Niğde?"

*"Can local cheeses be considered as a prominent element in terms of sustainable gastronomy tourism?"

In order to find in-depth answers to these questions, the qualitative research method was preferred. As a result of the research, some suggestions were generated in order to reveal the local cheeses of Niğde and to ensure the

sustainability of these cheeses.

The Conceptual Framework

Despite the fact that cheese has been documented as early as 3000 BC, its history seems to go far further back, and a precise date is still elusive (Salgue et al., 2013). Due to its many types, cheese is a popular dairy product that lasts a long time and has a high nutritional value in terms of vitamins and minerals (Yerli, Şen, and Özbay, 2018). Additionally, it has the highest demand for water, materials, and energy among dairy products because of its commercial significance and vast volume (Van Uxen et al., 2021). Based on data from Atlas Big (2025), the global cheese production is millions of tons per year. Turkey is the world's seventh-largest producer of cheese, with a production of 830,000 tons per year, whereas America is one of the biggest manufacturers, with six million tons. As the importance and value of cheese produced in large quantities has increased throughout history, it has been determined that there has been a great deal of academic research on cheese including history of cheese (Salgue et al., 2013), cheese types of regions (Şengül and Çılgınoğlu, 2023; Güney, 2022; Genç and Akyürek, 2022; Dağ, 2020; Yaman and Kayış, 2018; Yerli, Şen, and Özbay, 2018; Karaca, 2016; Kamber, 2015); social sustainability (Echeverría et al., 2022); environmental and economic sustainability (Gosalvitr et al., 2021); sustainable conservation (Moula Ali, Sant'Ana, and Bavisetty, 2022); cheese tourism (Cihangir and Demirhan, 2020; Fusté-Forné, 2020; Fox et al., 2017); gastronomy tourism (Hastaoğlu, Erdoğan, and Işkın, 2021); geographically indicated cheeses (Yenipınar, Köşker and Karacaoğlu, 2014); isolation (Bağcı and Çınar, 2005), presence of mites (Karatepe et al., 2017). Local cheeses are marketed as tourist products (Karaca, 2016), and many travelers who engage in tourism activities want to experience cheese tourism, which has emerged as an alternative form of travel (Fusté Forné, 2020). This is because each country has its own distinctive cheeses among its local products and generates significant tourism revenue through gastronomic tourism. According to Taşkın and Altaş (2025), cheese is a product of agricultural and dairy activities that reflect the natural environment as well as the cultural identities of the communities who create it. According to Harrington (2005), a variety of elements, such as produce from agriculture that are now in use, the climate that affects these products, culture, geography, religion, ethnic diversity, history, beliefs, and values, can all contribute to the definition of a region's gastronomic identity. By incorporating the items that make up the gastronomic identity into gastronomic tourism, a region's attractiveness is increased, regional development is supported, and the components that constitute the gastronomic identity are preserved (Kivela and Crotts, 2005). The concept of sustainable gastronomic tourism also takes preservation of these culinary components into account. Passing down forgotten dishes to future generations is made possible by sustainable gastronomy tourism, which also permits the appropriate management of natural and cultural resources and the use of regional ingredients in dining establishments and hotel kitchens. To ensure its continuity, it is necessary to produce and consume food in an ecologically sensitive manner, adopt a cultural heritage-preserving approach while being environmentally conscious, train local residents, management, producers, and consumers on awareness, and stay up to date with the latest developments in this field through information and communication technologies (Bora and Çetin, 2022) and is one of the values that regions possess in terms of sustainable gastronomic tourism, along with local products and cheeses that can shape gastronomic identity.

Method

Qualitative research methods enable it to be straightforward to gather primary or secondary data that is required

to construct the theory from various pieces of information (Creswell, 2020; Kozak, 2017; Berg and Latin, 2008). In this study, qualitative research methodologies were employed, and the snowball sampling approach, derived from the purposive sampling method, was utilized to select participants. Compared to quantitative research methods, the sample size made use of in qualitative research methods is smaller (Yağar, 2023). The sample size has been given by a variety of writers (6, 12, 15, etc.) (Boddy, 2016; Guest et al., 2006; Bertaux, 1981). In his study, Low (2019) pointed out that reaching data saturation would be sufficient and that the important thing is data saturation, not the number of samples. Because it was considered that data saturation had been accomplished and because it was noted that the same statements appeared repeatedly, the snowball sampling method was selected from the purposive sampling method in this study. Ten cheese producers and employees of cheese-producing businesses in Niğde province participated in the interviews. There were just ten cheese producers interviewed.

Document review and semi-structured interview techniques were applied in this study by using qualitative research methods. In this direction, a preliminary interview was carried out by obtaining expert opinions on the subject and the questions planned to be included in the interview form, and the finalized version was used in the actual implementation. Cheese producers who agreed to participate in the study were contacted in advance, and appointments were made between May 5, 2024, and June 5, 2024, at their convenient date and time, and final interviews were conducted. The interviews took approximately 45 minutes for each participant. The questions to be included in the interview were classified into two categories as demographic and open-ended. While demographic questions cover the participant's age, profession, and position in the business, open-ended questions consisted of questions such as what the local cheeses of Niğde province are, how long and where they have been produced, the factors affecting the quality of local cheeses, the problems encountered during production, who consumes these products the most and how well they are known, and whether local cheeses have an impact on sustainable gastronomy. Content analysis was also used as a data analysis method. The interviews were recorded with a voice recorder, the findings were put into words, and local cheeses belonging to Niğde were revealed and photographed. In order to collect the data used in this study, approval was obtained from the Niğde Ömer Halisdemir University Rectorate Ethics Committee, protocol number 2024/11-62 and decision date 04 June 2024.

Findings

In this section of the study, the results of the interviews conducted with 10 participants are displayed. Demographic data regarding the interviewed participants and the answers given to the open-ended questions were evaluated by subjecting them to content analysis.

Demographic Data of Participants

In this section, the demographic characteristics of the participants in the study are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Data of Participants

Participant	Age	Profession/Business Position
P1	47	Producer
P2	58	Producer
P3	26	Producer
P4	45	Producer
P5	39	Producer
P6	18	Producer
P7	38	Producer
P8	34	General manager in a producing company
P9	52	Mechanical engineer in a producing company
P10	55	Food engineer in a producing company

As the demographic data of the respondents are examined in Table 1, it is noticed that only 1 person is in the 18-25 ages range and 2 people are between the ages of 26-35. While 2 people are between 36 and 45, 4 people are aged 46 and over. It was understood that 8 of the participants are producers and 1 is a business owner and works as a general manager in a manufacturing business. Moreover, 1 is a food engineer and works as a production manager in a manufacturing business.

Responses by the participants for Open-Ended Questions

When the participants were asked “Where are Niğde cheeses produced?” they indicated that cheeses from the Niğde region could mostly be found in Bor (Karacaören, Kavuklu, Kızılcaköy, Gökbez villages), Çamardı (Bademdere, Üskül, Üçkapılı, Uluğağaç villages), Çiftlik (Melendiz village), Aktaş and Ulukışla districts and in Niğde city center.

Once the question “How long have you been producing cheese?” was asked, all except P8 (16 years), P9 (5 years) and P10 (35 years), most answered that “they had been producing cheese since childhood”.

Then the question “What are the cheeses of the Niğde region?” was directed to the attendees, and they replied that Niğde Cottage Cheese (Niğde Küp Peyniri) (P1, P2, P3, P4, P7, P8, P9, P10); Gödelek, Küpecik, Hot Cottage (Acı Çömlek) (P2, P9); Niğde Fresh Cheese (Niğde Taze Peyniri) (P2, P6, P7); Niğde Leather Tulum (Niğde Deri-Bez Tulum) (P4, P5, P6, P7); Niğde Moldy Tulum (Niğde Küflü Tulum) (P5, P6, P10); Niğde Tulum (Niğde Basma Bidon Tulum) (P6, P7); Niğde Blue Cheese (Niğde Mavisi) (P2, P8, P9, P10); Niğde White Cheese (Niğde Beyazı), Niğde Cappadocia Cave Cheese (Niğde Kapadokya Mağara Peyniri), Tabal Cheese (Tabal Peyniri), Niğde Log Cheese (Niğde Küçük Peyniri) (P9).

The answers to the question of “What are the factors affecting the quality of cheese?” were as follows: P1 and P2; “Hygiene of milk and during milking, regular changing of the water during production and protection of sourdough”; P3; “Waiting period, salt content, whey”; P4; “Providing the temperature and humidity conditions of the place where it is produced, yeast quality”; P5 and P6; “Milk of small cattle such as goats and sheep rather than cows, boiling the milk thoroughly”; P7 “The feed quality of the animal from which the milk will be taken, in other words, the milk which is basically the raw material”; P8, “Hygiene conditions, production with correct methods, machine and master competence, storage, shelf life and storage conditions”; P9, “Mold bacteria, cave culture, humidity, fermentation, no additives, minimum 3 months ripening period” and P10, “Fat ratio of milk, antibiotic values etc. issues related to raw materials, hygiene and cold chain” are the factors that determine the quality of cheese.

In response to the question “Who consumes Niğde regional cheeses?”, all participants stated that “Middle-aged

and older people, local people and expatriates prefer these cheeses more frequently, and that young people consume cheeses that are sold in markets, which are softer in terms of taste and smell”.

Another question asked to the partakers was that, “What are the problems encountered during production?” The problems they encountered during production involved the following expressions: “Lack of milking due to animals getting sick or milk from sick animals (P1)”, “Milk being sold as fatty but not being sold realistically, producers attempting to buy skim milk due to skim milk being cheaper (P2, P7)”, “Short waiting period and inadequate salting (P3)”, “Making cheese from raw milk (P4)”, “Not knowing how to make cheese (P6)”, “No standardization in raw material quality, not paying attention to issues such as milk cleaning and bacteria separator, how animals are fed (P8)”, “Raw material not being selected from lagoon or asaf sheep breeds with better quality milk (P9)”.

The answers given to “Do you think the cheeses from Niğde region are well-known enough?” explained that they are generally not well-known enough. This question was answered by participants P5 and P7 as “Everyone knows. People even come from other cities and countries to buy our cheeses. This situation makes us very happy and we understand better that we are doing the right thing”.

Finally, when they were directed “Do you think these cheeses contribute to Niğde in terms of sustainable gastronomy?”, most of the participants stated that these cheeses are known by the local people and sold in large quantities, but they do not think they contribute much to the sustainable gastronomy tourism of the region, and yet these products have a serious potential in terms of Niğde gastronomy (P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9).

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is claimed that traditional products are becoming more and more vital for sustainable gastronomy tourism, and that the country we live in, which has a wide diversity of cheeses, should emphasize these culinary values (Karaca, 2016). This study was carried out in Niğde province because, in addition to its historical and cultural significance and indigenous products, it is thought to have a gastronomic identity and the potential for sustainable gastronomy tourism. The purpose of this study is to identify the local cheeses and to assist in promoting and raising awareness of them. This study is regarded as unique in the realm of sustainable gastronomy and attempts to make a scientific contribution. Within the scope of the study, local cheese producers and business employees in Niğde province were interviewed, the interviews were recorded, and local cheeses from Niğde province were photographed and listed. As a result, a number of recommendations were put forward. As a result of the interviews, local cheeses from Niğde province were listed as follows:



Figure 1. Niğde Blue Cheese (Niğde Mavisı)



Figure 2. Niğde White Cheese (Niğde Beyazı)



Figure 3. Niğde Cappadocia Cave Cheese (Niğde Kapadokya Mağara Peyniri)



Figure 4. Tabal Cheese (Tabal Peyniri)



Figure 5. Niğde Log Cheese (Niğde Kütük Peyniri)



Figure 6. Niğde Jar Cheese (Hot Pot Cheese (Acı Çömlek), Küpecik, Gödelek) (Niğde Küp Peyniri)



Figure 7. Niğde Moldy Tulum (Niğde Küflü Tulum)



Figure 8. Niğde Leather Tulum (Niğde Deri-Bez Tulum)



Figure 9. Niğde Fresh Cheese (Niğde Taze Peyniri)



Figure 10. Niğde Tulum Cheese (Niğde Basma Bidon Tulum)

The results of the interviews showed that the following factors affect cheese quality: hygiene, waiting time, salt content, production stage, yeast quality, temperature, and humidity conditions of the place where it is produced, milk source, feed quality, correct and high-quality machinery use, storage, and preservation conditions. On the other hand, interviews displayed that local cheese types are most preferred by locals, expatriates, and middle-aged individuals. Obtaining milk, selling milk from sick animals, improper salting and aging, milk quality that does not meet supplier standards, other producers directing producers to buy skim milk during production, making cheese from raw milk, and production errors are just a few of the issues that cheese producers face, as previously mentioned. The participants also mentioned that Niğde cheeses have a lot of promise, despite the fact that it was found that the cheeses from the region are not well-known.

Local, nostalgic, genuine, and handcrafted traditional gastronomic aspects are all part of sustainable gastronomy tourism, which uses them as a way to draw tourists to a place (Ak, 2022). Products with a distinct gastronomic identity, like cheese, also help to promote the area by giving it a brand name (Fusté-Forné, 2020). Accordingly, it has been suggested that further research on local products ought to be conducted and transmitted to upcoming generations in keeping with these conversations. To promote Niğde's regional cheeses from a gastronomic perspective and contribute to the economy, it can be said that these products should be given more space at festivals, fairs, and gastronomy departments, and that institutions and organizations such as NGOs, municipalities, universities, and the governor's office should collaborate more with local producers to further reveal the existing potential in Niğde province. However, given that middle-aged and older people are more likely to consume local cheeses, it can be argued that educating the public about these products and promoting them to new generations, along with

implementing social media and website-based awareness and promotion campaigns, are essential to maintaining local products and guaranteeing their sustainability and health. According to the participants, these cheeses are in great demand both as presents and for consumption by the local populace as well as by expats residing in other provinces and nations. They noted that Niğde cheeses are produced naturally, are high quality, and have a high fat content, yet are sold at much more affordable prices compared to other regions. In this respect, it can be said that introducing these local cheeses from Niğde province with affordable prices can be a marketing strategy and may make social and economic contributions to the region and the country by increasing the sales of local producers. According to Sabur and Güneş (2023), sustainable gastronomic tourism also depends on expanding the quantity of regional food products with geographical indicator registrations and carefully carrying out registration procedures and inspections. Niğde province has six geographically indicated products (Bor Söğürmesi, Darboğaz cherry, Niğde Kelle Söğüş, Niğde Sarım Burma dessert, Niğde Tahinlisi, Niğde Tavası) and three geographically indicated products (Niğde apple, Niğde Geven honey, Niğde köfteri) for which applications have been filed (Türk Patent, 2025). The region's sustainable gastronomy is expected to be promoted if applications are submitted for Niğde cheese varieties and registration certificates are acquired for the products in question.

Limitations and Future Research

Since this study aims to bring cheeses from the Niğde region to light and reveal their potential in terms of sustainable gastronomy tourism, the study was conducted only in Niğde. Future studies may explore in more detail the production stages, storage processes, hygiene, and sanitation practices in the production processes of these local cheeses in Niğde. Additionally, food technologies, sensory analyses, etc., related to Niğde local cheeses can be addressed in terms of food engineering and can be studied with different disciplines and regions. Likewise, comparable research can be conducted in the province of Niğde for products other than the regional cheeses that were sampled for this study.

Declaration

All the authors of the article contributed equally to the article process. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. In order to collect the data used in this study, approval was obtained from the Niğde Ömer Halisdemir University Rectorate Ethics Committee, protocol number 2024/11-62 and decision date 04 June 2024. Moreover this study was produced from a project accepted in the 2023/2 Term within the scope of TÜBİTAK 2209-A University Students Research Projects Support Program.

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Appendix 1. Ethics Committee Permission



Evrak No ve Sayısı: 11/06/2024-517609

T.C.
NİĞDE ÖMER HALİSDEMİR ÜNİVERSİTESİ REKTÖRLÜĞÜ
ETİK KURUL
KARARI

Toplantı Tarihi	Kimlik/Dosya No	Toplantı Sayısı
04/06/2024	22504254-050.04	11

KARAR NO:2024/11-62: Üniversitemiz Sosyal Bilimler Meslek Yüksekokulu Aşçılık Bölümü Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Betül ÇETİN danışmanlığında Aşçılık Bölümü lisans öğrencileri Ahmet Turan KÖŞECİ ile Özcan TEMİR'in yapacağı "Niğde İline Ait Yöresel Peynirlerin Sürdürülebilir Gastronomi Turizmi Kapsamında Değerlendirilmesi" konulu araştırma etik yönden incelenmiş olup etik açıdan **uygunluğuna**, oy birliği ile karar verilmiştir.

Prof. Dr. Zeliha YILDIRIM
Başkan

Prof. Dr. Mustafa SARIDEMİR
Üye

Prof. Dr. Ayhan CEYHAN
Üye

Prof. Dr. Esen GÜRBÜZ
Üye

Prof. Dr. Ayten ÖZTÜRK
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Doç. Dr. Hande BALTACIOĞLU
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