

1 **Mind the Gap: Exploring Perceived Importance and Performance in**
2 **Regional Wine and Food Tourism Experiences**

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35 **Abstract**

36 This paper explores visitor perceptions of wine and food tourism in the Petrich–Sandanski
37 region of Southwestern Bulgaria, an emblematic but underexplored area within the Struma
38 Valley wine region. The aim is to identify key strengths and weaknesses of the regional offer
39 and derive insights to support sustainable destination development and policy design.

40 The study applies a combination of classic and diagonal Importance–Performance Analysis
41 (IPA) to survey data from domestic tourists in Bulgaria (n = 177), comparing the importance
42 assigned to specific attributes with their perceived performance.

43 Findings indicate consistently high evaluations across most attributes, with wine and food
44 quality, authenticity, and atmosphere emerging as core strengths. Value for money and
45 interpretive quality (e.g., commentary and presentation), on the other hand, perform below
46 expectations, suggesting areas for managerial intervention. Less central attributes, such as
47 special diet options and culinary demonstrations, were rated lower in both importance and
48 performance, confirming their peripheral role. The high importance of GI foods, coupled with
49 absence of certified products in the region, points to untapped potential for linking gastronomy
50 with food heritage.

51 The study advances the literature by integrating an innovative dual-IPA framework with a focus
52 on domestic tourist perspectives in an emerging wine tourism destination, offering actionable
53 insights for policy and regional development strategies.

54

55 **Keywords:** wine tourism, food tourism, importance-performance analysis, Bulgaria

56

57 *1. Introduction*

58 In recent years, wine and culinary tourism have emerged as significant segments within the
59 global tourism industry, offering travellers immersive experiences that combine cultural
60 exploration with gastronomic indulgence [1], [2], [3]. These forms of niche tourism not only
61 contribute to the economic vitality of rural regions but also play a pivotal role in preserving and
62 promoting local heritage and traditions [4].

63 Understanding tourist perceptions and satisfaction levels is crucial for the sustainable
64 development of wine and culinary destinations. Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA),
65 introduced by Martilla and James [5], has been widely adopted in tourism research as a
66 diagnostic tool to assess service quality by comparing the importance of specific attributes to
67 their perceived performance. This method enables destination managers to identify areas
68 requiring improvement and to allocate resources effectively [6].

69 In the context of wine tourism, IPA has been utilized to evaluate various aspects such as winery
70 services, tasting experiences, and overall visitor satisfaction (Mitchell & Hall, 2006). Similarly,
71 in culinary tourism, IPA has been applied to assess factors influencing visitor satisfaction at
72 food festivals and gastronomic events, highlighting the importance of food quality, authenticity,
73 and service [7]. However, the majority of IPA applications in this field focus on well-
74 established destinations, leaving emerging regions underrepresented.

75 The Petrich–Sandanski region, with the Melnik area at its heart, constitutes the core of the
76 Struma Valley wine region, widely regarded as one of Bulgaria’s most emblematic areas of
77 viticulture. Its strengths lie in the concentration of wineries within a compact geographical area,
78 enabling visitors to combine multiple cellar visits in a single trip, as well as in the diversity of
79 establishments – from small, family-run wineries to luxury estates integrating hospitality
80 services [8]. The region’s hallmark is the indigenous Broad-leaf Melnik Vine and its cultivated
81 varieties (Melnik 55, Melnik 1300, Ruen), which are emblematic of the terroir and provide a
82 unique competitive advantage [9]. Over the past decade, the calendar of events has expanded,
83 with initiatives such as the Melnik Wineries Open Doors enhancing visibility, while award-
84 winning wines and investments in infrastructure have further strengthened its positioning.
85 Despite these advances, challenges remain, including limited international awareness of
86 Bulgarian wines and fragmented cooperation among local stakeholders. Overall, the Struma
87 Valley illustrates a dynamic stage of wine tourism development: moving beyond an emerging
88 destination towards a competitive niche, yet still requiring coordinated marketing and strategic
89 support to reach its full potential [8].

90 In contrast, the development of food tourism in the region remains at a more nascent stage.
91 While the area is characterized by a rich culinary heritage rooted in Mediterranean and Balkan
92 traditions, local gastronomy is not yet systematically integrated into the tourism product.
93 Restaurants and small producers occasionally emphasize regional specialties, but there are no
94 established food routes or consistent promotion of local products under Geographical Indication
95 (GI) labels. As such, food-related experiences are more fragmented and opportunistic compared
96 to the relatively structured wine tourism offer.

97 Against this background, the present study contributes in three important ways. First, it
98 advances the application of IPA by focusing on wine and food tourism experiences in
99 Southwestern Bulgaria, with particular emphasis on the destinations of Sandanski, Melnik, and
100 Petrich. While this area represents the historical heart of Bulgarian viticulture and is
101 increasingly recognized for its wine tourism potential, its culinary tourism offer remains
102 fragmented and underdeveloped. By analysing both domains together, the study not only maps

103 the current stage of tourism development in the Struma Valley but also identifies opportunities
104 for integrated growth of wine and food experiences — a perspective rarely examined in
105 previous research. Second, it reflects the perspective of domestic tourists, a group often
106 overlooked in IPA-based studies that tend to privilege international visitor markets. Capturing
107 domestic perceptions is particularly relevant in contexts where regional tourism relies heavily
108 on local demand, and where domestic tourists may have different expectations and benchmarks
109 of authenticity. Third, the study combines the classic and diagonal approaches to IPA, offering
110 both a quadrant-based assessment of strategic priorities and a regression-based benchmark for
111 identifying over- and under-performers. By integrating these perspectives, the analysis provides
112 a more nuanced and robust diagnostic tool.

113

114 **2. Literature review**

115 *2.1. Food and wine tourism*

116 Food and wine tourism is frequently classified as a niche form of tourism, attracting travellers
117 with specific cultural, gastronomic, or lifestyle interests [10], [11]. From this perspective, it
118 complements the broader tourism industry by diversifying rural economies, extending the
119 tourism season, and valorising local heritage [12], [13]. Niche positioning has been particularly
120 relevant in the early stages of development, when such products primarily appealed to
121 enthusiasts seeking specialized experiences such as wine tastings, vineyard tours, or regional
122 food festivals [3], [4].

123 At the same time, scholars increasingly highlight the expanding scope of food and wine tourism,
124 especially in relation to wine. Sigala & Roninson [14] emphasize the growing role of wine
125 tourism in regional development, innovation, and destination branding, arguing that its impact
126 extends well beyond niche markets. This reflects the dual character of wine tourism: while it
127 retains features of a specialized product, it also attracts general leisure travelers in search of
128 authenticity, culture, and memorable place-based encounters.

129 Food tourism, by contrast, presents an even more complex case. As Richard [15] notes, eating
130 is both a necessity and a universal cultural activity, meaning that food-related experiences occur
131 during every journey, regardless of whether they are the primary motivation for travel. Culinary
132 experiences can therefore be seen as both mainstream and niche: mainstream because food is
133 an inseparable element of any trip, but niche when deliberately sought out in forms such as
134 cooking classes, gourmet tours, or specialty festivals. This duality underscores the importance
135 of understanding not only how tourists consume food and wine experiences, but also how
136 destinations strategically position these offerings between specialized and mainstream markets.

137 Tourists engaging in food and wine experiences are often motivated by authenticity, sensory
138 pleasure, and the desire to connect with local heritage [16]. Rather than treating authenticity as
139 an objective feature, recent scholarship tends to conceptualize it as a perceived and relational
140 quality of the tourist experience. In food tourism, this is evident in work linking authenticity to
141 local food consumption, destination foodscapes, and tourists' gastronomical quests [17], [18],
142 [19]. In wine tourism, authenticity has similarly been associated with terroir-based meanings,
143 local atmosphere, host sincerity, and interpretive engagement with wine and place [20].
144 Accordingly, this study adopts an experiential understanding of authenticity, viewing it as
145 emerging from visitors' encounters with local wines, foods, and traditions. Studies also suggest
146 that food and wine are increasingly decisive factors in destination choice, particularly in regions
147 that have developed strong culinary identities [15], [21]. At the same time, the sector brings
148 significant benefits to destinations, including the diversification of rural economies, the
149 extension of tourist seasons, and the support of small and medium enterprises [22].
150 However, challenges persist. The rapid growth of food and wine tourism has raised concerns
151 about carrying capacity, authenticity versus commercialization, and the environmental
152 sustainability of wine production and gastronomic events [23], [24]. These tensions are
153 particularly evident in emerging destinations where infrastructure and service quality may lag
154 behind growing tourist expectations.

155 *2.2. Applications of IPA in wine and food tourism studies*

156 The application of Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) in wine tourism spans a period of
157 nearly a quarter century, illustrating the method's adaptability to evolving research questions
158 and industry contexts. The earliest study [25] focused on cellar door service quality using the
159 SERVQUAL model, marking IPA's initial use in operational assessments within established
160 wine regions. Subsequent studies in the early 2000s and 2010s expanded IPA's application to
161 include visitor segmentation [26], regional marketing alliances [27], and event experiences [28].
162 More recent contributions from 2016 onward reflect a shift toward strategic destination-level
163 planning, the integration of advanced analytical frameworks (e.g., structural equation modeling,
164 S-O-R, IPMA), and a focus on emerging markets and generational shifts [29], [30], [31]. This
165 chronological trajectory highlights not only the growing methodological sophistication of IPA
166 applications, but also the increasing emphasis on destination branding, visitor motivation, and
167 experience personalization in wine tourism research.

168 In terms of geographic distribution, we can see a diverse range of regions, with research
169 conducted across both mature wine tourism destinations and emerging regions. About half of
170 the studies included in Appendix 1 are situated in internationally established wine regions such

171 as Portugal, Australia, Canada, and the United States, where wine tourism infrastructures and
172 branding strategies are well developed [25], [29], [30]. The other half focus on emerging wine
173 tourism areas including Mexico, Greece, Croatia, and the Czech Republic, where wine tourism
174 is still evolving as a strategic economic activity [28], [32], [33], [34].

175 The studies encompass a wide range of wine tourism formats, reflecting the sector's multi-
176 dimensional character. Several focus on the winery experience, particularly cellar door service
177 quality and the winescape, using IPA to evaluate tangible and intangible aspects of on-site visits
178 [31], [35]. Others examine wine-related events such as fairs and festivals, where the emphasis
179 is on the overall visitor experience and event management [28]. At the regional or destination
180 level, IPA is applied to explore broader themes such as destination image, visitor motivation,
181 cooperative marketing, and intentions to visit [27], [32]. A few studies also take a strategic or
182 branding-oriented approach, investigating constructs like brand love, word-of-mouth intention,
183 and critical success factors for regional competitiveness [29], [30].

184 There are several conceptual frameworks used in conjunction with IPA to enhance analytical
185 depth and managerial relevance. The SERVQUAL model remains foundational in assessing
186 service quality at the micro (winery) level, particularly regarding staff behavior, reliability, and
187 tangible service elements (O'Neill & Charters, 2000). At the destination scale, some studies
188 apply the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model to examine how external cues (e.g.,
189 gastronomy, online reviews) influence internal states (e.g., identity) and ultimately affect
190 tourism intention [32]. Others incorporate brand-oriented constructs such as brand love and
191 word-of-mouth intention, often using structural equation modeling to identify key satisfaction
192 drivers prior to mapping performance [29]. In one case, a neural network-based IPA model was
193 used to combine stated and derived importance, providing a more nuanced analysis of event
194 quality [28]. Additionally, studies focusing on generational cohorts or visitor segments use
195 factor analysis and segmentation theory to structure IPA around relevant tourist profiles [26],
196 [34].

197 Studies applying Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) in food tourism research appeared
198 almost a decade later than in wine tourism and show a gradual but steady integration of the
199 method into the evaluation of food-related tourism experiences. The earliest publications, such
200 as Smith and Costello's [7] study of a U.S. culinary event, focused primarily on operational
201 aspects and event management, similar to early wine tourism studies centred on service quality
202 at cellar doors [25]. Over time, food tourism research using IPA diversified both
203 methodologically and thematically, paralleling developments in wine tourism. In the 2010s,
204 studies in regions such as South Korea, Kenya, and Taiwan applied IPA to assess hygiene,

205 service quality, and menu diversity in both festivals and accommodation contexts, emphasizing
206 visitor satisfaction and foodservice delivery. In recent years, much like wine tourism research,
207 food tourism studies have increasingly incorporated experiential, emotional, and identity-based
208 dimensions, often combining IPA with methods such as structural equation modelling (SEM)
209 or asymmetry analysis [36], [37]. This evolution reflects a broader trend in both fields: a shift
210 from basic performance diagnostics to more strategic and behaviour-oriented assessments,
211 aligned with the growing recognition of food and wine as key components of destination image,
212 branding, and visitor loyalty.

213 Unlike wine tourism research, the geographical distribution of IPA studies in food tourism
214 reveals a strong emphasis on Asia, particularly East and Southeast Asia, with notable
215 contributions from South Korea [38], [39], Thailand [36], [37], Taiwan [40], and China [41].
216 These countries account for over half of the studies summarized in Appendix 2 and reflect the
217 region's proactive positioning of food as a core component of tourism development and cultural
218 branding. In contrast to wine tourism, which features a more balanced representation between
219 mature regions (e.g., USA, Portugal, Australia) and emerging destinations (e.g., Mexico,
220 Croatia, Czech Republic), food tourism IPA research is more concentrated in emerging or
221 rapidly developing tourism markets, where local cuisines are leveraged to enhance destination
222 competitiveness. A smaller number of studies originate from Western contexts, such as the
223 United States [7], or from non-Western destinations with growing food tourism sectors, such
224 as Kenya [42] and Mediterranean countries like Turkey [43], where food tourism is increasingly
225 integrated into the broader hospitality offer. Compared to wine tourism, which often focuses on
226 internationally recognized regions, food tourism studies tend to spotlight regional or
227 subnational destinations and urban gastronomic initiatives, such as Phuket's designation as a
228 Creative City of Gastronomy [37]. This highlights a strategic use of IPA to support culinary
229 identity formation, infrastructure development, and service enhancement in diverse food
230 tourism contexts, particularly in places seeking to consolidate their position on the global
231 gastronomic map.

232 The reviewed IPA studies in food tourism reflect a diverse range of research foci, covering both
233 micro-level experiences (e.g., restaurants, cooking classes, hotel dining) and macro-level food
234 tourism settings (e.g., regional cuisine, food festivals, culinary identity). Several studies
235 concentrate on food service quality in accommodation or restaurant contexts, examining
236 tourists' perceptions of hygiene, menu variety, service speed, and presentation [39], [40], [43].
237 Others explore culinary events and festivals, where IPA is used to assess visitor satisfaction
238 with the overall experience, including access, pricing, and food diversity [7]. A notable trend

239 in more recent research is the shift toward experiential and identity-based food tourism, as seen
240 in studies of cooking classes in Thailand [36] and gourmet consumption in urban gastronomic
241 destinations [37]. These studies move beyond functional attributes to assess authenticity,
242 emotional connection, and cultural learning, echoing a similar shift observed in wine tourism
243 research. Additionally, some studies adopt a comparative focus, such as Su's [40] analysis of
244 individual versus packaged tourists in Taiwan, reflecting interest in segmentation and
245 personalized service in culinary experiences. Overall, the foci range from basic service
246 evaluation to strategic experience design, underlining the versatility of IPA in capturing
247 different layers of the food tourism experience.

248 While many food tourism IPA studies rely on the traditional importance–performance matrix,
249 several incorporate theoretical frameworks and segmentation approaches to enhance analytical
250 depth. Earlier studies tend to focus on basic service delivery models, analysing attributes such
251 as sanitation, taste, and staff courtesy without explicit conceptual scaffolding [39], [41].
252 However, more recent research demonstrates a stronger theoretical orientation. For instance,
253 Kim and Lee [44] apply a typology based on four consumer attitude profiles – convenience-
254 stable, value-oriented, adventurous-aggressive, and traditional-active – to interpret IPA clusters
255 in regional food tourism. Pratt et al. [36] integrate IPA with Importance–Response Performance
256 Analysis (IRPA) and Impact–Asymmetry Analysis (IAA) to identify not just priority areas but
257 also asymmetric effects on satisfaction, while Sangkaew et al. [37] combine structural equation
258 modelling (SEM) with IPA to link food-related perceptions to behavioural intentions. These
259 hybrid methods mirror trends in wine tourism research, where models such as S-O-R (stimulus–
260 organism–response) and brand love are increasingly used. Additionally, segmentation plays a
261 prominent role, as in Su's [40] study of tourist typologies and Obonyo et al.'s [42] analysis of
262 hotel manager perspectives on food service attributes. This demonstrates a broader movement
263 toward targeted, theory-informed applications of IPA, supporting more nuanced
264 recommendations for experience design, destination marketing, and hospitality management.
265 The reviewed literature underscores the evolution and versatility of IPA as a tool for evaluating
266 wine and food tourism experiences across a wide range of geographic and thematic contexts.
267 Studies have moved from early assessments of service delivery and operational quality toward
268 more complex applications that incorporate branding, motivation, and segmentation
269 frameworks. However, several research gaps remain. First, few studies integrate both wine and
270 food tourism experiences in a single IPA framework, despite the increasing interdependence of
271 these domains in visitor experiences and regional branding strategies. Second, while
272 destination-level studies are gaining momentum, there is limited research applying IPA in

273 smaller, emerging wine and culinary regions – particularly in Eastern Europe. Most notably,
274 Bulgaria remains underrepresented in this body of work, with no known IPA applications in the
275 country’s wine or food tourism contexts. This is especially relevant in regions such as
276 Sandanski and Petrich, where wine tourism is relatively well-developed, anchored by the
277 emblematic town of Melnik, one of Bulgaria’s most recognized wine destinations. In contrast,
278 gastronomic tourism in the region is still emerging, with untapped potential to contribute to
279 regional identity and visitor experience. By applying IPA to explore visitor perceptions of both
280 wine and food tourism offerings in this cross-border context, the current study addresses these
281 gaps and supports more integrated, evidence-based destination development strategies.

282

283 **3. Material and methods**

284 This study employs a quantitative research design to assess visitor perceptions of wine and food
285 tourism in the cross-border region of Sandanski and Petrich in Southwestern Bulgaria. The
286 region was selected due to its prominence as a wine tourism destination, centred around the
287 town of Melnik, one of Bulgaria’s most emblematic wine-producing areas, and its
288 underdeveloped, yet promising, potential in gastronomic tourism. While wine-related
289 experiences are well-structured and increasingly visible in national promotional efforts, food
290 tourism remains fragmented, presenting opportunities for strategic development based on
291 visitor feedback.

292 *3.1. Research methods*

293 Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) was employed to evaluate visitor perceptions of wine
294 tasting experiences in the Petrich–Sandanski region. Widely applied in tourism and hospitality
295 research [25], [28], [33], IPA serves as a diagnostic tool for identifying areas where
296 performance aligns with, exceeds, or falls short of visitor expectations. By comparing the
297 importance that tourists assign to different service attributes with their perceived performance,
298 the method highlights both core strengths to preserve and weaknesses requiring managerial
299 attention.

300 *3.2. Survey Design*

301 A structured questionnaire was developed based on previous IPA studies in food and wine
302 tourism and adapted to the regional context. The present paper draws on the items relevant to
303 wine and food experiences, which formed part of a larger study on regional tourism
304 development. Respondents were asked to evaluate 11 attributes of the wine tasting experience,
305 including wine quality, authenticity, variety, ambience, staff professionalism, accompanying
306 food, and value for money. They also assessed 10 attributes of the culinary experience, such as

307 the quality and presentation of food, authenticity of dishes, variety, atmosphere of the dining
308 setting, professionalism of staff, opportunities to learn about local gastronomy, the use of local
309 or seasonal products, availability of special diet options, value for money, and the possibility to
310 pair food with regional wines. Each attribute was measured on two 5-point Likert scales:

- 311 • Importance (1 = “Not important at all” to 5 = “Extremely important”)
- 312 • Performance (1 = “Very poor” to 5 = “Excellent”)

313 3.3. Data collection

314 Data were collected through an online survey conducted between April and May 2025. A
315 snowball sampling method was used, with the questionnaire distributed via social media
316 platforms and online travel and gastronomy forums. Participation was limited to Bulgarian
317 visitors who had previously visited the region, verified by a screening question (“Have you
318 visited the region before?”). A total of 202 questionnaire responses were collected. After data
319 screening, 177 responses were retained as valid and included in the analysis. For the purposes
320 of this study, only responses to the IPA-related questions were analysed.

321 The questionnaire included two sets of Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) items: one
322 focused on wine tourism experiences, the other on food tourism. These items were selected
323 based on a comprehensive literature review of prior IPA applications in wine and food tourism
324 [7], [25], [29], [37], and reflect key elements influencing visitor satisfaction and loyalty, such
325 as product quality, authenticity, service, setting, and emotional engagement.

326 3.4. Analytical procedure

327 The analysis followed three steps:

- 328 1. Calculation of mean scores for each attribute (importance and performance).
- 329 2. Classic IPA (grand mean method): The overall mean of all importance and performance
330 ratings was used as cross-hair values to form the four quadrants (*Keep up the Good
331 Work, Concentrate Here, Possible Overkill, Low Priority*). Attributes were then
332 positioned accordingly.
- 333 3. Diagonal IPA (regression-based method): To address the correlation between
334 importance and performance, a regression line was estimated with importance as the
335 predictor of performance. Residuals were calculated to assess whether each attribute
336 was performing above or below expectations given its level of importance. Attributes
337 with negative residuals were considered under-performers, and those with positive
338 residuals over-performers.

339

340

341 3.5. Reliability and validity

342 The wine-tourism attributes were adapted from prior IPA studies in wine tourism and organized
343 to reflect the principal domains that recur in the literature. Specifically, the final set includes:
344 (1) **core product attributes** (*quality of wines tasted, variety of wines*), consistent with earlier
345 emphasis on wine quality and offer composition (Singh & Hsiung, 2016; Stergiou et al., 2018);
346 (2) **authenticity and territorial distinctiveness** (*unique/local grape varieties*), in line with
347 studies highlighting local atmosphere, destination identity, and place-based differentiation [26],
348 [29], [32]; (3) **interpretive and service-related attributes** (*professional commentary*),
349 consistent with prior attention to staff knowledge, professionalism, and learning about wine
350 [25], [28], [33]; (4) **experiential setting** (*atmosphere and setting*), aligned with scenic beauty,
351 destination image, and winescape attributes reported in earlier research [26], [30], [31]; (5)
352 **complementary and social dimensions** (*accompanying food, opportunity for discussion,*
353 *duration of tasting*), which reflect the increasingly experiential and relational character of
354 winery visits [28], [29]; and (6) **practical and evaluative dimensions** (*possibility to purchase,*
355 *accessibility and signage, value for money*), which correspond to infrastructure, convenience,
356 and value considerations frequently included in destination-oriented IPA studies [30], [31],
357 [33].

358 The selection of food-tourism attributes was likewise informed by earlier IPA research and
359 structured around the key evaluative dimensions most frequently identified in the literature. The
360 final set includes: (1) **core product attributes** (*quality of food, variety of dishes*), consistent
361 with earlier emphasis on taste, freshness, food quality, and menu variety [38], [39], [40]; (2)
362 **authenticity and cultural distinctiveness** (*authenticity and traditional character*), in line with
363 studies highlighting authenticity, cultural connection, and local culinary identity [36], [37],
364 [41]; (3) **interpretive attributes** (*presentation and explanation*), corresponding to educational
365 value, food explanation, and menu presentation [36], [43]; (4) **experiential setting** (*atmosphere*
366 *and setting*), aligned with dining environment and aesthetic or environmental aspects of the
367 experience [37], [40], [43]; (5) **heritage-linked local product opportunities** (*GI food*
368 *opportunities*), reflecting the broader literature on local specialties and culturally distinctive
369 foods [41], [44]; (6) **economic evaluation** (*value for money*), consistent with prior attention to
370 price and price fairness [7], [37], [39]; and (7) **experience diversification attributes** (*special*
371 *diet options, culinary demonstrations/classes*), which reflect nutritional variety and the
372 participatory turn in gastronomic tourism [36], [39].

373 In the study, authenticity was operationalized as a visitor-perceived quality of the wine and food
374 tourism experience, reflected in attributes associated with local distinctiveness, traditional

375 character, and connection to place. This was captured through the items *unique/local grape*
376 *varieties* in the wine-tourism scale and *authenticity and traditional character* and *GI food*
377 *opportunities* in the food-tourism scale. This approach is consistent with prior research that
378 conceptualizes authenticity in food and wine tourism through place-linked products, local
379 culture, and experiential cues rather than as a fixed inherent property of the destination [17],
380 [18], [20].

381 The questionnaire included parallel sets of attributes measuring both the *importance* and
382 *performance* of wine and food tourism experiences. To assess the internal consistency of these
383 scales, Cronbach's alpha was calculated. The coefficients indicated excellent reliability: wine
384 tourism (Performance $\alpha = 0.97$; Importance $\alpha = 0.94$) and food tourism (Performance $\alpha = 0.93$;
385 Importance $\alpha = 0.90$), confirming that the attributes capture coherent dimensions of visitor
386 perceptions and provide a reliable basis for subsequent IPA analysis.

387 3.6. Methodological reflection

388 The results indicated consistently high mean scores across attributes, ranging from 3.8 to 4.6.
389 This "ceiling effect" is frequently observed in wine tourism research, where visitors generally
390 report high levels of satisfaction. While such clustering suggests a strong baseline performance,
391 it compresses the scale and makes absolute differences appear modest. The value of IPA in this
392 context lies in revealing relative misalignments between importance and performance. Even
393 small gaps are strategically relevant, as they indicate areas where expectations are not fully met.
394 For example, "value for money" emerged as a critical under-performer despite receiving
395 relatively high-performance scores, while more subtle discrepancies were identified in wine
396 variety and professional commentary. To capture these nuances more effectively, the study
397 applied both the classic IPA and the diagonal IPA approaches, ensuring a more robust and
398 comprehensive interpretation of visitor perceptions.

399

400 4. Results

401 The socio-demographic profile of the respondents offers background information for
402 interpreting the survey results, though it should be noted that the sample is not representative
403 of all wine/food tourists in the region. Most participants fell into the 45–64 age group (around
404 60%), followed by 26–44 years (27%), with smaller shares under 25 and over 65. Women
405 accounted for 71% of respondents, while men and those preferring not to disclose their gender
406 were less represented. In terms of education, the largest proportion reported higher education
407 (bachelor's or master's degree), though respondents with secondary and doctoral qualifications

408 were also present. Income levels were concentrated in the 1,600–2,500 BGN range (44%), with
409 additional groups in both lower and higher income brackets.

410 Beyond the socio-demographic characteristics, the survey also explored respondents' general
411 attitudes toward wine and food tourism. Around 40% reported that they often or always include
412 wine and culinary experiences in their travels, while another 35% indicated that they sometimes
413 do so, suggesting that gastronomy is a recurring but not universal element of leisure activities.
414 When asked to assess their own knowledge of wine and gastronomy, the majority positioned
415 themselves at a moderate level (scores 3–4 on the five-point scale), with only a small minority
416 declaring very high expertise. At the same time, the perceived role of food and wine in travel
417 decisions was rated highly: nearly 70% considered such experiences important or very
418 important in shaping their travel choices. These findings indicate that food and wine tourism
419 hold a meaningful place in the preferences of the surveyed visitors, providing a relevant context
420 for the subsequent Importance–Performance Analysis.

421 *4.1. Wine Tourism Experiences: Descriptive Statistics and IPA Results*

422 *4.1.1. Descriptive statistics of wine tourism attributes*

423 To evaluate visitor perceptions of the wine tasting experience in the Petrich–Sandanski region,
424 respondents rated 11 attributes on two dimensions: importance and performance. Table 1
425 presents the mean values for each attribute.

426

427 *Table 1. Descriptive statistics (wine tourism attributes, n=177)*

Attribute	Importance (M)	Importance (SD)	Performance (M)	Performance (SD)
Quality of wines tasted	4,55	0,88	4,28	0,96
Variety of wines	4,25	0,98	4,06	1,02
Unique/local grape varieties	4,45	0,95	4,28	0,96
Professional commentary	4,22	1	3,99	1,13
Atmosphere and setting	4,24	1	4,16	1,03
Accompanying food	4,19	1,01	3,84	1,16
Opportunity for discussion	3,9	1,19	4,01	1,13
Duration of tasting	4,12	0,97	3,89	1,12
Possibility to purchase	4,41	0,92	4,44	0,92
Accessibility and signage	4,21	1,03	4,22	0,99
Value for money	4,47	0,88	4,1	1,08

428

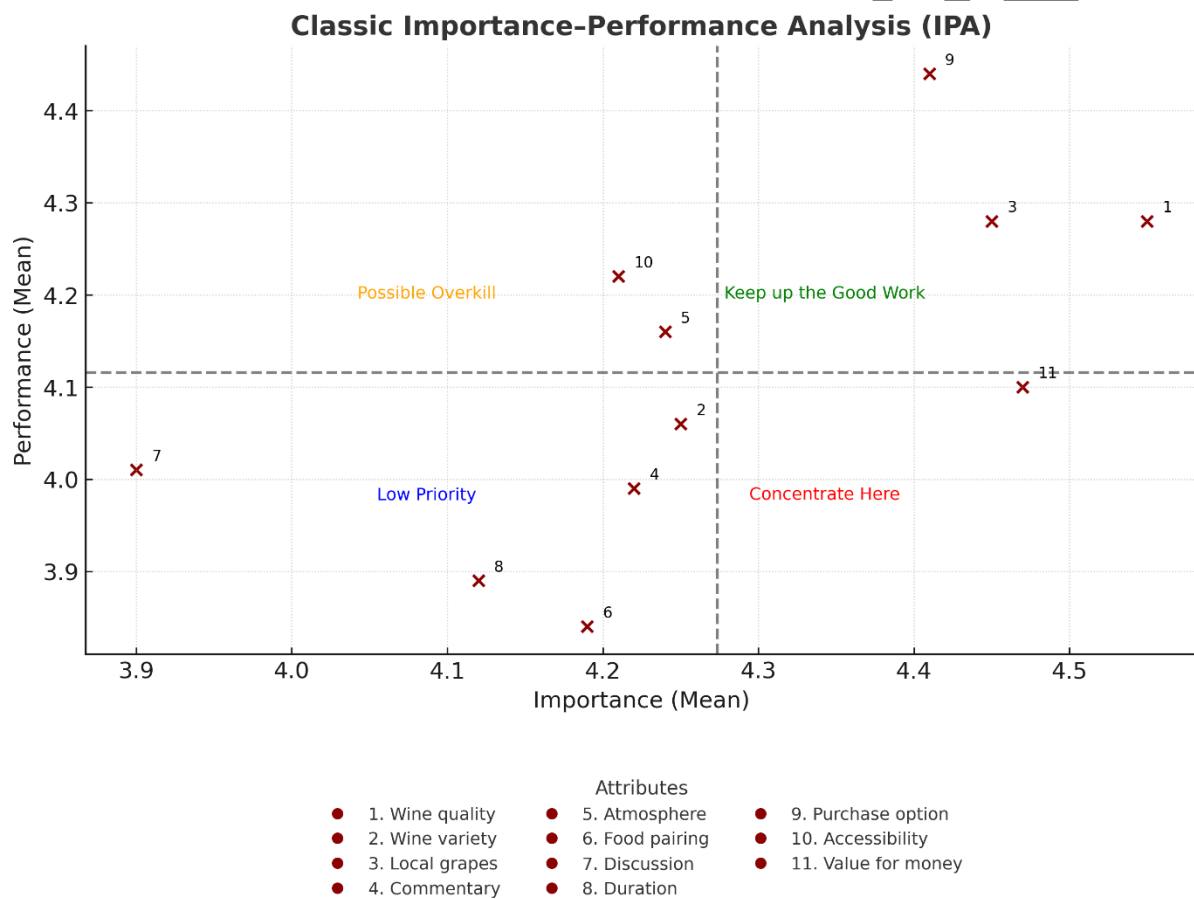
429 Overall, the results show that all attributes received relatively high scores, with mean values
430 clustered between 3.8 and 4.6 on the five-point scale. This pattern reflects a generally positive
431 evaluation of wine tourism in the region, with only subtle differences across attributes. In terms
432 of importance, the highest ratings were given to: *quality of wines* (M=4.55), *value for money*
433 (M=4.47), and *uniqueness of local grape varieties* (M=4.45), highlight particular emphasis on
434 authenticity and product quality, along with the economic dimension of the experience.
435 On the performance side, the top-scoring attributes were: *possibility to purchase wines on site*
436 (M=4.44), *quality of wines* (M=4.28), and *uniqueness of local grape varieties* (M=4.28). At the
437 lower end of the spectrum, attributes such as *opportunity for discussion with the wine guide and*
438 *other participants* (M=3.84 performance) and *duration of the tasting* (M=3.89 performance)
439 received slightly lower ratings, though still above the scale midpoint. The findings suggest that
440 wineries in the region are already performing strongly in areas central to the visitor experience.
441 At the same time, there are areas with room for improvement, particularly in terms of interaction
442 and experiential depth. Standard deviations were generally modest, indicating a relatively
443 consistent pattern of responses across most attributes.
444 The results indicate that, while the region is perceived positively overall, subtle gaps between
445 importance and performance exist. These will be further explored through the IPA quadrant
446 analysis in the next section.

447 4.1.2. Classic IPA (wine tourism)

448 The classic IPA grid (**Errore. L'origine riferimento non è stata trovata.**) distinguishes clearly
449 between core strengths, one critical weakness, and several lower-priority attributes.
450 The “*Keep up the Good Work*” quadrant features three key strengths: *wine quality*, *local grape*
451 *varieties*, and *purchase options*. These attributes score highly on both importance and
452 performance, marking them as pillars of the regional wine experience. Maintaining excellence
453 here is crucial, as they form the core of the destination’s competitive positioning and directly
454 influence tourist satisfaction. These attributes combine product excellence, authenticity, and
455 logistical convenience, and are already performing well in areas that visitors consider highly
456 important. They should therefore remain central pillars of the regional wine tourism offering.
457 The “*Concentrate Here*” quadrant contains a single but critical weakness: value for money. Its
458 very high importance combined with comparatively lower performance suggests a clear
459 mismatch between visitor expectations and perceived benefits.
460 The “*Possible Overkill*” quadrant includes *atmosphere* and *accessibility*. Both attributes
461 perform strongly but are of comparatively lower importance to visitors. This suggests that
462 further investments in these areas may yield limited marginal benefits. Their current high

463 performance already contributes to a pleasant and welcoming experience, but additional
 464 emphasis may not significantly enhance satisfaction relative to other areas that require more
 465 attention.

466 Finally, five attributes fall within the “*Low Priority*” quadrant: *wine variety*, *professional*
 467 *commentary*, *food pairing*, *opportunity for discussion*, and *tasting duration*. These attributes
 468 receive only moderate importance ratings and exhibit relatively modest performance levels.
 469 While they are not currently major drivers of visitor satisfaction, they nonetheless represent
 470 areas where incremental improvements could enrich the offer, especially if the region aims to
 471 attract more experienced wine tourists or strengthen its educational and interactive components.
 472 However, they do not require immediate resource allocation.



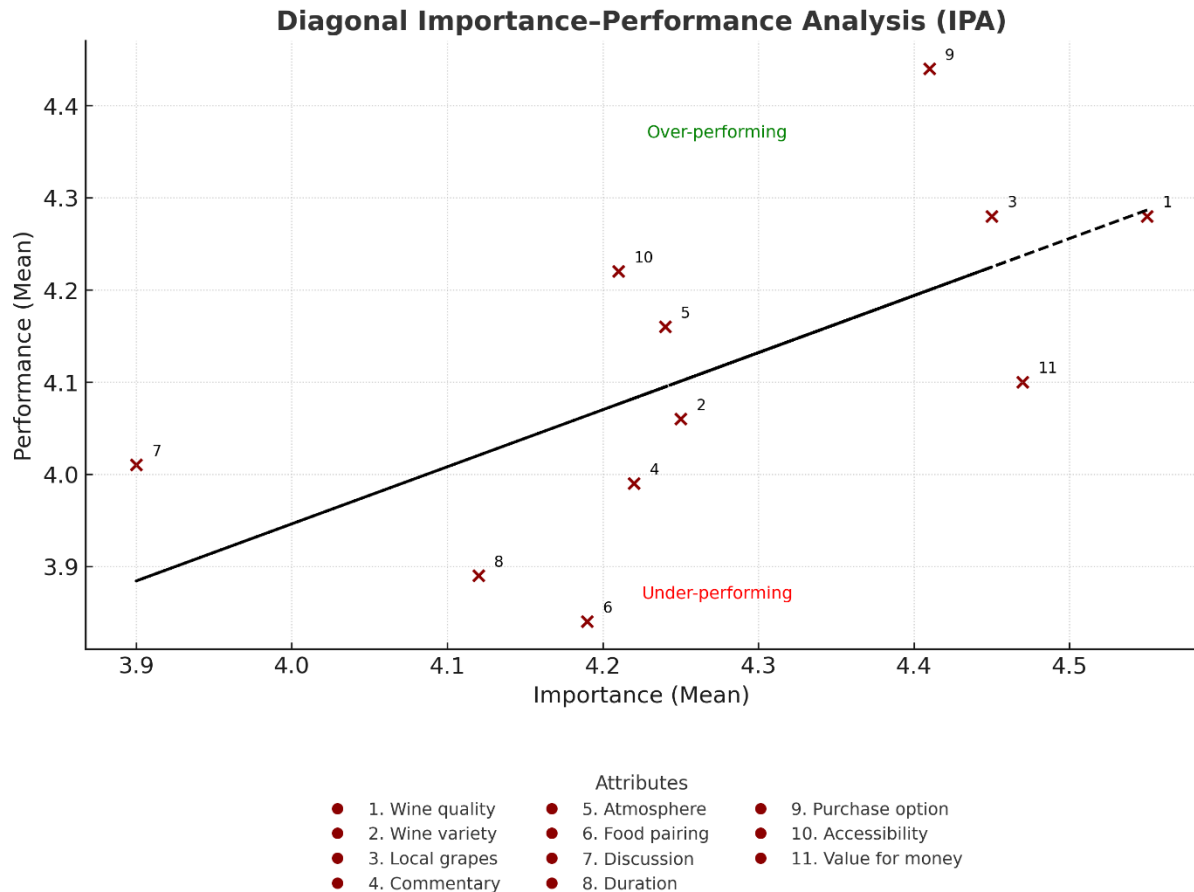
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474 *Figure 1. Classic IPA grid for wine tourism attributes (n=177)*

475 Overall, the classic IPA highlights a relatively balanced offering with strong performance in
 476 core product attributes. However, the perceived value-for-money gap stands out as a critical
 477 issue for destination managers to address.

478 4.1.3. Diagonal IPA (wine tourism)

479 To refine the analysis, a diagonal IPA approach was applied, using regression to model the
 480 relationship between importance and performance. This method evaluates whether each
 481 attribute performs above or below expectations given its importance level. The results presented
 482 in **Errore. L'origine riferimento non è stata trovata.** confirm several findings from the
 483 classic IPA while also revealing subtler performance gaps.



484

485 *Figure 2. Diagonal IPA grid for wine tourism attributes (n=177)*

486 The regression line in the diagonal IPA represents the level of performance that would normally
 487 be expected for each importance rating. Attributes positioned above the line can be interpreted
 488 as over-performing, while those below the line indicate under-performance relative to visitor
 489 expectations.

490 Consistent with the classic IPA, *value for money* is one of the most expressed under-performers,
 491 confirming it as a pressing weakness in the regional wine tourism offer. The diagonal IPA,
 492 however, also identifies several additional attributes that fall below expected performance
 493 levels: *wine variety*, *professional commentary*, *food and wine pairing*, and *tasting duration*.
 494 Although some of these did not emerge as priorities in the classic analysis, their position below

495 the regression line indicates that, given their importance, visitors expect higher performance
496 than they currently receive. These represent hidden weaknesses that may subtly reduce the
497 overall experiential quality, especially for more experienced or curiosity-driven wine tourists.
498 In contrast, *wine quality, local grape varieties, atmosphere, purchase options, accessibility,* and
499 *the opportunity to discuss* appear above the regression line. This suggests that wineries are
500 exceeding visitor expectations in these areas, which can be considered key differentiators and
501 sources of competitive advantage. These strengths reinforce the region's authentic character
502 and contribute meaningfully to positive visitor impressions.

503 Overall, while the classic IPA highlights core strengths and the primary weakness of value for
504 money, the diagonal IPA sharpens the diagnosis by revealing additional experience gaps in
505 interpretation, pairing, and diversity of wines. Simultaneously, it underscores the importance
506 of preserving the strong performance of attributes linked to authenticity, quality, and
507 accessibility, which collectively define the region's competitive position.

508 4.1.4. Comparative interpretation of IPA approaches

509 The application of both the classic and diagonal IPA approaches provides complementary
510 insights into visitor perceptions of wine tourism in the Petrich–Sandanski region. Both methods
511 converge in identifying *value for money* as the critical weakness, underlining its strategic
512 importance for managers. This attribute combines very high importance with comparatively
513 lower performance, and thus represents a clear area where improvements are needed to
514 safeguard visitor satisfaction and loyalty.

515 The two methods also agree on the region's *core strengths*. The *quality of wines, authenticity*
516 *through unique grape varieties,* and the *opportunity to purchase wines on-site* are consistently
517 positioned as strong performers in areas of high importance. These attributes form the backbone
518 of the wine tourism experience and should be protected as central elements of destination
519 branding and development. At the same time, the diagonal IPA reveals additional insights not
520 evident in the classic grid. Specifically, *variety of wines* and *professional commentary* emerge
521 as *hidden under-performers*. While their importance was rated moderately in the classic IPA,
522 the regression-based approach shows that visitors expect more from these elements given their
523 relevance to the overall tasting experience. Addressing these gaps could enhance the perceived
524 sophistication and educational value of the offer.

525 4.2. Food Tourism Experiences: Descriptive Statistics and IPA Results

526 4.2.1. Descriptive statistics of food tourism attributes

527 The descriptive results for food tourism indicate that respondents generally evaluated both the
528 importance and performance of culinary experiences in the Petrich–Sandanski region highly,

529 with mean values clustering around 4 and above (Table 2Table 2). Among the performance
 530 ratings, the highest scores were assigned to *food quality* (M = 4.40) and *authenticity of dishes*
 531 (M = 4.28), confirming that visitors strongly value the sensory and cultural dimensions of the
 532 regional cuisine. *Atmosphere and setting* (M = 4.18) and *presentation and explanation of dishes*
 533 (M = 4.05) also received favorable evaluations, suggesting that the experiential environment
 534 contributes positively to satisfaction. On the importance side, the strongest emphasis was placed
 535 on *food quality* (M = 4.65), *authenticity* (M = 4.55), and *value for money* (M = 4.52),
 536 highlighting that visitors expect local food to deliver both cultural distinctiveness and a fair
 537 balance between price and quality. In contrast, attributes such as *special diet options* (M = 3.25)
 538 and *culinary demonstrations or classes* (M = 3.65) were rated lower in both performance and
 539 importance, reflecting their peripheral role in shaping overall food tourism satisfaction in the
 540 region.

541 Table 2. Descriptive statistics (food tourism attributes, n=177)

Attribute	Importance (M)	Importance (SD)	Performance (M)	Performance (SD)
Quality of food	4,63	0,77	4,23	0,91
Authenticity and traditional character	4,39	0,93	4,1	0,96
Variety of dishes	4,32	0,9	3,99	0,92
Presentation and explanation	4,04	1,1	3,41	1,25
Atmosphere and setting	4,46	0,86	4,02	1,03
GI food opportunities	3,99	1,13	3,41	1,27
Value for money	4,43	0,9	3,9	1,07
Special diet options	3,51	1,41	3,23	1,33
Culinary demonstrations/classes	3,44	1,34	3,08	1,36

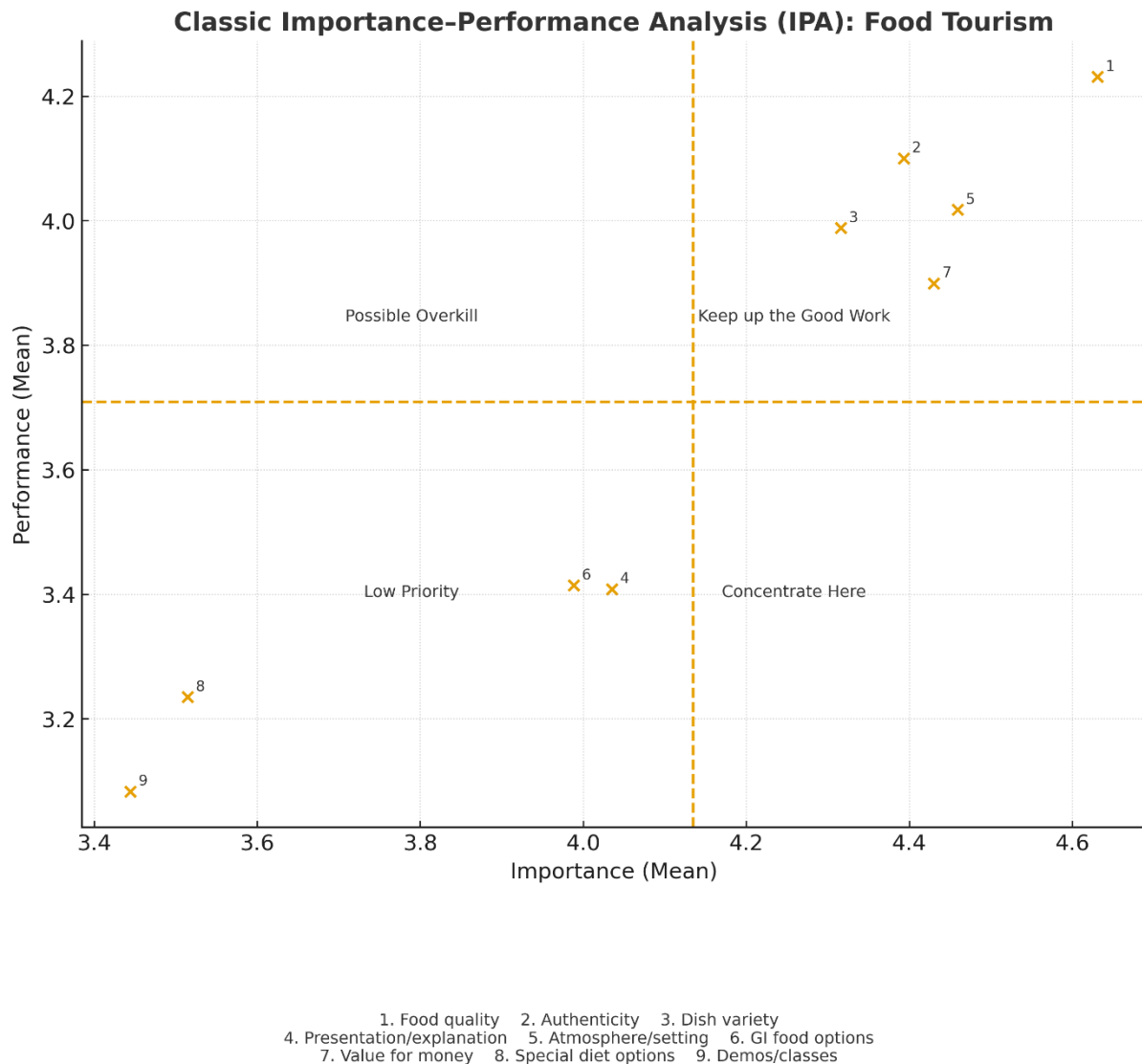
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543 4.2.2. Classic IPA (food tourism)

544 The results of the classic IPA grid provide a detailed view of how the different elements of the
 545 culinary experience align with visitor expectations (**Errore. L'origine riferimento non è stata trovata.**)
 546 **trovata.**)

547 Attributes such as *food quality*, *authenticity*, and *value for money* are positioned in the “*Keep up the Good Work*” quadrant, confirming them as core strengths that strongly contribute to
 548 satisfaction and should be maintained as priorities. *Atmosphere and setting* also falls into this
 549 quadrant, underlining the importance of providing a pleasant and culturally coherent
 550 environment for dining and tasting experiences. In contrast, *special diet options* and *culinary demonstrations or classes* appear in the “*Low Priority*” quadrant, reflecting both limited
 551 importance and relatively modest performance; while these may enhance niche experiences,
 552
 553

554 they are not critical for the majority of visitors. Interestingly, *presentation and explanation of*
 555 *dishes* occupies a position closer to the “Concentrate Here” quadrant, suggesting that while
 556 performance is acceptable, the importance attached by visitors warrants greater investment in
 557 staff training and storytelling to enrich the experiential and educational value of food tourism.



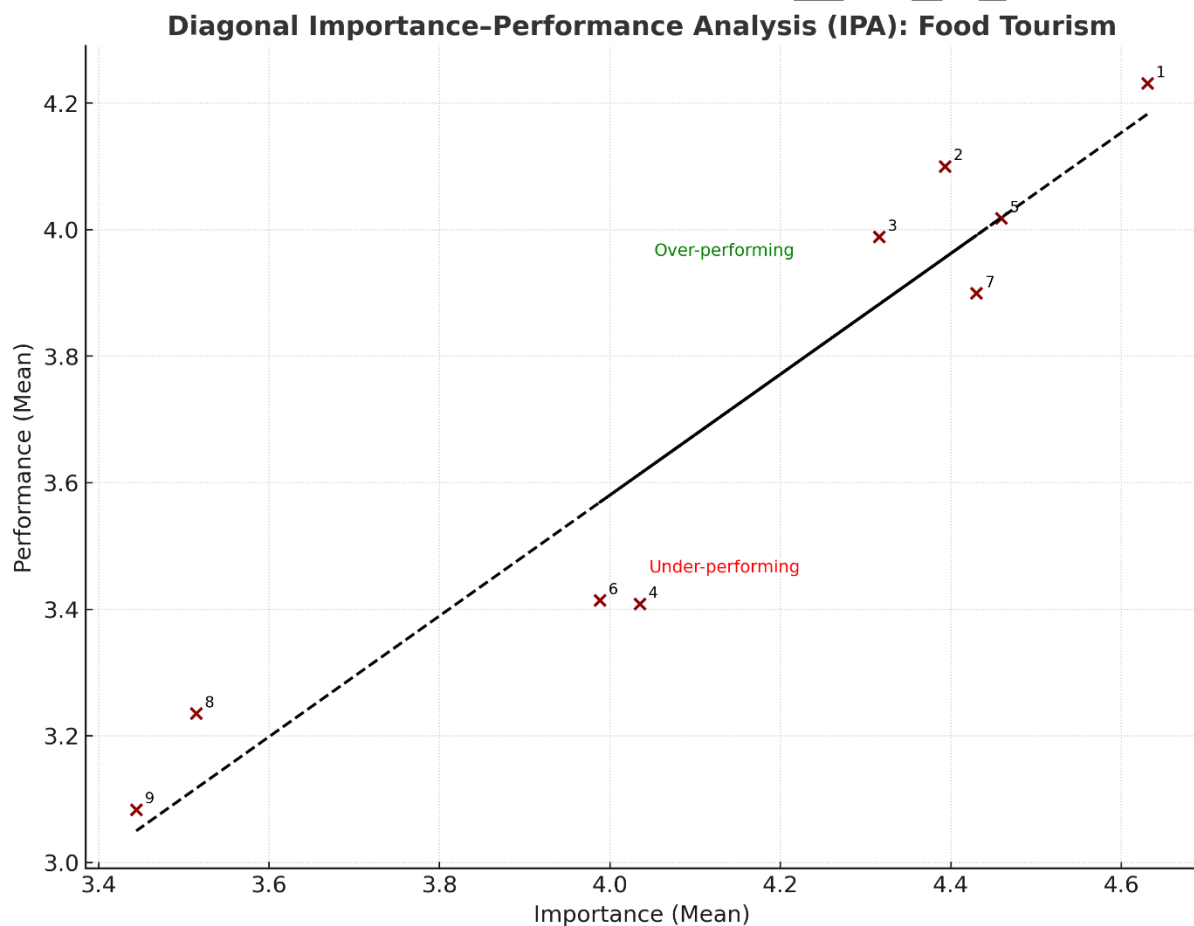
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559 *Figure 3. Classic IPA grid for food tourism attributes (n=177)*

560 *4.2.3. Diagonal IPA (food tourism)*

561 The diagonal IPA also reveals important nuances in visitor perceptions (Figure 4). Attributes
 562 such as *food quality* and *authenticity of dishes* clearly over-perform, with satisfaction levels
 563 exceeding expectations. These findings reaffirm them as core strengths and distinctive anchors
 564 of the regional culinary experience. *Atmosphere and setting* fall into a borderline zone,
 565 suggesting the need for careful monitoring and potential improvement.

566 In contrast, several attributes fall below the diagonal, indicating relative under-performance.
 567 The *opportunity to try foods with geographical indications (GI products)*, for example,
 568 performs below expectations, suggesting that visitors' interest in certified local foods is not
 569 fully met. Given the limited presence of officially registered GI products in the Petrich–
 570 Sandanski region, this may reflect either visitors' misperceptions about what constitutes GI
 571 food or the insufficient visibility of local specialties. This underscores the potential for
 572 developing and communicating authentic regional products under the GI framework.
 573 *Presentation and explanation of dishes* also remains an area of weakness, pointing to the need
 574 for stronger interpretive and storytelling skills among staff. Finally, *value for money* continues
 575 to underperform across both wine and food experiences, confirming a recurring challenge for
 576 the destination, while *special diet options* and *culinary demonstrations or classes* occupy a
 577 peripheral position with limited perceived importance.



1. Food quality 2. Authenticity 3. Dish variety
 4. Presentation/explanation 5. Atmosphere/setting 6. GI food options
 7. Value for money 8. Special diet options 9. Demos/classes

578

579 *Figure 4. Diagonal IPA grid for food tourism attributes (n=177)*

580 Overall, the findings from both IPA approaches confirm that food tourism in the Petrich–
581 Sandanski region is evaluated positively, with consistently high ratings for quality, authenticity,
582 and atmosphere. The classic IPA highlights these attributes as core strengths that should be
583 preserved, while the diagonal IPA confirms that their performance broadly matches visitor
584 expectations.

585 A more nuanced picture emerges for *value for money*: although it appears in the “Keep up the
586 Good Work” quadrant of the classic IPA, indicating solid absolute performance, it falls below
587 the regression line in the diagonal analysis, signalling that performance is *lower than expected*
588 *given its high importance*. This makes value for money a *latent under-performer*, deserving
589 strategic attention even if not visibly problematic in the classic IPA.

590 The clearest and most consistent weakness across both approaches concerns the *presentation*
591 *and explanation of dishes*, which underperforms relative to expectations and shows only
592 moderate absolute performance. Improving the interpretive dimension of the culinary
593 experience therefore offers the greatest potential for enhancing visitor satisfaction.

594 The position of *GI foods* differs somewhat across the two IPA approaches: in the classic IPA
595 they fall within the “low priority” quadrant due to their lower overall importance, whereas the
596 diagonal IPA reveals that, for the level of importance they *do* hold, performance is below the
597 expected benchmark. This suggests that while GI foods are not yet decisive for the wider visitor
598 base, there is a latent unmet expectation among those who value local or distinctive products,
599 likely linked to misconceptions about GI certification or limited visibility of authentic regional
600 specialties. This creates a strategic opportunity to strengthen the connection between
601 gastronomy and local food heritage through clearer communication and potential product
602 development. By contrast, special diet options and culinary demonstrations/classes remain
603 peripheral, suggesting limited strategic relevance for the mainstream visitor market at present.

604

605 **5. Discussion**

606 The combined IPA analyses of wine and food tourism in the Petrich–Sandanski region reveal a
607 generally positive visitor perception, with both domains characterized by high performance and
608 importance values. This confirms the region’s potential as an emerging wine-and-food
609 destination but also exposes areas requiring managerial attention.

610 A key finding across the two domains concerns *value for money*, although its role differs in
611 strength between wine and food tourism. In the wine tourism analysis, value for money emerges
612 as the most pronounced weakness, under-performing in both the classic and diagonal IPA. This

613 echoes earlier IPA-based studies in wine tourism, where pricing perceptions consistently appear
614 as sources of dissatisfaction [28], [30], and aligns with research showing that the balance
615 between cost and perceived benefit is a critical determinant of destination competitiveness [33].
616 In the food tourism analysis, value for money performs adequately in absolute terms but falls
617 below the regression line in the diagonal IPA, suggesting that it does not fully meet expectations
618 for an attribute of such high importance. These patterns indicate that improving value
619 perception in the Petrich–Sandanski region will require not only transparent and consistent
620 pricing but also a stronger communication of added experiential and cultural value.

621 The importance of *authenticity* emerges strongly in both wine and food tourism, echoing
622 previous work that positions authenticity as a cornerstone of memorable visitor experiences
623 [31], [45]. Although it does not require correction, it would benefit from strategic enhancement,
624 particularly through improved storytelling, interpretation, and the development of clearly
625 identifiable local products (e.g., potential GI items). Such efforts would help transform existing
626 authentic elements into more explicit sources of competitive advantage. However, as Stergiou
627 [34] notes, authenticity must be carefully managed to avoid commodification; in the studied
628 region, this suggests building narratives around terroir, heritage, and tradition while retaining
629 cultural integrity.

630 Another recurring weakness identified in both analyses relates to the *interpretive dimension*:
631 the professional commentary during wine tastings and the presentation and explanation of
632 dishes in gastronomy. Previous IPA studies in wine tourism underline the critical role of
633 knowledgeable hosts in shaping satisfaction [25], [27]. Similarly, research on food and wine
634 experiences stresses the importance of multisensory and educational components [46]. The
635 Petrich–Sandanski findings thus confirm that strengthening interpretive and storytelling
636 capacities among service providers is essential for transforming visits into learning-rich,
637 emotionally engaging experiences.

638 The results concerning *GI products* deserve special attention. While respondents rated them
639 positively, the region lacks officially recognized GI foods. This discrepancy may be explained
640 by visitors' general association of local specialties with authenticity rather than an
641 understanding of formal certification. Comparable insights have been reported in the Italian and
642 Portuguese contexts, where visitors often equate local provenance with quality regardless of
643 official labelling [26], [47]. For Petrich–Sandanski, this indicates untapped potential in
644 developing and promoting GI recognition for selected products, thereby strengthening links
645 between gastronomy, heritage, and tourism.

646 The consistently *lower ratings of peripheral attributes*, such as special diet options and culinary
647 demonstrations, suggest that these elements currently play a secondary role in shaping visitor
648 satisfaction. While not immediate priorities for development, they may still enrich the offer for
649 specific niche markets (e.g., health-conscious or experiential travellers) and provide
650 opportunities for product diversification in the longer term.

651 These findings also resonate with recent qualitative research on the critical success factors of
652 wine tourism in the Struma Valley [9]. That study identified satisfiers such as wine quality, the
653 people dimension (hospitality and friendliness), and the winery tour experience, alongside
654 dissatisfiers like accessibility and inadequate service. The convergence between the IPA results
655 and qualitative insights strengthens confidence in the evidence base, showing that both methods
656 highlight the same core strengths (wine quality, authenticity, atmosphere) and weaknesses
657 (interpretive quality, value for money). Moreover, the qualitative perspective adds nuance by
658 emphasizing emotional engagement and host–guest interaction, which in the IPA analysis
659 scored lower in importance but remain central for long-term loyalty and regional reputation.

660 At the same time, several differences from previous research stand out. First, the overall
661 performance values in Petrich–Sandanski are unusually high, with most attributes scoring close
662 to or above 4, whereas earlier IPA studies [28], [30] often report a wider spread with some
663 attributes rated much lower. This may reflect the domestic profile of respondents in the present
664 study, who may be more positively predisposed toward local offerings. Second, while GI
665 products are central in contexts such as Italy and Portugal [26], [47], in Petrich–Sandanski their
666 high rating reflects perceived authenticity rather than actual GI-certified products –
667 highlighting *potential* rather than established strengths. Third, whereas previous studies stress
668 the importance of host–guest interaction [9], [25], [27], in this study attributes like discussion
669 with the guide or explanation of dishes received relatively modest scores, suggesting that
670 domestic visitors may prioritize product quality over interpersonal engagement. Finally,
671 peripheral attributes such as special diet options and cooking classes, which are gaining
672 importance in more mature destinations, remain clearly secondary in Petrich–Sandanski,
673 confirming its status as an emerging destination still consolidating its core offer.

674 Overall, the comparison with earlier IPA studies and the integration of qualitative evidence
675 demonstrate both convergence and divergence. The Petrich–Sandanski region shares common
676 challenges with other emerging destinations, particularly regarding value for money and
677 interpretive quality, but also shows unique opportunities rooted in authenticity, grape varieties,
678 and the potential of GI-linked gastronomy. Strategically addressing these issues will be key for
679 positioning the region as a sustainable wine-and-food tourism destination.

680 **6. Conclusion**

681 This study applied Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) to evaluate visitor perceptions of
682 wine and food tourism in the Petrich–Sandanski region of Southwestern Bulgaria, one of the
683 country’s most emblematic yet underexplored destinations. Based on a survey of domestic
684 tourists, both the classic and diagonal IPA approaches revealed consistently high ratings across
685 most attributes, confirming the positive image of the region’s gastronomic and oenological
686 offerings. Core strengths identified include the quality of wines and food, authenticity of local
687 products and traditions, and the pleasant atmosphere of tasting environments. At the same time,
688 value for money and interpretive dimensions (professional commentary, dish presentation)
689 emerged as areas requiring attention. Attributes such as special diet options and culinary
690 demonstrations/classes were rated less important and less influential, suggesting they currently
691 play a marginal role in shaping visitor satisfaction.

692 The findings extend the literature on IPA applications in tourism by demonstrating its value in
693 an emerging destination context where attributes are evaluated positively but important
694 weaknesses remain. Unlike more established wine and food tourism regions, Petrich–Sandanski
695 shows an unusual convergence of high-performance scores across most attributes, underlining
696 the need to interpret IPA results within their contextual and cultural setting. The study also
697 contributes by combining classic and diagonal IPA, showing how the two approaches
698 complement one another: the former highlights strategic priorities, while the latter identifies
699 hidden under- and over-performers. Integrating these methods strengthens diagnostic validity.
700 For practitioners, the results underscore the importance of maintaining the region’s core
701 strengths – product quality, authenticity, and atmosphere – while addressing weaknesses that
702 threaten long-term competitiveness. Improving perceptions of value for money requires not
703 only pricing strategies but also the communication of experiential and cultural added value.
704 Enhancing interpretive quality through staff training, storytelling, and visitor engagement will
705 help transform good experiences into memorable ones. Although not central at present,
706 diversifying the culinary offer through dietary options or experiential activities such as cooking
707 classes may appeal to niche markets and broaden the region’s attractiveness. Finally, the
708 paradoxical positive ratings for GI products highlight the potential for developing and
709 promoting local specialties under official certification, thereby strengthening links between
710 gastronomy, heritage, and sustainable tourism. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest
711 a need for more proactive support for the integration of GI foods into the regional tourism offer.
712 Local and regional authorities could contribute through targeted financial incentives,
713 administrative and advisory assistance for producers involved in certification processes, and

714 coordinated territorial marketing that more clearly links local gastronomy with regional
715 identity. Such measures could improve both the visibility and the experiential incorporation of
716 GI products, thereby helping to address the current gap between their recognized importance
717 and their still limited presence within the destination experience.

718 Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample was obtained through non-
719 probability sampling and is skewed toward highly educated, domestic, and female respondents,
720 with a marked concentration in the 45–64 age group. Accordingly, the findings are most
721 representative of this particular visitor profile and should not be generalized uncritically to the
722 wider tourist population, especially to international visitors, younger tourists, and more
723 demographically diverse segments. In addition, these sample characteristics may have shaped
724 the evaluation of certain attributes, particularly value for money, informational quality, and
725 authenticity-related aspects, since middle-aged and highly educated respondents may differ in
726 their expectations and evaluative criteria from other market segments. Second, the survey
727 focused on a defined set of attributes derived from previous research. Although this ensured
728 analytical consistency and comparability, it may have overlooked other potentially relevant
729 dimensions of the visitor experience.

730 Future studies could build on these findings in several ways. Comparative research across
731 domestic and international tourists would provide a fuller picture of visitor expectations and
732 satisfaction. Longitudinal designs could assess whether perceptions shift as the region develops
733 its wine and food tourism offer. Integrating IPA with qualitative approaches, such as in-depth
734 interviews or netnography, would capture the emotional and narrative dimensions of
735 experiences more fully. Finally, studies that link IPA results to behavioural outcomes such as
736 loyalty, revisit intention, or spending would enhance the practical utility of the method for
737 destination managers.

738 In sum, the study confirms the Petrich–Sandanski region’s potential to consolidate its position
739 as a sustainable wine-and-food tourism destination. By leveraging authenticity, improving
740 interpretive quality, and addressing value concerns, stakeholders can shape experiences that are
741 both memorable for visitors and beneficial for the local community.

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Appendix 1: Applications of Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) in Wine Tourism (summary by study)

Study	Wine Tourism Focus	Region	Methodology	IPA Elements
O’Neill & Charters (2000)	Winery (cellar door)	Australia (mature)	SERVQUAL + IPA	SERVQUAL-based service quality items: responsiveness, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and reliability—mean importance vs performance ratings
Williams & Dossa (2003)	Wine destination segmentation	Canada (mature)	Tourist segmentation + IPA	Experience elements segmented by tourist type: scenic beauty, friendliness, learning, recreation, and local atmosphere—mapped through IPA for generalists vs immersionists
Randall & Mitchell (2008)	Wine marketing alliance	Canada (mature)	Online survey + IPA (business partners)	Perceived benefits of a wine tourism marketing alliance: branding, visitor traffic, business image, and regional promotion—assessed through IPA
Mikulić et al. (2012)	Wine fair	Croatia (emerging)	Extended neural network-based IPA	Attributes rated by visitors and exhibitors at a wine fair, including service quality, professionalism, location, and event size—combined stated and derived importance using neural network IPA
Singh & Hsiung (2016)	Wine region experience	USA (mature)	CSFs + visitor survey + IPA	Critical success factors in wine destination: wine quality, destination image, food and lodging, infrastructure, activities, and value—ranked via IPA
Stergiou et al. (2018)	Single winery visit by Gen Z	Greece (emerging)	Factor analysis + traditional IPA grid on winescape attributes	Winescape factors: cost considerations, wine & entertainment, destination attributes, service staff, and learning about wine—identified via factor analysis and mapped via IPA
Rašovská et al. (2020)	Wine region vs others	Czech Republic (emerging)	Survey + MANOVA + IPA	19 destination attributes such as cleanliness, staff knowledge, food quality, accessibility, and crowding—contrasted across wine and non-wine regions using IPA

Dias et al. (2023)	Wine regions and cellar visits	Portugal (mature)	PLS-SEM with IPMA; constructs include brand love, wine involvement, emotional & evaluative satisfaction, WOM intention	Emotional and evaluative satisfaction, brand love, wine involvement, and word-of-mouth intentions—mapped using Importance–Performance Matrix
Dias et al. (2024)	Winery visits / wine destination experience	Portugal (mature)	Structural equation modeling + IPA (brand love framework)	Factors contributing to brand love: active participation, place identity, place satisfaction, and relationship quality evaluated via IPA
Leyva-Hernández & Toledo-López (2024)	Wine region visitation intention	Mexico (emerging)	S-O-R model + IPMA	Constructs from S-O-R model: traditional gastronomy, electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM), destination identity, intention to visit—evaluated through IPMA

Appendix 2: Applications of Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) in Food Tourism (summary by study)

Study	Country/Region	Focus	Context	IPA Elements / Attributes	Methodology
Kim & Lee (2010)	South Korea (Sangju province)	Consumer perceptions of food tourism properties	Regional tourism (macro)	Attractive landscapes, accommodation price, food fame, local specialty shops, climate; Four factors identified: convenience-stable, value-oriented, adventurous-aggressive, traditional-active	Survey, factor analysis, IPA
Kang & Lee (2010)	South Korea	Wellbeing fusion menus in restaurants	Restaurant menu development (micro)	Taste, sanitation, freshness, cleanliness of dishes, diet/vegetable/nutritional variety, organic food, menu distinction, price	Survey, IPA grid analysis
Obonyo et al. (2013)	Kenya (Western Tourist Circuit)	Food service attributes in gastro-tourism development	Hotel-based food services (macro)	Grouped into three: food service output, input, and process; emphasis on service delivery and quality	Survey of hotel managers, factor analysis, IPA
Pratt et al. (2020)	Thailand (Chiang Mai)	Cooking class experiences as third-generation food tourism	Experiential food tourism (micro)	Attributes include authenticity, educational value, host interaction, kitchen cleanliness, sensory engagement; compared using traditional IPA, IRPA and asymmetry analysis	Survey, IPA, IRPA, IAA
Smith & Costello (2009)	USA (international culinary event)	Customer satisfaction at a culinary event	Culinary event (macro/micro)	27 items including food/beverage price, event access, parking, food tasting; predictors of satisfaction	MANOVA, regression, IPA

Hwang (2019)	South Korea (Daegu Chimac Festival)	Festival attributes in a food & beverage event	Food festival (macro)	Hygienic environment, taste & variety, food quality & service, purchase convenience; mapped across 22 detailed attributes	Survey (n=322), factor analysis, IPA
Su (2013)	Taiwan	Dining attributes for individual vs packaged tourists	Tourist dining experience (macro)	Hygiene, service quality, food quality, restaurant cleanliness, dining environment; quadrant comparison for tourist types	Survey (n=435), t-tests, IPA
Yurcu et al. (2020)	Turkey (Alanya)	Food service characteristics in accommodation enterprises	Hotel dining services (macro)	Cleanliness, speed, staff courtesy, menu presentation, service equipment, music/image; grouped into maintain/improve/low-priority zones	Survey (n=382), IPA
Zhao & Wang (2017)	China (Heilongjiang Province)	Tourist satisfaction with local cuisine (Longjiang cuisine)	Local culinary identity (macro)	Taste, aroma, freshness, nutritional value, food explanation, utensils, cultural depth; grouped in dominant/maintain/repair/vulnerable zones	Survey (n=180), IPA with quadrant analysis
Sangkaew et al. (2023)	Thailand (Phuket, Creative City of Gastronomy)	Tourists' perception of gourmet consumption	Urban culinary destination (macro)	Attributes include food authenticity, price fairness, cultural connection, aesthetic appeal, behavioral intentions	Survey, SEM + IPA