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Preserving local gastronomy as cultural heritage in Türkiye: a qualitative study on sustainable valorization of Fethiye wedding foods

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Abstract

Food and beverages are integral elements of cultural heritage, reflecting societies' histories, identities, and values. However, globalization and changing lifestyles have diminished the diversity of traditional cuisines, posing a threat to their preservation. Showcasing these culinary traditions, particularly in tourism destinations, can contribute to raising awareness and safeguarding cultural heritage. This study investigates the traditional wedding foods and table customs of Fethiye, which are at risk of being forgotten, and explores their potential as tourism assets. A qualitative research design was applied, combining semi-structured interviews with local experts and direct observations at wedding ceremonies. The findings reveal that Fethiye's gastronomic traditions hold significant potential for sustainable tourism development. The study concludes by offering practical recommendations and highlighting the importance of community participation in preserving culinary heritage.

Keywords Intangible cultural heritage, Wedding foods, Traditions, Tourism, Türkiye

Introduction

Culinary cultures are shaped by a society's history, geography, climate, migrations, beliefs, customs, and traditions. Within this structure, special days and ceremonial meals embody key rites of passage—such as birth, marriage, and death—where food plays a symbolic role and reinforces family and social unity. Food also reflects cultural identity, collective memory, social status, moral

values, entertainment, and celebrations [1]. In Türkiye, ceremonies related to birth, circumcision, and marriage have long served to strengthen social ties, reinforce common values, preserve traditions, and transmit cultural heritage across generations [2]. The dishes prepared and shared during these events constitute essential elements of regional culinary culture [3].

Region-specific eating and drinking rituals are also important components of gastronomic tourism, attracting visitors and influencing destination choices [4, 5]. Fethiye's cuisine, shaped largely by nomadic heritage [6], contains distinctive culinary elements whose documentation and preservation are vital for regional gastronomy. Although studies exist on Muğla's culinary culture [7, 8], no research has focused on wedding foods, which represent a significant cultural expression. Because food is a key component of intangible cultural heritage, wedding ceremonies—where dishes are

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prepared according to local traditions—play a crucial role in sustaining and transmitting this heritage. This study examines Fethiye's wedding rituals and dishes, aiming to contribute to the literature and support future research.

Wedding traditions in Türkiye have been widely studied across fields such as sociology [12, 13], folklore [1, 11, 12], cultural studies [13, 14], tourism and gastronomy [2, 4, 5, 15–18], religion [19], nutrition and dietetics [20], and sustainability [21]. Despite Fethiye's status as a major tourism destination, no study has addressed wedding foods or their potential use in tourism. Therefore, the main purpose of this research is to identify wedding dishes specific to Fethiye and discuss their potential integration into the tourism and food and beverage sectors. The study is expected to contribute both to the preservation and transmission of traditional wedding foods and to local development by transforming these dishes into economic value.

Societies' historical and cultural values function as a mirror reflecting their identity, evolving or resisting change depending on time and circumstances [22]. Weddings and their associated practices are among the key traditions that shape this cultural identity, as they mark the establishment of the family—the smallest unit of society. In ancient Turkish communities, weddings were referred to as “toy” or “törün,” and throughout history, they have been celebrated in a festive atmosphere [16]. As significant cultural expressions, wedding ceremonies continue to play an important role in reflecting communal values and social life [9]. One of the earliest documented examples of wedding traditions in Anatolia is the İnadık Vase (1600–1450 BC), housed in the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations. Discovered during excavations near the Ankara–Çankırı road in 1966, the vase depicts rituals such as banquets and sacrificial ceremonies, highlighting the deep historical roots of wedding-related practices [4] (Fig. 1).

Weddings, which mark the establishment of the family—the smallest unit of society—are among the most significant traditions reflecting communal lifestyles and dating back to ancient times. In Turkish culture, they symbolize the collective desire to live and share together, bringing people from all social groups together in a festive atmosphere [23]. Culinary culture, which mirrors societies' ways of life, not only fulfills nutritional needs but also supports psychological well-being and social interaction. Food-related practices vary across societies, and culinary culture emerges as a comprehensive system shaped by the journey of food from production to consumption, along with the material and immaterial cultural elements embedded in this process [24–26].



Fig. 1 İnadık vase. Source Authors' fieldwork (2023)

Methods

Qualitative methods allow for an in-depth exploration of complex topics and offer important opportunities to understand individuals' experiences and their relationship with their environment [27, 28]. For this reason, the qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for the research problem. In line with the purpose of the study, interview questions were prepared first, followed by the selection of participants. To reach individuals knowledgeable and experienced in the subject, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were applied. Purposive sampling aims to select participants who can best illuminate the phenomenon under investigation [32], while snowball sampling enabled access to additional key informants—for instance, once a cook preparing traditional wedding dishes in Fethiye was identified, other local cooks were reached through this contact.

In total, 11 participants formed the study sample. All interviews were conducted face-to-face by the first author in the Fethiye region, lasted approximately 20 min, and took place in a conversational atmosphere. Data saturation was considered reached when no new information emerged. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and independently reviewed by the researchers. MAXQDA 2020 was used for data coding and visualization. The interview questions developed for the study are listed below.

1. Are there any dishes and drinks that are unique to Fethiye and reflect Fethiye culture? If so, what are they?

2. Are there any dishes in Fethiye that were previously available at wedding foods and reflect the culture of the region, but are not used now? If so, can you give an example?
3. Can you give information about Fethiye table customs? Are there any table customs that you pay attention to at weddings? If so, can you tell us?
4. Can Fethiye wedding foods be used as touristic products in the tourism sector? If it can be used, what can be done to use it?

All interviews were conducted after obtaining informed consent from the participants. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasized, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the research. To ensure confidentiality, personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and anonymized codes were used. Ethical clearance for this research was obtained from the Gümüşhane University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Decision No: 2023/3). The authors confirm that no generative AI or large language model assistance was involved in the design, data collection, analysis, or writing of this manuscript.

All interviews were conducted in Turkish, the native language of the participants. For the purposes of this study, the transcripts were translated into English by the authors themselves, ensuring that the original meanings and nuances were preserved as closely as possible.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, the interpretation of themes was carried out collaboratively by the authors through repeated discussions. In addition, findings were cross-checked with participants who have long-standing experience in preparing traditional wedding foods. These individuals, who have been engaged in wedding practices for many years, confirmed the accuracy and cultural appropriateness of the results.

Fethiye district was chosen as the study area because it is an important tourism destination in Türkiye and has a deep-rooted history. Fethiye is a district of Muğla province in the west of the Mediterranean Region. Its surface area is 3059 km². The Seydikemer district surrounds it to the east, the Mediterranean to the south, southwest, and west, the Dalaman district to the northwest, and the Çameli district of Denizli to the north. Figure 2 shows the map of Fethiye district.

Results

In this part of the study, the findings obtained because of the interviews are presented. In this context, first, general information about the participants is included. Subsequently, the content and descriptive analysis results



Fig. 2 Map of the research area [31]

Table 1 Demographic information of participants

Participant	Sex	Age	Education	Marital status	Profession
1	Female	63	Primary education	Married	Housewife
2	Female	38	Bachelors degree	Married	Teacher
3	Female	68	Secondary school	Widow	Housewife
4	Male	64	Primary education	Married	Cook
5	Male	55	Primary education	Married	Farmer
6	Male	48	High school	Married	Cook
7	Male	48	High school	Married	Cook
8	Male	64	Primary education	Married	Cook
9	Male	71	Primary education	Married	Cook
10	Male	33	Associate degree	Married	Cook
11	Male	48	Primary education	Married	Cook

of the question asked within the scope of the study are included.

Table 1 provides descriptive information about the participants. Accordingly, 8 of the 11 participants interviewed were male and 3 were female. Especially in recent years, the fact that the cooks who cook wedding foods in Fethiye are predominantly men has been effective in the fact that the participants are predominantly men. Considering the age range of the participants, it is ranging from 33 to 71 years old. When we look at the educational status of the participants, the level of education at the primary school level is predominant. In particular,

it is seen that the educational status of the participants with a higher age is lower. Almost all the participants are married. However, most of the participants are cook. The other participants are people who, although not cooks, have knowledge and interest in wedding food.

Figure 3 shows the food and beverages offered at Fethiye weddings because of the interviews. Food and beverage offerings have become an important tradition at Fethiye weddings. Serving food and drinks, especially to invited guests, is seen as an important step in the marriage ceremony. It has been determined that both Fethiye-specific and Türkiye-specific dishes are served at the weddings attended by interviews and one-on-one researchers. In a traditional wedding, an average of 5–6 types of food are served. Herb pastry, chickpeas with meat, dried beans, herb dishes, *yoğurtlama* (*yoğurtlama* is an appetizer made with eggplant, potatoes, peppers, tomatoes, and garlic yoghurt), green beans, frying, salad, (deliberately included in the food category because it was made in a single variety), bulgur with milk, and pilaf are the dishes that are frequently made at Fethiye weddings. Lentil soup, chicken soup (village chicken), and *cacık* (Turkish yoghurt with cucumber and herbs) are the soups that are served. *Lokma*, pumpkin dessert, *baklava* (hand opened or home *baklava*), *kiyam* (the mixture of honey/molasses and sesame), phyllo dessert, *ashure* dessert (noah's pudding), and *semolina halva* are the types of desserts made at weddings. However, today, factors such as changing habits, economic difficulties, and changing culture led to the loss of food and beverages made at Fethiye weddings and the meanings of these food and drinks. It is stated that this change is very fast, especially after the COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019) epidemic. Foods such as rice pudding, pasta dessert, crumpets in thick syrup, homemade *baklava*, and *bulamaç* (a

dish made by adding water, flour, a small amount of sugar and butter) are foods that were previously available at wedding foods in Fethiye and reflect the culture of the region, but are not made at weddings now.

Are there any table customs observed at Fethiye weddings? If so, could you describe them? When the responses to this question were analyzed, it was found that there are several table customs unique to the region. These customs include serving meals on large round metal trays, eating from shared plates (see Figs. 4 and 5), preparing food and beverages collectively by women in the neighborhood, serving dishes in a specific order, eating while seated on the floor, and tipping those who prepare the food. Almost all participants indicated that these traditions have significantly declined in recent years, with the pace of change accelerating notably after the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, it is important to note that such practices may still vary depending on the specific



Fig. 4 Wedding foods prepared for guests on a tray. Source Authors' fieldwork (2022)

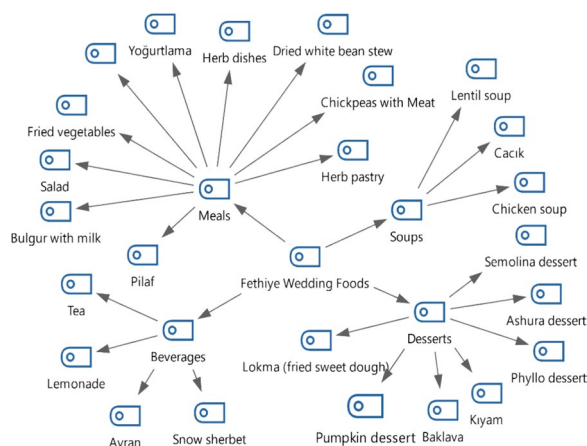


Fig. 3 Food and drinks offered at Fethiye weddings. Figure created by the authors



Fig. 5 Wedding foods prepared by neighbors on a wood fire. Source Authors' fieldwork (2022)

village or the preferences of the wedding hosts. Below are selected direct quotations from some of the interviewees, reflecting their experiences and observations.

Before, everyone ate from the same plates. They would sit their acquaintances. Now most of them eat their own table d'hôte plates. We can say that there is not much of that togetherness left. A lot of attention is paid to hygiene. Previously, for example, handmade baklava had been rolled out. To make trays of baklava, the ladies in the neighbourhood used to make baklava in the style of collaborators. (P1)

In the past, before they started to distribute the food, they used to say "the lid of the keşkek doesn't open." The host of the wedding would give whatever money he wanted. In some way, it was a custom. This is how the distribution of food was started. (P9)

Within the scope of the study, questions were asked to the participants about whether Fethiye wedding foods can be used within the scope of touristic products in the tourism sector and if so, what can be done to use them. All of the participants interviewed within the scope of research stated that Fethiye wedding foods can be considered within the scope of tourism. It has been stated that the meals made especially at Fethiye weddings should be included in the menus of the food and beverage establishments serving in the region. However, it is argued that thanks to the use of the dishes made at wedding within the scope of tourism, these dishes can be transferred to future generations, they can be prevented from being forgotten, that is, culture can be preserved. P6 emphasizes that wedding foods should be served to tourists by keeping the wedding theme or atmosphere alive, so that tourists can have memorable experiences and increase their desire to visit the region again. In particular, the participants draw attention to the fact that Fethiye wedding foods can be evaluated within the scope of gastronomy tourism. It is stated that the tourism demand for the region may increase, especially if festivals or events related to wedding foods are held. In addition, P10 states that the region can gain advantages in terms of promotion and marketing with the use of wedding foods in the tourism sector and organization of some events based on these meals. Below are some of the participants' direct views on the subject.

Of course, it can be used. We invite tourists to the table, we introduce them to our culture, and we try to make them love the food so that they will visit again. In the past when we invited tourists, they would thank us, they would be very pleased (P3).

For example, in terms of gastronomic products, when I was working as a kitchen chef at the hotel, there was a lamb shank on a keskek. The stranger didn't know, but he was very pleased when we served it with special sauces and told him. After all, Ottoman food was very popular with foreigners (P7).

Discussion

The decline of traditional wedding dishes in Fethiye stems from intertwined factors. Economic pressures—such as rising food costs and the commercialization of weddings—reduce the feasibility of preparing labor-intensive dishes, while generational lifestyle changes lead younger families to prefer quicker, individually plated meals, a trend reinforced by post-pandemic hygiene concerns. Moreover, tourism-driven modernization introduces external culinary influences and encourages standardized catering, gradually displacing localized communal practices and limiting intergenerational transmission of culinary heritage.

Transforming traditional wedding foods into tourism products requires careful consideration of ethical, socio-cultural, and sustainability dimensions. Although local food traditions can enrich tourism experiences and support regional identity, they also face risks of commodification and symbolic appropriation that may dilute their ritual significance. As noted in the literature, using local foods in tourism may promote culture and stimulate local economies, but commercialized imitations and inauthentic practices can lead to cultural degradation [33]. Similarly, Çalık and Ödemiş [34] emphasize that protecting intangible cultural heritage within sustainable tourism frameworks demands cultural sovereignty, informed consent, and active community participation to prevent episodic extractivism and ensure long-term sustainability.

Wedding ceremonies, while universal in purpose, hold particular cultural significance in Türkiye and preserve deeply rooted traditional features. In Turkish belief, the communal preparation and distribution of wedding dishes symbolize abundance and prosperity [4]. As practices as old as human history, wedding traditions play a crucial role in maintaining and transmitting national cultural heritage. Marriage—one of the most important stages of human life—has long involved extended processes shaped by customs and rituals. Although wedding practices across Türkiye share common features, they may differ from province to province, district to district, and even village to village [11]. Fethiye, with its cultural diversity, exhibits distinctive wedding traditions and food rituals, making these practices valuable for tourism development.

Food and beverages occupy an essential place in social life, serving as key elements of traditional and religious ceremonies. This study examined the traditional foods and beverages prepared for Fethiye weddings and their potential use in the tourism sector. Findings indicate that, as in other regions, certain dishes are specially prepared and served to guests, accompanied by table customs specific to Fethiye weddings. The literature from different regions of Türkiye similarly documents rich culinary practices at weddings. Erol and Alaşan [16] report the frequent preparation of baklava, stuffed leaves, bulgur soup, bulgur pilaf with meat, beans, okra with meat, chickpeas with meat, and yoghurt soup during henna nights and weddings, along with compote, regional desserts, and grape-based stews. Baysal and Yıldırım Saçılık [29] identify tray pastry as a significant dish in Milas weddings and other special occasions. Çitak and Sandıkçı [30] note that wedding menus in Afyonkarahisar often include barley noodle soup, meat pilaf, tahini dishes, okra soup, stuffed vegetables, oven-baked rice pudding, pastry, and compote. Yıldırım and Karaca [5] find that nomadic communities frequently prepare roasting, meat stews, keşkek, thimble soup, buckthorn dishes, tattoo pilaf, squeezing, flatbread, katmer, bagels, yellow burma, and dried beans on special occasions. Overall, evidence from different regions shows that unique and diverse dishes are prepared for special celebrations throughout Türkiye, and the present study's results align with these findings.

Another focus of the study concerns the customs and traditions surrounding the preparation, presentation, and table practices of wedding foods. The findings show that these dishes hold meanings that go far beyond nourishment; they embody love, cooperation, sharing, hospitality, and respect for tradition—values central to the formation of the family, the foundational unit of society. Practices such as collectively preparing meals, serving all guests with special care, sharing food from round metal trays, following a specific order of dishes, and proceeding to dessert together reflect these symbolic functions. Previous studies similarly emphasize the cultural meanings attributed to food during special occasions. For instance, several studies [10, 17] report that wedding preparations are traditionally conducted by the entire village community, illustrating strong cooperation and solidarity. Sağlam [9] also notes that collective preparation enhances hospitality through shared offerings. However, as modern weddings increasingly rely on catering services, these communal rituals are disappearing. Other studies [4, 17, 18] argue that changes in family structure, technology, urbanization, and socioeconomic pressures have contributed to the decline of traditional practices. Kaymaz [13] states that some people view old-style wedding dishes as outdated, leading to their abandonment,

whereas Özer [4] notes that traditional meals still retain their value in rural areas. Overall, although wedding practices differ across Türkiye, food remains a central element, and the results of this study align with previous findings indicating that traditional wedding dishes in Fethiye are losing their importance. Without intervention, the symbolic meanings embedded in these food traditions risk disappearing. Presenting Fethiye's traditional wedding dishes to tourists in culturally appropriate ways may help preserve and transmit these values to future generations.

International research further supports the cultural significance of wedding foods. Guzman [35] found that among the Itawes community in the Philippines, wedding rituals symbolize not only the union of individuals but also the merging of families. Han [36] showed that in Japan, South Korea, and China, traditional wedding foods such as rice, seaweed, and tea carry symbolic meanings linked to blessing, fertility, and communal unity. Similarly, Juadah dishes in the Minangkabau community of Indonesia reflect cultural identity and convey moral–symbolic messages [37]. In rural Kazakhstan, Werner [38] demonstrated that foods and gifts offered at weddings carry meanings related to social status, belonging, and identity formation. This comparative perspective suggests that Fethiye's case is part of a broader global pattern in which wedding foods function as vehicles for cultural transmission and social memory.

The similarities between Fethiye and other regions of Türkiye can be attributed to the shared cultural foundations of Anatolian societies. Practices such as collective meal preparation, the symbolic use of meat-based dishes, and the emphasis on hospitality reflect long-standing agrarian and communal lifestyles. Consistent with findings from various regional studies, the prominence of cooperation and abundance in wedding meals mirrors the social logic of solidarity and reciprocity embedded in Turkish wedding traditions. These parallels suggest that, beyond geographical differences, wedding foods across Türkiye function as a unifying cultural language that communicates shared meanings of generosity, togetherness, and social harmony.

However, certain distinctions observed in Fethiye arise from the district's strong exposure to tourism and modernization. Continuous interaction with international visitors and the hospitality sector has encouraged the hybridization of traditional culinary practices. Developments such as the adoption of individualized plating, the increased use of professional catering, and changes in table arrangements—especially following the COVID-19 pandemic—indicate a shift from communal to more individualized dining formats. These transformations show that although symbolic values

of unity and generosity remain, their material expressions have evolved under the influence of socioeconomic development, heightened hygiene awareness, and global cultural exchange.

Conclusions

Several elements of the regions (historical, geographical, location, agricultural characteristics, religious characteristics, sociocultural structures, socioeconomic status) are effective in the formation of culinary culture and these elements are manifested in wedding foods. Fethiye also has its own wedding foods and drinks due to some of its features. However, it includes pleasure features in stages such as identification, preparation, presentation and consumption of these foods and beverages. In this context, this food and beverages offered on special days and celebrations can reflect the local culture of Fethiye. Food and beverages are not just a situation in which needs are met and reflect the event of nutrition. On the contrary, it is a cultural event that includes many social issues from identity to culture. Fethiye food and beverages are one of the important cultural elements that can reflect the identity of Fethiye district in this context. From this point of view, it is important to present these wedding foods and beverages, which reflect the cultural identity of the region, to tourists as touristic products. Especially for tourists visiting the region, presenting these dishes and drinks with a unique wedding theme to Fethiye can provide rich experiences. In the interviews with the participants, it was concluded that wedding foods and drinks unique to Fethiye can be offered to tourists with table customs and wedding traditions specific to the region and an important attraction element can be created in the region. An important building block of Fethiye food culture is the table tradition. As emphasized by Türk and Şahin (2004), the table is a symbol of unity, friendship an indicator of cultural characteristic, and a status determinant, where relations (which have changed) from the past to the present are established more sincerely. In this context, if Fethiye wedding foods and drinks are transferred to tourists with table traditions unique to the region, tourists can have permanent experiences and local people can earn more economic income from the tourism sector.

Abbreviations

AI	Artificial intelligence
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
FTSO	Fethiye chamber of commerce and industry
MAXQDA	Qualitative data analysis software

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Author contributions

All authors have contributed equally to this article, from manuscript preparation to finalizing the article. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data availability

Anonymized transcripts and related materials can be provided upon reasonable request and with appropriate ethics approval by contacting the corresponding author.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was reviewed and approved by the Gümüşhane University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee at the meeting dated 14/06/2023 (Decision No: 2023/3). It was unanimously concluded that the project complies with the current legislation. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews, and participants also provided consent for the publication of anonymized quotations from their interviews.

Consent for publication

The authors have given approval for the publication of this manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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