

SUGARCANE DERIVATIVES AS A CORE OF RURAL GASTRONOMIC TOURISM: A CASE STUDY IN THE COMMUNITY OF SOCCHABAMBA, AYABACA – PERU

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study analyzes the potential of rural gastronomic tourism centered on the artisanal production of sugarcane derivatives in the community of Socchabamba, located in Ayabaca province, Piura region – Peru. Using a case study methodology, the research aimed to understand how traditional practices related to sugarcane cultivation and processing serve as an identity, economic, and symbolic axis for local families. Semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation were conducted with eight producers, allowing the recovery of narratives and detailed descriptions of the production process, including ancestral cooking techniques, traditional tools, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. The findings reveal that products such as panela, bocadillo, and alfeñique hold not only economic value as sources of household income but also patrimonial value, being deeply embedded in religious celebrations, community practices, and affective memory. Moreover, a growing tourist interest in hands-on experiences involving the artisanal production process was identified, supporting the notion that contemporary tourists seek authenticity, territorial identity, and culturally meaningful products. However, the study also found weak institutional articulation, limited external promotion, and a lack of public policies aimed at enhancing this agro-food heritage. It is concluded that consolidating Socchabamba as a destination for sustainable gastronomic tourism requires integrated rural development strategies, heritage-based approaches, community participation, and coordinated institutional support.

Keywords: gastronomic tourism, sugarcane, cultural heritage, rural economy, artisanal products.

INTRODUCTION

At the global level, according to the World Tourism Organization (2023), sugarcane derivative production reached 172 million metric tons, 65% of which was used for confectionery, making it the most utilized sector in the food industry. Additionally, the Royal Academy of Gastronomy of Spain and KPMG (2025) point out that the high volume

of consumption is attributed to the ability of these products to be preserved without refrigeration, their density and stability even under climatic variation, and their wide application in artisanal recipes. Similarly, CNV Internationaal (2021) reports that per capita consumption of these sweets reached 23.1 kilograms, as consumers value the variety of gourmet products offered, adapted to local traditions, and especially because the sweets are made with molasses, which gives all products a more intense flavor.

In Latin America, sugarcane production in 2023 reached 59 million tons, of which 27% was used in the preparation of traditional sweets as part of the region's cultural identity. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024), this type of confectionery has grown by 12.3% in the last three years, driven by direct-fire cooking techniques passed down through generations. Moreover, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2021) emphasizes that products such as cocadas, nougats, and panelas, which are present in community and religious fairs, demonstrate their cultural value within a food tradition that reflects memorable local expressions.

In Peru, sugar production in 2023 reached 10,231,756 tons, 18% of which was used in the elaboration of regional sweets, reflecting the articulation between agricultural production and cultural practices (AgroPerú, 2021). The National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (2025) reports a per capita consumption of 26.4 kg of sugar for pastry use, sustained by an offering that combines native ingredients such as peanuts, purple corn, or Andean fruits, with colonial techniques such as manual beating and the use of copper kettles. This integration has led to the creation of emblematic products used in ritual contexts such as processions, altars, and patronal festivities, confirming the sweet's significant role as an element of national identity (National Institute of Agricultural Innovation, 2021).

According to Perucaña (2025), in 2023 the Piura region—specifically Ayabaca—produced 342,187 tons of sugarcane, of which 23% was allocated to the production of artisanal sweets sold at religious festivals. AgroPerú (2021) reports that during the SeñorCautivo de Ayabaca festivity, 17,240 tourists were registered, consuming sweets made from sugarcane and shaped into religious figures, baked in clay ovens. Likewise, the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (2025) notes that at the Dulce Sabor de los Andes fair, 19,321 units were sold by a limited number of local producers who still practice ancestral techniques dating back to colonial times. Additionally, the National Institute of Agricultural Innovation (2021) mentions that these products attract consumers not only for their flavor but also because they are closely tied to faith, tradition, and community identity. At the local level, the community of Socchabamba demonstrates significant gastronomic and touristic potential with products such as bocadillo, alfañique, panela, and cañazo made using artisanal techniques derived from sugarcane.

This study is justified by the need to promote the cultural and economic valorization of sugarcane in the Sierra of Piura through sustainable rural gastronomic tourism development. The research approach proposes a strategy to enhance local identity, stimulate rural economies, and strengthen regional food heritage. Integrating sugarcane derivatives with local cultural expressions constitutes a concrete opportunity to promote cultural tourism in the various producing zones of the region. Furthermore, the relationship between regional sweets and the diversity of native knowledge, artisanal skills, and religious celebrations allows for the planning of thematic routes, specialized fairs, and tourist experiences that enrich intangible heritage. This perspective not only boosts local economies but also consolidates cultural identity and diversifies the tourist value offering with authentic and sustainable products.

Recent studies show how pastry and sugar by-products gain increasing touristic and symbolic significance within specific cultural settings. Thus, Babel (2022) highlights the *chancaca* of Saipina–Bolivia as a driver of heritage narratives and local identity. Similarly, Araújo (2023) analyzes the *bolo de rolo* of Pernambuco as a cultural expression preserving ancestral knowledge, while Siuda and Panini (2023) focus on religious confectionery in the Azores as a fragile expression of ethnic identity. These products, beyond their recognized culinary trajectory, function as mediums that connect the past and the community, intertwining with tourism strategies based on the authenticity of the place that shapes them. Likewise, various perspectives emphasize how innovation and sustainability are transforming sugar's role into a new actor in gastronomic tourism. Samilyk and Paska (2023) propose artisanal sugars with infusions as a means to revalue local products. Aguilar (2024) promotes molasses as a by-product that strengthens the sustainable value chain. Noor and Prasmita (2023) present agricultural decisions as factors behind the stability of the traditional sugarcane production sector. In other words, tradition is not being threatened by innovation but rather strengthened by agroecological and circular practices. Therefore, sugar is not merely an ingredient; it is a symbol of identity, sustainability, and cultural resilience.

Gastronomic tourism contributes to the revalorization of confectionery through various territorial and social approaches. In Santa Marta (Colombia), Sossa and Rivero (2024) portray sustainable gastronomic tourism as grounded in cultural diversity, especially reflected in local sweets. In Riobamba (Ecuador), Villalva and Inga (2021) highlight the role of ancestral knowledge in regional rituals. Simone (2023) explains how in Spain, local confectionery is gaining increasing prominence through gastronomic tourism, while Chamberlain (2023) adds an identity trend by linking pastry with LGBTQ+ expressions. Long (2022) refers to Irish soda bread as an element of cultural identity and a marker of belonging. In sum, these approaches position pastry as a symbolic and emotional activity that enriches tourist experiences by connecting with the timeless culture inherent to the places.

Likewise, other more structural approaches are presented. Campos and Castillo (2024) identify key thematic lines within sustainable gastronomic tourism, such as the use of artisanal products with heritage value. Liao and Tung (2024) highlight the role of communities in defining heritage, emphasizing festive confectionery. Morales and Fuste (2021) propose integrating sweets into wine routes as part of sustainable sensory experiences. Valdés et al. (2023) warn of the pandemic's impact on rural sweet production and consumption in Cuba. Flores and Ramírez (2024), Cartay (2024), and Siregar and Nawai (2022) address pastry tourism from the perspectives of resilience, sustainability, and cultural adaptation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The formation of the Theory of Gastronomic Tourism has been consolidated over the past decades, with one of its main references emerging through Erik Wolf, founder of the World Food Travel Association, who promoted this theoretical approach by presenting culinary tourism as an integral cultural experience (Stone et al., 2022). This theory gained greater traction in the 2000s, due to the advance of cultural globalization and the growing trend of food heritage as a distinctive element of the tourist experience (Nekmahmud and Hassan, 2021). Fusté-Forné and Wolf (2023) argue that gastronomy is not only the consumption of food, but also a vehicle for the transmission of cultural identity and traditional knowledge. Fusté-Forné and Wolf (2025) mention that tourists do not merely seek food but also sensations that provide them with an aesthetic and emotional experience

rooted in the place, thus making gastronomy a key resource for economic and social diversification and sustainability in tourism.

In accordance with the above, pastry assumes an important role as a symbolic and sensory expression of local traditions (Stone et al., 2022). Furthermore, Fusté-Forné and Wolf (2025) state that sweet preparations, often linked to festivities, rituals, or colonial legacies, allow tourists to immerse themselves in the cultural imagination of the destination. Nekmahmud and Hassan (2021) emphasize that regional desserts can become tourist attractions themselves, generating thematic routes, festivals, and experiential activities. On the other hand, Fusté-Forné and Wolf (2023) suggest that the inclusion of pastry in the gastronomic tourism market not only adds economic and cultural value but also contributes to the revaluation of ancestral techniques, stimulates local entrepreneurship, and promotes tourism market innovation from a perspective of identity and lived experience.

So-called sweet culinary tourism, under the label of pastry tourism or cultural tourism focused on sweet fairs, is an emerging typology within gastronomic and cultural tourism (Abdullahi et al., 2025). Pereira and Camões (2024) state that this is a form of tourism driven by travelers who seek sensory experiences related to the tasting, preparation, and learning of indigenous sweet products. Moreover, Nematzadeh et al. (2024) indicate that this type of tourism not only satisfies nutritional needs but also seeks to reconnect with cultural authenticity, local identity, and emotional connection with the traditions of the place. Consequently, this type of tourism leads visitors to fairs, festivals, artisanal markets, and pastry workshops. In this regard, Rizkiyah and Faridi (2022) emphasize that this journey is an opportunity to offer tourists a cultural heritage narrative full of symbols, techniques, and flavors that enhance the value of the territory as a cultural destination.

The appreciation of ancestral knowledge associated with the production of traditional confections is another common feature of this form of tourism, which takes place in both rural and urban communities (Rizkiyah et al., 2022b). Likewise, Abdullahi et al. (2025) affirm that recipes passed down from generation to generation within families specialized in sweet-making serve as a driver of tourism, encouraging responsible consumption, promoting local economic sustainability, and creating opportunities for small-scale producers, especially women and families dedicated to traditional confectionery. Similarly, Pereira and Camões (2024) argue that these practices also foster dessert fairs, dessert routes, and even home-made sweets, which become part of the tourism offering by diversifying products with cultural identity.

In this sense, Nematzadeh et al. (2024) state that pastry tourism functions as a means for the conservation of intangible heritage, while fostering rootedness by revitalizing the use of local inputs. Rizkiyah and Faridi (2022a) point out that within this cultural and productive framework, raw materials play a central role, particularly highlighting sugarcane by-products for their historical and cultural role, as well as their regulatory contribution to the production of traditional sweets (Rizkiyah et al., 2022b). Chancaca, cane syrup, and brown sugar are not only basic food products in sweet cuisine, but also identity-bearing elements at the heart of Latin American communities (Suarez et al., 2023). According to Lee et al. (2023), their artisanal manufacturing reflects rural knowledge at the family level and collective economies of consumption. Beyond their gastronomic role, they fulfill a symbolic function in thousands of national celebrations and fairs (Pongpat et al., 2023). Likewise, Mod et al. (2024) emphasize their diversity, low level of industrialization, and contribution to household economies, while Zaman et al. (2023) add that their unrefined processing preserves vital nutrients and can be integrated into responsible tourism projects. In this regard, Lee et al. (2023) and Suarez et al. (2023) agree that the use

of these ingredients in sweet gastronomic tourism routes promotes authenticity, sustainability, and territorial, memorial, and communal engagement.

Table 1. Comparative overview of “sweet gastronomic tourism” typologies in recent literature

Author(s) & Year	Context / Case	Conceptualization of Sweet Gastronomic Tourism	Key Contribution / Risk Identified
Babel (2022)	Saipina, Bolivia	Chancaca as a driver of heritage narratives and local identity	Highlights cultural revitalization but limited capacity for broad economic transformation
Araújo (2023)	Pernambuco, Brazil	<i>Bolo de rolo</i> as intangible cultural heritage	Shows the tension between cultural branding and preservation of intergenerational knowledge
Siuda & Panini (2023)	Azores, Portugal	Religious confectionery as fragile ethnic expression	Emphasizes vulnerability of heritage under pressures of commodification
Villalva & Inga (2021)	Riobamba, Ecuador	Ancestral sweets in ritual and tourism circuits	Illustrates potential for authenticity-based tourism, constrained by weak institutional frameworks
Fusté-Forné & Wolf (2025)	Global perspective	Sweet preparations as experiential tourism resources	Positions pastry as a symbolic and emotional dimension of gastronomy
Abdullahi et al. (2025)	Nigeria (comparative)	Sweet snacks (<i>Kuli Kuli</i>) as tourism products	Demonstrates potential for rural livelihoods, but requires sustainability strategies
Rizkiyah & Faridi (2022)	Indonesia	Local sweets as cultural tourism assets	Underscores the centrality of ancestral techniques and risks of over-commercialization

METHODOLOGY

Epistemological and Methodological Approach

This research is framed within a qualitative and interpretative perspective, aiming to understand the meanings that social actors construct around their productive practices, traditional knowledge, and their relationship with the territory. Thus, the phenomenon of gastronomic tourism in sugarcane-producing rural communities is not approached as an external object, but as a contextual experience, shaped by interaction, narrative, and symbolization.

Case Justification and Contextual Delimitation

The case study was justified by the uniqueness of the phenomenon analyzed and the opportunity to acquire detailed knowledge of the sociocultural context in which sugarcane practices emerge. For this reason, the research selected Socchabamba, a typical and highly representative community of many other rural areas in northern Peru, where traditional agri-food practices are at risk of disappearing.

Socchabamba is a rural Andean community in northern Peru characterized by its domestic and family-based economy dedicated to agriculture and by its traditional productive practices linked to sugarcane. Not being part of commercialized tourist circuits, Socchabamba emerges as a key scenario to explore ancestral mechanisms for the valorization of local agri-food heritage. The choice of this case was based on the potential of this setting to serve as a specific demonstration of how agri-food heritage can be articulated with mechanisms and processes of sustainable rural gastronomic tourism. The geographical delimitation includes the cultivation fields, the artisanal sugarcane production facilities such as ovens, trapiches, or communal kitchens, as well as the socio-family and festive environments where sugarcane-based products can be consumed or commercialized.

Research Design and Phases

The research was developed in four sequential phases, which ensured methodological rigor, interpretative depth, and triangulation of sources.

Phase 1: Theoretical Review and Construction of the Conceptual Framework

This phase began with a systematic review of literature in academic databases, focusing on three conceptual axes: (1) rural gastronomic tourism, (2) agri-food heritage, and (3) artisanal sugarcane production in Andean contexts. Additionally, relevant background studies were identified to frame the research: studies on the touristic valorization of traditional products (Fusté-Forné & Wolf, 2025), the symbolic dimension of sweets in religious festivals (Araújo, 2023), and the importance of ancestral knowledge in artisanal transformation processes (Rizkiyah & Faridi, 2022).

Phase 2: Fieldwork and Data Collection

This fieldwork phase was carried out in Socchabamba between August and October 2024, through the implementation of semi-structured interviews with eight key informants: artisanal producers, farmers, and bearers of traditional knowledge. These individuals were selected using purposive and convenience sampling criteria, considering their trajectory, years of experience in the sector, and community recognition.

Although the number of interviewees may appear limited, the selection of eight participants was sufficient to achieve theoretical saturation, as recurrent themes, production practices, and symbolic references emerged consistently across the accounts. In qualitative research, saturation is reached not by the quantity of cases but by the depth and redundancy of insights, when additional interviews no longer contribute substantially new information (Stake, 2005). This criterion was fulfilled in the present study, ensuring that the narratives captured adequately represent the diversity of experiences and perspectives within the community of Socchabamba.

The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes, were audio-recorded, transcribed into text, and subsequently coded. The topics addressed included personal histories in sugarcane production, production techniques, cultural meanings attributed to sugarcane derivatives, links with festivities, perceptions regarding the arrival of tourism, and difficulties in accessing external markets.

Subsequently, observation was employed during visits to sugarcane fields, production workshops, and domestic spaces. Field notes and ethnographic photographs were taken,

with prior authorization from the owners. These approaches made it possible to capture technical, gestural, and contextual aspects that would have been impossible to reconstruct solely through verbal records.

Phase 3: Thematic Coding and Interpretative Analysis

The analytical categories were grouped into three central dimensions:

1. **Traditional knowledge and artisanal production techniques**
2. **Family economy and use of income derived from sugarcane**
3. **Tourist perception, experiences, and heritage projection**

Constant analysis guided the process of examination, comparison, and association between empirical data and the conceptual framework, through a deductive pathway that enabled the identification of deeper meanings. It was possible to analyze the symbolic construction of sugarcane around a core of local identity and as a milestone of emerging tourism through an abductive approach.

Ethical Considerations

The authors declare that the content of this article complies with the ethical principles of respect, informed consent, anonymity, and return of results. All participants provided verbal and written consent, including signed authorization, to use their accounts and images for academic purposes. All real names were replaced with alphanumeric codes, and photographic records were taken with explicit permission. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee of the Universidad Nacional de Frontera.

Table 2. Analytical Categories, Dimensions, and Operational Application

Theoretical construct	Dimension	Definition / Operational application
Traditional knowledge	Knowledge transmission	Knowledge inherited about sugarcane, transmitted orally and through intergenerational practice.
Artisanal production	Techniques and tools	Use of manual methods, traditional utensils, and non-technified processes in the production of sugarcane derivatives.
Family economy	Economic income	Level of income obtained from the sale of panela, cane sweets, and cane liquor; use of earnings for household needs and sustainability of the activity.
Experiential tourism	Visitor interaction	Tourists' perception of authenticity; observation activities, dialogue with producers, and participation in the artisanal production process.
Heritage value	Cultural meaning	Relationship of sweets with religious festivities, collective memory, local identity, and ritual community uses; symbolic construction of the product as a heritage asset.

Considerations on the Transferability of Results

Although the qualitative design does not seek statistical generalization, the conclusions derived from the analysis of consumption and savings offer transferable elements to other Andean rural communities whose economies are based on artisanal production. The

concept of transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is fundamental in this perspective: more than the results themselves, the aim is to provide other researchers and decision-makers with an interpretative framework and a logic of analysis that allow them to understand similar phenomena in comparable contexts. In this regard, the present methodology has been documented in the most detailed manner, ensuring transparency in the reporting and enabling a critical re-reading of this work for its potential comparison in analogous situations.

RESULTS

The presentation of results is organized into three emerging categories from the qualitative analysis: (1) Artisanal Production and Traditional Knowledge, (2) Economic Impact on the Community, and (3) Tourist Appeal and Visitor Perception. These dimensions are interwoven as part of a socio-economic and cultural framework that shapes the potential of sugarcane-based gastronomic tourism.

3.1. Artisanal Production and Traditional Knowledge

It is recognized that the farmers of Socchabamba, through the cultivation and transformation of sugarcane, possess ancestral knowledge transmitted from generation to generation. Among the most representative products—such as bocadillo, alfeñique, cane syrup, and granulated panela, and to some extent ritual figurines of skulls—are all handcrafted.

The cooking process of cane juice is described in four traditional sub-stages: (1) decantation and initial cleansing; (2) progressive boiling with impurity removal; (3) gradual concentration; and (4) cooking point identified through sensory signals such as the formation of bubbles (“when it starts to fizz”). This knowledge is not formally documented, yet it constitutes a technical-cultural expertise essential for heritage valorization.

“My grandfather used to do it just the same... when the syrup boils like this, you know it’s ready. You don’t learn this from books; you learn by watching.”(Farmer 5)

Moreover, the use of rustic tools (iron pans, wooden molds, ladles) and wood-fired cooking confirms the artisanal nature of the process, differentiating it from automated industrial production. It therefore functions as a cultural asset that conditions and frames the configuration of a tourism offer with local identity.

3.2. Economic Impact on the Community

Income from sugarcane constitutes the main economic resource for most families. The reported average monthly income ranges between 300–500 soles, with a few exceptions of farmers—primarily linked to regional and international markets—earning over 900 soles per month. During religious festivities such as SeñorCautivo or Semana Santa, sales increase by up to 40%. This is generally the peak demand period and the main source of annual income for most interviewees.

However, respondents noted that they are not formally organized nor legally structured, nor are they associated in any productive collective. As a result, they lack bargaining power and do not have access to fairs or state funding.

“During festivals we sell more, but still we’re on our own. If there were support, we could offer more products.”(Farmer 3)

Additionally, a type of family economy was observed, operating through collective labor—mainly among close relatives—without formal hiring of external workers. The entire process is observed by consumers, and all residual bagasse is reused as fuel, demonstrating sustainable practices within the local economy.

3.3. Tourist Appeal and Visitor Perception

Artisanal sugarcane production is also generating growing interest among external visitors, particularly due to its experiential nature. Interviewees reported that some consumers—especially from Piura, Lima, and Chiclayo—“are curious” to witness the full process, interact directly with producers, and learn about the cultural context of these products.

The attributes that motivate the purchase and consumption of these products include, according to interviewees: the “traditional” flavor, “lack of chemicals,” “natural ingredients,” and “affective memory of childhood or ancestral tastes.” In other words, these products are valued not only for their appearance or flavor, but also for their cultural and emotional significance.

“When people see how the syrup is made, they want to buy more. They say it reminds them of their grandparents.” (Farmer 2)

However, producers indicate that there is no coordinated local tourism promotion strategy, and that the Municipality “does not open opportunities for us to be part of regional circuits” nor does it provide “technical assistance.” Thus, a structural gap is revealed between the cultural potential of the product and its visibility in formal markets.

DISCUSIÓN

This qualitative research has made it possible to understand how the artisanal production of sugarcane derivatives in Socchabamba–Ayabaca, in the northern highlands of Peru, is not only a primary economic activity but also a cultural practice with significant symbolic, heritage, and touristic value. The findings align with studies that highlight gastronomy as a tool for identity and local development (Fusté-Forné & Wolf, 2023; Nekmahmud & Hassan, 2021), and with approaches that see culinary tourism as a strategy for rural sustainability (Campos & Castillo, 2024).

4.1. Sugarcane as living heritage and traditional knowledge

According to Suárez et al. (2023), sugarcane derivatives such as “panela, miel, and chancaca” are part of Latin America's agri-food heritage. In Socchabamba, this heritage remains alive through the transmission of technical and symbolic knowledge inherited across family generations, which guides the production process. The observation of these technical skills reinforces the argument of Rizkiyah & Faridi (2022), who emphasize the centrality of ancestral technique in creating authentic tourist experiences.

The culturalization of these products, whether in religious environments or local festivities, confirms what Araújo (2023) refers to as “ritualized gastronomy,” where cooking a sweet within the community becomes an act of communal expression and a manifestation of shared memory. Therefore, the case of Socchabamba perfectly illustrates the characterization of Liao & Tung (2024), who define it as a “heritage resource legitimized by the community.”

4.2. Rural economy and gastronomic tourism as a subsistence strategy

According to Abdullahi et al. (2025), sugarcane producers operate within a domestic economy characterized by family labor, informality, and multifunctionality. In this context, the reported monthly income (300–500 soles) falls below the legal minimum wage in Peru. This finding supports the theoretical claim of Siregar & Nawai (2022) regarding the economic vulnerability of rural producers and the need to design livelihood strategies through tourism-related businesses as a complementary source of income.

The lack of formal associations and the absence of municipal policies for promotion, as reported by participants, reinforce the structural limitations identified by Flores & Ramírez (2024), who warn that without coordinated tourism governance, rural gastronomic tourism

is left to individual effort. This appears inconsistent with the increasing demand for sustainable and culturally rooted culinary experiences (Chamberlain, 2025; Simone, 2023). A critical dimension that emerges from the findings concerns the extent to which gastronomic tourism can genuinely transform the structural economic precariousness observed in rural communities. While the artisanal production of sugarcane derivatives provides a symbolic and cultural foundation for tourism development, it remains uncertain whether this activity alone can significantly alter household vulnerability without broader institutional support and market integration. Furthermore, the commodification of heritage entails potential risks: the over-commercialization of traditional practices may dilute their authenticity, marginalize local actors, or generate dependencies on volatile tourist flows. This tension underscores the need for balanced strategies that safeguard cultural integrity while enabling economic viability. Comparative experiences in Latin America reinforce this point. In Bolivia, the heritage narratives around chancaca in Saipina demonstrate how local identity can be revitalized through tourism, yet still face constraints in scaling benefits across the community. In Brazil, the commercialization of bolo de rolo in Pernambuco shows both opportunities for cultural branding and the challenges of preserving intergenerational knowledge amidst growing external demand. Similarly, in Ecuador, the integration of ancestral sweets in Riobamba's cultural circuits illustrates how authenticity can be leveraged as a tourism asset, but also reveals the fragility of relying on limited institutional frameworks. These comparative cases suggest that the Peruvian experience in Socchabamba aligns with broader regional dynamics, where artisanal confectionery represents both a pathway to rural diversification and a field of contestation over heritage, identity, and sustainability.

4.3. Tourism experience and sense of place: between the symbolic and the economic

The visitor's interest in observing the production process and learning the origin of the products confirms the view of Fusté-Forné & Wolf (2025), who argue that modern gastronomic tourism is driven by experience and authenticity, beyond consumption itself. Tourists seek not only to taste but also to appreciate the links between food, territory, and community.

This experiential component was emphasized by Long (2022), who associates sweet products with sensory memories that, through emotional recall, bring back sensations tied to travel. In Socchabamba's case, this connection materializes when tourists identify flavors that take them back to childhood, grandparents, or local patronal festivals—contexts that, as shown by Lee et al. (2023), reflect symbolic eating deeply rooted in place. However, despite this potential, the study confirms a critical gap between the cultural offering and the tourism market, also described by Morales & Fusté (2021). In fact, the absence of thematic routes, infrastructure, and interpretative commercial spaces reveals the urgent need to incorporate this heritage wealth into sustainable tourism development strategies coordinated across the public sector, local communities, and private actors.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative research enabled an understanding of the relationship between traditional practices, rural economic dynamics, and the symbolic construction of territory through the artisanal production of sugarcane derivatives in the community of Socchabamba (Peru). Taken together, these findings demonstrate the multifunctionality of this activity: on one level, as a means of livelihood; on another, as a cultural ancestral practice; and finally, as an emerging tourist attraction.

On the one hand, it was observed that artisanal sugarcane production constitutes a fully established system of local knowledge that is key to the community's identity. This is due to the fact that its production retains sensory techniques and ritual practices passed down through generations. Thus, what is reproduced is not merely food, but meanings, memories, and ways of making and feeling that render it a living agri-food heritage. These insights align with the theoretical contributions of Fusté-Forné and Wolf (2023), as well as Araújo (2023).

On the other hand, the study confirms that despite its informality and limited scalability, the cultivation and transformation of sugarcane remains the main source of income for rural families. The lack of associativity, formalization, and institutional support constrains its transformative potential, deepening the structural inequalities of Andean rurality described by Abdullahi et al. (2025) and Flores and Ramírez (2024).

Consequently, this research shows that the traditional sugarcane-based confectionery has high experiential tourism value which, in this case, remains underexploited. The visitor's desire to observe the artisanal process and acquire a cultural, authentic, and sustainable product presents a concrete opportunity for developing a progressive gastronomic tourism rooted in identity and authenticity.

Lastly, based on the case studies and analysis, it was concluded that the Socchabamba experience represents a unique case in how rural gastronomic tourism can be developed in an integrative and healthy way. However, improving these experiences requires further progress in public policies that enhance tourism practices and foster collaborative networks to promote thematic routes, local fairs, and cultural certification schemes.

This work contributes to rural and cultural tourism by offering a situated ethnographic/anthropological approach that highlights the voices and practices of rural actors as active authorities in shaping a tourism economy based on authenticity, craftsmanship, and symbolism.

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