

History to eat. The *foodification* of the historic centre of Florence

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the concept of foodification to the wider debate on the issues related to the touristification of cities. The idea at the base of the concept is that many cities in Europe and beyond are undergoing a transformation of their historic centre into a food-dominant retail space, in which the city's business landscape is converging towards specialized functions centred prevalently around food. This transformation emphasizes other socio-spatial dynamics connected to touristification in which central areas take on the function of a stage and display case for short-lived urban experiences aimed at visitors to the detriment of residents. After a theoretical discussion on the concept of foodification, the article takes a closer look at the different forms in which the process is apparent in the historic centre of Florence. It lays out the main results of an empirical survey and illustrates three main features of foodification: i) the expansion of catering activities; ii) the substitution of pre-existing retail businesses; iii) the targeting of food-related activities to meet the diverse types of tourism demand. Finally, the paper examines the attempts to govern the *foodification* process and recalls the necessity for broader public interventions to manage the tourism phenomenon.

1. Food, tourism and the city: side effects?

Between the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018, two Municipality of Florence injunctions drew the attention of the media and public opinion to the relationship between food sales and consumption and urban space. On 28 April 2017, the council issued a regulation amending the “Measures for the Protection of the UNESCO Historic Centre”. These amendments placed – among the other interventions – a three-year halt on the opening of new businesses offering food and drink, food retailers, and artisan or industrial activities involved in the preparation or sale of food sector products. More recently, on 3 September 2018, the municipality issued an edict that gained the nickname of the “sandwich ordinance” (*l'ordinanza del panino*) in Italy's news columns, an urgent provision, limited to those streets and squares in the centre under most pressure from tourism, which bans the consumption of food in public in some hours of the day and evening. The provision was necessary, in the eyes of the council, owing to the success of some businesses offering the traditional Florentine flat bread snack, “*schacciata*”, so appreciated by tourists that one such eatery was able to

boast having the most reviews in the world on Tripadvisor. The mayor and council members vindicate both provisions as tools to regulate the “factory churning out food” (*mangificio*) that has grown up in Florence's historic centre.

Despite their different goals, these recent regulatory interventions bring to light what are perceived as “side effects” of the relationship between food (and the ways in which it is sold and consumed), tourism and the city, especially in those cities with a strong tourist presence. In fact, similar measures have recently been introduced or their adoption is being considered in several other tourist destinations, to remain in Europe: Venice, Rome, Verona, Dubrovnik, Lisbon and Barcelona.²

In all these cases, the public measures are based on the idea that tourism can play a disruptive role in transforming urban spaces and the consumer practices that take place in the city and, more specifically, in the historic centre. What raises concern is, on one hand, the proliferation of a business model increasingly directed towards a single category of goods, since this process is thought to be happening in substitution of other and different business activities, including the centre's last surviving neighbourhood stores and artisanal shops; on the other hand, the

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² Being extremely recent, these measures are reported by online newspapers, blogs and grey literature. For more information see: Dubrovnik, <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/dubrovnik-restaurant-ban/index.html>; Venice, <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/dubrovnik-restaurant-ban/index.html>; Rome, <https://www.comune.roma.it/web/it/informazione-di-servizio.page?contentId=IDS366555>; Barcelona, <https://www.barcelona-metropolitan.com/Blogs/in-the-city/tourist-access-la-boqueria/>; Verona, Municipal Council resolution no. 60 of 3 October 2013 https://portale.comune.verona.it/nqcontent.cfm?a_id=2597. All links were last accessed on 24 February 2020.

massive physical occupation of the public space as a place where meals are consumed by tourists, a situation strongly lamented by residents as the ultimate attack on the historic centres' liveability caused by their overtouristification.

Indeed, this situation is emblematic of the consolidation and acceleration of a wider and longer-lasting process, which tourism significantly amplifies, namely the transformation of historic centres into areas given over to consumption and leisure. In this process, central areas take on the function of a stage and display case for short-lived urban experiences aimed at visitors and occasional passers-by to the detriment of residents. In recent years, this process has been addressed by a growing body of literature dealing with the urban effects of overtourism (Dodds & Butler, 2019; Milano et al., Innerhofer, Erschbamber, & Pechlaner, 2020) and the issues related to the tourism gentrification and touristification of cities (Cocola-Gant, 2016; 2018; Mendes, 2016; Gravari-Barbas & Guinand, 2017). While a precise definition of these different concepts is far from being achieved (Koens, Postma, Papp, 2018), there is agreement over the fact that mass touristification may generate different negative impacts on local destinations, favouring depopulation, displacement, gentrification, retail banalization and the decline in liveability for the community (Sequera, Nofre, 2018). These effects have been reported and analysed in (radically) different cities in every continent, such as (to name a few that have not yet been mentioned): Amsterdam, Paris, Malaga, Palma de Mallorca, Seville, Kyoto, Goa, Rio de Janeiro, Vancouver, and so on (Routledge, 2001; Burnett, 2014; Freytag & Bauder, 2018; Milano, Cheer, & Novelli, 2019; Barrera-Fernández, García Bujalance, & Scalici, 2019; Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2019). In reaction to what is perceived as the intolerable impact of mass tourism, anti-tourist movements have started to spread in many of the above-mentioned contexts (Clancy, 2019), generating a pressing urgency for the local authorities to devise strategies to manage the phenomenon and its consequences (UNWTO, 2018; Zacher et al., 2019).

Taking a cue from the initial examples and these wider reflections, the idea at the base of this paper is that numerous cities, especially in Southern Europe, are at the centre of what can be defined as a process of *foodification*, that is, a transformation of their historic centres into a food-dominant retail space, in which the city's business landscape, sales and consumption practices are converging towards specialized functions centred prevalently around food. This transformation consolidates and emphasizes other socio-spatial dynamics connected to touristification and takes the wider processes of the spectacularization and tourism gentrification of historic centres to the extreme. Indeed, in these areas, services for stable residents are diminishing, favouring depopulation and resulting in a growing segregation between residential districts and central areas. The article takes a closer look – from both a theoretical and empirical point of view – at the different forms in which the phenomenon of *foodification* is apparent in the historic centre of Florence. The ultimate objective of the article is to assess the intensity and pace of this trend, as well as to investigate its different effects on the city and how policies are dealing with the phenomenon.

In detail, the article is structured as follows: the second section presents the concept of *foodification* in light of the most recent debate on the impacts of tourism growth in historic centres. More precisely, in this section we take a position in the debate on overtourism, touristification and tourism gentrification and illustrate the genesis of *foodification* within a wider reflection on the relations between tourism, food and urban transformations; subsequently, the article introduces the case study of the city of Florence, with a short presentation of some of the significant structural and functional transformations that have happened since the 1960s and 70s, resulting in the progressive transformation of the historic centre from residential space to a “stage” for consumption practices; after a paragraph presenting the methodological basis of the research, we lay out the main results of the empirical survey carried out in the historic centre of Florence, illustrating the

recent acceleration in the foodification process and the different manners and forms in which it has been taking place; the next section examines the attempts to govern the foodification process through national and municipal regulations; then, a paragraph presenting the most relevant policy suggestions is drawn up as an output of the research; lastly, the conclusions lay down the basic features of the Florentine case study to underline the limits of reparatory policies aimed at the food sector alone and to recall the necessity for broader public interventions to manage the tourism phenomenon.

2. The *foodification* of historic centres

This paper ideally responds to the call launched by Sequera, Nofre, 2018 for “a new research agenda” on urban touristification as a new global strategy through which the tourist city is re-imagined, negotiated and developed, with special attention to the transformation of the traditional retail spaces of central urban areas into new commercial areas for tourists. Indeed, the concept of *foodification* proposed here strives to express the particular refunctionalization of urban spaces due to the increase in the sale and consumption of food as a result of the expanding tourist demand. From this viewpoint, foodification has to be incorporated in the ongoing transformation of the urban environment caused by the excessive growth of visitors in certain destinations. In other words, it may be intended as one of the many consequences of overtourism on cities as regards the retail sector, in a similar way to the neologism “airbnbization” introduced to express the changes – and tensions – in local housing markets (Nofre & Sequera, 2019; Picascia, Romano, & Teobaldi, 2019; Richards, 2017).

In recent years, the literature dealing with the impacts of excessive tourism pressure on urban settings has made a significant giant leap forward, both from the theoretical and the empirical point of view (Dodds & Butler, 2019; Perkumienė & Pranskūnienė, 2019), renewing the previous domain of tourism impact studies (Postma, Schmuecker, 2017). This emerging field of interest has also been driven by the voice of many anti-tourism movements arising in several European countries – such as Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, England and Croatia – and beyond (Colomb, Novy 2018; Martín, Guaita Martínez, & Salinas Fernández, 2018; Seraphine, Sheeran, & Pilato, 2018; Clancy, 2019). At the same time, it has been observed that a certain conceptual as well as lexical confusion exists regarding the understanding and discussion of the phenomenon (Koens, Postma, Papp, 2018). In order to introduce the concept of foodification, it may be useful to briefly present and take a position on the main research approaches to tourism in urban contexts.

A growing body of literature, inside and outside academia, has converged on the concept of “overtourism” (Capocchi et al., 2019; Dodds & Butler, 2019; Innerhofer et al., 2020; Milano et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the term is used to signify different things: on the one hand, it is defined as the perception or the *feeling* among locals and tourists that the quality of life and of the visitor experience is deteriorated because of the presence of too many tourists (Muler Gonzales et al., 2018; Goodwin, 2017); on the other hand, and in more “structural” terms, it is associated with the quantity of tourists overwhelming a destination's holding capacity from the ecological and economical point of view and, as a consequence, with its resilience and vulnerability (WTO/UNEP, 1992; Mansfeld, Jonas, 2006; UNWTO, 2018; Bertocchi & Visentin, 2019). Differently, the concepts of tourism gentrification and touristification have been used by other scholars – often as synonyms – to emphasize the interplay between tourism and urban change, focusing either on the transformation/upgrading of middle-class neighbourhoods into tourism enclaves marked by a proliferation of corporate entertainment and tourism venues (Gotham, 2005; 2018) or on what are described as the main related socio-spatial consequences induced by tourism growth such as, on the one hand, residents' displacement, symbolic and material dispossession and marginalization, and the museumification, commodification and spectacularization of urban spaces, on the other hand (Cocola-Gant, 2016; 2018; Mendes,

2016; Gravari-Barbas & Guinand, 2017).

The interchangeable use of tourism gentrification and touristification, though, has recently been contested by Sequera and Nofre (2018), arguing that “there are substantial epistemological differences” between the two terms (p. 850). In fact, the expansion of urban tourism in central urban areas is not always a precondition for gentrification, as it may also regard “the transformation of an already gentrified neighbourhood into a place for tourist consumption, entertainment and leisure” (p. 851). This seems to be exactly the case of historic centres in many cities in Europe and beyond, where the expansion of tourism impacts on neighbourhoods that had already been gentrified and are now affected by new processes of depopulation, retail change and worsening liveability conditions that do not necessarily reflect the patterns modelled by the gentrification paradigm. In order to stress this difference, the authors specifically mention the retail sector, arguing that the tourism-induced transformation of commercial areas in city centres does not upscale the retail offer towards more sophisticated, international and bigger markets; on the contrary, it leads to newly standardized and “Disneyficated tourist areas (...) through the rapid expansion of low-cost, franchised retailing” (p. 848).

While we agree with Sequera and Nofre (2018) on the idea that touristification should be considered a process per se, with its own features and specificities, we are also convinced that all these concepts are strongly case-specific, and should be interpreted as open and multidimensional interpretative keys rather than rigid explanatory models (Freytag & Bauder, 2018; Wohler, 2011). In the same line of thought, we think that touristification encompasses several processes of different and sometimes opposite signs: to again mention the retail sector, as we will discuss later on, tendencies towards the standardization and banalization of the retail landscape normally co-exist with examples of more sophisticated spaces, targeting different types of tourists.

On the back of this, in this paper we use touristification to identify a process of urban transformation according to which historic centres are increasingly assuming the functions of spaces dedicated to tourism, leisure and consumption, to the detriment of stable residents. Depending on the case, this process may lead to overtourism and tourism gentrification. Hence, within this wider framework, the term foodification is introduced as one of the main ways in which touristification is apparent in historic centres as regards the retail sector. More precisely, it represents the process through which the pre-existing retail landscape is progressively taken over by a single typology of commercial activity related to the selling and consumption of food.

Attention to the role of food in shaping the urban space is nothing new (Steel, 2013; Bell & Binnie, 2005). Indeed, the concept of *foodification* takes up some more or less recent lines of reasoning on the relationship between food and urban transformation, relating them to the tourism phenomenon. Already in the early 1990s, Sharon Zukin (1991) noted how spaces dedicated to food and drink were acquiring an increasingly important role in facilitating and accelerating those revitalization and gentrification processes activated by the penetration, in deindustrialized and/or degraded neighbourhoods, of social classes bringing new forms of city living and consumer orientations. In 1999, Joanne Finkelstein coined the neologism *foodainment* precisely to place attention on how food – and in particular the construction of an aesthetic, cultural and urban imaginary around food, drink and eating out – had come to represent a constitutive element of the renewal underway of ways of experiencing the city and the redefinition of city lifestyles (Finkelstein, 1999). As other authors noticed, these same imaginaries and atmospheres were referred to and exploited in the spectacularization and regeneration of neighbourhoods and parts of the city itself (Neal, 2006). For example, it has been observed how food reflects specific social statuses and plays a significant role in defining different urban identities and subcultures (Hyde, 2014; Slater, 2006): the use of adjectives such as typical, traditional, authentic, artisan, ethnic, fusion, popular and street denotes more than a simple way of preparing the food, to instead refer, on both the supply and demand

side, to a specific striving for different atmospheres, and cultural and identity experiences that define places and people through food. From this perspective, the urban food economy forms a central element in the resignification of different city settings and the consumer practices that take place in them, playing a role, for example, in the construction of the sense of “authenticity” of a particular place, or its ethnic character, or its connotation as an entertainment and leisure destination (Laurier & Philo, 2004; Bell & Binnie, 2005; Bell, 2007). A vast and consolidated body of literature has indeed demonstrated how – in the outlook of the contemporary tourism market – food represents one of the most attractive and characterizing features of a particular destination (Henderson, 2009; Pieniak, Verbeke, Vanhonaker, Guerrero, & Hersleth, 2009; Quan & Wang, 2004), for the very reason that food and the places connected with it play a decisive role in creating the sense of tradition, authenticity and specific experience that tourists and visitors look for in a locality (Povey, 2011). Furthermore, even though gastronomy does not rank as the main motivation urging tourists to visit a destination, the meal experience constitutes one of the most important components of tourist satisfaction (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2017; Nield, Kozak, & LeGrys, 2000). As noted by Bell (2007, p. 9): “places to eat and drink have, in fact, come to occupy a central role in the production of new forms of city living associated (...) with forms of so-called cultural tourism”.

From this point of view, in European historic cities like Florence and the others above mentioned, the tourists and local population who converge upon the centre for leisure purposes bring with them – albeit in different ways – a new demand to experience the city and see the historic centre as an ideal place for an exciting experience which widely manifests itself in the consumption of food.³ In this case, more than the food itself, it is the place where the food is offered and consumed (“a treasure chest of history”, as one tourist interviewed in previous studies on the case of Florence effectively summed it up) (Loda, 2010), the all-enveloping journey in time that guarantees the “authentic” quality of the tourist experience, which distinguishes it from the banalization attributed to the tourist industry (Zukin, 2008).

The reorganization of the commercial sector and expansion of catering activities in city centres, thus, meets the demand expressed by both residents and (for the most important part) tourists looking for leisure and authentic experiences. At the same time, it gives rise to social and spatial consequences. On the one hand, the expansion of retail activities targeted mostly at tourists may drive processes of standardization, normalization, spectacularization and commodification of the urban space (Atkinson, 2003; Loda, Aru, Barsotelli, & Sbardella, 2011), increasing the feeling of symbolic and material dispossession among residents (Sequera & Nofre, 2018) and generating displacement and conflicts between residents and tourists because of the decline in urban liveability (Clancy, 2019; Nofre et al., 2018); on the other hand, the changing retail landscape causes the progressive disappearance of neighbourhood and local shops, substituted by fun&food tourist venues (Mendes, 2017; Koens, Postma, Papp, 2018). In the debate on food- and retail-driven gentrification (Sbicca, 2018; Hubbard, 2017, Cohen, 2018), for example, catering activities are pinpointed as playing a decisive role in expanding retail gentrification processes, in which “the inner city is served up as a spectacle to be consumed by the middle class” (Hubbard, 2017, p. 4), “displacing in the process local stores, with governments failing to protect them despite their importance to long-time residents” (Zukin et al., 2009). However, while the literature on food and retail gentrification mainly emphasizes the role of chain stores in the upgrading of specific streets or portions of

³ The capacity of food to satisfy the search for an “authentic” experience is certainly nothing new – Nietzsche already spoke of a “Kosmopolitismus der Speisen” (Nietzsche, 1964) – but there is no doubt that it forms a central element of present-day Western (mass) culture, and the historic centres of cities (and of Florence in particular) are the ideal place to satisfy this desire.

the city (Mermet, 2017), foodification unveils how the commercial landscape as a whole is becoming touristified, in the framework of a wider reorganization of the urban functions at the metropolitan scale.

At the end of this first part of the paper, we can sum up what has been presented and discussed by defining the foodification of historic centres as the process of retail change which is amplified by the touristification of cities, and displays three main features: i) the general expansion of the number of catering activities in the historic centre; ii) the substitution of pre-existing retail activities by food-oriented activities, with the subsequent standardization of the retail landscape towards a single commercial typology; iii) the targeting of (the most part of) food activities to meet the tourist demand for authenticity.

Furthermore, this process is normally accompanied by other dynamics drawing attention to more or less recent urban transformations induced by tourism, such as the growing amounts of rented apartments on tourism hospitality circuits, or the progressive use of buildings and areas in historic towns for heritage tourism and museums, leading to the consequent segregation of residential and tourist spaces. While it is definitely true that these processes can be considered neither homogeneous nor universal, it is equally evident that they often appear together and combine, emphasizing the far-reaching transformation of the urban fabric and practices.

3. Recent urban trends in the “cradle of the Renaissance”

The transformation of the commercial fabric in Florence, and in particular the significance assumed by the catering sector, reflects the more general functional and structural change that the city has been experiencing since the 1960s and 70s. At this time, a little later than in the North American cities, a massive demographic haemorrhage from the central portions of urban areas, going by the name of counter-urbanization or deurbanization, also started to become evident in Italy (Camagni, Gibelli, & Rigamonti, 2002; Dematteis, 1983).

In Florence, the phenomenon caused a great reduction in the resident population of the compact city (municipal area), from 457,000 inhabitants in 1971 to 382,000 in 2017. Having left the city, the population gradually settled first in the two immediately outlying belts, and then in increasingly distant areas, relying on the existing tight, regularly spaced network of smaller towns, giving rise to a hybrid form of functional urban area with 700,000 people, which Giacomo Becattini (1973) effectively defined as “urbanized countryside”, a specific local variation of the phenomenon known internationally as urban sprawl.

Parallel to the redistribution of the urban population on a vaster regional scale, the compact city of Florence, comprising the historic centre and part of the residential neighbourhoods which appeared around it at the end of the nineteenth century, experienced a sizeable contraction in its commercial sector, despite regional and municipal policies initially aimed at limiting this process. This shrinkage was the effect both of the drop in residents, and the competition exercised by big suburban retailers, initially evident in the downturn in traditional food sales and the closure of family-run businesses, to then extend to almost all the other sectors. Making a partial exception to this trend was clothing which, owing to the added value of the goods and relatively simple logistical management, was more able to defend its place in the traditional city shopping streets, therefore leading to the so-called “textilization” of some retail zones (Loda, 2006b). The reduction in commercial functions, added to the almost total loss, beginning in the 1930s, of production and manufacturing in the compact city, marked a crucial passage in the transformation of the city's economic base.

With regard to the historic centre in particular (the portion of compact city within the fourteenth-century walls), this passage generated both a reduction in functions, making it a place mainly set aside for cultural and leisure activities – also attracting the same population from the urbanized countryside, especially in the initial phase of its development – and above all causing a marked refunctionalization for tourism purposes.

The attraction of Florence as a prime tourist destination, right from its “discovery” as the cradle of the Renaissance by Jacob Burckhardt (Loda, 1997), was further strengthened by the inclusion of the historic centre in the UNESCO world heritage list (1982). Since then, the numbers of tourists have increased constantly, and massively: the average rate of annual growth from 2000 to date has been +1.9% for arrivals and +2.4% for overnight stays. In the municipalities in the Florentine metropolitan area, the numbers of tourists in 2017 touched on 15 million, with no fewer than 3883 million arrivals and occupancy figures of 10,203 million in the city, according to Centro di Studi Turistici di Firenze data.

The growth of tourism in the city has been further boosted in the last few years owing to the phenomenon of short-term tourist lets made popular with Airbnb, which it is estimated in 2017 brought around 600,000 people to houses in Florence, which, multiplied by the number of overnight stays, took the figures to almost 1,800,000 (Centro di Studi Turistici di Firenze data).

Owing to its impact on the property market, this new form of tourist accommodation not only increases the numbers of incoming tourists, but also plays a significant part in upping rents and depressing the already weak residential function of the centre. In 2016 around one fifth of the real estate in the historic centre of Florence was offered on the Airbnb platform (only considering “whole houses” offered on the site, without counting single rooms), the highest number of all cities in Italy (Romano, Picascia, & Capineri, 2018), a fact that makes a glaring contribution to reducing the availability of accommodation, raising prices and intensifying the gentrification of the historic centre.

All in all, if it is therefore true that the demographic reduction (and ageing) of the historic centre is lower than what might be supposed based on the official statistics, and that the population actually living in the historic centre is higher than registered because around one quarter of the actual residents are students, foreign students, migrants, etc. not registered with the Florentine authorities (Loda, 2006a), it is equally true that the official statistics underestimate the pressure of tourism. In fact, the absolute majority of the over 25,000 people added to the official residents of the historic centre (around 20,000) every day are tourists, as documented by a recent mobile analytics study carried out by Vodafone for the municipality of Florence (Comune di Firenze, n.d.). As it exclusively weighs on the historic centre of the city, and indeed on some limited portions of it, such a number of tourists poses serious capacity problems and has a particularly great impact on various sectors of city life (mobility and commerce first of all).

The fall in the number of residents and increase in tourists are certainly the factors that have the largest effect on the transformation of the commercial fabric and the expansion of the catering sector in the historic centre of Florence, all in the framework of an evolving national legislative framework which, as of the 1990s, implemented the deregulation of the sector and greatly limited the ability of the municipalities and public institutions to govern the commercial sector. Nevertheless, the phenomenon must be read in the more general context of the aforementioned spectacularization of historic city centres, which is reinforced in the case of Florence by its great tourist development, and the expansion of new lifestyles, one of whose fundamental features is the ubiquitous experience-seeking trend.

To find out more about the phenomenon, in both quantitative and locational terms, and the forms that it assumes, we set out a co-ordinated series of empirical surveys on the catering activities in the historic centre of Florence, which formed a particularly interesting case study for analysis of the links between the expansion of catering activities and processes of tourism gentrification.

4. Research method

A series of empirical surveys were undertaken between 2016 and 2018 in order to analyse the expansion of catering activities from a quantitative and qualitative point of view, and to aid its interpretation



Fig. 1. Survey area 2018 and 2005. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

in the more general context of the urban transformations underway.

The research was carried out in the portion of the historic centre situated within the fourteenth-century walls, namely, the area on the UNESCO world heritage list. The surveys covered an area of 150 ha, corresponding to 30% of the UNESCO site (blue colour in Fig. 1), which includes the main tourist destinations in the city (the cathedral of S. Maria del Fiore) and a large part of the areas with the densest tourist presence. Hence, it can be considered wholly representative of the entire UNESCO area, and in turn of UNESCO sites located in historic city centres.

In the research carried out in 2016–18 we:

1. mapped all the outdoor eating spaces (June 2016); the data concerning size, form and position of these spaces were added to GIS, giving the address of the business as the locational attribute;
2. mapped all the catering activities (May–June 2018); the data were added to GIS, giving the address of the business as the locational attribute;
3. carried out a sample survey of the characteristics of the catering activity (May–June 2018); the survey, aimed at finding the organizational characteristics of the catering activity, was carried out using a standard questionnaire given to a random sample of 237 businesses, corresponding to 45.7% of the total number present in the survey area. The questionnaire, comprising 31 questions, asked the business owners about the history, organizational structure and economic performance of the activity, but also about the business strategies and future prospects, the manager's past experience and his or her perceptions of the opportunities offered by the external

context.

Since the research covers an area of 60 ha (in yellow in Fig. 1) where a sample survey had been made in 2003 on the characteristics of the commercial activities, including catering, as well as a survey in 2008 on outdoor eating spaces, for that portion of the survey area we were able to make a 15-year panel study, comparing the current situation with the situation deducible from the data available from these previous LaGeS surveys.

5. Foodification of Florence historic centre? Results of the empirical research

At present (autumn 2018) the survey area counts 518 catering activities, in a wide range of formats, from the more traditional bars and cafés, *trattorie* and restaurants, to more innovative forms in which catering is associated with various forms of co-working.

On average, there is around one catering activity per 23 officially resident inhabitants, and their distribution mirrors that of accommodation activities, giving an impression of the significance exercised by the development of tourism in the city on the transformations in its commercial sector. Consequently, the greatest concentration of catering activities is seen in the southern part of the survey area, namely in the streets closest to the main tourist attractions, along the road between the railway station and the cathedral of S. Maria del Fiore and along Via Nazionale, traditionally the location of hotels. There is nevertheless also a notable density of catering activities along the streets stretching from the centre towards the residential neighbourhoods of the northern portion of the survey area (in Via S. Gallo, Via Santa Reparata etc.), a zone increasingly affected by the phenomenon of short-term tourist lets (Airbnb) (Fig. 2).

In recent years, alongside with the growing number of tourists, catering activities have multiplied at an extremely fast rate, their number doubling in less than 15 years. In a portion of the survey area for which we have data from a previous similar survey, it is calculated that in the period from 2003 to 2018 the number of catering activities rose from 147 to 228: a 55.1% increase.

The sample survey recently performed on 237 catering activities currently present in the area confirms the intensity and rate of the

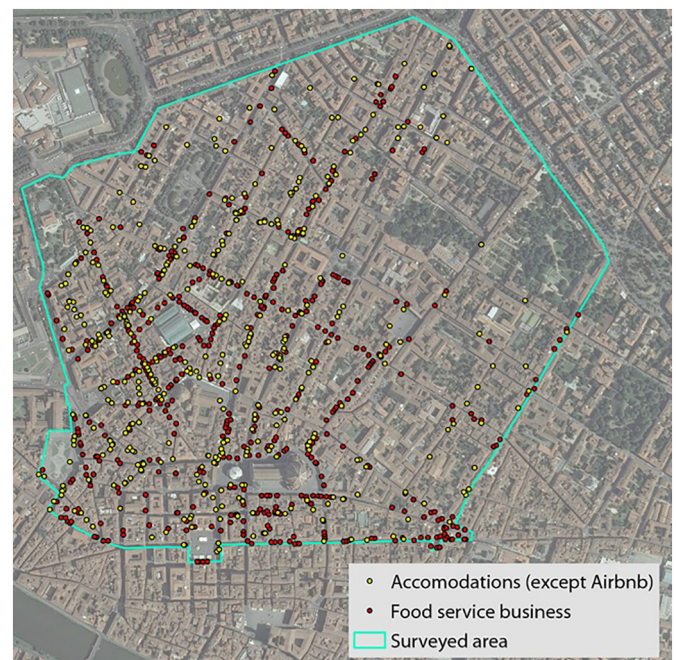


Fig. 2. Distribution of catering activities and hotels.

expansion in the sector, highlighting how just under one third were started up in the last three years (2016–18).

Among the catering activities interviewed, 63% are substantially a continuation of the businesses previously located on those premises. However, no fewer than 25% had occupied previously unused premises (in 6% of cases) or replaced other types of commercial or artisan activities that targeted non-tourist demand.

Over four fifths of the businesses are family-run businesses having a single venue run by staff usually comprising one or two owners plus two or three employees, with an additional 11% made up of branches of other companies or franchises. The presence of large international chains, such as McDonald's or Starbucks, is very limited, given the obstacles imposed by the municipal administration policies.

Over two thirds of the businesses fall into quite traditional formats, such as restaurants, *trattorie*, bars or *pasticcerie*; nonetheless, sandwich shops, ice cream shops and new formats for the Florentine context, such as fast food outlets and beerhouses, are multiplying, above all in response to youth demand.

5.1. Extent and rate of the expansion

On average, the catering businesses can seat 62 people, in an average surface area of 134.3 square metres (mode and median value are equal to 100 square metres). If the average value is projected onto the whole sample under consideration, it can be estimated that, in the survey area, catering activities occupy premises measuring around 69,567 square metres.

To this figure we need to add the areas where the catering activities have set up outdoor seating, a formula that is particularly effective at interpreting the search for the “all-enveloping journey in time” experience cited above (Loda et al., 2011).

The activities with outdoor seating, which pay a public property occupation tax, have multiplied in recent years, owing to the town council's tendency to commercialize public spaces (streets, pavements or squares).

In the survey area, there are 207 outdoor seating areas at present. The comparison between the present survey and the one carried out in 2008 on the same area shows how in the span of less than a decade, the number of these areas has increased by 67%. At the moment, just under half of the businesses (44%) have one, and the overall surface area occupied adds up to 4446 square metres, marking a 45% increase compared to 2008 (Loda et al., 2011).

If we are to add this figure to the space occupied by catering activities, we get to 74,013 square metres, that is, 4.6% of the street-level spaces in the area, a high proportion in relation to the scarcity of public spaces often lamented by the citizens. The intensification in this trend has been so great that UNESCO area planners have drawn attention to the phenomenon in the hope that Florence can manage to maintain a “balance between the free use of public space and its use for commercial ends” (Fig. 3).

The combined effect of the increase in catering activities, the different formats and the multiplication of outdoor areas significantly contribute to transforming the business landscape of the historic centre, making it increasingly spectacularized and appear as a place of leisure and socialization whose patrons identify and recognize each other through their choice of venues and shared practices of food consumption (Fig. 4).

5.2. Attractiveness for business and investors

If, on the one hand, the described changes point to a further dramatic reduction in residential functions, on the other hand, the new face of the historic centre consolidates and boosts its desirability in terms of real estate investments. Of the premises occupied by catering activities, 84% are rented, a percentage that rises to 92% for those businesses set up in the last three years, confirming the extreme scarcity

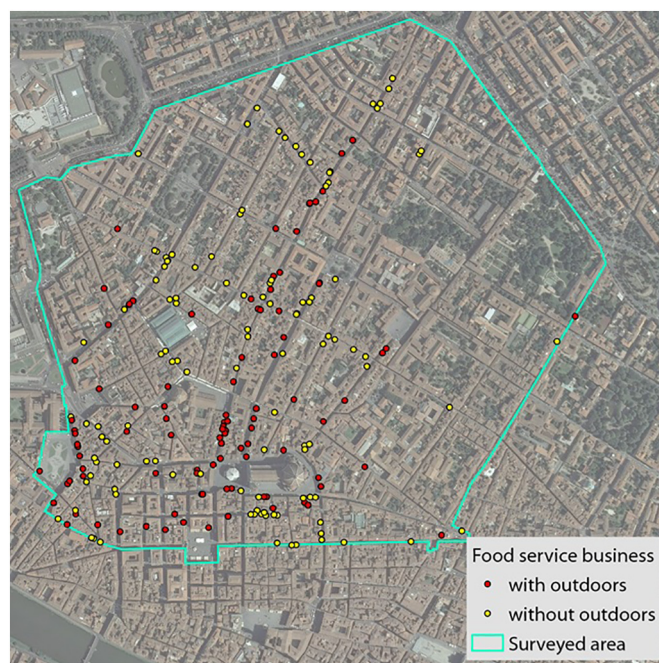


Fig. 3. Activities with outdoor seating areas.

of premises on the market for sale. The monthly rent declared by the business owners (77) – therefore rounded down – is on average € 3991, that is € 44 per square metre, of course with great differences on the basis of the possibility of attracting passing custom, in particular tourists. The monthly rent has gone up in the last three years in one third of cases, demonstrating the continuing rise in real estate values (Fig. 5).

A comparison with the data from similar research carried out in 2003 (Loda, 2004) highlights how the rent has increased at much higher rate than inflation: if the average rate of inflation calculated by ISTAT on consumer prices in Italy in the same period were applied to the 2003 value, the current market value would be a lot lower, at € 33.20.

The great gains from capital invested in business premises, accounting for the scarce availability of premises for sale in the area under investigation, reflect the area's commercial appeal. In turn, a significant indicator of this can be seen in the businesses' turnovers. The picture is definitely a positive one: over 37% of business owners declare that their turnover has gone up in the last three years, while less than one fifth report a decrease. It is interesting to observe how the percentage of businesses reporting an increase in turnover is particularly high among the new formats: sandwich shops (50%), fast food outlets and beerhouses (66%).

The development of tourism in the city makes a very significant contribution to the economic vitality of the area, as highlighted by the data on the composition of the catering businesses' turnovers. On average, tourists make up over half of their turnover (52%), followed by regulars (31%) and lastly occasional customers (17%). The activities with the highest percentages of turnover resulting from tourist demand naturally cluster in the portions of the survey area closest to the centre. The activities that mainly cater for regular customers represent less than one quarter of the total; nonetheless, demand from tourists makes a considerable contribution to their turnover too (on average one third) (Fig. 6).

The positive trend in turnover is reflected in the prevalently positive assessment of the area in terms of business opportunities: the great majority of business owners (61%) deem that the concentration and variety of venues helps to make the area appealing to the public; while only 38% consider that the excessive proliferation of catering activities

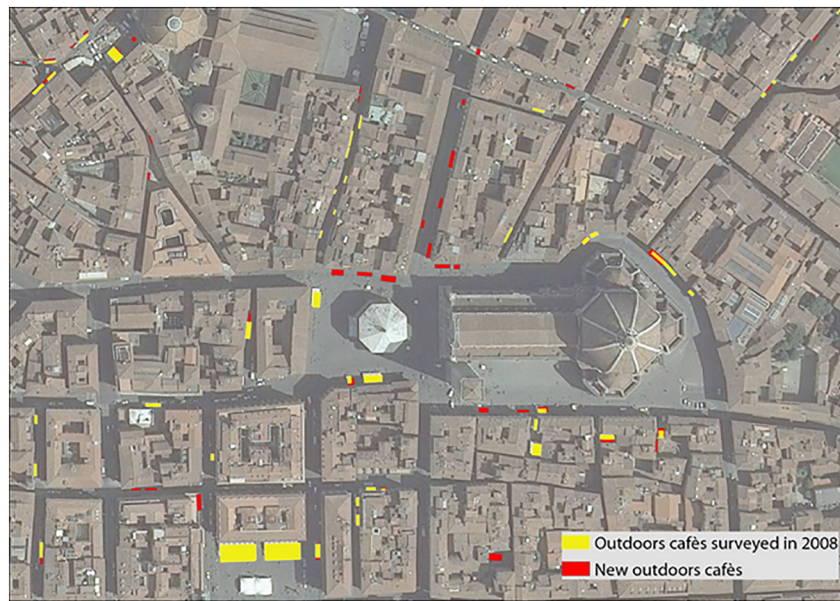


Fig. 4. Map of outdoor seating areas in Piazza Duomo.

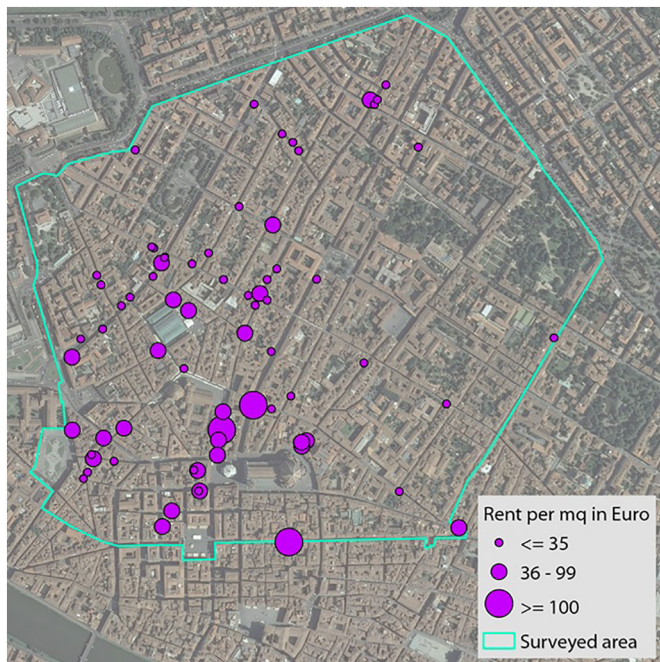


Fig. 5. Map of values per area.

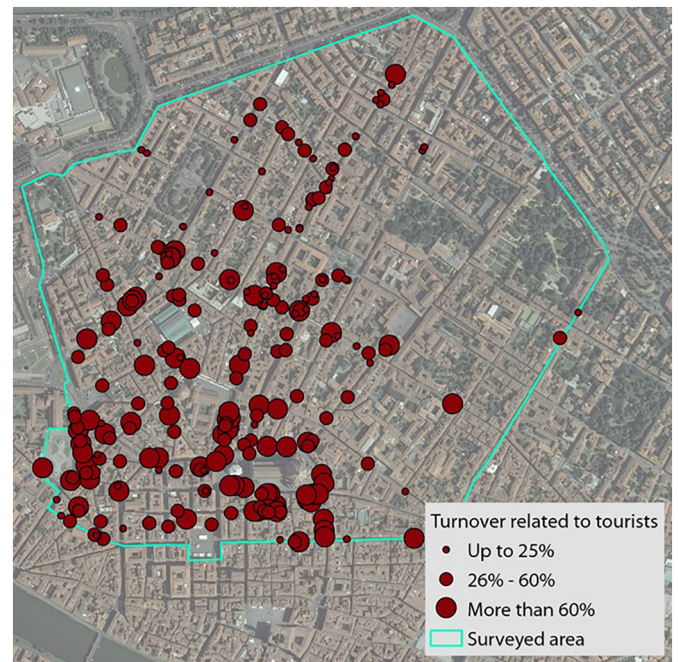


Fig. 6. Percentage of annual turnover from tourist demand.

can lead to unfavourable conditions of competition among them (Fig. 7).

Understandably, this evaluation is closely correlated to turnover trends, with the percentage of those concerned about the competition twice as high among those activities with a comparably lower turnover ($\text{Chi}^2 = 0.004$). Nevertheless, the figures do not display spatially significant clusters of activities with falling turnovers (declared, let us remember, by under 20% of the businesses), nor are the downward trends concentrated in specific types of activity. Instead, these drops seem to be linked to operating difficulties in the businesses themselves, and in particular they appear correlated to the age of the owners: the higher their age, the more difficult they may find it to pinpoint the right target and to develop business strategies for them.

Future business prospects are nevertheless seen in a positive light by 61% of the business owners interviewed (excellent by 22%) and in a

negative light by just 10% (Fig. 8 Business outlook), a figure which is even smaller than the number of businesses with a falling turnover.

5.3. New formats and targets

An additional element documenting the economic vitality of the area is the business owners' propensity towards innovation. In just under half of cases (43%), the activities had undergone innovative changes in the last three years, with revamped premises, furnishings, or types of offer. As far as the last category is concerned, it is interesting to observe that, as shown in the open interviews to the managers, in no fewer than 40% of cases these consisted of innovations to the menu, proving to be crucial ground on which businesses can attempt to stand out and advertise themselves to the public.

As regards the restaurants and *trattorie* in particular, which account

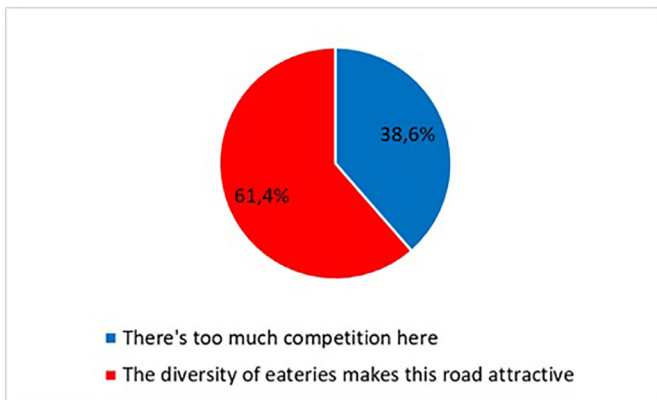


Fig. 7. Evaluation of the area.

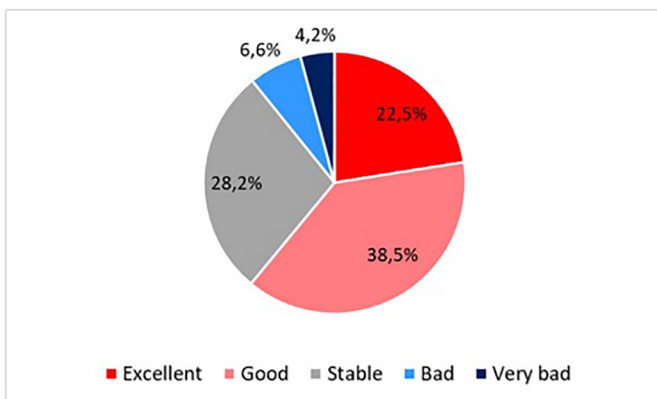


Fig. 8. Business outlook.

for one third of the catering activities in the area, the attempt to attract a specific target has led to a widespread tendency among those businesses which work mainly with tourists (and in particular with Italian, European and North American tourists) to label themselves as a “traditional” venue, so as to meet the common trend to seek “authentic” experiences. The operation, at times emphasized by adding the adjective “old” (*antico*) to the name of the venue, takes concrete shape in rustic or rustic-chic furnishings, and a menu which includes the most celebrated components of the traditional local cuisine, such as “Florentine steak” or “peposo” (peppered beef stew).

Among the restaurants with a large slice of local custom, ethnic venues have instead been proliferating – a category which, alongside Chinese restaurants (accounting for the majority, and firmly established in the city), has recently come to count Japanese, Iranian and Ethiopian restaurants as well as health food activities catering for vegans or specializing in salad-based dishes.

Lastly, fast food outlets, pizza places and sandwich shops, furnished to somehow reflect local traditions, offer meals to a young public and day trippers.

In general, nevertheless, the most apparent aspect of the transformation underway in the catering sector is the tendency towards a wider range of more complex, blended formats: more and more often, the activities seem to associate food consumption with forms of co-working or the sale of non-food products (flowers, gifts and fancy goods, furniture, in particular vintage furniture), cater for a highly specialized demand (chip shops, juice bars, organic food restaurants), or generate intrepid hybrid models combining quite distant culinary traditions, showing a surprising ability to respond to the progressive segmentation of the tourist demand and the tastes of a globalized public (Fig. 9).

To sum up, the outcomes of the survey confirm that the catering sector has expanded at a great rate in the historic centre of Florence, its



Fig. 9. Culinary mixes.

size increasing by 50% in less than 15 years, taking the place of a whole host of other businesses operating in other sales and service or craft sectors that cannot afford the same rent prices as tourist-oriented businesses.

The businesses involved in the expansion process, around 50% of which can be described as catering for tourists, show a marked dynamism and great capacity to respond to the progressive fragmentation of the tourist demand, as well as an ability to respond to the evolutions in the tastes of the local public.

Lastly, the dynamics described have generated a considerable economic boost, in terms of restoring the historic centre's business appeal and real estate values, which had been dampened in the period of the exodus towards the urbanized countryside, albeit against a background of further depression of its residential function and tourism gentrification.

6. Regulating foodification

The transformations described in the previous sections have taken place within a deregulatory framework which for a long time has limited the possibilities of local councils to govern the commercial sector in city centres. Since the end of the 1990s, Italy has seen a series of different measures which have led to a widespread deregulation of the sector, with the goal – among others - of relaunching the commercial function of historic centres which, as we have seen, were losing resident population and business activities. The authorization procedures which had been in force from the early 1970s to the end of 1990s were based

on complex programming of the commercial sector following some fixed criteria, including restrictions on the proximity of businesses belonging to the same goods category. Since 1998 (law decree no. 114/1998 known as the “Bersani Decree”), and through subsequent reforms (in particular law decree no. 223/2006 and the more recent, symbolically named “Salva Italia” (Save Italy) decree no. 214/2011), the procedures to open new activities have been significantly simplified, with the abolition of numerous locational and organizational restrictions and limitations, for example, concerning opening hours and days.

While on one hand, deregulation has helped to revitalize the economy of historic centres, in the case of art cities progressively subjected to the pressure exercised by mass tourism, it has objectively fostered a process of retail gentrification and *foodification*, especially catering activities aimed at satisfying tourist requirements. The side effects of *foodification* and progressive tourism gentrification – phenomena which by no means concern Florence alone – have led to attempts on the part of various levels of national and local government to limit their most macroscopic consequences. Nevertheless, this has been done through measures whose priority is to defend the cultural heritage and traditional make-up of places. At national level, the recent decree law no. 222/2016, also known as the “Save Historic Centres Regulation”, gives councils, in agreement with the superintendences responsible for the protection of landscape and cultural heritage, the authority to issue specific regulations to limit those business activities considered incompatible with the goals of safeguarding and enhancing the heritage in areas of historic, archaeological, artistic and environmental significance, which evidently includes historic town centres. More specifically, the decree reaches out to what is established in the Cultural Heritage and Landscape Code (issued with law decree no. 42/2004), which lays down that “cultural heritage cannot be destroyed, harmed, damaged or used for purposes not compatible with its historic or artistic nature or such as to jeopardize its preservation” (art. 20.1).

It is moreover evident how measures openly aimed at protecting the integrity of the heritage – and not at fighting the tourism gentrification of historic centres – create an ambiguous set of regulations and risk generating paradoxical effects, strengthening that same process of spectacularization and promotion of the dimension of authenticity which fosters the tourist appeal of historic areas.

Instead, in the case of Florence, right from the start, the measures to safeguard the historic centre have always been directed towards the catering sectors. A factor stimulating this focus is the UNESCO Management Plan for the Historic Centre of Florence (Comune di Firenze, 2016). Launched in 2016 following a complex process of listening to and involving local players, it identifies phenomena such as business standardization and the loss of neighbourhood businesses and traditional craftsmanship as factors potentially undermining the integrity and authenticity of the cultural heritage, factors at the very basis of the criteria for inclusion on the World Heritage List; the plan therefore urges measures to be taken to limit the phenomenon. In reaction to this solicitation, on 27 April 2017 the city council approved a new regulation, the “Measures for the Protection of the UNESCO Historic Centre” subsequently amended by resolution no. 58/2018.

The crux of the decree is the regulation of the food on offer in the historic centre, resulting in a series of measures concerning the vicinity between businesses and catering in general: first of all, it places a three-year stop – restricted to the historic centre of the city – on opening new businesses for the consumption, retail, industrial or artisan preparation, or sale of food and drink; second, indefinite restrictions on some specific types of both food (such as pizza places, dispenser machines, self-service restaurants, businesses using precooked and frozen foods) and non-food activities (money exchange, phone centres, internet points, betting shops and so on). In third place, the regulation places a permanent restriction in some areas with a longstanding historic and cultural identity on opening different commercial activities to those explicitly listed (for example, in the case of Ponte Vecchio it is only possible to open jewellery, art and antique shops). While the first two

mainly aim to slow down the growth of commercial activities, and above all, to prevent the proliferation of specific categories of goods, the third explicitly sets out to protect some geographical areas whose identity hinges on the local craft heritage.

Moreover, it is significant to note how the same regulation outlines further standards aimed at promoting the Florentine “food tradition”: for example, catering activities are asked to prepare their food using “local” products – with at least 70% (reduced to 50% for exclusively sales activities) from local sources or of certified origin – and to specify the use of these products in their menus.

Even though the effects of similar policies can obviously only be assessed in time, two main considerations emerge from analysis of the policies. The first refers to the councils' limited scope for intervention in regulating not so much the foodification phenomenon itself, but the processes linked to it: while it is true that some recent regulatory provisions have provided new tools for intervention in the commercial and catering sector, it also emerges that most of the measures implemented by the councils are temporary and highly sectoral. The social transformations leading to the tourism gentrification and spectacularization of historic centres are, however, deep-seated and cannot simply be limited through ad hoc provisions aimed at specific commercial sectors and segments. The second consideration instead points at the intrinsically ambiguous nature of the policies fielded to limit the phenomenon, as recalled previously: while the main goal is to preserve the integrity of the historic centre, in reality they risk giving further backing to – instead of limiting – the touristification process. The provisions made to date seem to be attempts to manage the transformation process and guide it to a certain extent by selecting the products and services on offer. In this perspective, it becomes quite critical to evaluate the measures adopted by the municipality of Florence to halt further expansion of the catering sector: despite being meant to limit the more macroscopic effects of these transformations, they however seem unable to prevent the continuation of the process or the social effects that it implicitly entails.

7. Policy suggestions

The case of Florence is part of a longer list of cities which are having to deal with the effects of growing touristification, adopting strategies and tools for which there are no universal or – even less so – consolidated recipes (UNWTO, 2019). The literature – both academic and not – has recently started to reflect on which management approaches and policy tools can prove effective in regulating overtourism and its urban impacts (Zacher et al., 2019). In this connection, the already quoted report by UNWTO (2019) identifies 11 strategies and 68 measures aimed at managing visitors' growth in cities. The document insists in particular on the need to involve the local stakeholders in order to find a balance between the different requirements on the table and ensure profit for all, preventing degeneration towards situations of conflict and “tourismphobia”.

While referring to this literature for further investigation, the case of foodification in Florence nevertheless allows us to reflect on some policy indications that we find significant:

- 1) Supporting residentiality. Commercial activities targeted towards tourists, which include catering activities in the form described in Florence, are proliferating in a space where long-term residents are falling and, as a consequence, the demand for neighbourhood stores and local services is dying. Furthermore, the lack of residents emphasizes the effects of banalization, museumification and Disneyfication typical of touristification processes, which foodification well represents. Housing policies are thus needed in order to support and promote new forms of residential living in historic centres experiencing depopulation.
- 2) Spatially distributing the tourist flows. The concentration of catering activities in the historic centres reflects the growing

segregation between areas subject to touristification and the rest of the territory. In a logic of reducing tourist pressure on the central areas of the city and promoting new forms of tourism development, indirect measures are requested, such as the promotion of sites, museums and tourist and cultural attractions in the wider area, indeed repeatedly brought up in the local public and political debate but only partially implemented.

- 3) Overcoming the emergency logic. The three-year block on new openings and ban on eating meals in the public space imposed in Florence are effective measures of a sectoral, emergency and temporary nature, which intercept some of the most evident manifestations of touristification but do not allow its effective management. In line with the international indications, both short- and long-term measures are needed (Zacher et al., 2019) and “stop-gap” interventions only prove to be effective if part of a strategic reflection on long-term and intersectoral urban development.

8. Conclusions

The cases referred to in this article and the results of the survey pinpoint and describe a phenomenon of the functional transformation of historic centres into a space increasingly characterized by i) the expansion of catering activities; ii) the substitution of pre-existing retail businesses; iii) the targeting of food-related activities to meet the diverse types of tourism demand.

The first part of the paper defines this transformation as foodification and puts forward a framework of the concept. More specifically, it demonstrates how *foodification* slots into the wider process of touristification as it is linked to other processes (like airbnbisation) which combine to increasingly touristify and occasionally gentrify the city, increasing the segregation between spaces for leisure and residential neighbourhoods. It also discusses how this process emphasizes a more generalized process of urban change that is underway in many cities both inside and outside Europe, which is seeing the earmarking of central spaces and historic neighbourhoods for mainly leisure, recreational and commercial functions.

Then, empirical surveys were performed to take a closer look at the different forms in which the phenomenon of foodification is apparent in the historic centre of Florence. The results show that foodification has generated a considerable economic boost to the historic centre's commercial desirability and real estate values, thus restoring its strength of attraction after the period of exodus towards the urbanized countryside. However, this has happened against a background of further depression of the area's residential function and growing touristification. In this context, the analysis demonstrates that the catering and food sale sector forms a fundamental component of the Florentine urban economy, chiefly made up of family-run businesses, with quite a limited role played by branches and franchises of supra-local organizations. Nevertheless, in prospect, it is necessary to judge the threshold beyond which the scales of the single-function, leisure-oriented historic centre will tip, reversing the process and reducing its appeal and economic potential.

In this perspective, the final part of the paper evaluates the measures adopted by the municipality of Florence to halt a further expansion of the catering sector. It argues that, despite being meant to limit the more macroscopic effects of these transformations, the measures however do not manage to go beyond an emergency and temporary outlook and, paradoxically, they even risk causing the inverse effect, making the historic centre a space that is ever more on a “tourist scale”. Thus, it is suggested that, in order to limit the touristification effects (also) induced by foodification, transversal more than sectoral policies are needed that can operate on the commercial, residential, town planning and tourism sectors at the same time, in a logic of reducing the tourist pressure on the central areas of the city and promoting new forms of residential living in the historic centre. As such, as we see it, measures such as the promotion of sites, museums and tourist and

cultural attractions in the wider area seem to constitute effective tools to fight the growing segregation between spaces for food and leisure and spaces for living.

To conclude, this work has been useful to extend the discussion on touristification effects on city centres to analyse the role of food in this process. The element of novelty is its attempt to evaluate the role of food as a central promoter, like housing, of the process of touristification. We believe that this role could be further analysed in future works stemming from other significant case studies.

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Mirella Loda: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Sara Bonati:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **Matteo Puttilli:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest.

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