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The logo for 'Eco Food Experience' features a stylized green leaf with a white fork inside it, positioned between the words 'Eco' and 'Food'. The word 'Experience' is written below 'Food'.

Eco Food Experience

A Service Design Approach to AI-Driven Responsible Food Tourism

Author | Maryam Roozbehi

Politecnico di Milano
School of Design
Master of Science in Product-Service System Design

Supervisor | Laura Galluzzo

Co-supervisor | Valentina Facoetti

AY 2025-26

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

In the preparation of this thesis, I made use of AI-based tools, specifically ChatGPT (OpenAI), Claude (Anthropic), NotebookLM (Google), and Stitch (Google), to support different stages of the work. These tools were used in a limited and controlled way: ChatGPT and Claude mainly for paraphrasing, refining language, and condensing certain passages to improve clarity and readability; NotebookLM to summarize and organize academic sources and support the understanding of the reviewed literature; and Stitch as a source of inspiration and benchmarking, to compare the proposed interface against existing design standards and explore more creative directions. The research design, analysis, interpretation of findings, arguments, and design decisions presented in this work are my own. AI was employed only as a supporting and guiding tool, not as a source of original reasoning. The final interface designs, like the rest of the work, were developed and decided by me. Every AI-assisted passage was reviewed, edited, and validated, and I take full responsibility for the final content of this thesis.

By disclosing this use openly, this declaration reflects in practice one of the central arguments of the research itself: that AI should remain a controllable tool that supports human decision-making and judgment, rather than an autonomous system that generates content on its own. Keeping the author's control and responsibility at the centre of the process is the same principle of responsible, human-guided AI use that this thesis advocates in the context of food tourism.

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Italiano

Abstract

Il cibo è uno dei modi più diretti e profondi attraverso cui i viaggiatori entrano in contatto con le culture locali ed è sempre più riconosciuto come un veicolo per forme di turismo più responsabili e sostenibili. Tuttavia, mentre la pianificazione del viaggio si sposta quasi interamente sulle piattaforme digitali, il cibo rimane scarsamente integrato nel percorso che queste piattaforme supportano. Questa disconnessione rivela tre lacune interconnesse:

In primo luogo, il cibo è assente come fase strutturata e individuabile all'interno del percorso di viaggio digitale: risulta frammentato, invisibile e difficile da trovare tra piattaforme disconnesse, dove la prenotazione dell'alloggio rappresenta l'ultimo punto di contatto in grado di guidare i viaggiatori verso una partecipazione gastronomica locale responsabile; eppure anche le piattaforme responsabili si fermano a questo punto, lasciando il percorso gastronomico irrisolto. In secondo luogo, le comunità ospitanti sono escluse dai sistemi turistici, e le loro conoscenze gastronomiche e pratiche culturali locali rimangono invisibili e non strutturate all'interno delle piattaforme mainstream. In terzo luogo, l'uso dell'intelligenza artificiale nel turismo gastronomico rimane poco utile, poiché la logica di raccomandazione delle grandi piattaforme è al servizio della conversione commerciale e dei ranking di popolarità, piuttosto che del beneficio della comunità o di una guida responsabile — una conseguenza di modelli di business costruiti attorno all'engagement e ai ricavi, anziché a valori sostenibili o orientati alla comunità.

In risposta a queste lacune, questa tesi propone EcoFood Experience, un livello di servizio (service layer) per un turismo gastronomico responsabile, progettato per integrarsi nelle piattaforme turistiche digitali esistenti, con Ecobnb — una piattaforma dedicata a criteri di ospitalità sostenibile in 48 paesi — come punto di ingresso strategico.

Attraverso una metodologia di service design che combina ricerca documentale, analisi di casi studio e questionari rivolti agli utenti, la tesi sviluppa un concept che collega la mediazione digitale con la partecipazione gastronomica locale fisica. La ricerca sposta il punto di

osservazione dalla soddisfazione del consumatore verso il benessere, la visibilità e la capacità d'azione delle comunità ospitanti, ponendo i loro bisogni e i loro limiti al centro dell'offerta di servizio, anziché trattarle come fornitrici passive. EcoFood Experience introduce l'intelligenza artificiale come strumento di guida e di supporto alle decisioni, attraverso una pianificazione personalizzata e il confronto, aiutando i viaggiatori a orientarsi tra scelte gastronomiche responsabili, proteggendo al contempo le condizioni di chi ospita e preservando i valori della comunità.

Il risultato è un livello di servizio strutturato, composto da cinque componenti digitali: la continuazione del viaggio (journey continuation), che consente ai viaggiatori di proseguire il proprio percorso responsabile all'interno della stessa piattaforma dopo la prenotazione, riducendo il carico cognitivo ed eliminando la necessità di cercare tra servizi disconnessi; un pianificatore di viaggio basato sull'AI, spiegabile, modificabile e in grado di stimare i costi; un livello di scoperta (discover) che risponde a dove e a quali esperienze gastronomiche si possono vivere; un livello di supporto alle decisioni che opera confrontando le opzioni selezionate rispetto a metriche di sostenibilità; e un livello sociale e dei creator che permette alle comunità ospitanti di presentare le proprie conoscenze e capacità. Questi sono collegati a formati di esperienza fisica in contesti privati e semi-privati, basati sui bisogni di chi ospita, quali corsi di cucina condivisa, visite in fattoria, tour dei mercati, eventi gastronomici, ristoranti locali e orti urbani comunitari, dando vita a un percorso gastronomico continuo e responsabile, dalla pianificazione pre-viaggio al coinvolgimento durante il viaggio. Il contributo principale di questa ricerca risiede nel ridefinire il turismo gastronomico responsabile come un sistema mediato, che si sposta dal consumo passivo proprio di un modello estrattivo verso una partecipazione generativa, in cui il viaggiatore, la comunità ospitante e la tecnologia responsabile sono strutturalmente connessi anziché trattati in isolamento.

Parole chiave: Turismo gastronomico responsabile; Design dei servizi; Intelligenza artificiale (IA); Turismo sostenibile; Partecipazione della comunità ospitante; Piattaforme digitali per il turismo.

English

Abstract

Food is one of the most direct and profound ways in which travellers connect with local cultures, and it is increasingly recognised as a vehicle for more responsible and sustainable forms of tourism. Yet as travel planning shifts almost entirely onto digital platforms, food remains poorly integrated into the journey these platforms support. This disconnect reveals three interconnected gaps:

First, food is absent as a structured and discoverable step within the digital travel journey, scattered, invisible, and hard to find across disconnected platforms, where accommodation booking is the last touchpoint that could guide travellers toward responsible local food participation, yet even responsible platforms stop here and leave the food journey unaddressed. Second, host communities are excluded from tourism systems, their local food knowledge and cultural practices remaining invisible and unstructured within mainstream platforms. Third, the use of AI in food tourism remains unhelpful, with recommendation logic in large platforms serving commercial conversion and popularity rankings rather than community benefit or responsible guidance — a consequence of business models built around user engagement and revenue rather than sustainable or community-centred values.

In response to these gaps, this thesis proposes EcoFood Experience, a responsible food tourism service layer designed to integrate within existing digital tourism platforms, with Ecobnb, a platform dedicated to sustainable accommodation criteria across 48 countries, as a strategic entry point.

Through a service design methodology combining desk research, case study analysis, and user surveys, the thesis develops a concept that connects digital mediation with physical local food participation. The research shifts the point of observation from consumer satisfaction toward the well-being, visibility, and agency of host communities, placing their needs and boundaries at the centre of the service offering rather than treating them as passive providers. EcoFood Experience introduces AI as a guidance and decision support tool through

personalised planning and comparison, helping travellers navigate responsible food choices while protecting host conditions and preserving community values.

The outcome is a structured service layer composed of five digital components: journey continuation, which allows travellers to continue their responsible journey within the same platform after booking, reducing cognitive load and eliminating the need to search across disconnected services; an AI journey planner that is explainable, editable, and predicts costs; a discover layer that answers where and what food can be experienced; a decision support layer that works by comparing each selection against sustainable metrics; and a social and creator layer for host communities to present their knowledge and abilities. These are connected to physical experience formats in private and semi-private settings, based on the needs of hosts, such as co-cooking classes, farm visits, market tours, food events, local restaurants, and urban community gardens, creating a continuous and responsible food journey from pre-trip planning to on-trip engagement. The primary contribution of this research lies in reframing responsible food tourism as a mediated system that moves from passive consumption within an extractive model toward generative participation, where the traveller, the host community, and responsible technology are structurally connected rather than treated in isolation.

Keywords: Responsible food tourism; Service design; Artificial intelligence (AI); Sustainable tourism; Host community participation; Digital tourism platforms

1

Introduction

Context, motivation &
research questions

1 — INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aim of the thesis

Tourism is one of the most dynamic industries in the world today, contributing not only to cultural exchange but also to global economic growth. In 2019, before the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the travel and tourism industry contributed trillions of dollars to global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). According to projections from the World Travel & Tourism Council, in partnership with Oxford Economics, this impact is expected to continue rising steadily, with forecasts pointing to sustained expansion through 2025 and even further out to 2035 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019).



Figure 1: Global online travel market size from 2017 to 2030 (Statista, 2025)

As illustrated in Figure 1, tourism emerges as a major driver of development, but it also reveals the responsibility that comes with its growth. While tourism has become more accessible than ever, the large-scale, high-volume nature of the industry has often strained destinations, leading to environmental damage, cultural erosion, and social inequality. This diffusion of tourism, often referred to as mass tourism, is a historical consequence of the democratisation of paid vacations, more affordable transportation, and the standardisation of tourist experiences, situated within a broader socio-cultural and economic framework shaped by capitalist logics of production and consumption.

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1179020/online-travel-agent-market-size-worldwide/>

This context has prompted the rise of sustainable and responsible approaches that prioritise a balance between economic benefits, environmental stewardship, and community well-being. Instead of viewing host communities as passive providers of services, responsible tourism calls for active participation, accountability, and mutual respect.

Within this necessary shift towards responsible models, food tourism emerges as a highly vibrant and meaningful vehicle for implementing sustainable travel practices. Its relevance is further underscored by its significant scale within the industry, where food and drink services represented 83.1% of tourism and hospitality companies in Italy in 2023 (Statista, 2024), as shown in Figure 2.

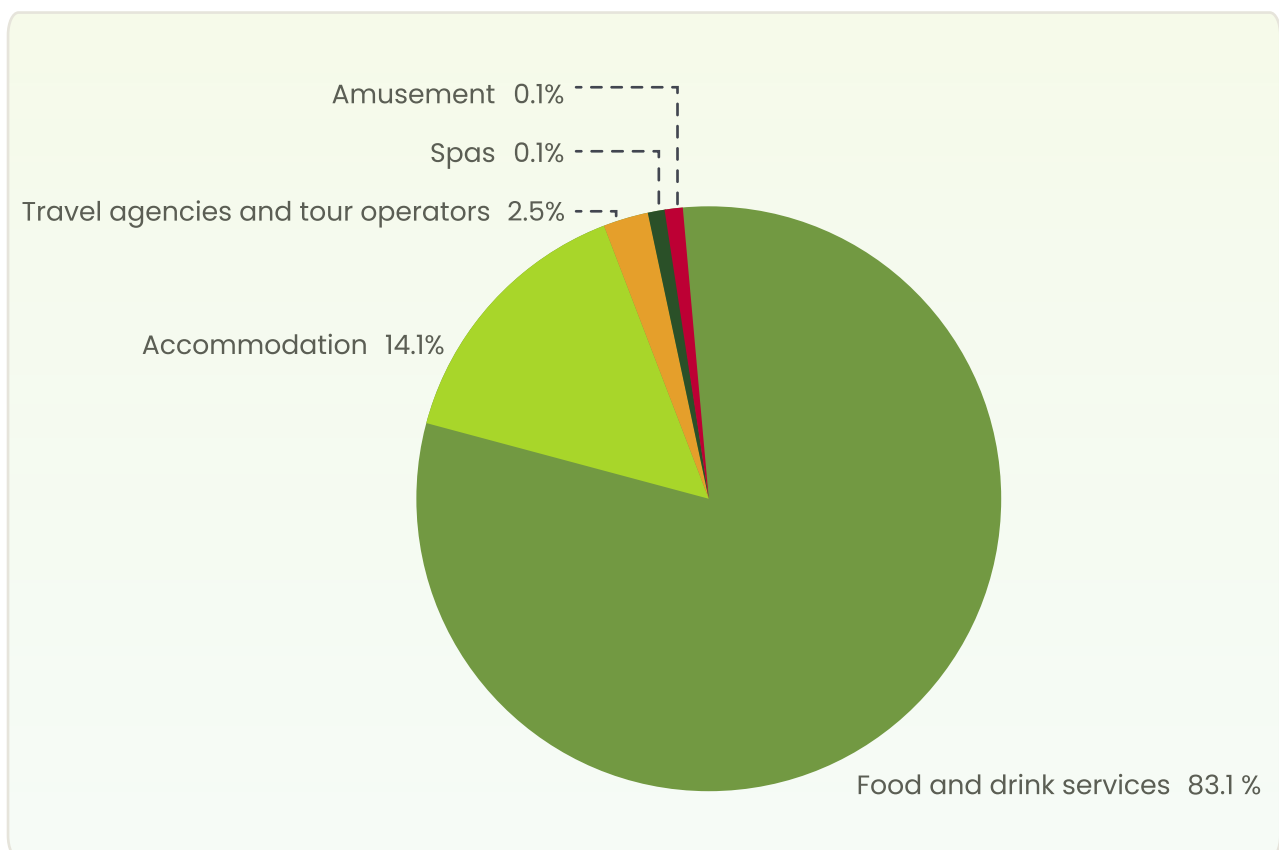


Figure 2: Distribution of tourism and hospitality companies in Italy in 2023, by segment (Statista, 2024)²

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/707947/share-of-tourism-and-hospitality-companies-italy-by-sector/>

Data further highlights this importance: food and wine tourism is considered a primary criterion for 19% of travellers surveyed when choosing a holiday, and a general criterion for another 53% (Statista, 2019a).

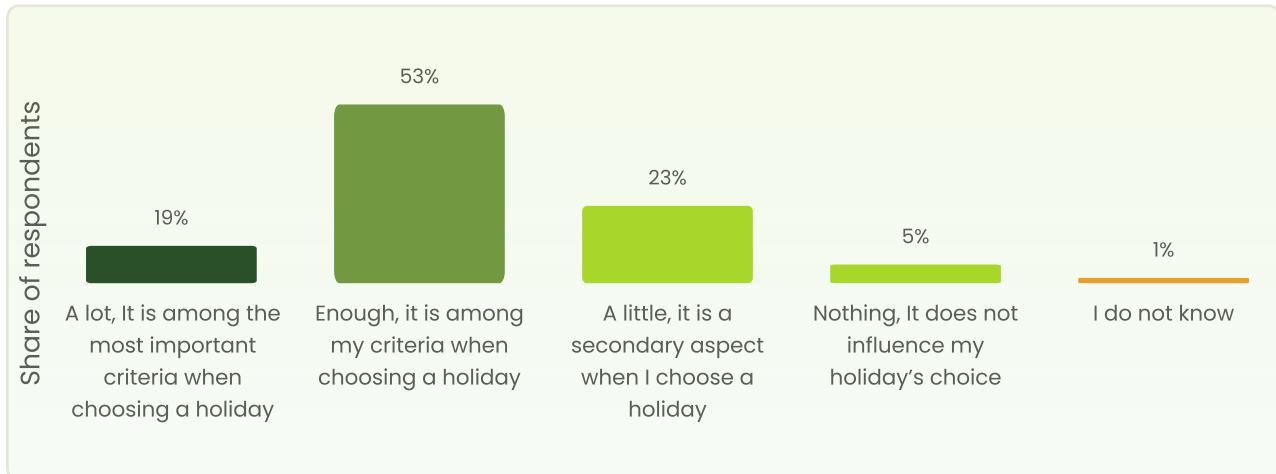


Figure 3: How is food and wine tourism relevant to you when you choose a holiday? (Statista, 2019a)³

This high engagement is further reflected by the fact that 56% of travellers strongly or partially agree that they always seek information about local food and wine when visiting a new destination (Statista, 2019b).

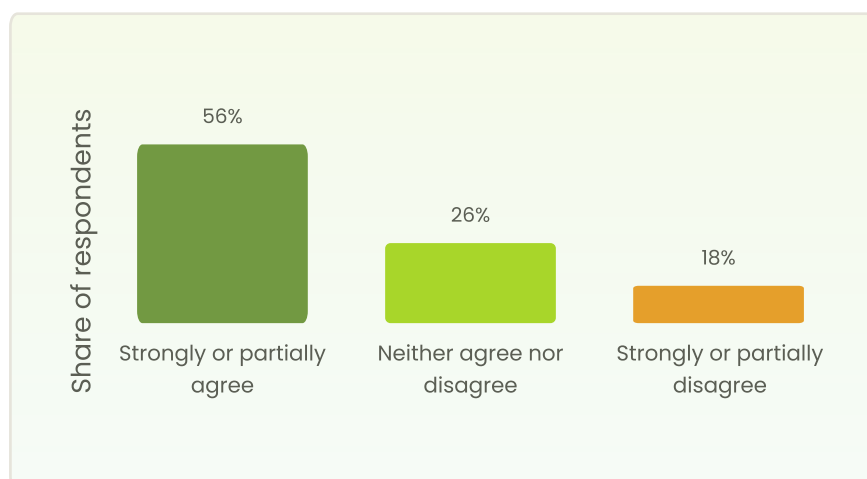


Figure 4: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "When travelling somewhere I always inform myself about local food and wine?" (Statista, 2019b)⁴.

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1028151/relevance-of-food-and-wine-tourism-when-choosing-a-holiday-italy/>

⁴ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1039188/interest-in-local-food-tourism-among-travelers-in-italy/>

Responsible food tourism goes beyond eating local dishes in restaurants. It enables travellers to engage with the identity, traditions, and everyday practices of host communities. Through food-related encounters, it can foster cultural pride, generate local employment, and support sustainable practices, including the reduction of food waste, ethical sourcing, and the reinforcement of local economies. However, many food-related tourism experiences are currently developed in fragmented ways, poorly connected to local contexts and everyday food practices, which limits meaningful interaction with host communities (Ellis et al., 2018).

In the current landscape of digital travel platforms, travellers are usually supported in planning transportation and booking accommodation, but much less attention is given to food as a main part of the travel itinerary and the continuing journey. At the same time, artificial intelligence becomes increasingly embedded in the design of new digital services, introducing new responsibilities around how recommendations are made, how local actors are represented, and how community values are preserved within automated systems.

Against this background, this thesis aims to design an AI-driven responsible food tourism service integrated as a scalable layer within existing digital tourism platforms. The goal is to shift the role of food from a passive consumption activity to an active vehicle for cultural exchange, community empowerment, and sustainable participation. Specifically, it investigates how local food practices, often fragmented, informal, and poorly visible on mainstream platforms, can be made more structured, discoverable, and meaningful for travellers, while actively involving and protecting host communities.

For this reason, AI is positioned at the centre of this service concept, not as a decision-making system, but as a mediating tool that connects traveller needs, host conditions, and responsibility metrics in order to generate a guided and locally grounded food journey. By reducing cognitive load and supporting more informed choices, AI makes locally grounded food experiences more accessible, while keeping full control in the hands of the traveller.

From a design perspective, the research applies Service Design to explore how digital interfaces can align traveller needs with community values in a human-centred way, moving from extractive consumption towards generative participation. The methodology is based on the Double Diamond framework (Design Council, 2019) and includes desk research, case study analysis, user surveys, and blue ocean strategy.

Overall, this thesis approaches food experiences not simply as a commercial product, but as a means of social connection, cultural learning, and community empowerment within the broader context of responsible tourism.

1.2 Thesis structure

This thesis is structured into nine chapters. Following the introduction in **Chapter 1**, which outlines the research context, problem statement, research gaps, and research questions, **Chapter 2** presents the study's theoretical foundation. It explores key concepts in tourism, including mass tourism, alternative and responsible tourism, policy and community-oriented design approaches.

Chapter 3 focuses on food tourism, examining its definitions, theoretical frameworks, and its potential to support local development, cultural exchange, and sustainability. It covers community-based food tourism, culinary education strategies, gastronomic heritage, current management trends, and future directions in the field.

Chapter 4 describes the methodological framework of the research. It explains the research design based on the Double Diamond framework and outlines the methods and tools applied.

Chapter 5 presents the findings from the exploratory and analytical phases described in Chapter 4. It integrates insights from platform analysis and user research to identify the state of the art in the platform landscape, what travellers and local hosts needs and fears, where the mismatches are between platforms and users, what design must respond to, and where the main system gaps and opportunities lie.

Chapter 6 presents the service concept for responsible food tourism experiences. It introduces the design objectives, responsibility considerations, and the positioning of the proposed service as a scalable layer within existing digital tourism platforms, Ecobnb, with particular attention to the role of it as a strategic entry point, the service layer as a mediating system, key actors and roles, and the overall service logic and interaction structure.

Chapter 7 presents the service design development. It outlines the evaluation framework and design principles, the offering map connecting digital and physical layers, user-centred framing through personas and user journeys, interface and interaction design, and the transferability and scalability of the service across different tourism contexts.

Chapter 8 reflects the implications and limitations of the proposed service. It discusses the findings, contribution of the research, limitations, and directions for future research and design development, before closing with the final conclusions.

1.3 Research gaps

Gap 1 — Traveller has no structured food journey

Despite representing approximately one third of tourist spending (Mnguni & Giampiccoli, 2016), food experiences remain absent as an integrated part of the digital travel journey. Accommodation, transport, and attractions have become widely standardised within online booking systems, yet food is still scattered across disconnected platforms or left entirely to informal discovery by travellers (Ellis et al., 2018). This fragmentation does not end at the planning stage. Once accommodation is confirmed, existing platforms provide no continued guidance toward locally grounded food experiences. Even platforms built on responsible tourism values stop at the booking moment, leaving travellers without support in continuing their journey in a way that aligns with their intentions. The journey breaks precisely at the moment it could become most meaningful.

As Facchetti and Galluzzo (2024) argue, tourism design has focused almost entirely on the visitor experience, while the structural conditions that would make responsible participation possible, including food, remain largely unaddressed. The absence of food from the digital travel journey is therefore not simply a gap in platform features, but a deeper structural failure to connect traveller motivations with meaningful local engagement.

Gap 2 — Host communities are structurally excluded from the food tourism system

Facchetti and Galluzzo (2024) further note that design efforts in tourism have largely been confined to improving the visitor experience, with limited attention to involving host communities and local administrations in shaping tourism services. This concern becomes more acute in the specific context of food. Research on the socio-cultural sustainability of gastronomy tourism argues that the field has largely examined a single stakeholder perspective at a time, overlooking how communities experience food tourism and raising the critical questions of who benefits, who is marginalised, and who bears the cultural costs (Cheng et al., 2025). In parallel, the over-commodification of local food culture has been shown to threaten residents' culinary

identity and erode community ownership over their own gastronomic practices (Şengül et al., 2025). This points to a structural absence: few services exist that support local people in offering, defining, and controlling their own food experiences on their own terms. As a consequence, local food knowledge, cultural practices, and community identity remain invisible within mainstream platforms, which frame hosts as providers of a service rather than as active participants in a responsible tourism system.

Gap 3 — AI is used irresponsibly in food tourism platforms

Across digital platforms, artificial intelligence is most commonly deployed through recommender systems designed primarily to manage information overload and to optimise commercial outcomes for the platform, while their underlying logic often remains opaque, giving users little ability to understand, question, or control how recommendations are produced (Magrani & da Silva, 2024). This pattern is well documented in tourism: AI-driven marketing and recommendation tools have frequently prioritised conversion and revenue over openness and the welfare of users (Florido-Benítez & del Alcázar Martínez, 2024), and major tourism platforms such as TripAdvisor, Airbnb, and Expedia have been shown to fall short of the accountability, responsibility, and transparency principles associated with sustainable tourism (Leal et al., 2020). At the same time, evidence from tourism contexts shows that transparency strongly shapes whether travellers trust and accept AI recommendations at all (Wang et al., 2026) — a condition that current commercially driven systems rarely satisfy.

These tendencies were confirmed by the empirical work conducted in this research. In the platform analysis, the only AI-based tool identified across all seven platforms examined was TripAdvisor's chatbot, which operates on popularity rankings and commercial ratings and returns only generic suggestions rather than responsible, context-specific guidance. Across all seven platforms, AI and guidance intelligence scored critically low — not because the technology is absent, but because the design logic behind it serves platform conversion rather than genuine user support. The traveller survey pointed in the same direction from the user side: while travellers expressed strong openness to AI support, this openness was conditional on being able to understand and control the interaction.

Against this background, no existing platform offers AI as a controllable and explainable guidance tool that connects traveller needs, host conditions, and responsibility metrics in a coherent way.

1.4 Research questions

In response to identified problems and research gaps, this thesis is guided by the following research questions:

Primary research questions:

How can AI-mediated digital service design transform food tourism from a fragmented and passive experience into a structured, locally grounded, and responsible journey for both travelers and host communities?

Secondary research questions:

How can AI be introduced as a transparent and controllable mediating tool within a food tourism service, reducing cognitive load for travelers while preserving the autonomy and boundaries of host communities?

How can AI be introduced as a controllable and explainable guidance tool within a food tourism service, reducing cognitive load for travellers while preserving the autonomy and boundaries of host communities?

How can a scalable digital service layer connect physical food experiences with digital mediation in a way that makes responsible choices more visible, discoverable, and meaningful within existing tourism platforms?

2

Theoretical background

Background & mass
Tourism & responsible
tourism

2 – Theoretical background

2.1 Background on tourism industry

Tourism has increasingly drawn attention in academic studies because of its wide-ranging impacts and its great potential for generating growth in destination areas (Saarinen, 2006). Its rapid expansion has brought social, cultural, economic, and environmental challenges to host regions, making it essential to understand how tourism develops and how its effects can be managed across different contexts (Saarinen, 2006). Over the past decades, the impacts of tourism have received increasing attention in discourses and studies on related development (Saarinen, 2006). At the same time, its growing scale has led to a range of evident and potential problems of environmental, social, cultural, economic, and political nature in destinations and systems, creating a need for alternative and more environment and host-friendly practices in development, planning, and policies (Saarinen, 2006). Since the 1960s, research has also highlighted the complexity of managing tourism growth and the importance of recognising its many dimensions and outcomes for destinations (Saarinen, 2006). As travel has become more accessible and people's motivations have diversified, the industry has expanded into many different forms. Tourists no longer simply want to see a place, they want to experience it in a way that reflects their personal interests, values, and lifestyles. This diversification has given rise to a variety of classifications, yet scholars and institutions still debate the most suitable framework for defining tourism types. As a result, tourism can be linked to a wide variety of activities and settings, which demonstrates the need to distinguish between different tourist types and forms of travel (Clarke, 1997).

2.2 Types and forms of tourism

Tureac (2010) offers one of the early attempts at categorisation, grouping tourism into six broad categories: leisure, healthcare, cultural, transit, short-distance, and business tourism. However, subsequent studies have pointed out the limitations of rigid classifications, arguing that tourism is too diverse and dynamic to be captured within a single fixed list.

In this thesis, to make sense of this complexity, a combined framework based on Cohen (1972), Pérez González (2025) and the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2008; UNWTO, n.d.) is adopted, as represented in Figure 4.

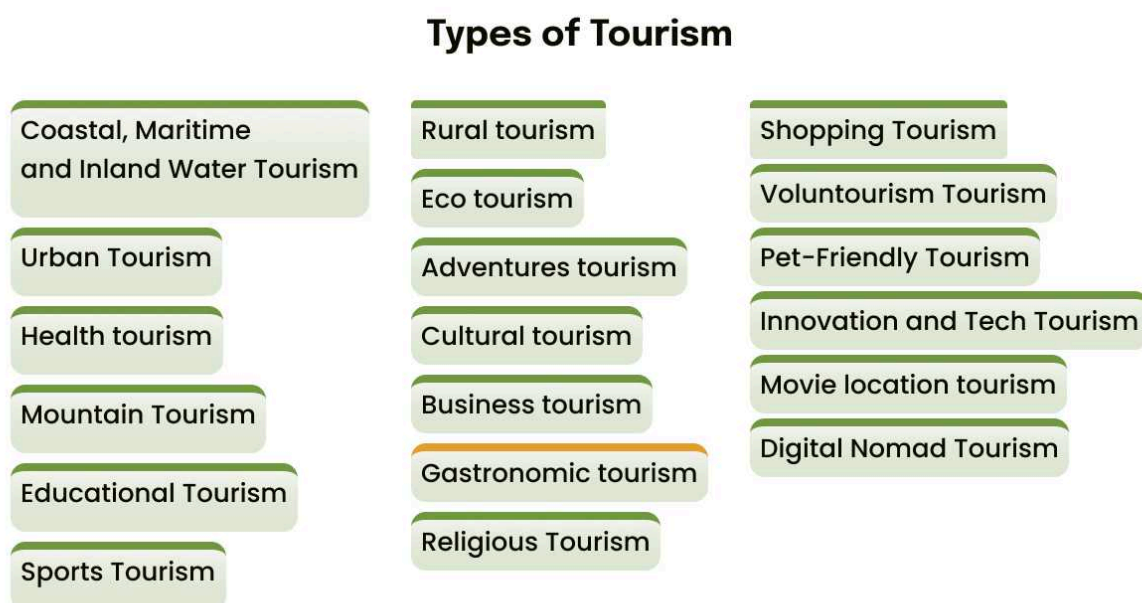


Figure 5: Types of tourism according to type and purpose of travel (Author's own elaboration based on UNWTO, 2008; UNWTO, n.d.; Cohen, 1972; Pérez González, 2025)

As illustrated in Figure 6, forms of tourism, is particularly relevant because it shows how motivations are shifting. As Tourism Notes (2024) points out, this is where we also find alternative forms of tourism, including ecotourism, agro-rural tourism, and increasingly, cuisine and food tourism.

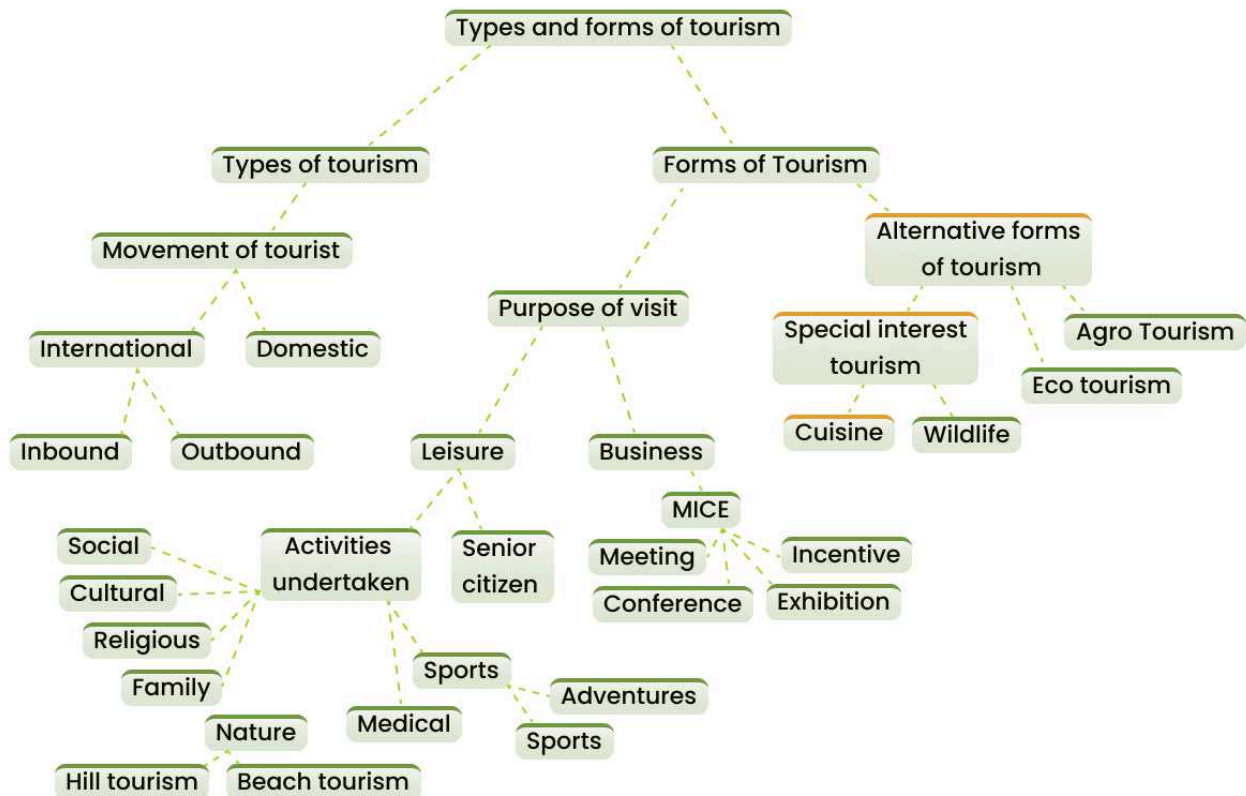


Figure 6: Figure 6: Types and forms of tourism (Tourism Notes, 2024)

Within this spectrum, food tourism represents a form with **strong potential for sustainable and responsible tourism**, yet one that remains underestimated.

For this reason, sustainable food tourism can be seen as part of a new paradigm in the industry. But to understand where food tourism fits, it is first necessary to clarify the difference between Mass Tourism and Alternative Tourism, since these categories form the backdrop against which food tourism has emerged.

2.3 Mass tourism vs. alternative tourism

Mass tourism is a complex phenomenon that emerges from large numbers of people travelling on a large scale and in a high-impact way. The concept is still debated in tourism studies. It is often described through deterministic discourses as a phenomenon characterised by large-scale, standardised, and rigidly packaged holidays, involving mass production, broad undifferentiated marketing, and large-scale consumption with minimal consideration for local customs or culture. In contrast, flexible discourses reconceptualise mass tourism as heterogeneous, dynamic, and multifaceted, encompassing multiple forms of mass tourism that evolve with changing production, consumption, and spatial contexts (Vainikka, 2013).

Typically, mass tourism relies on service providers such as travel agencies, which mainly organize accommodation, transfers, and guided services. These trips usually take place during the holiday season when travellers have greater availability (Christou, 2012).

Mass tourism is often observed as a catalyst that transforms a previously valuable territory into a purpose-built, artificial, and sometimes hastily constructed resort or holiday town, which offers standardized products like the “four S (sun, sea, sand, and sex)” (Vainikka, 2013) and further homogenizes the local environment. This meaning brings the idea of standardization that can have negative consequences for local communities, including the loss of cultural authenticity, environmental degradation, and economic dependence on large-scale tourism operations that prioritize commercial interests over local needs (Vainikka, 2013). Recognizing these effects highlights the need to define and promote forms of tourism that generate fewer impacts, which has led since the 1980s to the development of alternative and sustainability-focused tourism approaches (Vainikka, 2013).

The tourism sector itself has undergone multiple evolutions in recent decades due to its dynamic and complex nature (Facoetti & Galluzzo, 2024). While globalized mass tourism largely defined travel demand in the 20th century, the new millennium has brought a stronger and more diversified demand, driven by new information technologies, easier mobility, and the growth of affordable accommodation options (Gainsforth, 2020).

As a counterbalance to this traditional tourism, an important international workshop was organized to discuss the concept of "alternative tourism" (Holden, 1984). The notion of "alternative tourism" has since become a fashionable idea among those dissatisfied with the characteristics of mass tourism, as promoted by the tourism industry, and with its economic, social, and cultural impacts (Cohen, 1972). Sopheap and colleague (2015) categorized alternative tourism into a variety of approaches, including ecotourism, agro-tourism, rural tourism, community tourism, and ethical tourism. Despite their differences, these forms of tourism all share an appreciation for local communities and natural resources, which are considered essential assets in creating tourism activities that respect the environment and local sources

Thus, when something is labelled "alternative," its meaning ultimately depends on what it is considered an alternative to. An examination of the term "alternative tourism" reveals that it is understood in multiple, though related ways, as it refers to being an alternative to several different aspects of tourism. Consequently, these varying interpretations can result in very different practices and outcomes of "alternative tourism" (Cohen, 1972).

People seeking alternative tourism tend to be adventurous who like to discover new places, and experiences new food. In this sense, food tourism emerges as a key expression of alternative tourism, offering travellers an authentic way to connect with local culture and communities through culinary traditions.

The table below presents in more detail the characteristics that distinguish mass tourism from alternative tourism.

Mass Tourism	Alternative Tourism
Stay in large hotels with standardized services	Stay in guesthouses, hostels, or small family-run hotels
Rely on private transportation organized by agencies	Use public transport, shared mobility, or community-based options
Visit traditional, iconic, and crowded destinations	Explore unusual, less touristy, and community-centered places
Shop in global chain stores and outlets	Buy homemade products directly from local artisans and producers
Passive consumption of sights and activities	Active participation in cultural, creative, or nature-based experiences
Eat in tourist-oriented restaurants with standardized menus	Eat at local family tables, street food markets, or community-hosted food experiences
Book through international travel agencies and platforms	Book directly with local hosts, independent operators, or community-based platforms

Figure 7: Comparison between mass tourism and alternative tourism characteristics (Vainikka, 2013; Christou, 2012; Cohen, 1987; Sopheap et al., 2015; Jovicic, 2014)

2.4 Sustainable and responsible tourism

2.4.1 A paradigm shift towards sustainable and community-focused tourism

Sustainable tourism emerged as an alternative to traditional mass tourism, which is motivated by concerns over environmental, cultural, and social impacts (Triarchi & Karamanis, 2017). It is fundamentally interested in mitigating the negative effects of tourism activities and ensuring that local residents are economically and socially integrated (Triarchi & Karamanis, 2017). The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines sustainable tourism as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities" (2015). This approach aims to simultaneously meet the needs of both tourists and host communities, that is, protecting natural resources while promoting opportunities for the future. Moreover, it involves careful management of economic, social, and environmental resources, ensuring the maintenance of cultural integrity, biological diversity, and ecosystems.

The concept of sustainable development, on which sustainable tourism is based, is framed by three interconnected pillars: economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sustainability (UNWTO, 2022). These pillars must work in balance, meaning there is no need for a trade-off between environmental protection, social well-being, and economic advancement. Key drivers for tourism maturity in this context include the interaction between economy and environment, long-term planning and scalability, and the preservation of heritage for future generations (Koeman, 2002). When properly implemented, sustainable tourism can significantly benefit local communities by fostering peace, instilling pride in cultural traditions, and creating local jobs, thereby helping to prevent urban relocation (Green Ideas for Tourism, 2016).

While sustainability offers a comprehensive view of long-term viability across economic, environmental, and social dimensions, responsible tourism focuses on the actionable behaviours and ethical imperatives to take responsibility for the impacts of tourism (Facoetti & Galluzzo, 2024; Goodwin, 2011). Responsible tourism builds upon sustainability-based strategies and policies, emphasising appropriate behaviour and accountability from consumers, suppliers, and governments to enhance positive outcomes and reduce negative impacts (Fennell, 2006). It is grounded in the capacity to act and respond, fostering dialogue and action to make tourism more sustainable (Goodwin, 2011).

2.4.2 A paradigm shift towards sustainable and community-focused tourism

The tourism sector has generated significant economic benefits, but it has also produced a range of sustainability-related challenges. Problems such as overdevelopment, environmental degradation, overtourism, cultural commodification, and economic inequality within host communities have become increasingly difficult to sustain. These issues were made particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic (Facoetti & Galluzzo, 2024). Addressing such challenges requires changes that go through individual actions and involve broader shifts in production and consumption patterns, which is supported by policy-level decisions (Wever & Vogtländer, 2014).

Recent discussions in tourism research point to the need for a shift from what is commonly described as extractive tourism to more generative forms of tourism. Extractive tourism is largely based on the intensive use of local resources to create economic value, often with limited regard for social and environmental consequences. In many cases, this results in destinations giving more than they receive. Generative tourism, by contrast, places emphasis on participation, sustainable practices, and meaningful interaction between visitors and local communities. Its aim is to create positive outcomes for both destinations and residents, while supporting long-term social, cultural, and environmental well-being (Facoetti & Galluzzo, 2024).

This shift is closely linked to the role that design can play in reshaping tourism systems. Rather than focusing on fixed solutions, design in this sense emphasises ongoing change and adaptation within organisations and wider systems. When applied to tourism, this perspective offers a way to reconsider how destinations function in relation to sustainability goals and how tourism experiences can move beyond conventional models of consumption (Facoetti & Galluzzo, 2024). Services are increasingly discussed less as design objects and more as means for supporting the emergence of a more collaborative, sustainable, and creative society and economy (Cottam & Leadbeater, 2004; Meroni, 2007, in Sangiorgi, 2011). Within tourism, design can therefore aim to transform existing unsustainable systems into models that promote sustainable social transformation (Parker & Parker, 2007). Because organisations now operate in an environment of constant change, the challenge is not how to design a response to a single issue, but how to design a means of continually responding, adapting, and innovating – leaving behind not only a new solution, but the tools, skills, and organisational capacity for ongoing change (Burns et al., 2006, in Sangiorgi, 2011).

The role of design in this paradigm shift is central, though it has historically been underutilised in the tourism sector. As Facoetti and Galluzzo (2024) note, experiences of service design and participatory design in tourism have largely been confined to improving user experience, with very few applications extending to the co-design of tourism services with local communities and administrations. This represents a significant gap, given the potential of design tools and approaches to reorganise decision-making processes within tourism service systems.

Service design, in particular, has undergone an important evolution in recent decades. Rather than treating services purely as objects of design, it has increasingly positioned them as means for supporting broader societal transformation, fostering more collaborative, sustainable, and creative models of society and economy (Cottam & Leadbeater, 2004; Meroni, 2007, cited in Sangiorgi, 2011). When applied to tourism, this shift means that design is no longer concerned only with making experiences more pleasant or efficient for visitors. It becomes a tool for questioning existing systems, redistributing value, and building the conditions for long-term social and cultural change within destination communities (Facoetti & Galluzzo, 2024).

2.4.3 A paradigm shift towards sustainable and community-focused tourism

In the past, academic research and tourism practices have largely adopted an outside-in perspective, which focuses primarily on the customer experience and satisfaction (Fesenmaier & Xiang, 2017). While customer experience is undoubtedly important, this approach often minimises the social impacts of tourism when local communities are treated as passive actors rather than active participants in the planning and development of tourism offerings. As a result, assessments of social sustainability frequently rely on customer satisfaction and perceived destination sustainability, rather than on the actual well-being of host communities and their cultural values. So, the proposed paradigm shift advocates for an inside-out perspective in the design of tourism services.

This approach fundamentally changes the point of observation, enabling intervention at the base of the tourism system. By adopting an inside-out perspective, the focus shifts to co-designing tourism services from within host communities, prioritising their needs and fostering sustainable social impact (Facoetti & Galluzzo, 2024). This re-imagination of tourism practices is a bottom-up process that actively involves diverse stakeholders, including local communities, governments, and businesses, aiming to align the tourism service system with sustainable development goals and harmonise economic, social, and environmental dimensions (Mihalič, 2016). Thus, it is necessary that engaging with local communities through participatory approaches ensures that tourism development reflects their perspectives and contributes to a more sustainable and equitable framework (Mihalič, 2016).

Participatory Design is one of the practices through which the inside-out approach can be implemented. Originating in Scandinavian workplace democracy movements of the 1970s, Participatory Design is a design methodology that actively involves all stakeholders, particularly those most affected by a system, in the process of designing it. Rather than designing for communities, it means designing with them, ensuring that their knowledge, values, and lived experiences shape the outcomes of the design process (Manzini, 2015).

In the context of responsible tourism, Participatory Design offers a particularly relevant strategic approach. Facoetti and Galluzzo (2024) argue that participatory design has the capacity to trigger inclusive processes and dialogues by engaging the complex social dimensions of tourism systems, including host communities, local governments,

tour operators, and travellers. Its reflective nature, grounded in principles of inclusion and democracy, makes it well suited to the challenge of reshaping tourism from the bottom up. When applied to tourism service design, it shifts the focus from consumer satisfaction as the primary measure of success toward the actual sustainability and well-being of host communities, making visible what has previously been ignored in mainstream tourism development.

Furthermore, Participatory Design aligns with the broader political role of design in advancing social justice and community empowerment (Facoetti & Galluzzo, 2024). In practical terms, this means involving local communities not simply as respondents or beneficiaries, but as active agents who define the terms, boundaries, and direction of tourism development in their territories. This bottom-up, community-centred perspective is what gives the inside-out approach its transformative potential, and it informs the values and orientation of the service design framework developed in this research.

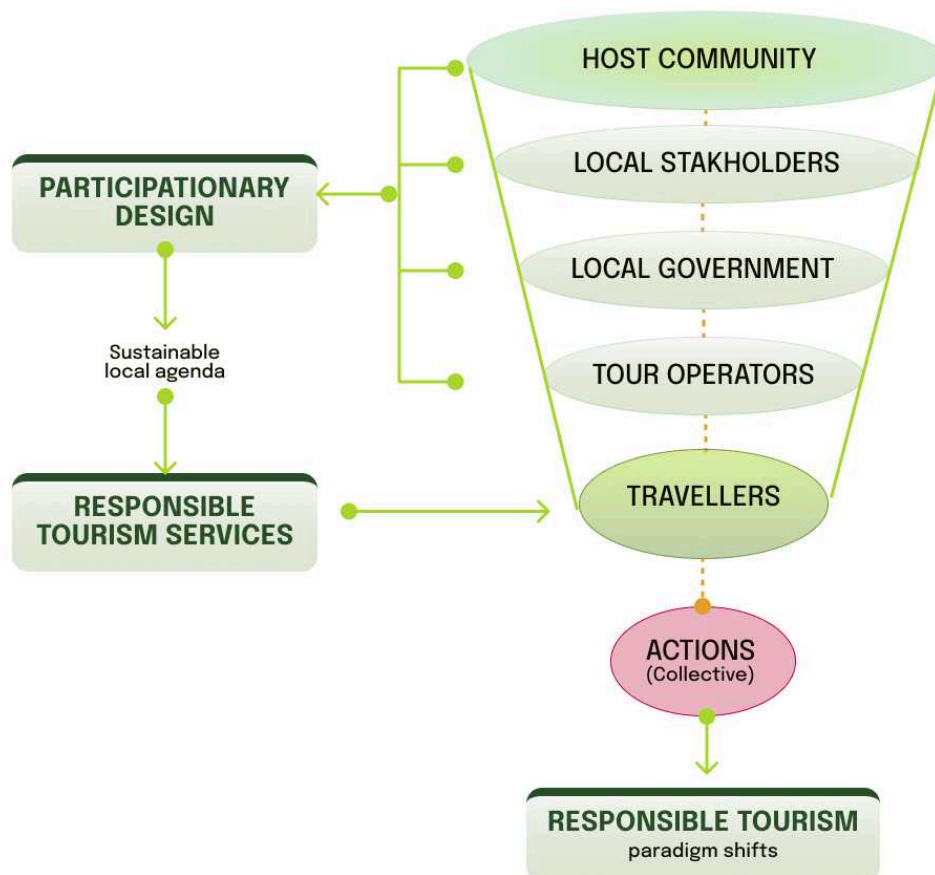


Figure 8: Hypothesised evolution of the responsible tourism paradigm towards a participatory design model (Facoetti & Galluzzo, 2024)

2.5 International policy frameworks and the 2030 agenda

Responsible and sustainable tourism does not exist in isolation. It is shaped and supported by broader global commitments that define how tourism should develop in relation to people, places, and the environment.

The United Nations World Tourism Organisation has been central in connecting tourism to the global sustainability agenda. The Tourism in the 2030 Agenda report and the Tourism and the Sustainable Development Goals: Journey to 2030 report both establish that tourism can contribute meaningfully to sustainable development, but only when models prioritise inclusive growth, local participation, and the protection of cultural and environmental assets (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017; UNWTO, 2023).



Figure 9: United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework (United Nations, 2015)

As illustrated in Figure 9, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals provide a shared global framework across seventeen interconnected goals, ranging from ending poverty and hunger to promoting responsible consumption, reducing inequalities, and building sustainable cities and communities (United Nations, 2015).

Food tourism, in particular, sits at the intersection of several of these goals. When managed responsibly, it has the potential to contribute to ending poverty and hunger, supporting decent work and economic growth, reducing inequalities, and promoting responsible consumption and production. These outcomes are not automatic. They depend on how value is distributed, how local communities are involved, and how transparent the supply chains behind food experiences actually are (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017).

What these frameworks make clear is that the shift toward more responsible tourism is

not simply a matter of individual choice or platform design. It requires structural changes in how tourism services are organised, who benefits from them, and how economic returns reach the communities that make those experiences possible in the first place.

2.5 Positioning within sustainable tourism research

Beyond international policy, contemporary academic research in sustainable tourism points in a similar direction, though it often goes further in questioning the assumptions that underpin current tourism systems.

Facoetti and Galluzzo (2024) argue that tourism can no longer be optimised only for growth and scale. Instead, they call for a redesign of tourism systems oriented toward sustainable social transformation, one that places host communities at the centre, values cultural integrity, and actively moves away from the logic of mass tourism. This echoes a wider movement in tourism research that questions the growth imperative itself and calls for redefining tourism around the rights and well-being of local communities rather than the interests of tourists and tourism corporations (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2019). What makes this perspective particularly relevant here is that it does not treat sustainability as an add-on feature, but as a foundational condition for how tourism services should be conceived and structured.

This perspective resonates with a growing body of research that reframes tourism less as a commercial transaction between a visitor and a destination and more as a practice grounded in responsibility, community participation, and shared value (Mihalič, 2016; Saarinen, 2006). When seen this way, the design of tourism services becomes a question not only of usability or convenience, but of who is included, whose knowledge is valued, and what kind of participation is made possible (Dolezal & Novelli, 2020).

For the purposes of this research, these insights are directly relevant. Designing a digital food tourism service that strengthens local food cultures and supports community-led engagement requires more than good interface design. It requires a clear understanding of the broader system in which that service will operate, and a commitment to advancing tourism as a tool for mutual learning and shared benefit, rather than as a means of extracting value from local communities.

3

Food Tourism

Learning by heritage of
food tourism & trends &
future

3 — Food tourism

3.1 What is food tourism?

Food tourism has developed into a significant field of study, though there is still debate about its exact meaning (Ellis, Park, Kim, & Yeoman, 2018). Hall and Sharples (2003) provided one of the earliest definitions of food tourism. They describe it as the visitation of primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants, and specific places where tasting and experiencing food products constitute the main motivation for travel. This definition has been widely adopted in later studies (Chang & Yuan, 2011; Park, Reisinger, & Kang, 2008; Presenza & Iocca, 2012; Sanchez-Canizares & Lopez-Guzman, 2012; Smith & Costello, 2009).

Over time, different terms have been used in the literature, most commonly “culinary tourism,” “food tourism,” and “gastronomic tourism” (Horng & Tsai, 2012; Sanchez-Canizares & Lopez-Guzman, 2012). These terms are often used interchangeably in the literature, but they do not refer to exactly the same focus. Culinary tourism is generally linked to cultural experience and learning processes. Food tourism places greater emphasis on tasting, sensory engagement, and the act of eating itself. Gastronomic tourism, by contrast, is more closely associated with host culture, lifestyle, and local identity (Horng & Tsai, 2010; Hegarty & O'Mahony, 1999).

Research on food tourism has approached the topic from different angles. Ellis et al. (2018) identify four main perspectives that are commonly used in the literature. One approach defines food tourism through participation in specific food-related activities, such as cooking classes, food festivals, or visits to production sites (Che, 2006; Presenza & Chiappa, 2013). Another perspective focuses on travellers motivation and considers food as a primary or secondary reason for travel (Bertella, 2011; Su, 2013). A third approach combines these two views and understands food tourism as food-related activities driven by an interest in food (Hall, 2006). A fourth perspective places food tourism within broader tourism contexts, such as cultural or rural tourism, and often treats food as a supporting element of destination development (Updhyay & Sharma, 2014; Spilkova & Fialova, 2013)

Ellis et al. (2018) also describe food tourism through five related themes: motivation, culture, authenticity, management and marketing, and destination orientation. Looking at these themes together shows that food tourism cannot be explained from a single perspective. It involves learning about culture, engaging the senses, forming identities, and contributing to destination development.

What emerges from this body of literature is that food tourism is a multidimensional phenomenon that extends well beyond the act of eating. It involves cultural learning, sensory engagement, identity formation, and meaningful interaction with place and community. For the purposes of this thesis, this understanding is particularly relevant: if food tourism is not simply about consumption but about experience and exchange, then it becomes a powerful vehicle for responsible tourism practices that place local communities and their knowledge at the centre of the travel experience.

3.2 Community-based tourism and food

Food has long been recognised as one of the most direct and intimate points of contact between travellers and local communities. Unlike accommodation or transport, food is deeply embedded in the daily life, identity, and cultural practices of a place. When travellers engage with local food, they are not simply consuming a product but entering into a relationship with the people, traditions, and values that produced it. As Mnguni and Giampiccoli (2016) note, food tourism should be understood as a learning experience of the gastronomy and culture of a specific territory, making it a particularly powerful vehicle for forms of tourism oriented toward meaningful exchange rather than mass consumption.

It is precisely this potential that makes the relationship between food tourism and community-based tourism worth examining. The growing market of food tourism presents an opportunity for community-based tourism to adapt and emphasise its gastronomic dimension, increasing its potential as a development tool for local communities (Mnguni & Giampiccoli, 2016). Understanding how these two dimensions relate to each other is therefore essential for developing responsible food tourism services that go beyond the surface of gastronomy and engage with the communities that make it possible.

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) is commonly understood as a form of tourism that is managed and owned by local people. Its main purpose is to generate benefits for the community, while supporting local providers and highlighting local cultural and environmental resources (Mnguni & Giampiccoli, 2016).

However, because CBT is often run by disadvantaged communities, it usually faces challenges such as limited resources and low skills (Mnguni & Giampiccoli, 2016). Food tourism is rapidly expanding, and gastronomy is becoming central to the tourism experience, yet there is still no comprehensive framework connecting CBT with food (Mnguni & Giampiccoli, 2016). Bringing CBT and food together can create a community

based food tourism (CBFT) model, where local and indigenous foods act as the main attraction (Mnguni & Giampiccoli, 2016). Within the broader tourism sector, food accounts for about one-third of tourist spending, and it also plays an important role in visitor satisfaction (Mnguni & Giampiccoli, 2016).

For CBT to be sustainable and self-reliant, it must generate income for the community, and the integration of food can strongly support this process (Mnguni & Giampiccoli, 2016). In practice, food sales are seen often a key source of income in community-based tourism initiatives. They can also support women's earnings and contribute to economic empowerment (Mnguni & Giampiccoli, 2016). At the same time, poorly managed food-related experiences may discourage tourists when hygiene and safety standards are not adequately maintained. For this reason, training and quality control are essential components of community-based food tourism (Mnguni & Giampiccoli, 2016).

Mnguni and Giampiccoli (2016) identify four main dimensions that link food with community-based tourism. These include food as an attraction reason and learning experience, food production and selling connected to local sourcing, food as a livelihood pathway supporting income, biodiversity, and education, and the enabling role of policy and community participation. Together, these dimensions show how food can function beyond consumption and contribute to broader community outcomes.

The relationship between food and community-based tourism indicates that food tourism, when properly managed, can play a meaningful role within CBT and generate positive outcomes for local communities (Mnguni & Giampiccoli, 2016).

For the purposes of this thesis, this framework is relevant primarily at a conceptual level. It describes an ideal community-based tourism scenario, in which food experiences are owned and managed by the community itself – a model that this research does not adopt in full. The framework is therefore drawn on here as a theoretical reference: it highlights how income distribution, food quality standards, and institutional support need to be considered together rather than in isolation, and it informs one of the guiding principles of this research – that local communities should be approached not as passive providers of food experiences but, as far as possible, as active agents in shaping them.

3.3 Learning through culinary tourism

Research shows that many leisure travellers learn about food and drink when visiting destinations, with 79% reporting such experiences (Stone et al., 2020). Food tourism supports regional identity and provides insight into a region's distinct culture (Jones & Jenkins, 2002). It has also been recognized for adding value to travel experiences (Marcoz, Melewar, & Dennis, 2016) and contributing to cultural sustainability (du Rand & Heath, 2006). However, little has been written about strategies that bring together multiple stakeholders to increase food knowledge among young residents, even though this could sustain traditions and benefit tourism providers (Stone et al., 2020).

Building on stakeholder theory, Stone et al. (2020) surveyed fifty-five stakeholders from twenty-nine countries to provide recommendations on how destinations can increase food and beverage knowledge among young residents. Their responses were categorized into five themes that form the basis of a food tourism education strategy: 1) education and formal schooling; 2) hands-on experiences and activities; 3) creating awareness; 4) career, job, or entrepreneurship opportunities; and 5) linking with global or local issues. In addition, stakeholders recommended conducting a local assessment of food and beverage resources before implementing long-term strategies (Stone et al., 2020).

What this education strategy makes clear is that increasing food knowledge goes well beyond formal schooling. Hands-on experiences, awareness-raising initiatives, and connections to local issues all point toward the importance of practical, participatory approaches in sustaining local food culture (Stone et al., 2020). For the purposes of this thesis, this is particularly significant: if tourists find it difficult to access local food culture through institutional or formal settings, then experience-based participation in food-related activities becomes one of the most accessible and meaningful ways to engage with local traditions. This reinforces the argument that food tourism services should be designed not only to facilitate consumption, but to create genuine opportunities for cultural learning and community connection.

3.4 Gastronomic heritage

Food and farming are increasingly recognised not only for their economic value but as a form of intangible cultural heritage. Policies in many countries treat agro-ecological practices as collective heritage with strong potential for advancing sustainability, aligned with the European Green and Social Deal, the Next Generation EU package, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 2 on ending hunger and promoting sustainable agriculture (Rivza et al., 2022). Within this perspective, gastronomy is seen as an essential element of cultural heritage and a key driver for tourists to discover destinations, combining tradition, authenticity, and modernity in sustainable development (Martín et al., 2020; Medina-Viruel et al., 2019; Vodenska, 2020).

Research on gastronomic heritage has increased in recent years, particularly alongside with UNESCO's heritage efforts. This body of work points to the role of food heritage in shaping cultural identity and supporting tourism development (Bessi re, 2013; Okumus et al., 2018). Scholars highlight that food tourism research should adopt multidisciplinary approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, and examining topics such as authenticity, unique food experiences, sustainability, and destination marketing (Okumus, 2021). Recent studies also indicate a link between visiting leisure destinations and discovering local food experiences or cultural events, helping to strengthen food system images and community pride (Klosse, 2021).

Gastronomic heritage is increasingly recognized as both a cultural value and an economic driver for regional and local development (Foris et al., 2020). Traditional foods embody authenticity, transmit traditions and stories, and allow tourists to explore local culture through tasting, preparation methods, and ingredients (Sims, 2009; Viegas & Lins, 2019; Chang et al., 2010). New culinary tourism formats such as food trails, market tours, cooking courses, and storytelling experiences further demonstrate how heritage can create engaging and multisensory encounters (Chiu & Huang, 2022; Roy et al., 2019).

Tourists' motivations to consume local food are often linked to cultural experiences, interpersonal relations, sensory appeal, excitement, and health concerns (Kim & Eves, 2012). Studies confirm that food tourism literature is dominated by themes of motivation, authenticity, management, marketing, and culture, showing the centrality of gastronomy in tourism (Ellis et al., 2018). Overall, gastronomic heritage provides

opportunities for sustainable tourism by integrating local identity, food sovereignty, and agro-ecological practices into tourism systems (Privitera et al., 2020; Richards, 2012).

What this body of literature makes clear is that gastronomic heritage is not only a cultural asset but also a strategic resource for sustainable tourism development. When supported by appropriate marketing, sound management, enabling policies, and genuine community involvement, it has the potential to align cultural preservation with economic development in a meaningful and lasting way (Martín et al., 2020; Privitera et al., 2020). For the purposes of this thesis, the discussion of emerging culinary tourism formats, including food trails, market tours, cooking courses, and storytelling experiences, is particularly relevant. These formats demonstrate practical ways in which travellers can be connected with local food culture through structured yet authentic encounters, reinforcing the argument that responsible food tourism services must be designed to support both cultural continuity and community participation, rather than treating gastronomy as a commercial product alone.

3.5 Current trends on food tourism

Authenticity is strongly linked with tourists' willingness to purchase and consume local food, as well as their participation in related activities and events (Angelakis et al., 2022). Scholars distinguish different types of food tourists, such as comfort seekers, moderates, and authenticity seekers, with the last group especially motivated by novel foods, authentic restaurants, and cultural learning (Özdemir & Seyitoğlu, 2017). In food tourism, perceptions of authenticity are often shaped by origin, such as the place, the local community, and the use of local raw materials. These perceptions can be strengthened and power through specific elements, including distinctive ingredients, storytelling, or unfamiliar product names. Previous studies show that such elements can positively influence visitor satisfaction and purchase intentions (Bryła, 2015; Youn & Kim, 2017).

In the literature, motivations in food tourism are often described using push and pull factors, with gastronomy playing significant roles in destination choice (Garibaldi et al., 2017). Satisfaction with food experiences can also shape how tourists perceive a destination overall. At the same time, research shows that motivations vary depending on context. For example, wine and beer festivals highlight how product type shapes visitor expectations and engagement (Afonso et al., 2018; Kraftchick et al., 2014).

For these reasons, food tourism is increasingly understood as more than the act of

eating. It provides opportunities for cultural learning, identity exploration, and the creation of memorable experiences (Angelakis et al., 2022). Angelakis et al. (2022) describe this process through three related elements: local food attributes, characteristics of food services, and features of the destination itself. These elements shape how tourists perceive food experiences and how they respond to them emotionally. Over time, such perceptions influence whether visitors choose to purchase, revisit, or recommend food-related experiences. In addition, marketing activities and the involvement of different stakeholders affect how destination food images are created and how overall satisfaction develops (Angelakis et al., 2022).

Overall, the literature emphasises that food tourism operates across multiple dimensions, including attraction, knowledge, culture, history, authenticity, motivation, and experience (Angelakis et al., 2022). Local food and gastronomy can function as a relatively stable, year-round attraction, often less dependent on seasonal or weather conditions than other forms of tourism (Angelakis et al., 2022). At the same time, food tourism responds to a strong desire to learn, with education and knowledge frequently becoming primary motivations (Angelakis et al., 2022). It also functions as a cultural practice, in which cuisine becomes both a symbol of place and an active expression of identity (Angelakis et al., 2022).

What the conceptual framework of food tourism management proposed by Angelakis et al. (2022) makes particularly clear is that food attributes, service quality, and destination features do not operate in isolation but collectively shape visitor satisfaction, repeat visits, and recommendations. For the purposes of this thesis, this integrated perspective is essential: designing a responsible food tourism service requires attention not only to the food itself, but to the quality of the interaction, the authenticity of the context, and the ways in which the destination and its communities are represented and experienced by travellers.

3.6 The future of food tourism

As society develops, both food and tourism consumption have changed significantly, with international tourists rising from 25 million in 1950 to over one billion today, and forecasts predicting 4.2 billion by 2050 (Yeoman & McMahon-Beatte, 2016). Food tourism has become a central part of tourist itineraries and destination strategies, reflecting the shift from cultural consumption in museums to the broader experience economy (Yeoman & McMahon-Beatte, 2016). Yeoman & McMahon-Beatte (2016) identify five major forces that will shape the future discourses of food tourism: food tourism as political capital, food tourism as a visionary state, the meaning of being a foodie, the drive for affluence and exclusivity, and fluid experiences in a post-modernist world.

First, food tourism functions as political capital, as food is a key element of national culture and identity, supported by history, traditions, and policies (Smith, 1995; Bourdieu, 1984). Political leaders use food tourism to generate employment, economic activity, and to reinforce cultural authenticity in tourism strategies (Yeoman & McMahon-Beatte, 2016). Second, food tourism is framed as a visionary state, embodying utopian ideals of authenticity, activism, and sustainability, while promoting localism and environmental awareness as part of future destination strategies (Shklar, 1965; Yeoman et al., 2014).

Third, the role of the foodie is central, as future consumers are expected to be better educated, wealthier, and more health-conscious, with food becoming a primary reason for travel and a means of shaping personal identity (Getz et al., 2014; Yeoman, 2012). Fourth, the drive for affluence and exclusivity reflects how rising incomes increase demand for high-value experiences, turning food into a marker of luxury, authenticity, and cultural capital (Yeoman, 2012; Yeoman et al., 2015). Finally, fluid experiences define post-modern food tourism, in which tourists seek diverse, authentic, and experimental encounters that reflect their aspirations and social identities, while actively using networks and communities to influence choices (Yeoman, 2008; Yeoman & McMahon-Beatte, 2016).

In conclusion, these five drivers interact to shape the collective discourse of food tourism, linking farmers, producers, distributors, retailers, and consumers into a shared vision of the future. Through these dynamics, food tourism is positioned as a powerful arena for identity formation, cultural preservation, and economic development in a globalised and highly dynamic world (Yeoman & McMahon-Beatte, 2016).

What emerges from this discussion is that food tourism is evolving into a complex field that simultaneously operates as political capital, cultural expression, and economic driver. The identification of five interconnected forces shaping its future, from the rise of the conscious foodie to the demand for fluid and authentic experiences, highlights how food tourism can no longer be approached as a single or uniform phenomenon (Yeoman & McMahon-Beatte, 2016). For the purposes of this thesis, this forward-looking perspective reinforces the need for food tourism services that are flexible, community-grounded, and capable of responding to travellers who are increasingly motivated not just by taste, but by identity, values, and a desire for meaningful cultural participation

4

Methodology

Research approach &
design process

4 – Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology that guided the development of a responsible food tourism service designed to be embedded within an existing digital tourism platform. The methodology follows a design research approach grounded in service design and responsible tourism principles.

The research begins with desk research, building an understanding of the tourism system and the local food-culture context, before moving into user research and, finally, design development. To structure this process, the research adopts the Double Diamond framework (Design Council, 2019), which organises the work into four iterative phases, combining exploratory inquiry, user research, prototyping, and reflective evaluation.

4.1 Overview of the research framework

The Double Diamond, developed by the Design Council (Design Council, 2005; updated 2019), guides the project through four iterative phases. Each phase alternates between divergent thinking, which explores broadly, and convergent thinking, which refines and decides.

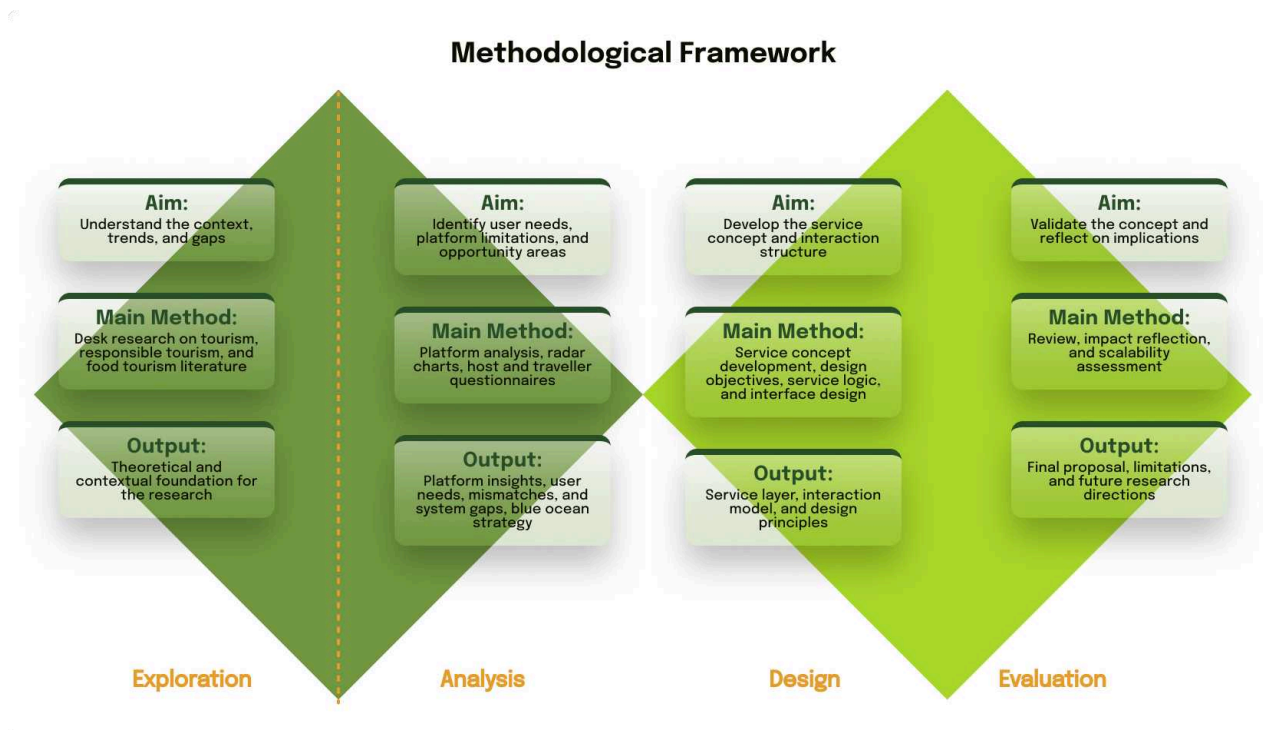


Figure 10: Methodological framework of the research based on the Double Diamond model (Design Council, 2005)

Exploration (Discover): understanding the context and mapping existing systems.

Analysis (Define): identifying insights, user needs, and opportunities by case studies and surveys.

Design (Develop): ideating, prototyping, and shaping service concept.

Evaluation (Deliver): validating the outcomes and reflecting on ethical implications.

In this thesis, the Double Diamond acts as both the research framework and design process, integrating desk research, platform analysis, user research, and design development into one continuous learning cycle. Chapter 2 and 3 focus on the first phase, Exploration, establishing the contextual foundation through desk research. Chapter 5 then moves into the Analysis phase, presenting findings from case studies and user research. Building on these findings, Chapter 6 develops the service concept and design objectives, corresponding to the Design phase. Finally, Chapter 7 translates the concept into design representation and evaluation, completing the fourth phase of the framework.

4.2 Phase 1 – exploration: desk research

The aim of this phase is to build a solid contextual and theoretical foundation before moving into user research and design development.

The desk research reviews existing academic literature on tourism, responsible tourism, food tourism, community-based approaches, and the responsible use of artificial intelligence in digital tourism platforms. The review of tourism- and food-related literature is organised across Chapters 2 and 3, while the literature on artificial intelligence informs the framing of the research gaps and the design of the service concept. Together, these reviews cover the key concepts, theoretical frameworks, and current trends in the field. Beginning from this foundation ensures that the subsequent phases of research are informed by a well-grounded understanding of the subject

4.3 Phase 2 – analysis: case studies and user research

Building on the contextual foundation established in Phase 1, Phase 2 focuses on two parallel streams of empirical investigation: the analysis of existing digital tourism platforms through case studies, and the collection of primary data from both local hosts and travellers through questionnaires. Together, these two streams provide the analytical basis for the design development presented in Chapter 6. The findings from this phase are presented and discussed in Chapter 5.

4.3.1 Case studies and platform analysis

During this phase, a selection of seven existing digital tourism platforms was examined to map the current landscape and identify recurring patterns and limitations in how food-related experiences are currently organised and guided within the broader tourism ecosystem.

The selected platforms were grouped into two categories: food and experience-oriented platforms, and tourism platforms. Each platform was examined through a shared analytical framework, organised around five dimensions: food offering structure, AI and guidance intelligence, environmental sustainability, social and community value, and commercialisation intensity.

The analysis combined two complementary layers of evidence. The first was interface-based observation through screenshots of home pages, search flows, and service

pages. The second was cross-case synthesis through comparative radar charts, which functioned as a visual tool to make structural contrasts and imbalances more visible across the selected platforms. The findings and design implications from this analysis are presented in Chapter 5.

4.3.2 Host questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed to explore local residents' willingness to offer food-related experiences within a responsible tourism context. It examined hosting willingness, perceived boundaries, safety concerns, motivations, and expectations regarding digital mediation. Participants were 17 adult residents aged between 30 and 50 years, with backgrounds across creative fields, education, services, and small local businesses. Data were collected through Google Forms and partly through paper-based questionnaires.

4.3.3 Traveller questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed to investigate travellers' expectations, preferences, and attitudes toward local food experiences during travel. It examined perceptions of authenticity, responsibility, timing of suggestions, trust, and openness to digital support. Participants were 26 adult travellers, both domestic and international, travelling individually, as couples, or in small groups. Data were collected mainly through Google Forms.

4.3.4 Data collection logic and ethical considerations

Both questionnaires followed basic research ethics principles, including voluntary participation, anonymity, and informed consent. Participants were informed that the study was conducted for academic purposes and were assured that no personally identifiable information was collected.

All responses collected through digital and paper-based questionnaires were combined into a single dataset to allow for consistent handling. Quantitative and qualitative data were reviewed and grouped into themes to support comparison between host and traveller perspectives. The analysis and interpretation of these findings are presented in Chapter 5.

4.4 Phase 3 — design: service concept development

Building on the analytical findings from Phase 2, Phase 3 focuses on developing the service concept for a responsible food tourism experience. This phase translates the identified needs, mismatches, and opportunities into design objectives, service logic, and interaction structure. The full development of the service concept is presented in Chapter 6.

4.5 Phase 4 — evaluation: design development and representation

The fourth phase translates the service concept into a concrete design representation, including the offering map, personas, user journey, and interface design. It also reflects on the implications, limitations, and scalability of the proposed service. The full design development and evaluation are presented in Chapter 7.

5

Analysis and Synthesis of Findings

By case studies & surveys

5 — Analysis and synthesis of findings

5.1 What exists today: platform landscape

This section examines how current digital tourism platforms position, structure, and mediate food-related experiences within the broader travel journey. Building on the exploratory case study phase described in the previous chapter, the aim is to develop a comparative understanding of the existing digital landscape in which food, travel, sustainability, and local participation are currently organized.

Rather than reading each platform as an isolated example, the selected cases are considered as part of a broader tourism ecosystem. This makes it possible to observe how different platforms frame access to food experiences, how they communicate sustainability and community value, how they represent hosts and local actors, and how they connect food-related offers to accommodation, mobility, and the wider travel process.

To support this analysis, the platforms were examined through a shared analytical lens. The section combines two complementary forms of evidence: first, interface-based observation through screenshots of home pages, search flows, result pages, and service pages; second, cross-case interpretation through comparative synthesis radar charts. Together, these materials make it possible to identify recurring patterns, structural limitations, and emerging design opportunities before moving into the discussion of mismatches and intervention areas in the following sections.

5.1.1 Analytical framework and use of interface evidence and comparative synthesis radar charts

To support a structured comparison across the selected platforms, a shared analytical framework was developed to examine how food experiences are currently integrated within digital tourism services. The aim was not simply to compare what each platform offers, but also to understand how these offers are made visible, searchable, interpretable, and actionable throughout the user journey.

The framework was applied through interface-based observation. This involved examining how platforms frame food experiences, what kinds of filters and categories are available, how hosts and local value are represented, and whether sustainability, responsibility, or community benefit are made legible in the interface. This observation was particularly useful for identifying practical issues such as high cognitive load, weak personalisation, limited filtering logic, missing sustainability cues, and the separation between accommodation and food-related services.

This initial framework was intentionally broad. Examining a digital platform thoroughly requires looking at many aspects at once, and the framework therefore produced a large and detailed set of metrics. This made it comprehensive, but in this form it was difficult to analyse and compare directly across cases.

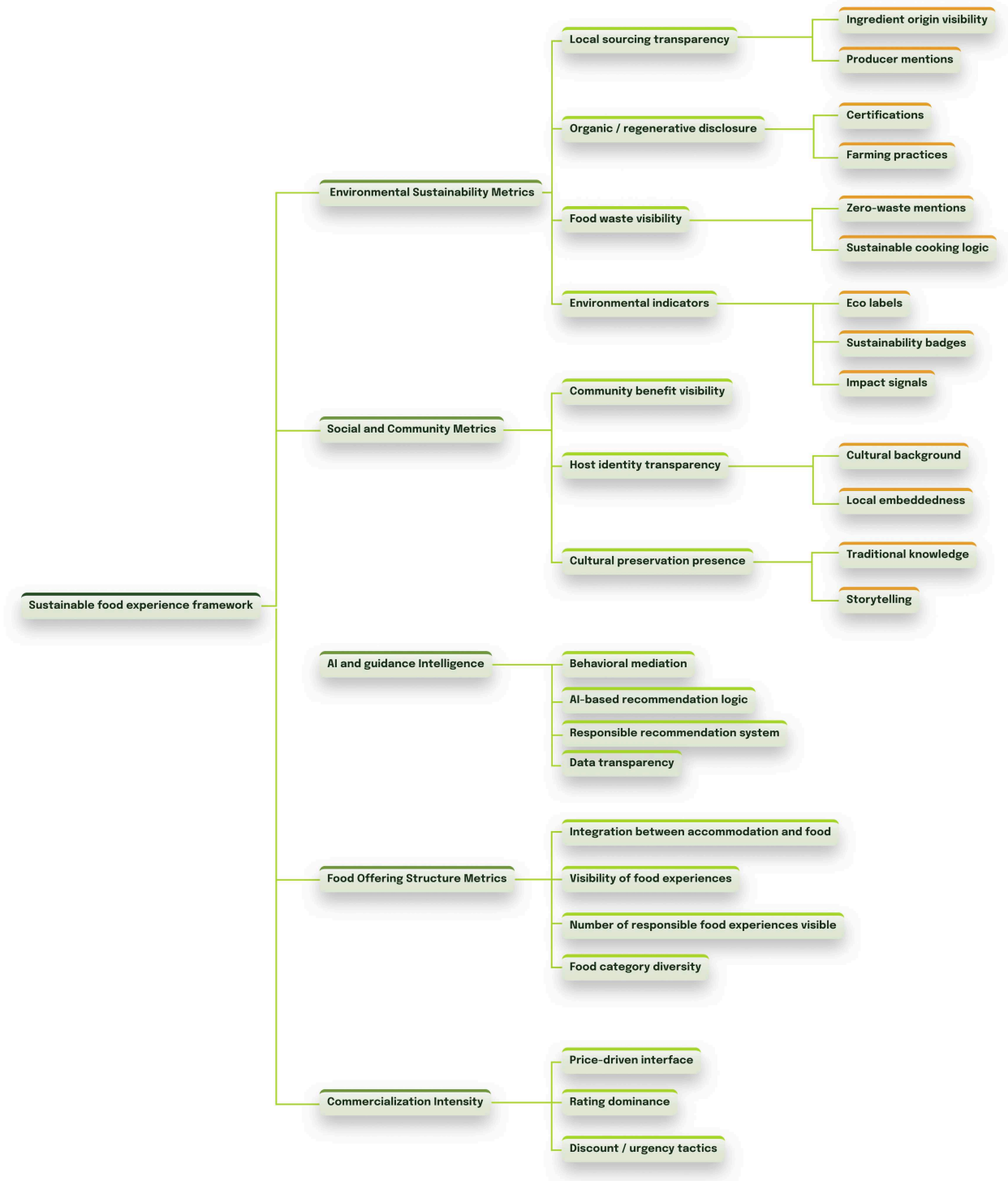


Figure 11: Initial analytical framework used to structure the comparative analysis before synthesis into the final radar chart dimensions (Author's own elaboration)

Although this level of detail was hard to use for direct comparison, it proved valuable beyond the analysis phase: the same framework is carried forward and refined in Chapter 7 (Section 7.1.1), where its dimensions are expanded into specific evaluation factors that guide the design principles of the proposed service.

Because the framework was too broad to compare visually, it was condensed into five broader dimensions and translated into comparative radar charts. For each platform, every dimension was rated on a five-point scale, where a higher score reflected a stronger presence, visibility, or legibility of that quality across the interface, based on the interface observation and the screenshots. The resulting scores form the axes of the radar charts presented in the following sections. Because the ratings rest on interpretive analysis of interface evidence rather than internal platform data, the radar charts are intended as a comparative and indicative tool rather than an exact measurement.

The five radar dimensions, and the keywords considered under each, are:

Food offering structure: accommodation–food integration, visibility of food experiences, responsible food experiences presented by locals, food category diversity.

AI & guidance intelligence: behavioural guidance, AI-based recommendation logic, responsible recommendation logic, personalisation.

Environmental sustainability: local sourcing transparency, organic / regenerative disclosure, food-waste visibility, environmental indicators.

Social & community metrics: community benefit visibility, host identity transparency, cultural preservation.

Platform value logic: price-driven design, rating dominance, discount / urgency tactics.

5.1.2 Food and experience-based platforms

1. Eatwith (Global)

Eatwith, launched in 2014 and originating in France and the United States, is a global platform focused on food- and experience-based tourism.

The platform is built around social dining and shared meals. As visible in the interface, host profiles, domestic settings, and personal descriptions are central elements in shaping how the experience is understood. Food is presented not only as something to consume, but as a social and cultural activity organized around meeting, hosting, and exchange. At the same time, the platform frames food as a standalone experience, with no direct connection to the user's accommodation or wider travel journey.

Strengths

- Strong experiential storytelling
- Clear host visibility
- Pre-booking contact option
- Clear food categories
- Dietary filter support

Weaknesses

- Weak sourcing transparency
- No sustainability filters
- Limited community benefit visibility
- Strong rating- and price-driven logic
- Standalone food experience with high intimacy at private home
- Guided responsible participation

Opportunities for Design

- Responsible food filtering
- Sustainability visibility
- Local sourcing transparency
- Community benefit indicators
- Explainable recommendations
- Accommodation-to-food connection

1. Eatwith (Global)

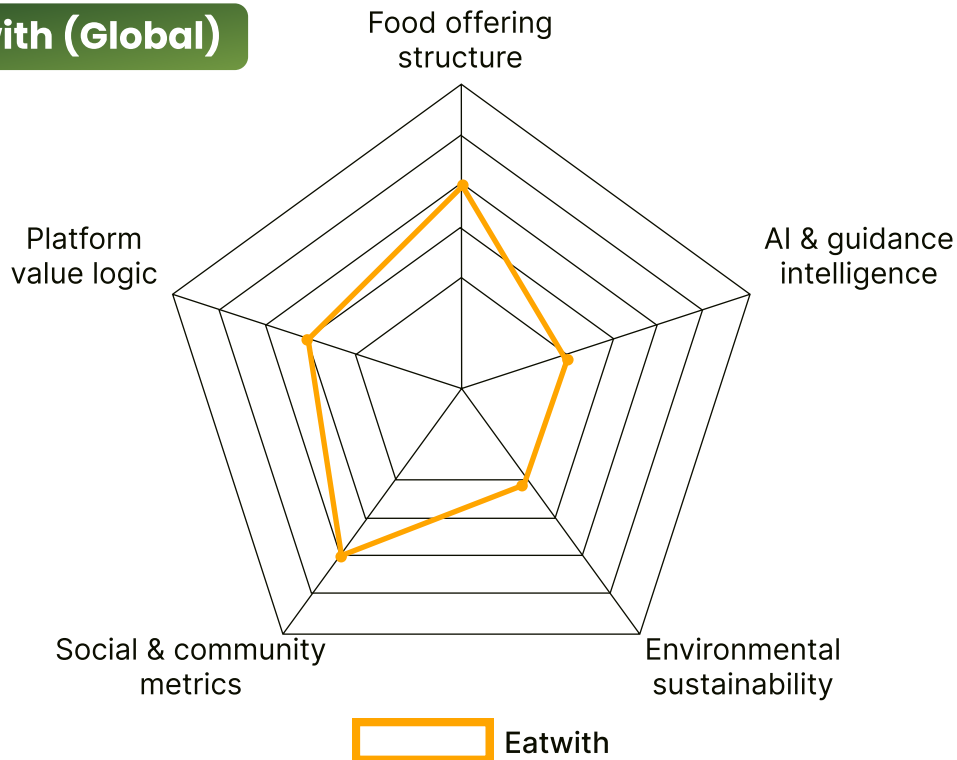


Figure 12: Comparative synthesis radar chart of Eatwith across the selected analytical dimensions

1. Home page

Food-specialized platform

Strong host visibility

Private/public event flexibility

Standalone food platform

No accommodation integration

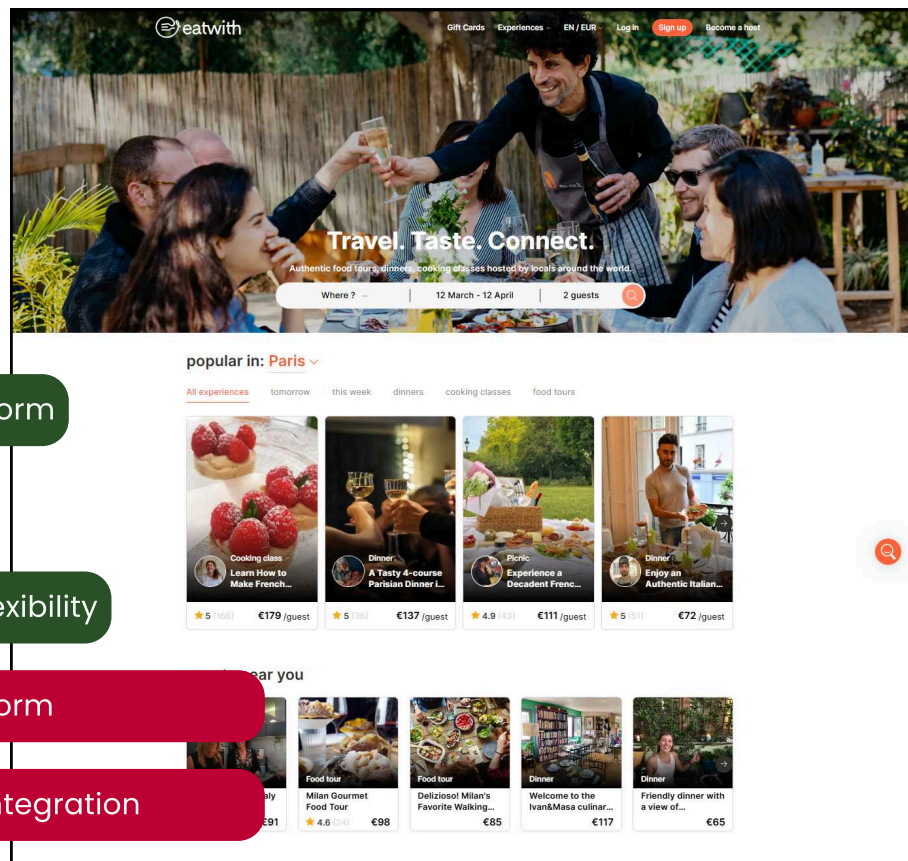


Figure 13: Screenshot taken from the Eatwith homepage

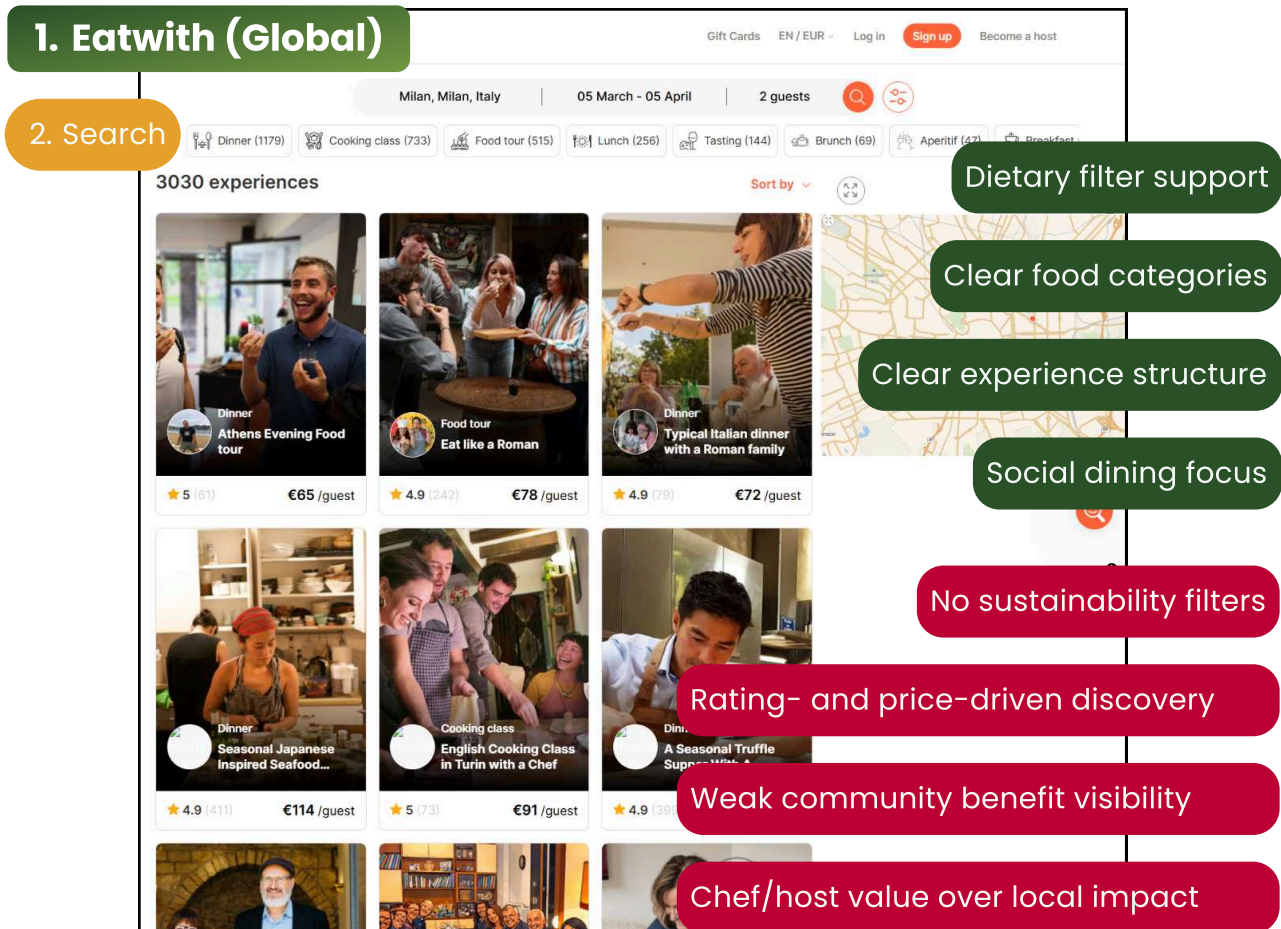


Figure 14: Screenshot taken from the Eatwith Search page

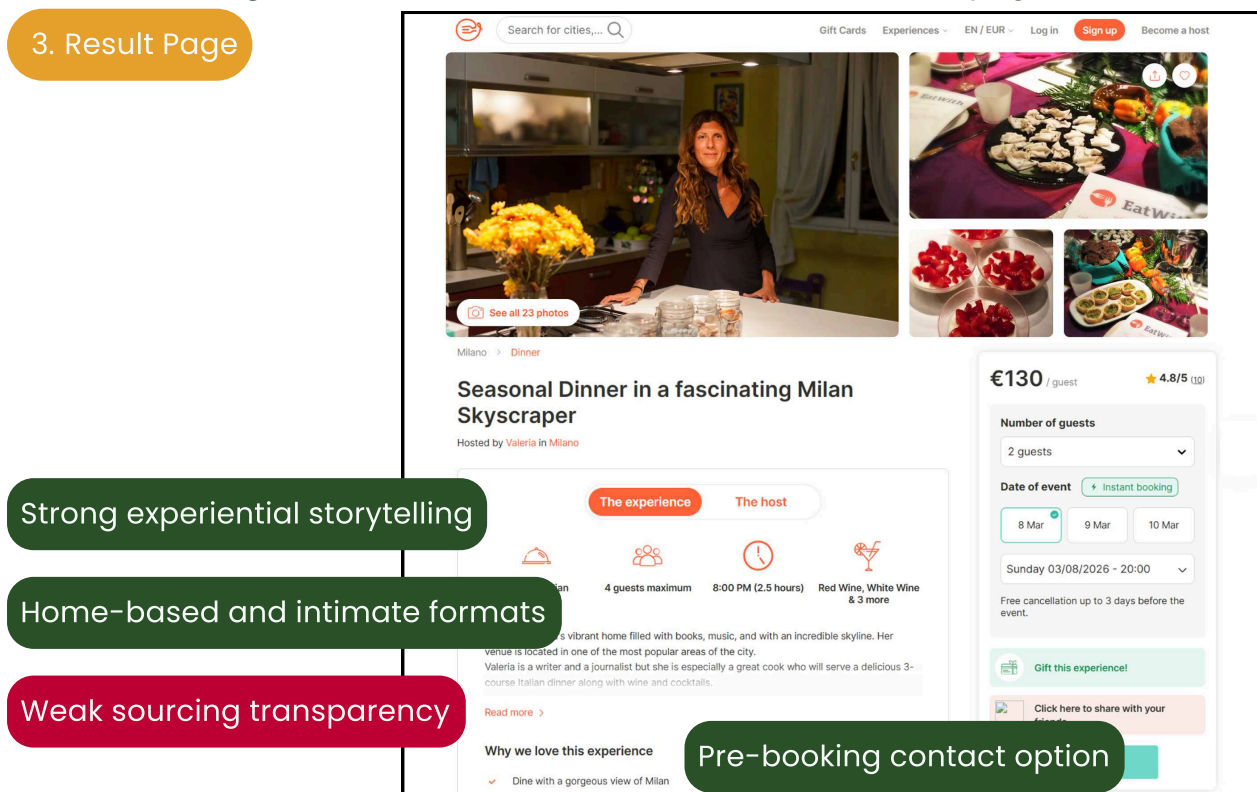


Figure 15: Screenshot taken from the Eatwith Result page

2. Devour Tours (National)

It was launched in 2012 and originated in Spain, specializing in guided culinary tours that connect gastronomy with local culture.

Devour shows the value of curated storytelling, but it also reveals an exclusion gap: when the platform does not operate in a city, the travellers receives almost no cultural food guidance at all. This suggests a design opportunity not only to curate experiences where services exist, but also to provide lighter forms of orientation, interpretation, and local food knowledge in places where direct booking is not available. In the same way, the platform's video and social layer points to the potential of participatory content, but currently this voice remains institutional rather than local. A stronger model would allow local actors, producers, and residents to contribute to the cultural visibility of food places more directly. While Devour communicates care, quality, and cultural depth effectively, this care is unevenly distributed: it is concentrated in the cities where the platform already operates, while destinations outside its curated network remain largely invisible.

Strengths

- Strong cultural and heritage storytelling
- Curated structure with low cognitive load
- Social/video content makes the platform feel active
- Good visibility of selected guides and vendors
- Clear service structure, including dietary support

Weaknesses

- Trust is built mainly through awards, reviews, and media endorsement
- Social and video content are platform-produced, not community-created
- Responsibility is narrated by the platform rather than demonstrated through local participation
- Coverage is limited to a small number of touristic cities

Opportunities for Design

- Open the social layer to local voices, hosts, and producers
- Extend food guidance beyond the currently covered cities
- Build trust through ecosystem transparency, not only platform authority
- Connect curated food discovery with accommodation and trip context
- Support more flexible participation beyond fixed guided tours

2. Devour Tours (National)

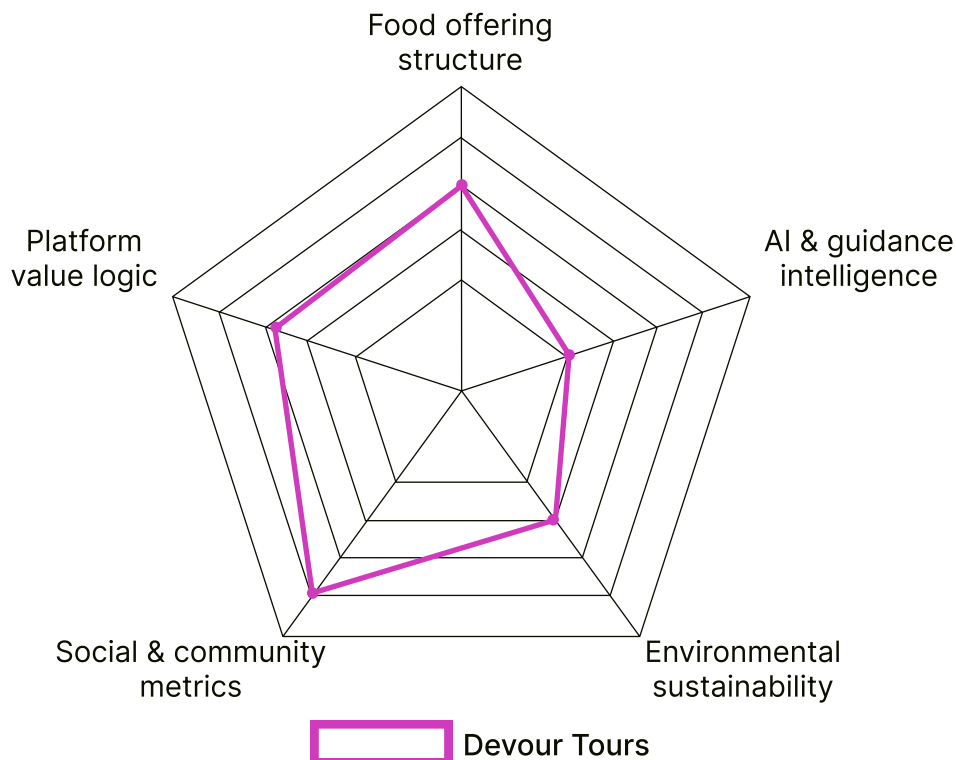


Figure 16: Comparative synthesis radar chart of Devour across the selected analytical

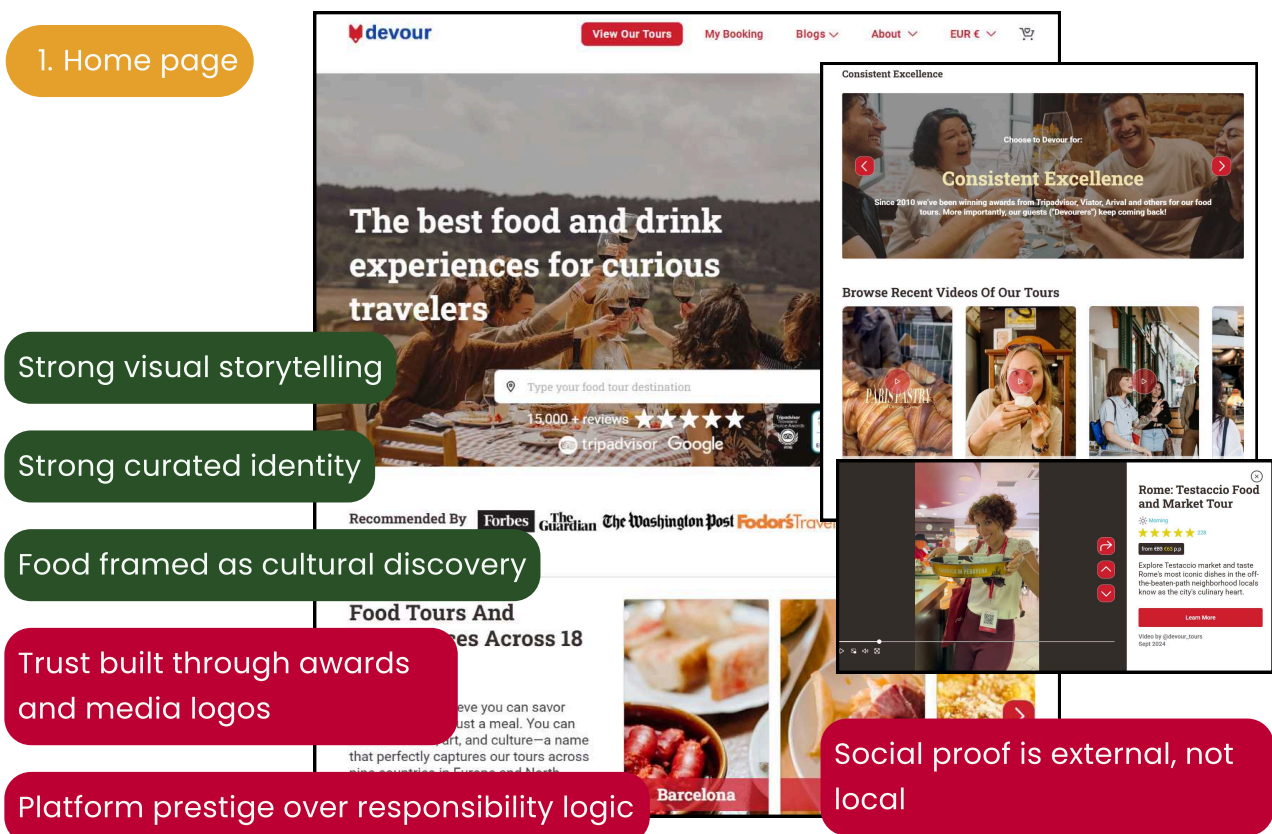


Figure 17: Screenshot taken from the Devour homepage

2. Devour Tours (National)

2. Search

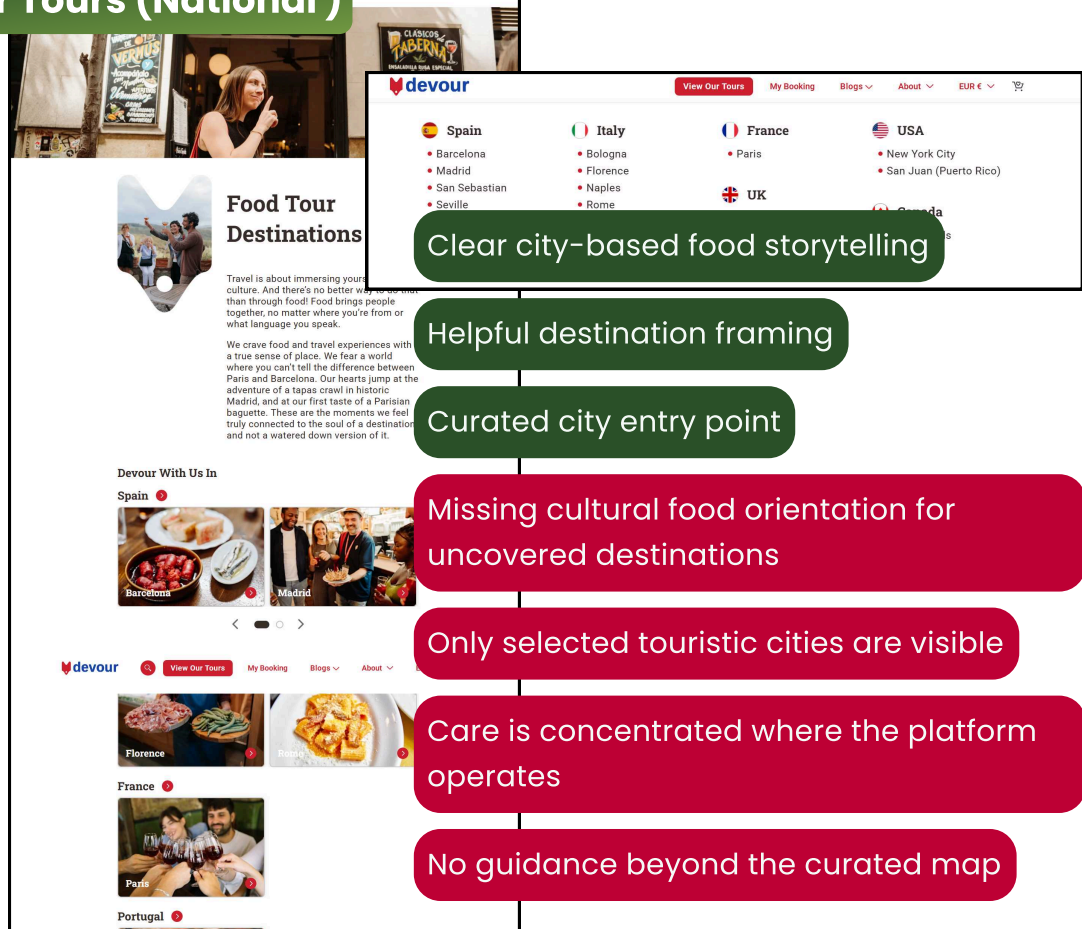


Figure 18: Screenshot taken from the Devour search page

1. Result Page

Good vendor and guide visibility

Structured itinerary and narrative clarity

Dietary support is visible

Reduced uncertainty before booking

Experience remains pre-packaged

Responsibility is narrated, not interactive

Local sourcing is described, not explorable

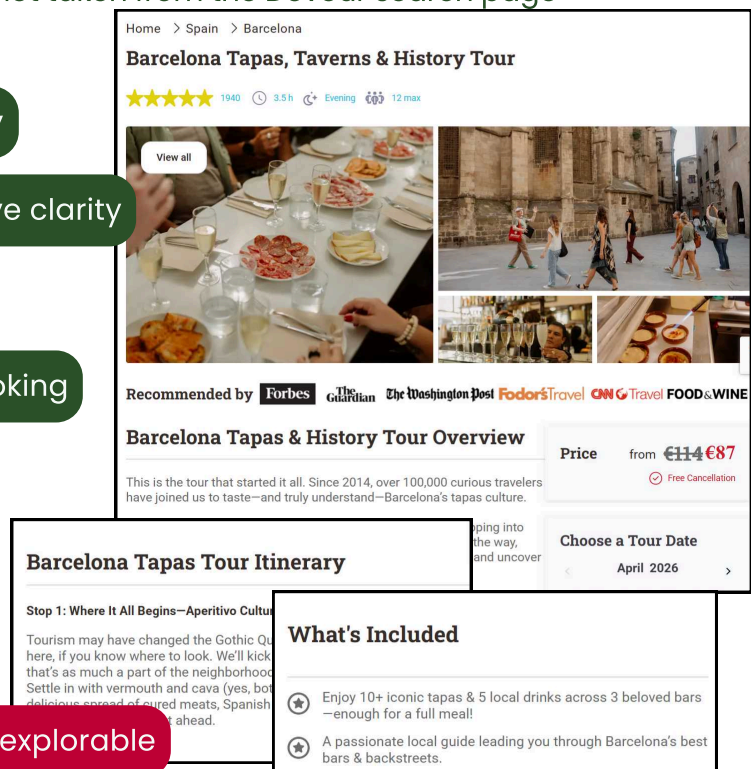


Figure 19: Screenshot taken from the Devour result page

3. Nagomi Visit / Borderless Visit

Nagomi, operating as Borderless Visit in Japan, and was launched in 2011. It offers volunteer-based cultural exchange through home-cooked meals with local families.

It is a platform built around cultural exchange rather than conventional culinary tourism. As shown in the interface, its main promise is not simply food discovery, but the possibility of meeting local families and sharing everyday life through home-cooked meals. The platform presents itself as a volunteer-based community rather than a commercial marketplace, and this gives it a very different value logic from other food tourism platforms. Food here is framed less as a product and more as a medium for human connection, mutual hospitality, and cultural learning. Unlike conventional booking platforms, Nagomi structures the encounter as a mutual invitation rather than an instant purchase, preserving a stronger sense of reciprocity between host and travellers.

Strengths

- Strong anti-commercial and human-centered logic
- Deep cultural intimacy and everyday home context
- Clear host-guest mutual matching process
- Strong community-based value proposition
- Food framed as relational and cultural exchange

Weaknesses

- High friction in the booking and matching journey
- Limited food taxonomy and filtering structure
- Weak searchability of sustainability-related practices
- Less immediate and scalable than platform-based discovery
- No connection to accommodation or wider travel planning

Opportunities for Design

- Keep low commercial pressure while reducing friction
- Add responsibility and sustainability tags for home-based experiences
- Support cultural etiquette and guided participation before the visit
- Introduce lighter personalization without losing mutuality
- Connect home-based food exchange with the wider travel journey

3. Nagomi Visit / Borderless Visit

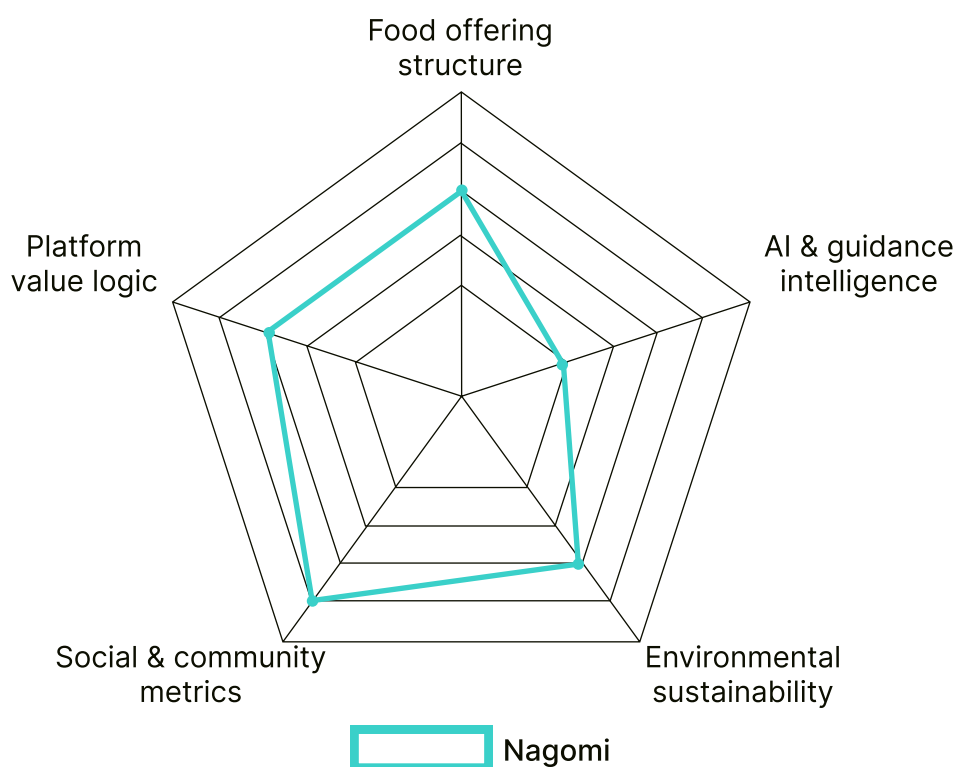


Figure 20: Comparative synthesis radar chart of Nagomi across the selected analytical dimensions

3. Nagomi Visit / Borderless Visit

Volunteer-based community logic

Food as a way to meet local families

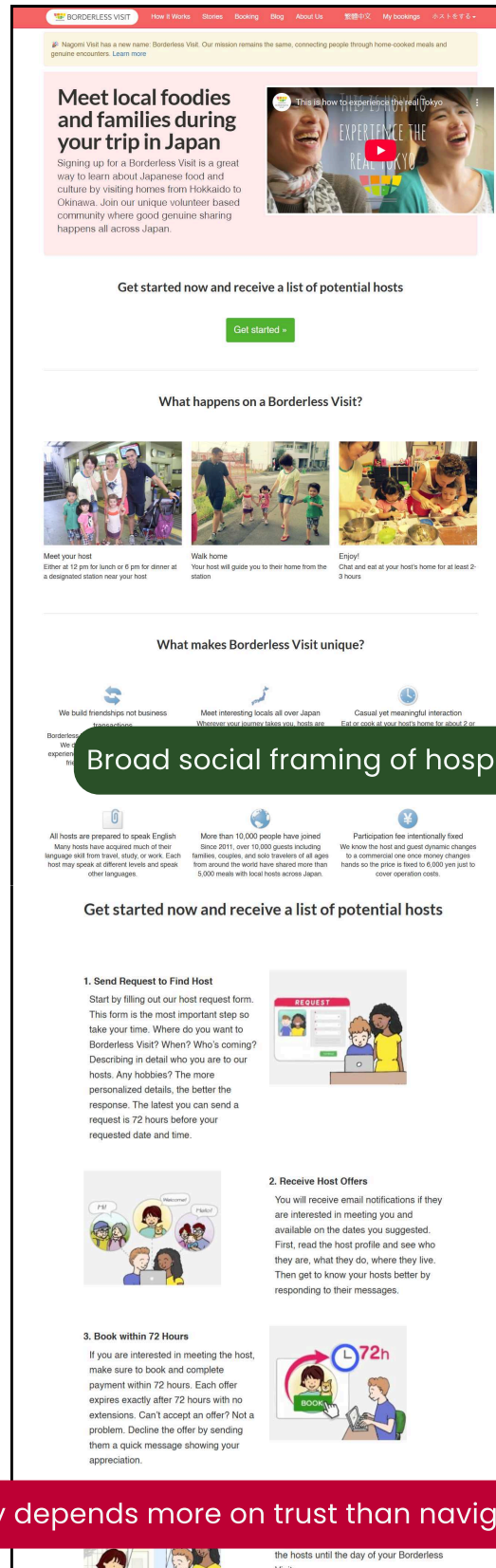
Limited structured food discovery

Sustainability is implicit, not searchable



Mutual interest over instant booking

Weak filtering and search support



Discovery depends more on trust than navigation

Weak user journey for visualization in websites

Figure 21: Screenshot taken from the Nagomi website

Interpretation of food platforms

The radar chart highlights a consistent pattern across food- and experience-based platforms. These platforms perform strongly in dimensions related to food offering structure and social and community interaction, reflecting their emphasis on storytelling, host presence, and culturally immersive formats. Food is positioned as a shared and experiential activity, often centered around identity, narrative, and personal connection.

At the same time, performance in environmental sustainability and AI-guidance support remains limited. Responsibility is rarely structured through clear indicators, filters, or verification systems, and digital guidance is minimal beyond basic search and selection. Platform value logic also remains relatively balanced but does not actively support responsible decision-making.

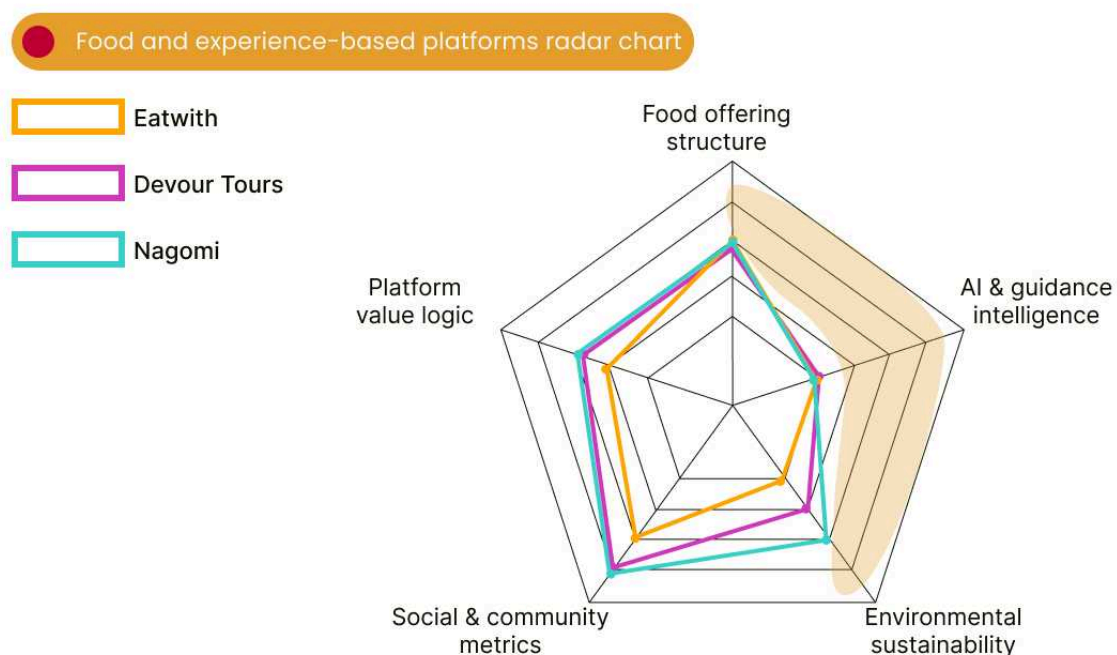


Figure 22: Comparative synthesis radar chart for Food and Experience-Based Platforms

As the chart shows, the yellow area stretches outward on food offering structure and social & community metrics, while pulling sharply inward on environmental sustainability and AI & guidance intelligence, and sitting mid-range on platform value logic. This uneven, lopsided shape reflects platforms built around cultural and social engagement rather than around responsibility or digital guidance. Overall, these platforms enable meaningful participation and cultural engagement, but lack the mechanisms needed to make responsibility visible, searchable, and actionable within the user journey.

5.1.3 Tourism and experience platforms

1. Responsible Travel (Global)

It was launched in 2000 and originated in the United Kingdom, promoting ethical and sustainable tourism through curated travel packages.

It is a global tourism platform that positions responsibility as its core identity rather than an additional feature. Responsibility is communicated consistently across the interface through editorial language, destination framing, travel guides, and content sections, making responsible tourism visible and legible throughout the homepage narrative and filtering structure. At the same time, the platform operates largely as a travel agency model, directing users toward curated holiday packages rather than flexible combinations of accommodation, food, and local experiences. Even without specific food offerings, it provides destination-based orientation through countries, places, and thematic content, reflecting a broader form of guidance than most other platforms analysed.

Strengths

- Responsibility is highly visible
- Strong storytelling around ethical travel
- Consistent mission-led positioning
- Destination guidance beyond direct booking
- Travel education through content and guides

Weaknesses

- Package-based logic restricts user flexibility
- Functions more as a travel agency than an open platform
- Limited modular choice of single experiences
- Food is not developed as a distinct experiential layer
- Weak connection between responsibility and everyday local food participation

Opportunities for Design

- Connect responsible travel values with flexible food experiences
- Move from package selection to more modular journey building
- Introduce food as a visible cultural and relational layer
- Link ethical destination guidance with local host-led participation
- Combine strong responsibility communication with more personalized travel mediation

1. Responsible Travel (Global)

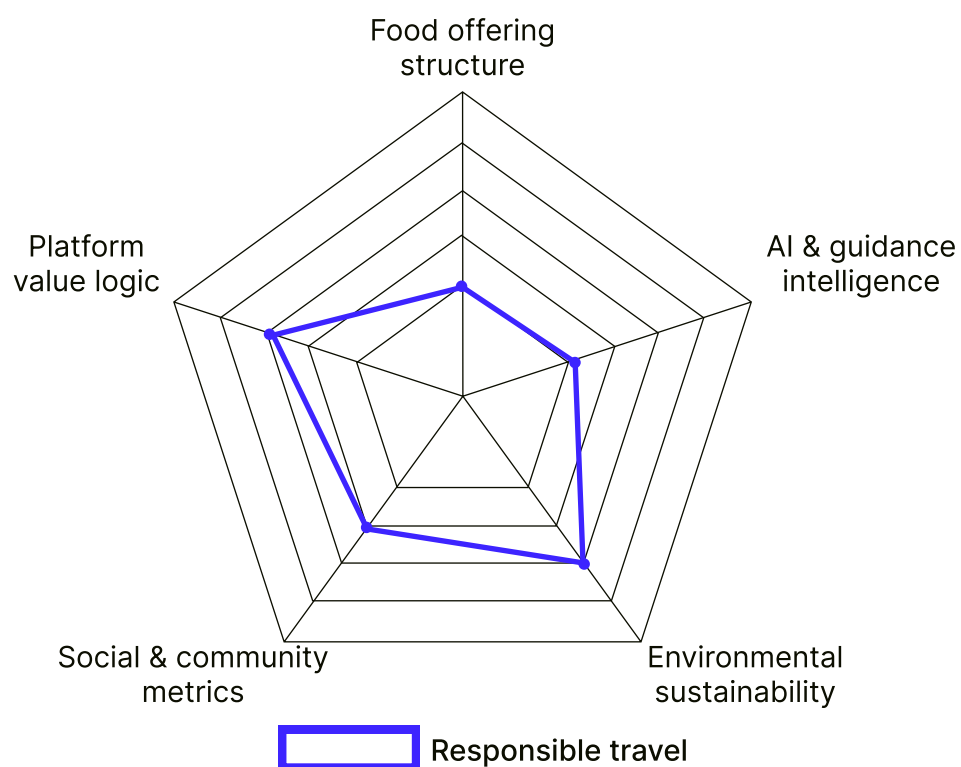


Figure 23: Comparative synthesis radar chart of Responsible travel

1. Responsible Travel (Global)

Responsibility is visible everywhere

Strong mission-led

Food is not a distinct experience layer

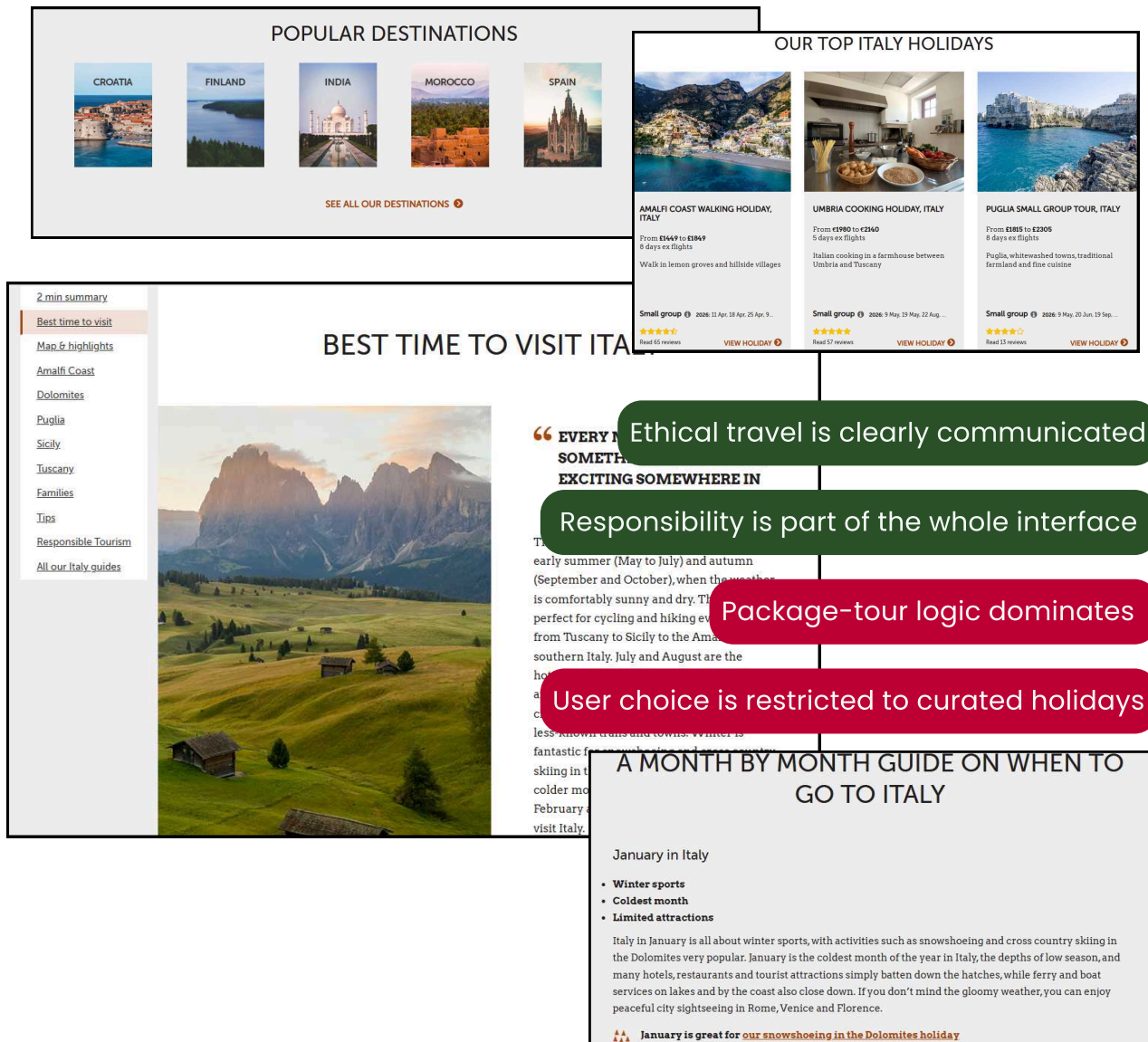
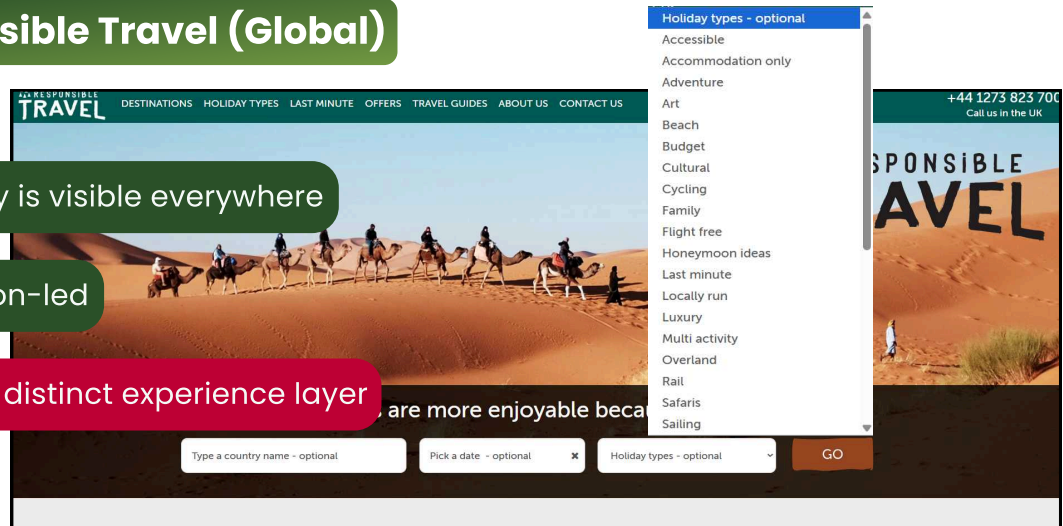


Figure 24: Screenshot taken from the Responsible website

2. TripAdvisor

It was launched in 2000 and originated in the United States, serving as a global travel and booking platform with a strong emphasis on user-generated reviews and ratings.

As visible in the interface, it offers a wide range of food-related activities, divided into categories such as dining experiences, cooking classes, and food tours. The platform is strong in visibility, searchability, and spatial browsing, especially through map integration and category-based exploration. However, its overall logic is strongly commercial. The interface is oriented toward ranking, and conversion, while responsibility and sustainability remain almost entirely absent from the search and decision process.

Strengths

- Large and highly visible food inventory
- Clear category structure
- Strong map-based discovery
- Functional filters for time, budget, and language
- AI-assisted itinerary suggestion

Weaknesses

- Strong conversion-focused interface
- High cognitive load from similar options
- Low personalization despite AI support
- No sustainability or responsibility filters
- Weak host and community visibility

Opportunities for Design

- Intent-based and explainable recommendations
- Responsible food filtering and value taxonomy
- Stronger community benefit visibility
- Better differentiation between similar options
- Context-aware curation linked to the travel journey

2. TripAdvisor

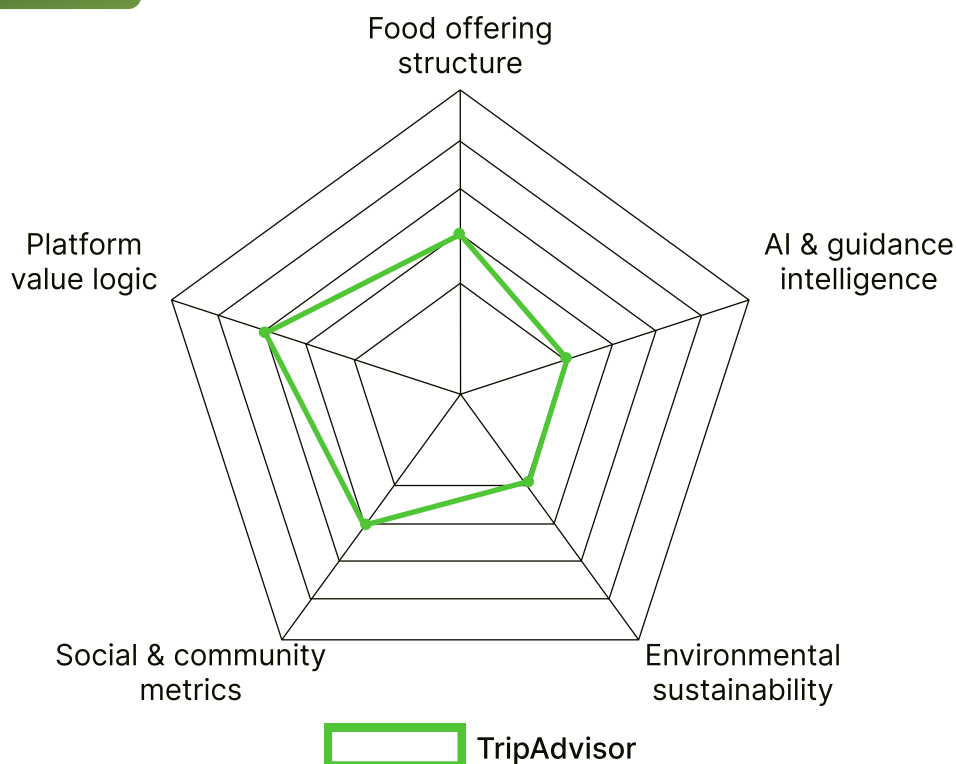


Figure 25: Comparative synthesis radar chart of TripAdvisor

1. Home page

Tripadvisor Plan with AI Rewards Discover Review Forums USD

Find places to eat

Search All Hotels Things to Do Restaurants Cruises

Restaurant or destination

Search

AI suggestion

Food suggestion

Commerciality rather sustainability

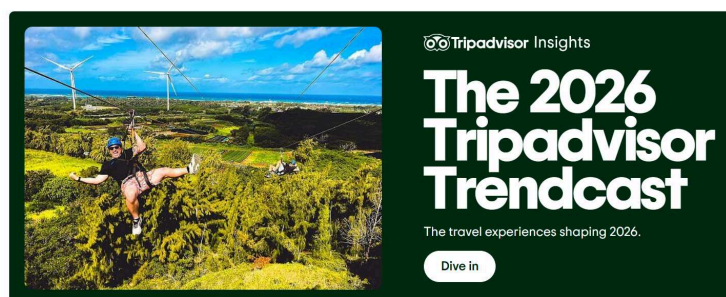


Figure 26: Screenshot taken from the TripAdvisor homepage

2. TripAdvisor

2. Search

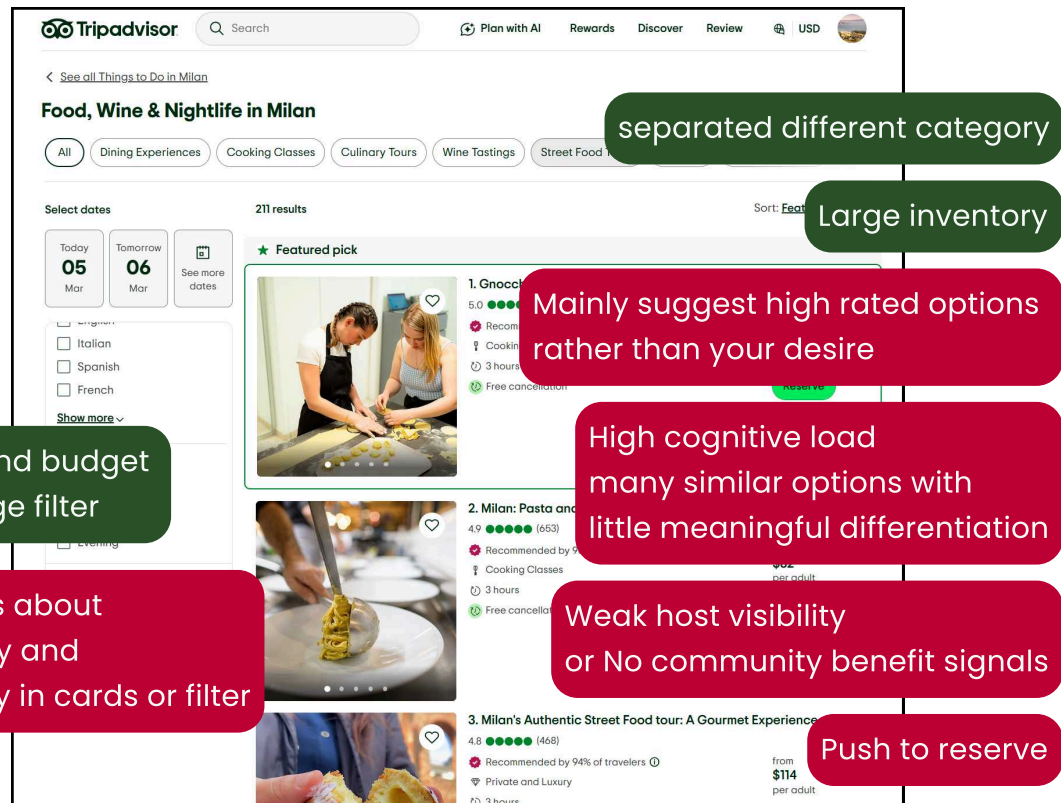


Figure 27: Screenshot taken from the TripAdvisor search page

3. Result page

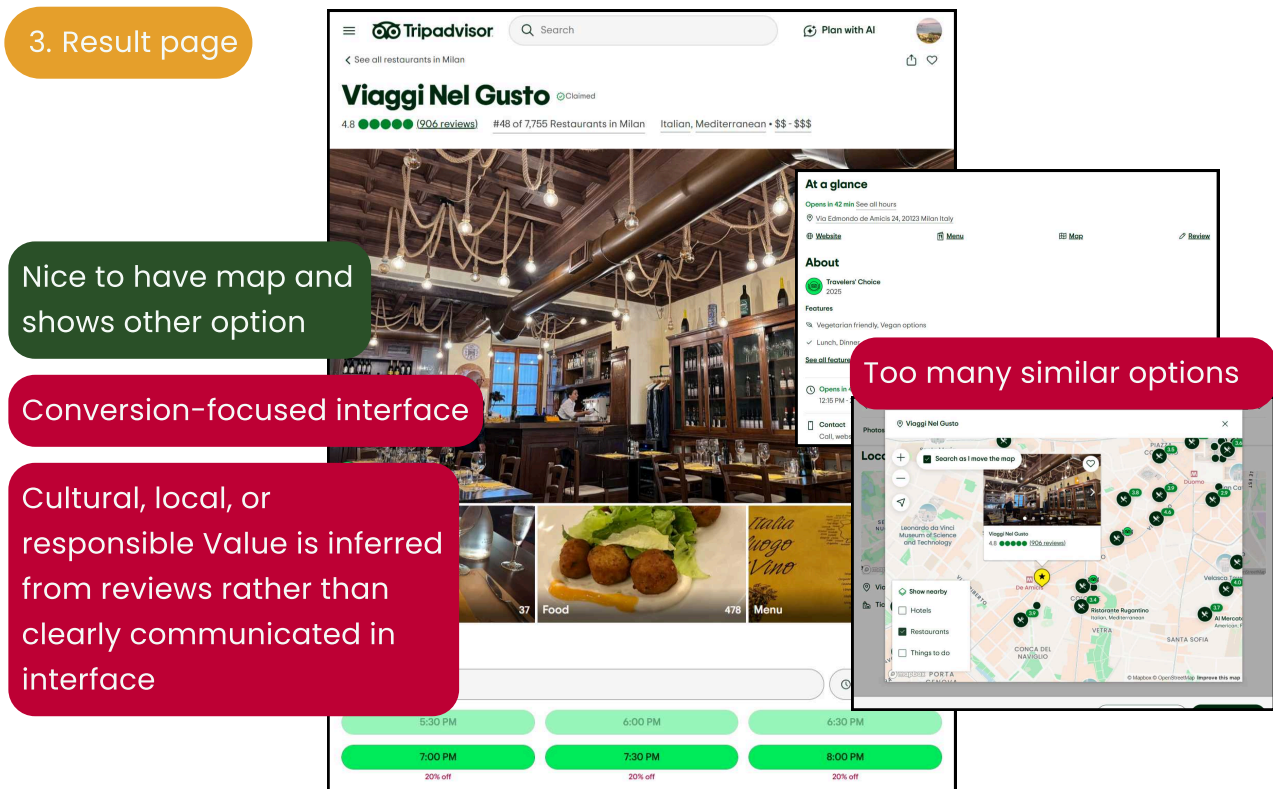
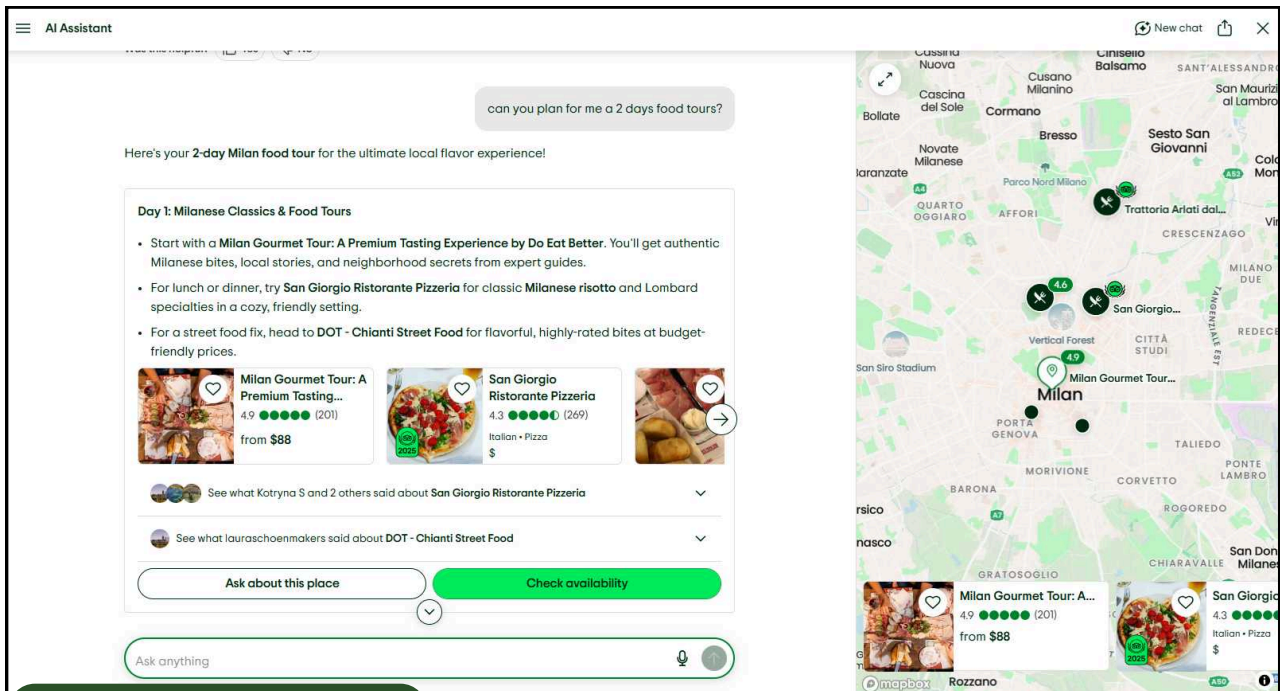


Figure 28: Screenshot taken from the TripAdvisor result page

2. TripAdvisor

4. Plan with AI



The only platform to have
an AI to suggestion

Show map

AI can create a journey, but not a truly personalized one, because it does not know your stay location, budget, diet, barriers, or specific needs.

AI focused on convenience again
suggested to you high rated options

Figure 29: Screenshot taken from the TripAdvisor plan with AI page

3. Airbnb

It was launched in 2008 and originated in the United States, revolutionizing short-term accommodation booking with a focus on local experiences and host-guest connections.

Airbnb is a particularly important case because it is the only platform in this comparison that contains both accommodation and food-related activities within the same ecosystem. In principle, this creates the possibility of a connected travel journey. In practice, however, the interface shows a clear separation between the stay and the food experience. On the homepage, food is barely visible as part of the travel offer, while the experiences and services pages frame food mainly as an activity, entertainment format, or chef-led service. The platform therefore extends the journey beyond accommodation, but does not actively mediate responsible participation in local food culture.

Strengths

- Strong host identity and trust cues
- Clear storytelling around experiences
- Food is present within the broader travel ecosystem
- Strong experience formats and visual framing
- Potential for a connected stay-to-experience journey

Weaknesses

- No mediation between stay and food
- Food is secondary to accommodation
- Discovery is driven by popularity, not user intent
- No sustainability or responsibility filters
- Limited and chef-centered food taxonomy

Opportunities for Design

- Build mediation between accommodation and food
- Make food more visible after booking
- Introduce responsibility-based filtering
- Develop intent-based and explainable recommendations
- Create broader and more inclusive food categories

3. Airbnb

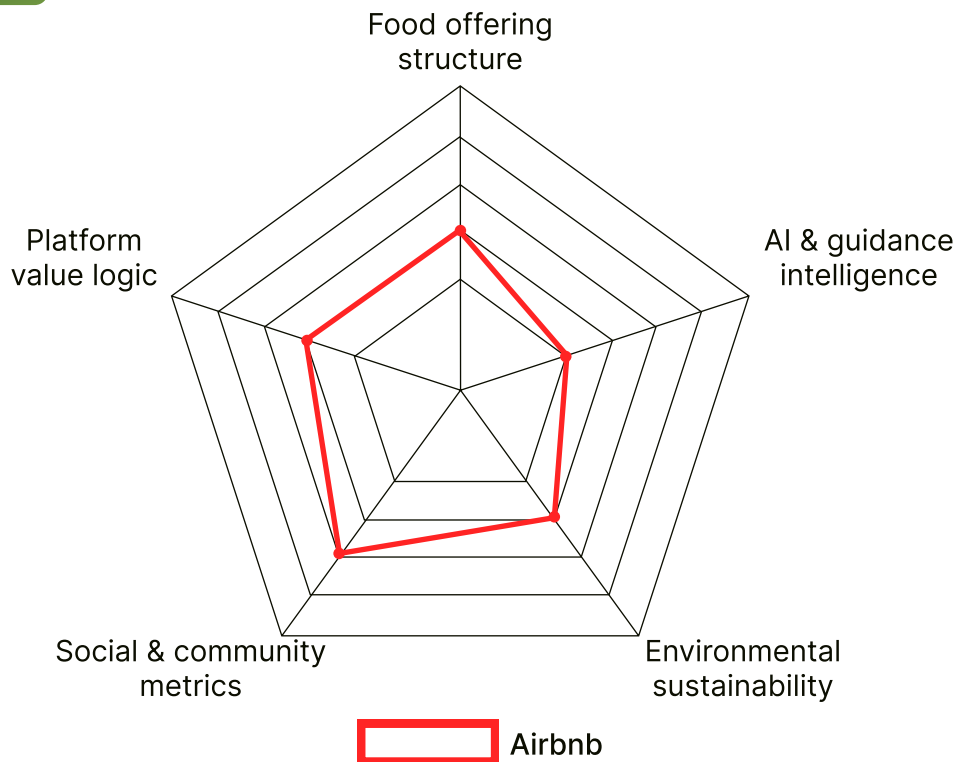


Figure 30: Comparative synthesis radar chart of Airbnb

1. Home page

Only platform linking stay and activities

Mission drift from community-sharing to mass tourism logic

Experiences added, but sustainability logic still missing in Homepage but not truly visible



Figure 31: Screenshot taken from the Airbnb homepage

3. Airbnb

2. Experience page

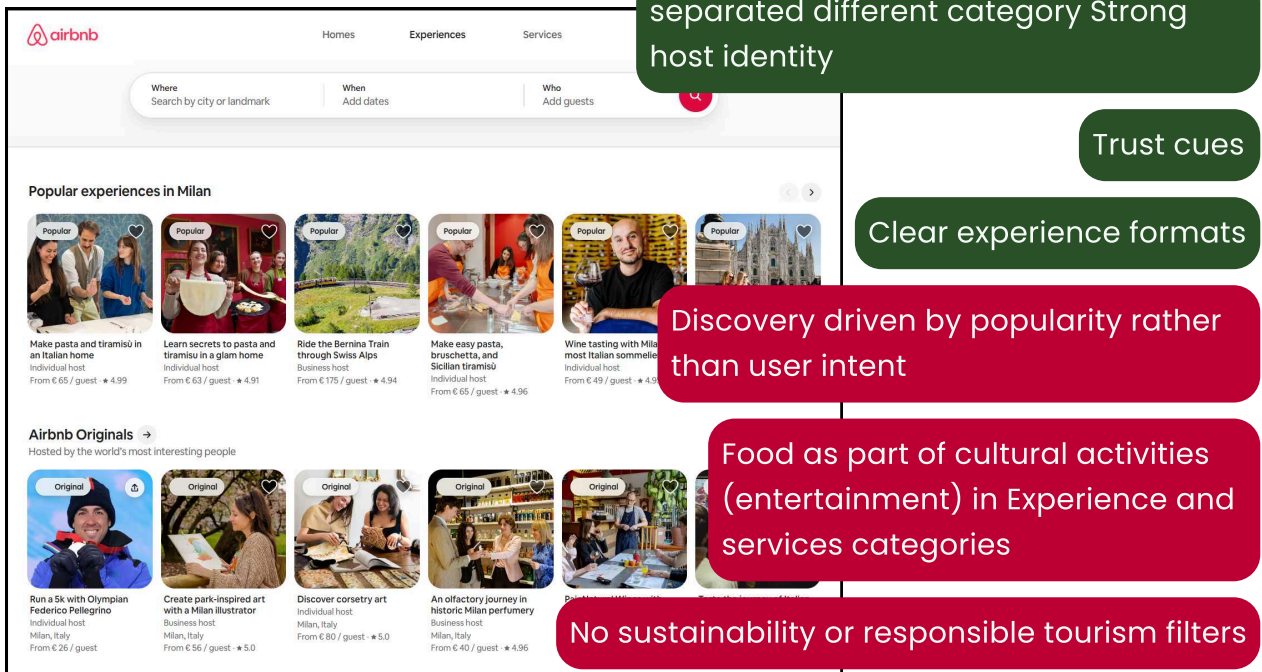


Figure 32: Screenshot taken from the Airbnb experience page

3. Service page

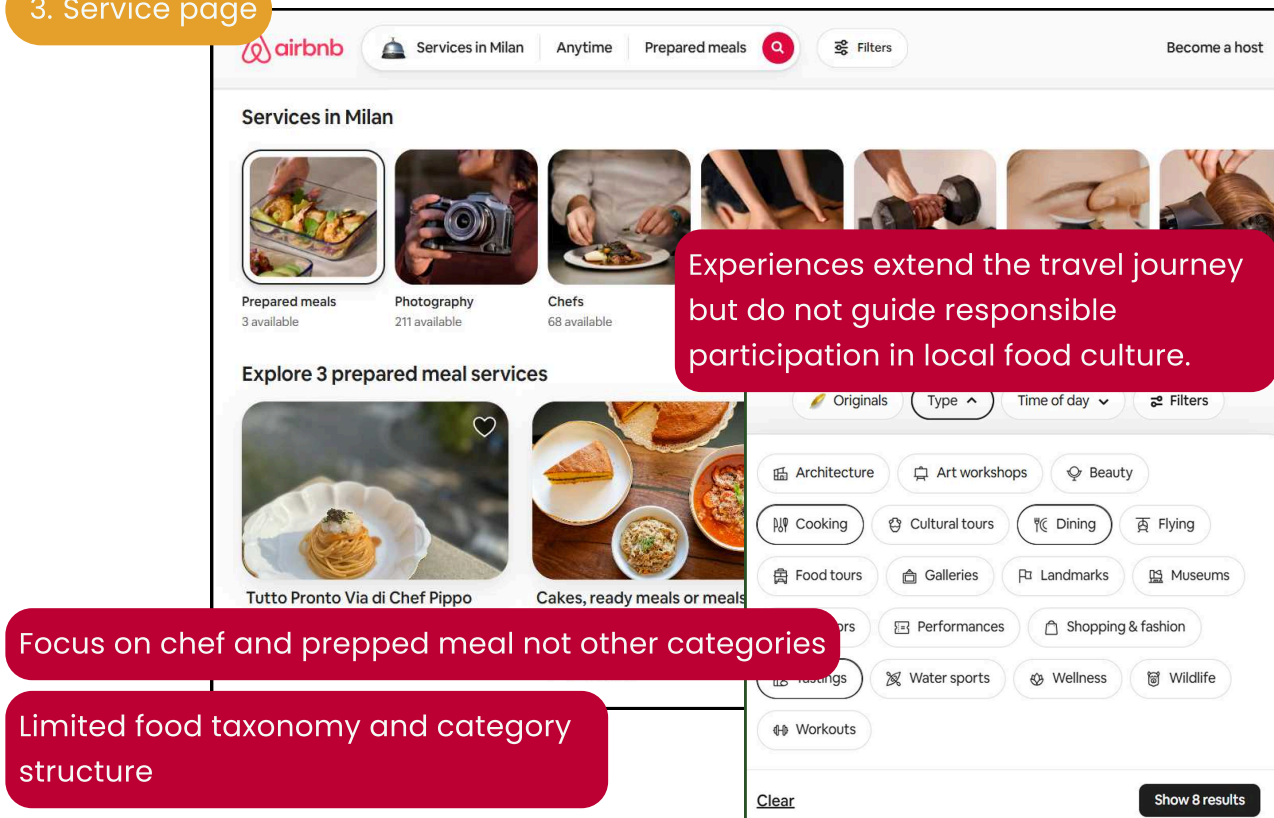


Figure 33: Screenshot taken from the Airbnb service page

3. Airbnb

4. Result page

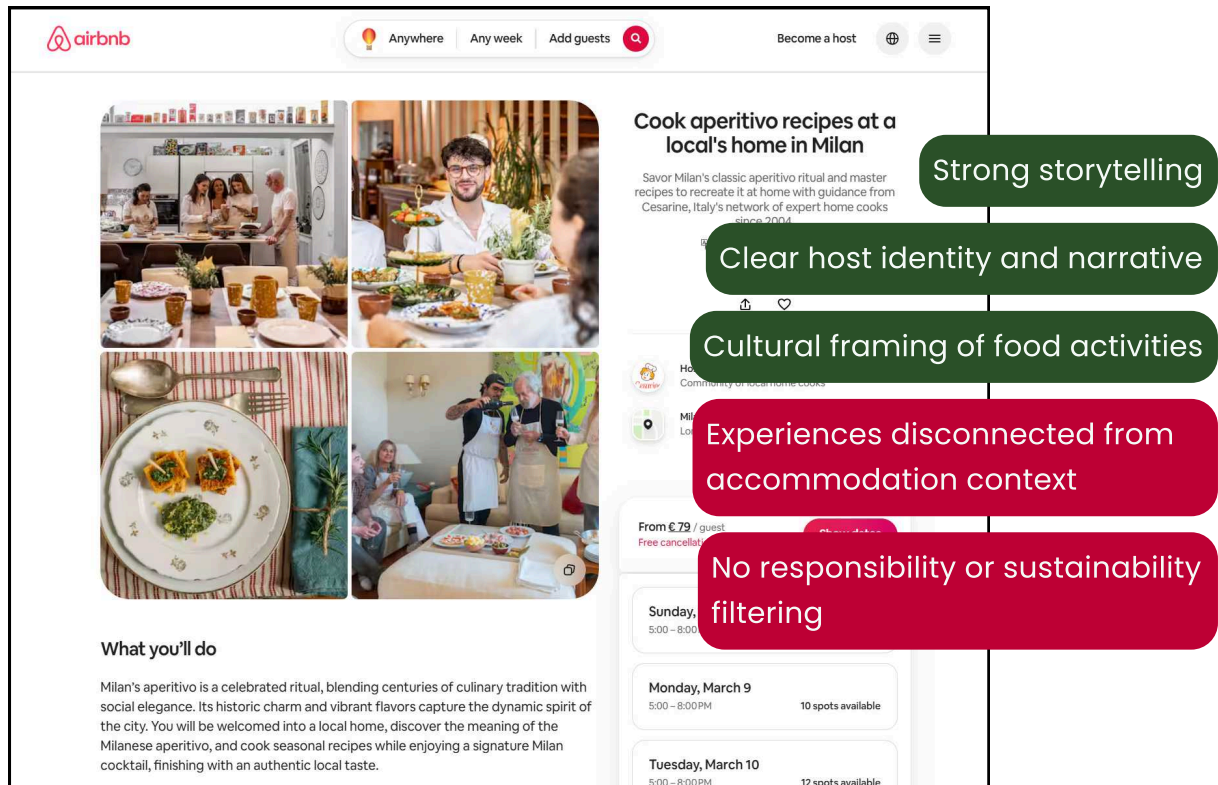


Figure 34: Screenshot taken from the Airbnb result page

5. Result page

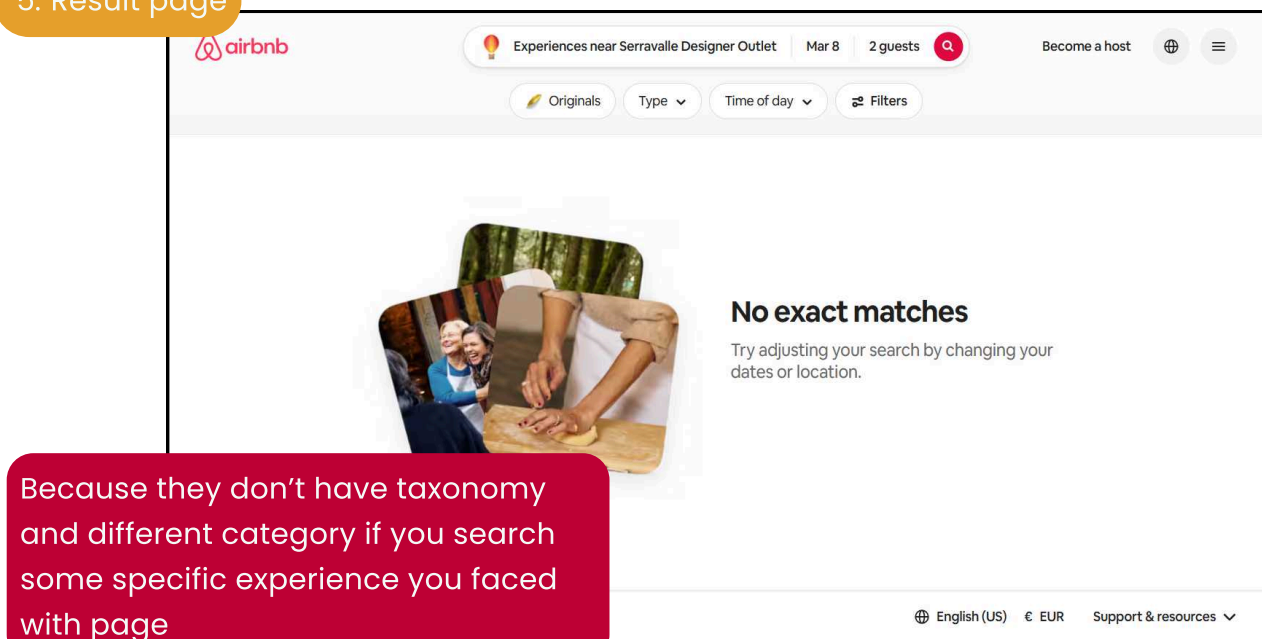


Figure 35: Screenshot taken from the Airbnb result page for error page

4. Ecobnb

It was launched in 2015 and originated in Italy, focusing on environmentally friendly and sustainable accommodations.

Ecobnb's interface showcases strong sustainability positioning, featuring messages like "Discover the authenticity of travelling with nature at heart" and focusing heavily on responsible stays. The platform excels at clear eco-certification criteria, displaying indicators of how environmentally conscious each stay is (e.g., CO2 savings or water use reduction). However, Ecobnb's interface reveals a major gap in the broader travel journey: it lacks an integrated food experience ecosystem. The platform's focus is entirely on accommodations, leaving a significant gap in terms of local food experiences, which would complement its sustainability-driven accommodation offers.

Strengths

- Strong sustainability transparency with visible impact indicators
- Clear trust signals through eco-certifications and ratings
- Respects host boundaries via a contact request system

Weaknesses

- No food experience ecosystem beyond stays and transport
- Responsibility ends at accommodation booking
- No mediation between stay and food discovery

Opportunities for Design

- Mediation between stay and sustainable food
- Post-booking journey continuation
- Local producer visibility and connection

4. Ecobnb

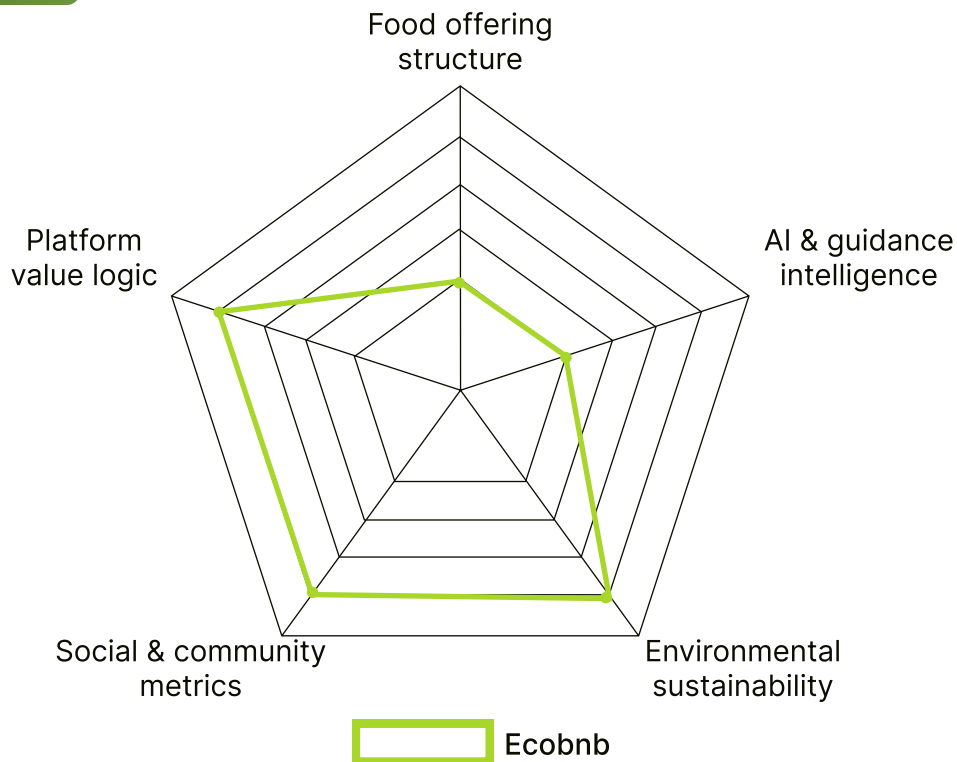


Figure 36: Comparative synthesis radar chart of Ecobnb

1. Home page

Strong sustainability positioning

No food experience ecosystem

No mediation between stay and food

not extend the journey just offer transportation

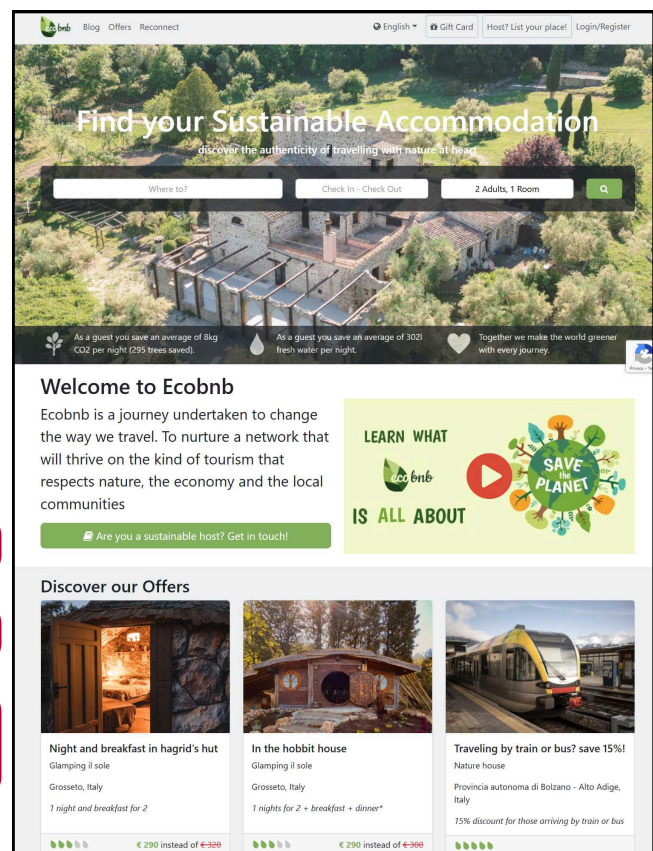
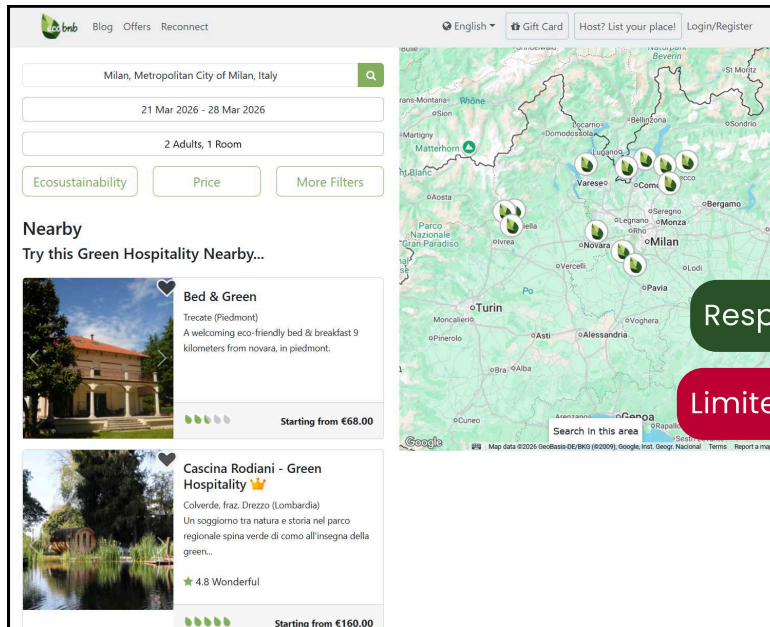


Figure 37: Screenshot taken from the Ecobnb home page

4. Ecobnb

2. Search page



Clear eco-certification criteria

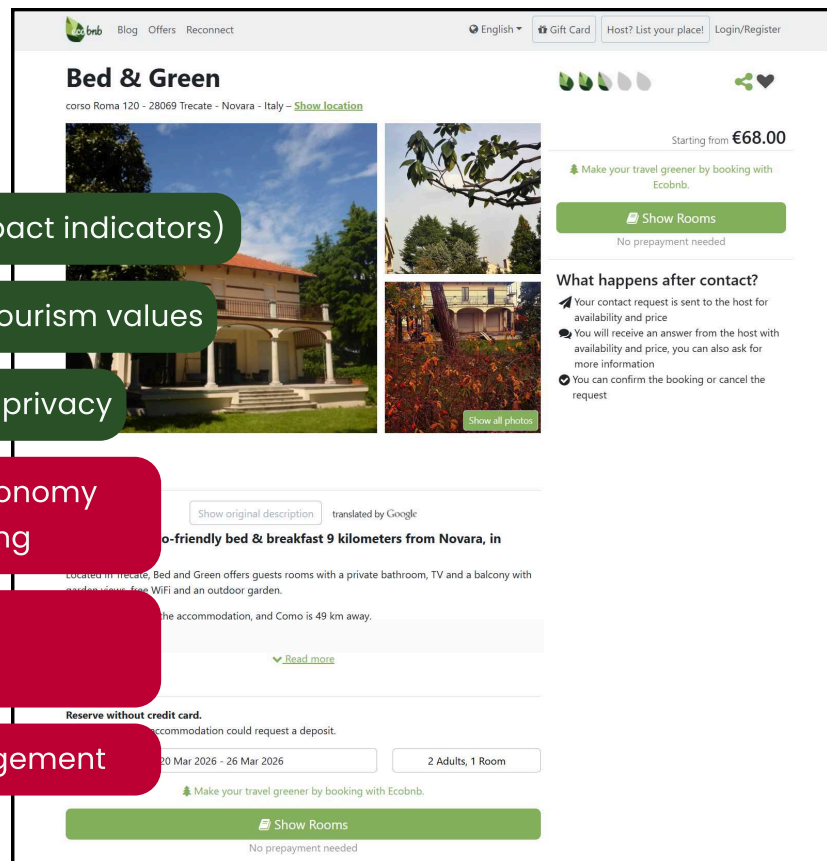
Responsible accommodation filtering

Limited cultural experiences discovery

Transparency about environmental practices

Figure 38: Screenshot taken from the Ecobnb search page

3. Result page



Trust signals (eco labels, impact indicators)

Alignment with responsible tourism values

Respect to host barriers and privacy

No connection to local gastronomy after accommodation booking

Responsibility ends at accommodation

No post-booking local engagement

Figure 39: Screenshot taken from the Ecobnb result page

Interpretation of Food Platforms

The radar chart highlights a consistent pattern across food- and experience-based platforms. These platforms perform strongly in dimensions related to food offering structure and social and community interaction, reflecting their emphasis on storytelling, host presence, and culturally immersive formats. Food is positioned as a shared and experiential activity, often centered around identity, narrative, and personal connection.

At the same time, performance in environmental sustainability and AI-guidance support remains limited. Responsibility is rarely structured through clear indicators, filters, or verification systems, and digital guidance is minimal beyond basic search and selection. Platform value logic also remains relatively balanced but does not actively support responsible decision-making.

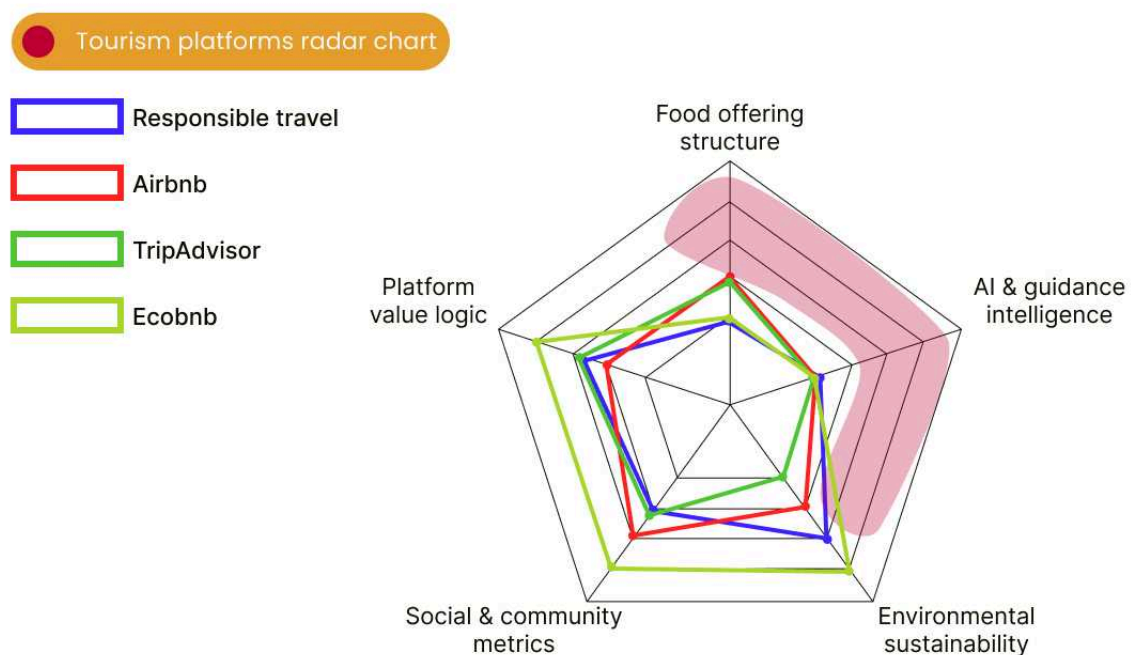


Figure 40: Comparative synthesis radar chart of tourism platforms

However, food offering structure and social and community dimensions remain less developed. Food is rarely treated as a central experiential layer, and interaction with local culture is often mediated through predefined packages rather than direct engagement. In addition, AI and digital mediation remain limited, with few tools supporting personalized or context-aware travel decisions.

As the chart shows in figure 40, the red area extends outward on environmental sustainability and platform value logic, while pulling inward on food offering structure, social & community metrics, and AI & guidance intelligence. This shape

reflects platforms organised around ethical positioning and certification rather than around food, community participation, or digital guidance. As a result, these platforms successfully communicate responsibility, but provide limited support for lived, participatory, and culturally embedded experience

5.1.4 Cross-Platform Synthesis and Design Opportunities

When all platforms are considered together, the radar chart reveals a clear structural imbalance within the current tourism ecosystem. Food- and experience-based platforms tend to perform strongly in participation, storytelling, and social interaction, but remain weak in responsibility and sustainability dimensions.

In contrast, tourism and sustainability-oriented platforms demonstrate strong performance in environmental and ethical dimensions, but offer limited experiential depth and cultural engagement.

This comparison shows that no platform currently achieves a balanced integration across all five dimensions. The two groups form almost opposite shapes: the platforms strongest on environmental sustainability and platform value logic – the dimensions most closely tied to responsibility – score lowest on social and community metrics, the dimension that captures host identity, cultural preservation, and community benefit, and therefore represents participation within this analysis. Platforms strong on that community dimension show the reverse pattern, while AI and guidance intelligence remains underdeveloped across both groups. The gap is thus this unmet combination: no platform brings responsible value logic, food discoverability, and adaptive digital guidance together in a single experience. This trade-off defines the key area for design intervention.

From a benchmarking perspective, the analysis suggests that future platforms should aim to bridge this divide by combining strong responsibility frameworks with accessible, culturally embedded food experiences, supported by more adaptive and user-centered forms of mediation.

Benchmarking responsible food tourism: platform comparison

Platform Performance Comparison

Tripadvisor

High scale, Symbolic Planning with AI, Strong discoverability, Commercial logic, Weak responsibility visibility, No community value signals

Airbnb

Stay + experiences in one ecosystem, Strong storytelling, No stay-to-food mediation, No responsible guidance

Ecobnb

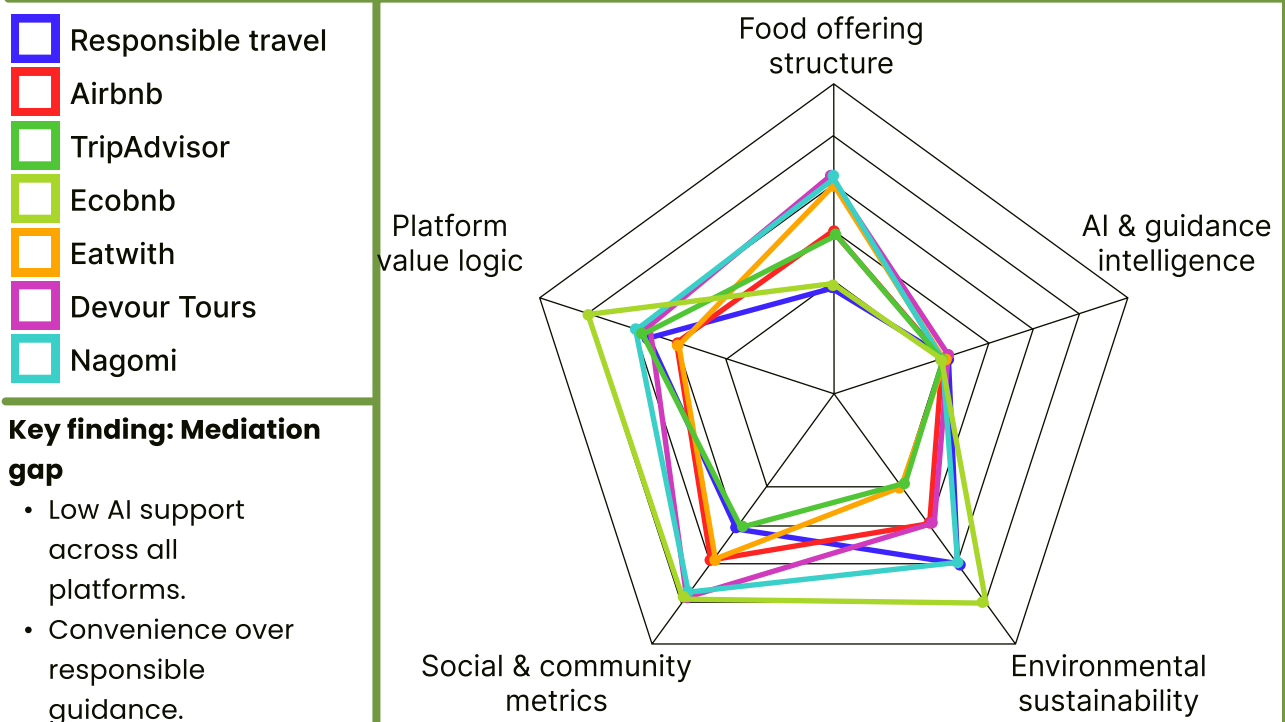
Strong sustainability positioning, Clear environmental transparency, Responsibility limited to accommodation, No food ecosystem, No post-booking food journey

Eatwith / Devour / Nagomi

Strong cultural storytelling, High host visibility, Rich social experience, Weak sustainability structure, Limited scale and system integration

Main Gap

- No platform combines all dimensions
- Responsibility and participation remain separated
- Food and sustainability are rarely integrated
- Guidance across the journey is missing, weak or fragmented



Design Opportunities

- Responsible filtering
- Explainable AI recommendations
- Connected travel journey
- Comparison by ethical criteria
- Local video content creation
- From policy to everyday participation

Key Insight

- The issue is fragmentation, not absence
- Useful elements already exist, but separately
- The opportunity is integration
- Food, responsibility, and guidance should work together

Figure 41: Benchmarking Responsible Food Tourism: Platform Comparison

5.2 What users need and fear: travellers and hosts surveys

5.2.1 Travellers needs, expectations, and barriers

This section presents a synthesis of findings from the traveller questionnaire, completed by 26 adult travellers, both domestic and international, travelling individually, as couples, or in small groups. The objective was to identify travellers' needs, expectations, and perceived barriers in relation to food experiences, with particular attention to responsibility, participation, and digital guidance.

Interest in local food and preferred experience formats

The results confirm a strong interest in local and authentic food experiences. However, rather than favouring a single dominant model such as dining exclusively in private homes, travellers clearly express a preference for variety in experience formats. While home-based experiences remained appealing to some respondents, 35.7% of participants indicated a preference for shared (semi-private) or community-based spaces. This reflects a desire for social interaction and cultural immersion without the discomfort or isolation often associated with private home settings.

Qualitative responses reinforce this tendency. Many travellers expressed interest in food experiences prepared by local residents, but within contexts that preserve a sense of public daily life and social interaction — such as local restaurants, markets, or neighbourhood spaces — where food is embedded in everyday community activity.

Needs related to authenticity and cultural meaning

Across the responses, authenticity appears repeatedly as an important expectation. Many travellers refer to the following points:

Eating food prepared by local people rather than in venues oriented toward tourists;

Accessing restaurants that are commonly used by residents and are not easily found on mainstream platforms;

Learning about the origin of ingredients, preparation practices, and the cultural traditions associated with meals.

Diversity in different kind of food services is one the main important reason for this experience. Several participants explicitly mention their interest in experiences such as local markets, bakeries, home-style cooking adapted to public or shared spaces, and food made by elderly residents or long-term local experts. Food is not perceived only as a product, but also as a medium through which personal and collective stories are conveyed.

At the same time, issues related to affordability and time constraints remain important. Travellers specially who travels alone or as a couple often note that fully immersive food experiences are expensive or incompatible with short stays and budget-oriented trips, reinforcing the need for flexible, scalable formats.

Barriers to participation and intimate experiences

Although travellers often express interest in the cultural exchange, many are hesitant about experiences that feel highly intimate or unstructured (participation is often structurally unsupported, leaving motivated travellers without clear pathways to engage). For travellers, entering to private homes is frequently linked to concerns about safety, social expectations, and personal comfort. Several travellers indicated that they would like to eat food prepared by local residents, but at the same time were reluctant to withdraw from public settings or engage in situations that feel socially demanding. This hesitation does not appear to reflect a lack of interest in local interaction. Instead, it relates to perceived social and emotional risks. For this reason, travellers often prefer settings that are semi-private or mediated place, where interaction with locals can take place in a more predictable and comfortable way.

Timing, decision fatigue, and discovery preferences

The timing of food-related suggestions plays a significant role in travellers acceptance. According to the results:

43.5% of respondents prefer to receive food experience suggestions upon arrival, when they are already present in the city and able to contextualize options;

39% prefer to see suggestions during trip planning, before finalizing daily activities.

This distribution indicates that travellers are sensitive to decision overload and prefer suggestions to align with specific moments of readiness rather than being continuously presented. Late-stage or intrusive recommendations risk being ignored, regardless of their relevance

Expectations toward digital mediation and AI

More than 90% of respondents report interest in using AI-based support to discover food experiences. This interest is conditional on transparency and on users being able to control the interaction.

When asked about preferred interaction formats, respondents most often mention the following:

Chat-based question-and-answer interactions;

Filter-based interfaces for selecting preferences such as budget, dietary needs, and distance;

Guided interactions based on a small number of simple questions.

In these responses, AI is described mainly as a support tool. It is associated with reducing effort during exploration rather than with making decisions on behalf of users.

Emerging expectations for new offerings

When respondents were asked about additional offerings, several topics appeared repeatedly:

Food diversity and experiences categorization: interest in seeing what types of food experiences are available in a destination and how many options exist.

Dietary restrictions and allergies: Many responses mention the need for vegan, vegetarian, and allergy-safe options. Clear information and certification are seen as important.

Social connection: Some respondents refer to interest in meeting local residents or other participants, especially in the case of solo travel.

Cultural aspects: References are made to food traditions, neighborhoods, producers, and preparation practices.

Affordability and sharing: Suggestions include lower-cost options for students, volunteering-based activities, and shared planning with travel companions.

Everyday food settings: Markets, bakeries, street food, and similar places are mentioned as interesting but not always easy to access.

Taken together, the responses relate to food experiences that are part of everyday life, involve social interaction, remain affordable, and are supported by clear forms of mediation.

Summary of travellers evidence

Overall, the findings indicate that travellers seek authentic, local food experiences that convey cultural meaning and human connection, while maintaining comfort, affordability, and flexibility. The main barriers are not lack of interest, but uncertainty, time pressure, and social hesitation.



Figure 42: Travellers evidence

These insights show how the everyday tools travellers rely on themselves — mainly Google and fragmented services such as TripAdvisor, fail to fully respond to their expectations, setting the stage for the analysis of host perspectives and the systemic mismatches discussed in the following sections.

5.2.2 Host Perspectives: Willingness, Conditions, and Boundaries

This section reports results from the host questionnaire. It describes local residents' willingness to offer food-related experiences, the conditions under which they are comfortable hosting, and their expectations regarding mediation and representation. It also reports how hosts refer to responsibility, participation, and trust in relation to food tourism.

Openness to hosting and preferred contexts

Most hosts report being open to sharing food and cultural experiences with travellers. This openness depends mainly on where the experience takes place, rather than on hosting itself.

About 70% of respondents prefer to host in shared or community-based spaces. These include courtyards, communal kitchens, semi-private areas, or nearby neighborhood venues. Such spaces allow contact with visitors without opening private home environments.

These responses show interest in hospitality and cultural exchange. At the same time, they reflect a clear need to protect personal space and maintain everyday routines.

Importance of trust, safety, and verification

Trust is a basic requirement for many hosts. Around 80% of respondents state that travellers profile verification is necessary when hosting food experiences. Verification is associated with safety, respect between participants, and a sense of responsibility.

Hosts repeatedly mention the following points:

- Access to basic information about participants before the experience;
- Clear expectations about behavior and group composition;
- Rules that apply to both hosts and guests .

Hosting is therefore not treated as an informal or spontaneous activity. It is handled as a task that involves preparation, mediation, and basic safeguards.

Motivations: cultural exchange over commercialization

Hosts often describe their interest in food experiences in relational terms rather than transactional ones. Many respondents refer to motivations connected to cultural exchange, storytelling, memory, and social interaction, rather than to profit or tourism performance.

Hosting is commonly described as:

- An opportunity to share traditions, recipes, and personal histories;
- A way to engage with visitors in a respectful and meaningful manner;
- A form of cultural participation rather than a service offered for sale.

This orientation shows that hosts place greater value on authenticity and responsibility than on scalability or standardization.

Desired new offerings and experience formats

When asked about additional offerings they would like to include, host communities mention a wide range of ideas. These suggestions reflect preferences for formats that are flexible and connected to local culture.

Cultural and theme-based experiences: Seasonal dinners, food-related cultural events, lunches connected to books, memories, or neighborhood identity, and intercultural or fusion experiences that do not necessarily take place in private homes.

Collaborative and local experiences: Co-created dinners, temporary pop-up events, collaborations with local associations, small local restaurants with specific values, and shared activities such as shopping at neighborhood markets.

Specific formats and locations: Family-oriented experiences, often held on weekends; short after-work gatherings with a limited duration; traditional home cooking that remains informal rather than restaurant-like; guided visits to historic shops; and simple Sunday lunches.

Specific niches: Gastronomic experiences linked to design, fashion, or art, as well as takeaway-based food offerings.

Specific formats and locations: Family-oriented experiences, often held on weekends; short after-work gatherings with a limited duration; traditional home cooking that remains informal rather than restaurant-like; guided visits to historic shops; and simple Sunday lunches.

These responses point to an interest in experiences that are limited in time, rooted in place, and connected to everyday cultural practices, rather than to standardized tourism formats.

Expectations regarding representation and communication

Hosts place strong emphasis on how the experience is presented to travellers. Respondents consistently call for an honest and non-stereotypical representation of food experiences.

Key expectations include

- concise and clear descriptions without exaggerated tourism narratives;
- simple and transparent language that reflects everyday reality;
- avoidance of clichés or idealized imagery.

Many hosts also suggest that experiences should be presented as selected and non-standard, not universally suitable for all travellers. They prefer the offer to be framed as optional, occasional, and clearly contextualized.

Importantly, hosts advocate for a relationship-centered framing, where the experience is communicated as cultural exchange, human encounter, or responsible participation rather than as a commercial service. Respect, clear rules, and mutual understanding are repeatedly highlighted as essential elements.

Summary of host evidence

Overall, hosts demonstrate a strong willingness to participate in food-based cultural exchange, provided that their boundaries, safety, and autonomy are respected. Hosting is perceived as meaningful and relational, but contingent on trust, clear mediation, and appropriate formats.



Figure 43: Host evidence

These insights complement the travellers findings and contribute to identifying the structural mismatches between host readiness and travellers hesitation, which are discussed in the following section.

5.3 Where the Mismatches Are

Bringing the platform analysis in section 5.1 together with the user research in section 5.2 reveals four recurring mismatches between what travellers and hosts need and what current platforms offers.

Discovery and trust. Travellers rely on general-purpose tools such as Google and TripAdvisor as their main source of trust, even though these apply no responsibility, dietary, cultural, or social-comfort filters in Case studies. Only secondarily do they turn to local or informal recommendations, despite expressing strong interest in authentic, locally grounded food. This exposes a mismatch between the tools travellers trust and the experiences they actually want.

Spatial preferences and available formats. Both groups converge on semi-private and shared spaces: 35.7% of travellers and around 70% of hosts prefer these over fully private homes or conventional public venues in surveys. Yet platforms rarely recognise this middle ground, so travellers hesitate to enter private homes while hosts seek to protect domestic boundaries.

Host representation and visibility. Hosts are treated as a homogeneous group, with no differentiation by motivation, format, or openness — even though they ask to be represented honestly and on a self-defined, non-standard basis in surveys. This limits hosts' control over how they appear and makes suitability harder for travellers to judge.

Trust mediation. Around 80% of hosts consider traveller verification necessary, and both groups ask for embedded trust-building (in surveys), yet platforms outsource trust to reviews and ratings instead of building it into the system (in case studies). As a result, platforms act as listing services rather than relational infrastructures, pushing users back toward the same general-purpose tools.

5.4 What design must respond to

The mismatches above point to a single underlying problem. Local hosts, cultural food knowledge, and sustainable tourism platforms already exist. What is missing is the layer that connects them into a coherent and responsible journey. This research approaches that layer through three design lenses.

Service design to address fragmented journeys. Service design understands services as systems that can be shaped to support broader social and experiential transformation, rather than as isolated products or single touchpoints (Sangiorgi, 2011). This research draws on that systemic understanding to address fragmentation, treating accommodation, food discovery, and local participation as parts of one connected journey rather than separate steps.

Inside-out perspective to make host participation easier. Research on responsible tourism argues for shifting the focus from visitor satisfaction toward the needs, well-being, and active role of host communities (Mihalič, 2016; Facoetti & Galluzzo, 2024). Building on this perspective, the present research applies the same logic to food, centring the conditions and boundaries of local food hosts identified in the user research so that participation is built around them rather than treating them as passive providers.

Interaction design to reduce cognitive overload. Finally, the way options are presented and navigated strongly affects how easily people can decide. Guided by travellers' expressed sensitivity to decision fatigue and timing (Section 5.2), this research uses interaction design to reduce cognitive and social friction, structuring discovery so that responsible options are easier to compare and decisions easier to make at the right moment.

Together, these three lenses define what the design must achieve. The following chapter translates them into the concrete objectives, logic, and structure of the EcoFood Experience service.

5.5 System gap and opportunity space

The previous sections showed that the current tourism ecosystem does not fail because of a complete lack of valuable elements. On the contrary, many useful components already exist across different platforms. Some platforms are effective in making responsibility visible, especially through sustainability signals, ethical positioning, and trust-related information. Others are stronger in food discovery, storytelling, host visibility, or experiential richness. The problem is that these qualities remain fragmented and rarely come together within one coherent journey.

This fragmentation creates a clear system gap. Platforms with stronger responsible tourism logic, such as Ecobnb, tend to stop at the accommodation layer and do not extend their value into food-related participation. By contrast, platforms that offer more accessible or engaging food experiences, such as Eatwith or Tripadvisor, generally rely on commercial discovery logic and provide limited transparency regarding sustainability, community benefit, or ethical value. Airbnb partially connects accommodation and experiences within one ecosystem, but still leaves a visible break between where people stay and how they engage with local food culture. As a result, responsibility and food participation are not integrated, but distributed across different platform models.

Seen through a Blue Ocean⁵ perspective, this gap should not be read only as a weakness in the market, but as an opening for a different kind of value creation. Rather than improving existing tourism logics one by one, the opportunity lies in linking dimensions that are currently separated: responsible tourism infrastructure, food experience visibility, and guided digital mediation. In other words, the strategic opportunity is not simply to add more experiences or more sustainability labels, but to create a system in which these dimensions support each other.

The visual mapping highlights this opportunity in the upper-right area, where high responsibility and high food accessibility begin to converge. This space is still largely unoccupied. Existing platforms either move toward responsibility without meaningful food participation, or toward food discoverability without responsible integration. The opportunity therefore lies in designing a mediation layer that can connect the stay, the food experience, and the local context in a more continuous and understandable way.

⁵ Blue Ocean Strategy, developed by Kim and Mauborgne (2005), distinguishes between "red oceans" — saturated markets where companies compete for the same demand — and "blue oceans," uncontested market spaces created by combining or reconfiguring elements that existing players treat as separate. Rather than out-competing rivals on established criteria, the approach seeks new value by serving needs the current market leaves unmet.



Figure 44: Blue ocean strategy

The Blue Ocean logic can be clarified through four strategic moves. First, it becomes necessary to eliminate platform habits that reduce meaningful choice, such as rating-only decision logic, generic one-size-fits-all recommendations, and platform-led discovery that ignores travellers intent. Second, it is important to reduce forms of friction and distortion that dominate current systems, including excessive commercial pressure, cognitive overload from undifferentiated options, and weak visibility of host-community relationships. Third, the system should raise the visibility of elements that are currently underrepresented but repeatedly valued by both travellers and hosts: sustainability transparency, community benefit, cultural storytelling, host identity, trust, and personalized support. Finally, it should create what existing platforms do not yet provide in an integrated way: explainable AI mediation, responsible matching logic, continuity after booking, and a clearer connection between accommodation and food participation.

What emerges from this analysis is not the idea of replacing all existing services with a completely new platform model. The stronger opportunity is to introduce a new layer of interaction within the tourism journey: one that makes responsibility easier to understand, food experiences easier to access, and participation easier to navigate. In this sense, the Blue Ocean is not defined by volume or scale, but by integration. Its value lies in transforming scattered features into a more coherent system, where ethical intention, local food culture, and digital guidance are no longer isolated from one another.

This opportunity space provides a strategic basis for the design objectives developed in the following chapter.

6

Service concept

From design objectives to
service logic

6 — Service concept for Responsible Food Tourism Experiences

6.1 Design objectives

The service concept developed in this research, named EcoFood Experience, emerges from the findings synthesized in Chapter 5, where the analysis highlighted both a clear interest in local food experiences and a series of structural barriers preventing these experiences from being accessed in responsible ways.

The main objective of EcoFood Experience is to transform food tourism from a fragmented and passive activity into a structured, locally grounded, and responsible journey, connecting food, travel, and local participation within existing digital tourism platforms, for the mutual benefit of travellers and host communities. The objectives below define how the service works toward this aim.

Reduce barriers to participation. Hesitation among both travellers and hosts often comes not from a lack of interest, but from uncertainty, weak trust, and the effort required to engage. The service introduces lower-threshold entry points that avoid models depending on immediate intimacy or high social exposure.

Support gradual engagement without forced intimacy. Meaningful participation should never demand immediate closeness. The service lets travellers begin with lighter, lower-threshold encounters and move toward deeper interaction only if they choose, so that engagement grows at their own pace rather than being assumed from the start.

Support private, semi-private, and hybrid formats. Meaningful food participation does not depend on a single setting. The service recognises a spectrum of formats — from private homes to semi-private and shared community spaces, local restaurants, and market activities — so that travellers and hosts can each take part at a level of openness that feels right for them.

Respond to user diversity through differentiation. Travellers and hosts differ widely in budget, comfort, motivation, and availability. Rather than treating either group as uniform, the service supports differentiated profiles and discovery paths, so that participation adapts to individual needs instead of pushing everyone through the same model.

Protect host autonomy. Hosts differ significantly in their motivations and boundaries. The service supports clearer role definition and differentiated participation so that local actors can take part on their own terms.

Make responsibility visible and comparable. Environmental impact, community benefit, and cultural value should be legible and comparable within the decision process rather than remaining vague or promotional.

Operate as a scalable service layer. The concept is designed as a transferable intervention that can extend existing tourism infrastructures across different platforms and destinations.

As illustrated in Figure 45, these objectives are directly grounded in the analytical insights developed in Chapter 5, showing how each design decision responds to a specific finding from the research. Together they establish the conceptual direction of the service and provide the basis for the ethical, structural, and interactional decisions developed in the following sections.



Figure 45: Design objectives of the EcoFood Experience – main objective and supporting objectives grouped by traveller, host, both, and platform.

6.2 Ethical commitments guiding the design

The design of EcoFood Experience is guided by three ethical commitments that shaped the decisions described in the following sections. The first is host autonomy: rather than treating home-based hosting as the default, the service is built to let hosts and local food actors define the terms, visibility, and boundaries of their own involvement. The second is cultural integrity: local food practices are approached as situated activities with specific social meaning, framed as encounter and learning rather than as a packaged performance of authenticity. The third is inclusivity: since travellers and hosts differ in budget, comfort, capacity, and motivation, the service is designed to support a spectrum of participation rather than assuming equal readiness across users.

These commitments are not treated here as claims about the finished service, but as principles that informed how participation, representation, and guidance were structured throughout the concept. Their implications, tensions, and limits are revisited in Chapter 8.

6.3 AI as a responsible guidance tool

One of the gaps identified in this research concerns the absence of AI with guidance in digital tourism platforms. AI tools exist in this space, but they remain driven by commercial priorities rather than genuine guidance, functioning more as conversion engines than as real support for the people using them (Florido-Benítez & del Alcázar Martínez, 2024; Magrani & da Silva, 2024).

At the same time, it would be difficult and unrealistic to design a digital service today without engaging with AI at all. AI is present in almost every platform people interact with, and that presence is not a problem in itself. The real question is not whether to use AI, but how the service design shapes and controls the role it plays. When AI is left to operate without clear design boundaries, it tends to make decisions on behalf of users, optimize for engagement over meaning, and obscure the reasoning behind what it suggests (Magrani & da Silva, 2024). Good service design is precisely what prevents this from happening. It is the service logic that determines whether AI controls the experience or genuinely supports it.

In this service, AI is introduced as a controllable and explainable guidance tool. It helps travellers clarify their preferences, discover relevant food experiences, and navigate choices more easily, and it can support the creation of personalized journey

suggestions. The distinction between AI that decides and AI that assists is what separates this approach from the commercially driven systems identified as a gap in existing digital tourism platforms. Keeping the basis of each suggestion visible and leaving control in the hands of the traveller also reflects evidence that the way recommendations are presented strongly shapes whether travellers trust and accept them (Wang et al., 2026). In this service, AI is present and visible, and it stays under the traveller's control rather than operating on its own.

6.4 Ecobnb as a strategic entry point: a scalable implementation case study

To demonstrate how the EcoFood Experience service works in practice, it is applied to a concrete platform rather than discussed in the abstract. Ecobnb is used in this thesis as an implementation case study: a real, existing platform on which the service logic, interface, and interactions can be shown in a specific context. Ecobnb was not chosen without purpose, but selected against a clear set of criteria drawn from the platform analysis in Chapter 5.

First, responsibility is embedded in its core service logic: sustainability is not a secondary label or promotional claim, but a visible organizing principle through which accommodation is framed, filtered, and understood. The platform has already built genuine trust around responsible travel rather than treating it as a marketing label, giving it stronger ethical consistency and lower commercial pressure than conventional tourism marketplaces. Second, it has a clear structural gap that the service is designed to fill: Ecobnb does not offer food experiences as an integrated part of the journey, so its responsible logic stops at the moment of accommodation booking, leaving no structured way to maintain engagement with the traveller beyond the stay. Third, as the Blue Ocean analysis showed in Chapter 5, Ecobnb already occupies the part of the landscape where responsibility is strongest while food experience visibility and accessibility remain weak – placing it exactly at the edge of the unoccupied space where responsibility and food participation converge. Fourth, Ecobnb is already active across 48 countries, which makes it a strong opportunity for demonstrating the service: a platform with this reach offers an established responsible-host community and shows that the proposed layer could operate at scale rather than in a single location.

Together, these criteria make Ecobnb a coherent and meaningful entry point: strong enough in responsibility to build on, yet incomplete enough in food participation to

make the contribution of the service visible. Ecobnb is therefore treated not as the final destination of the service, but as the platform through which its implementation is developed and demonstrated.

It is important to underline that this choice is illustrative, not exclusive. Ecobnb serves as one practical case study through which the service is shown in detail, but the service itself is designed as a scalable and transferable layer. The same logic, components, and interaction structure can be adapted to other responsible tourism platforms and to broader digital tourism contexts, as discussed further in Chapter 8.

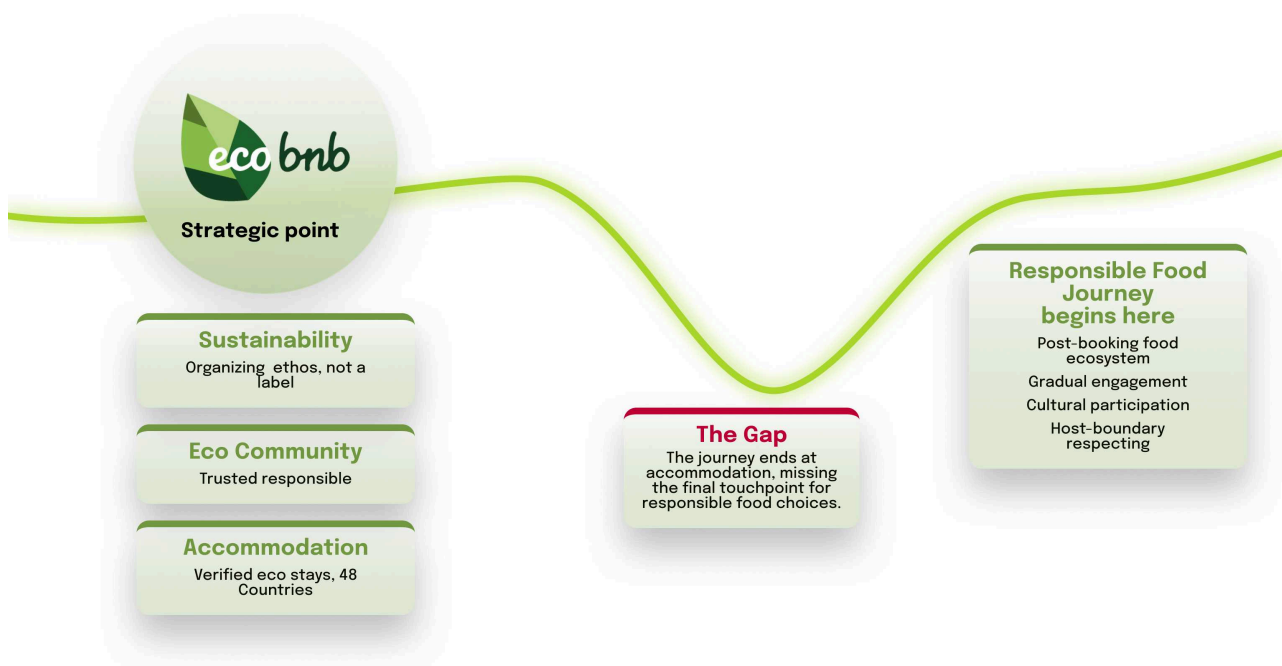


Figure 46: Ecobnb as a strategic entry point for the EcoFood Experience service layer

6.5 Concept positioning within digital tourism platforms

The EcoFood Experience is positioned not as a new standalone platform, but as a service layer that attaches to and extends an existing responsible tourism system. Rather than adding another isolated product to an already saturated digital landscape, the concept reorganizes how food-related participation is accessed within the travel journey.

Service. Concretely, the service takes the form of a layer made of five digital components working together: a journey continuation component that re-engages the traveller after booking; an AI journey planner that builds explainable, editable itineraries; a discover component that surfaces where and what food can be experienced; a decision support component that compares options against the responsibility metrics; and a social and creator component that gives hosts a visible identity and voice. These digital components connect travellers to a set of physical experience formats, such as co-cooking spaces (as semi-private place), community urban gardens for workshops or food events, local host spaces (as private place), farm and market visits, and local restaurants, through which the food journey actually takes place. The full structure of these components and formats, and the way they connect across the digital and physical layers, is developed in detail in the offering map in Chapter 7. Presented here in brief, they give the overall shape of the solution, which can then be described more precisely through what the layer receives as input, what it processes at its core, and what it produces as output.

Input. The layer activates once the accommodation is booked and receives distinct streams of information.

From the **platform**, it receives the confirmed stay, the location and the dates that fix where and when the traveller will be present, and which anchor everything that follows.

From the **traveller**, it receives a set of preferences: budget, dietary needs, acceptable distance from the stay, comfort level, and personal values.

From the **hosts**, it receives each local actor's offering: the type of experience, its format, its availability, and the conditions and boundaries the host has chosen to set.

From the **responsibility metrics**, it receives the criteria against which each experience is assessed. These are the same criteria dimensions used in the comparative analysis in Chapter 5 and revisited in Chapter 8 which are included environmental sustainability, social and community value, AI and guidance intelligence, food offering structure, and commercialization intensity, applied here as a live input rather than only as an analytical tool. Together they allow responsibility to be made visible and comparable later in the process.

Core. At its centre, the layer brings these streams together and processes them through five operations, match, filter, guide, explain, and compare. It matches traveller preferences against host offerings around the booked stay; filters them by availability, location, and the conditions each host has set; guides the traveller through the remaining options with the support of AI; explains the basis of every suggestion so it stays legible and adjustable; and compares the options against the responsibility metrics so they can be weighed side by side. Through these operations the layer creates continuity from the stay to food, makes responsibility actionable, and presents local hosts in their diversity according to availability, location, and the details they have provided. The full structure of this core is set out in the offering map.

Output. From these operations, the layer produces a coherent food journey connected to the stay rather than a ranked or popularity-based list. The traveller is supported toward informed choices, comparing real experiences on responsibility criteria and on hosts whose formats and boundaries are already stated, while responsibility itself becomes visible at the point of decision rather than hidden behind price or rating. The result is a continuous journey, informed decision-making, and visible responsibility, with reduced uncertainty on both the traveller's and the host's side.

Finally, this concept is designed as a scalable service layer that can operate across different responsible tourism platforms. Ecobnb is the preliminary platform selected to develop and demonstrate it, for the reasons set out in the previous section, but the input–core–output logic described here is platform-independent and can be adapted wherever an existing system leaves food participation disconnected from the responsible journey.

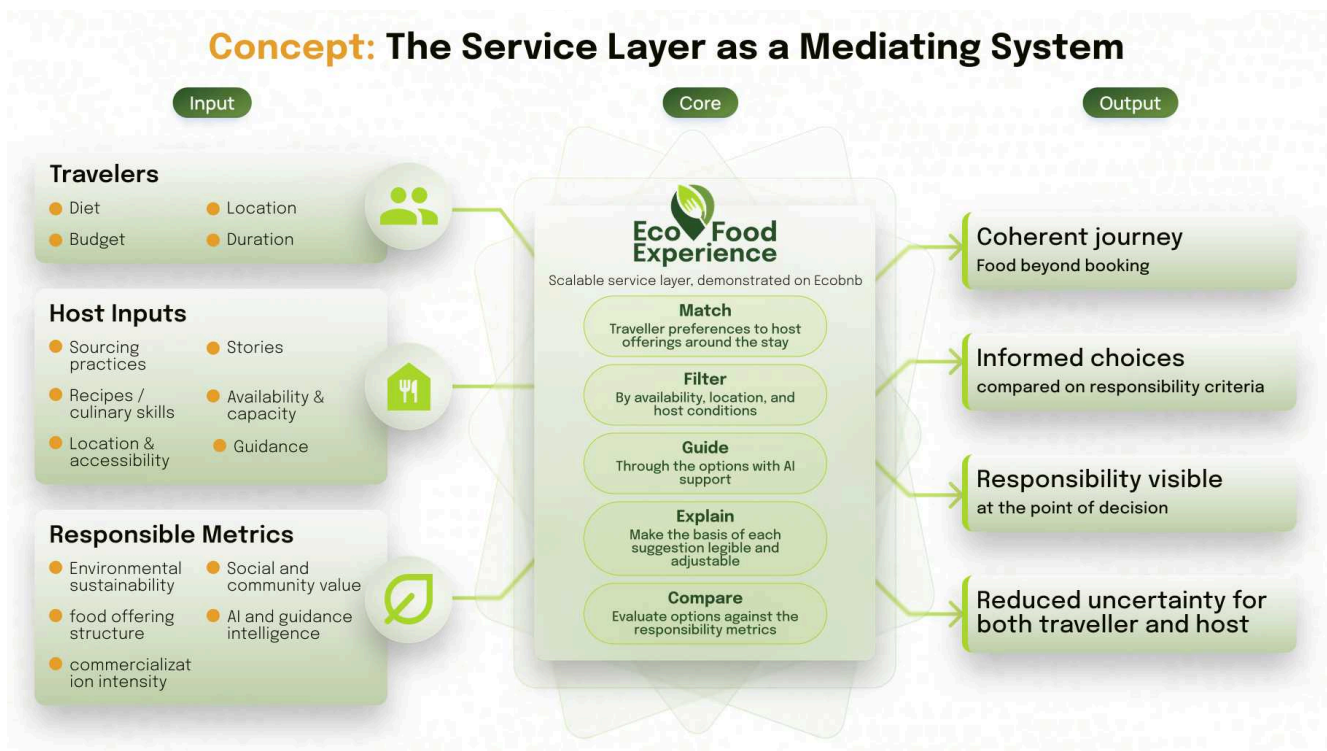


Figure 47: EcoFood Experience Concept

6.6 Service logic and interaction structure

The service begins at a moment that already exists in the traveller's journey: the accommodation booking. The EcoFood Experience builds on this point as a natural extension of the stay, introducing food-related participation as an optional but coherent next step once primary arrangements are in place.

From that point, the interaction unfolds gradually rather than through a single decision. The service introduces food-related options progressively, at moments when the traveller is ready to consider them days before arriving or during the journey, so that discovery follows the rhythm of the trip rather than requiring everything to be planned in advance. In this way, service reduce cognitive load and build trust at each step, this gradual approach ultimately strengthens responsible and conscious engagement with the destination.

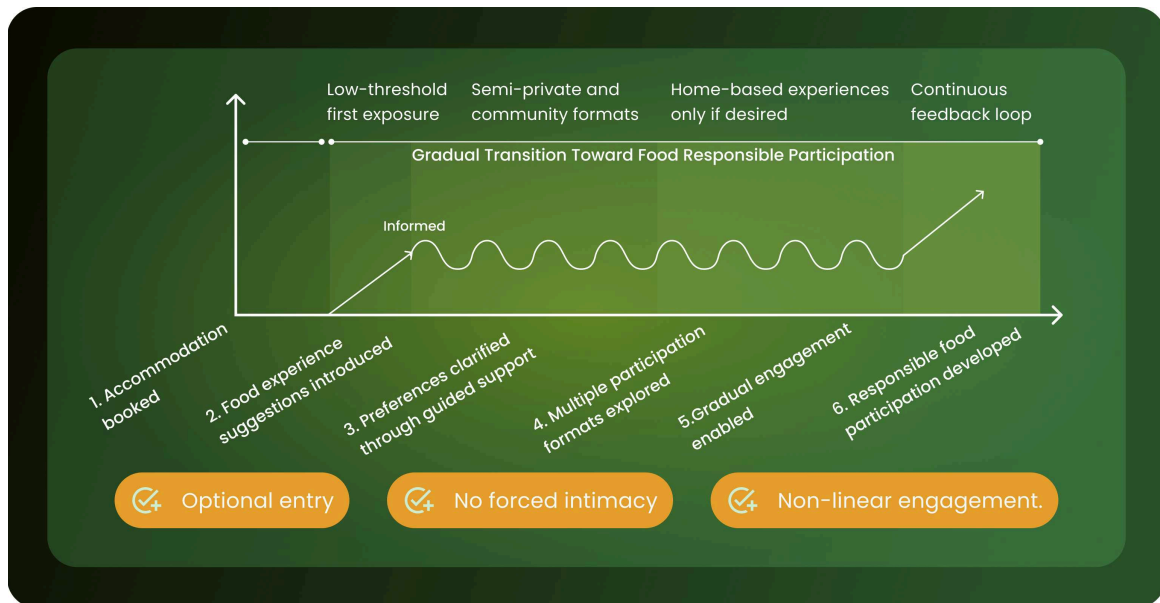


Figure 48: Gradual engagement map – from accommodation booking to food tourism engagement

This gradual structure also shapes the formats of participation available to the traveller. Low-commitment first encounters – neighbourhood food settings, market visits, local restaurants with cultural relevance – come before more immersive formats such as semi-private and community spaces. Home-based experiences remain available, but as one option within a broader continuum rather than the expected norm. The progression is not prescriptive: hosts retain full control over the conditions and visibility of their participation throughout.

The interaction structure also includes a continuous feedback loop. Reviews, host data, and engagement patterns feed back into the service over time, improving how experiences are described, matched, and suggested. In this way the system does not remain static after first use but develops through repeated interaction while remaining attentive to ethical and cultural differences.

6.7 Actors, roles, and relationships

To understand this ecosystem, an actor map is used to trace how the different actors relate to one another in practice. Rather than simply listing who is involved, it follows the links and exchanges that run between them, showing not just who matters, but how they work together to make the service function.

At the centre of the map sits the EcoFood Experience service layer, operating in close partnership with Ecobnb as the platform entry point. Around this core, the map traces the primary relationship the service is built to support: the exchange between travellers, who seek meaningful local food experiences, and local hosts, cooks, guides, and community organizers, who contribute the knowledge, spaces, and practices that make those experiences possible. The service layer sits between them, carrying preferences in one direction and host conditions and offerings in the other.

Beyond this core relationship, the map situates a wider group of local providers who supply the physical content of the food journey: farmers, cooking-class organizers, community kitchens, food markets, and small producers. They are connected to the service not as transactional listings but as the actors whose participation gives the experience its cultural and material grounding.

The map then traces the enabling actors that allow the service to operate responsibly over time, municipalities, sponsors, tourism NGOs, and food academies, whose links to the service take the form of legitimacy, funding, certification, and structural support rather than direct exchange with the traveller.

Read together, these connections show how the service depends not on a single provider but on a network of relationships, each contributing something the others cannot, and clarify why each actor is involved and what role it plays in keeping the service running.

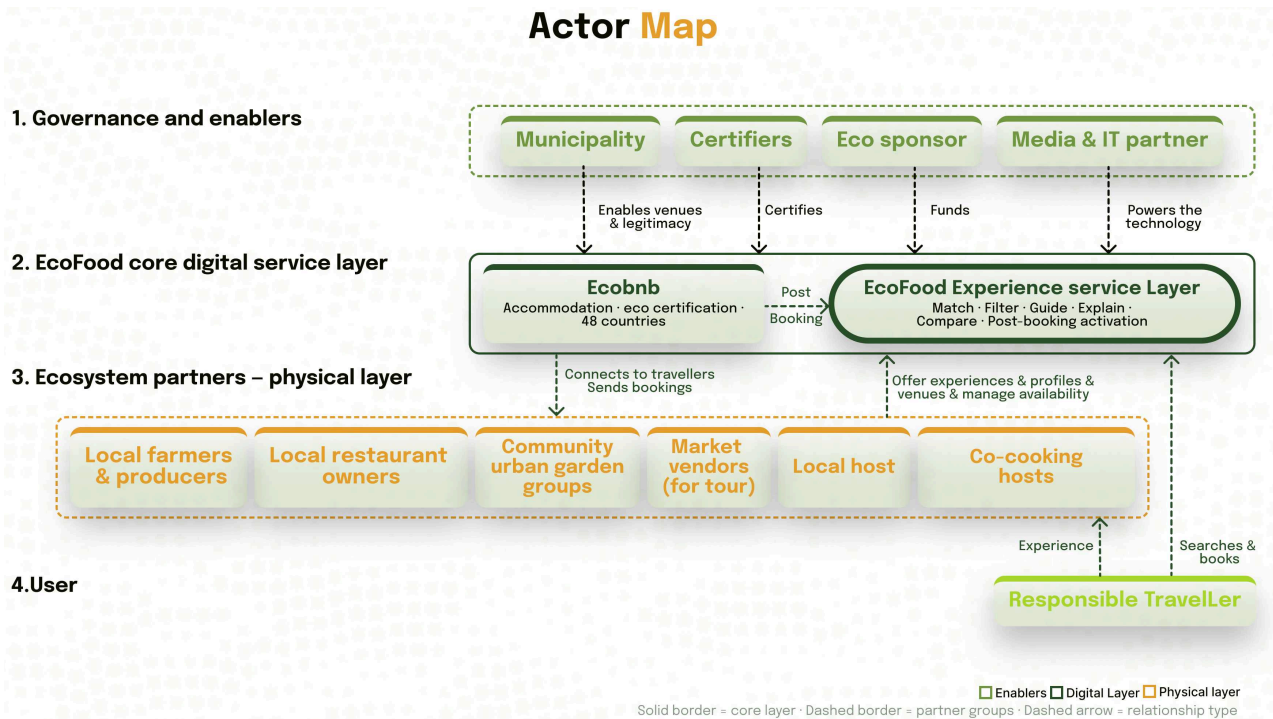


Figure 49: Actor map of the EcoFood Experience service ecosystem

System Map. The system map below shows how all material, information, financial, and technical flows circulate across the full ecosystem, from traveller preferences and host inputs through the service layer, out to physical experience providers, and back through governance, certification, and sponsorship structures that sustain the system over time.

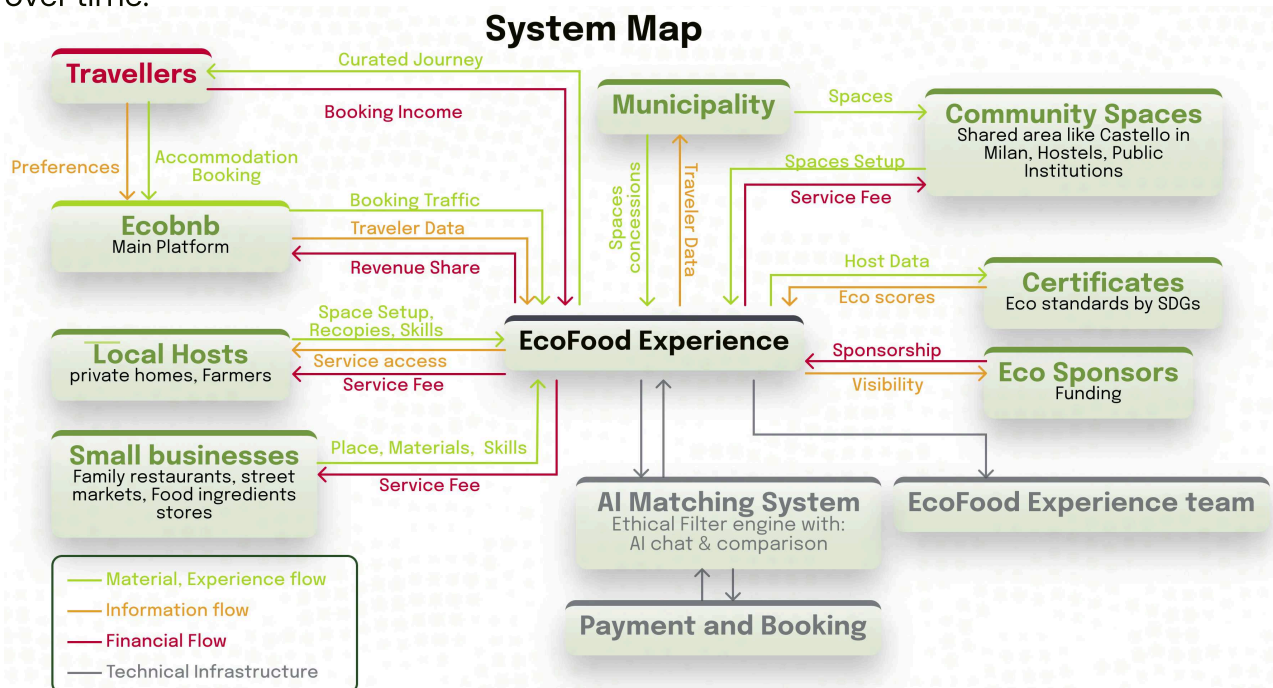


Figure 50: System map of the EcoFood Experience – material, information, financial, and technical flows

7

Design Development

Designing the EcoFood
Experience

7.1 Criteria factors for responsible food tourism platform

7.1.1 Evaluation factors for Responsible food tourism platforms

To support the transition from analysis to design, the criteria dimensions introduced in Chapter 5 were carried forward and further refined. These dimensions were not adopted from a single pre-existing model but developed as an original set of criteria, synthesised from two sources: the literature review in Chapters 2 and 3, which established the core values of responsible, sustainable, and community-based food tourism, and the comparative case-study analysis in Chapter 5, which revealed how existing digital platforms succeed or fail in delivering those values in practice. The literature defined what responsible food tourism should account for; the case studies showed where current platforms fall short, and together they determined which criteria a responsible food tourism service must address.

In the comparative platform analysis, these criteria were used in a synthesised form to structure the radar charts and make cross-case differences more visible. For the design phase, they were developed at a more detailed level, breaking each dimension down into specific, design-relevant factors

As illustrated in Figure 51, this expanded framework is organized around five dimensions: **environmental sustainability, social and community value, AI and mediation intelligence, food offering structure, and commercialization intensity**. Each dimension is broken down into more specific factors that help translate broad analytical insights into design-relevant criteria.

In this way, the framework serves a double purpose. It builds continuity with the earlier platform analysis, while also providing a more precise basis for shaping the service concept. In the following section, these factors are translated into a set of design principles that guide the proposed intervention.



Figure 51: Evaluation framework for responsible food experience integration in digital tourism platform

7.1.2 Translation into design principles

The design objectives in Chapter 6 defined what the service aims to achieve. They do not, however, say how the design should behave in order to achieve it. This is the role of the design principles: where the objectives are the destination, the principles are the rules of the road — operational guidelines that translate the goals into concrete design decisions and directly shape the interface developed in Section 7.4.

The following principles guide the proposed intervention:

Guidance over listing. The service should interpret, orient, and compare on the traveller's behalf, supporting a move from passive browsing toward guided participation rather than presenting an undifferentiated set of options.

Context-aware relevance. Suggestions should respond to the traveller's actual context — accommodation, location, budget, dietary needs, comfort level, and values — prioritising relevance over quantity so that decision-making remains manageable.

Responsibility as a comparable criterion. Environmental, community, and cultural value should be made explicit and comparable within the decision process, so that experiences are evaluated on responsibility rather than on price, popularity, or ratings alone.

Integration over fragmentation. Accommodation, food discovery, and local participation should be connected within a continuous journey, positioning food as part of the broader travel logic rather than as a disconnected addition.

Explainability as a basis for trust. The reasoning behind each suggestion should be visible and revisable, so that trust derives from understandable criteria rather than from opaque algorithms or external reviews.

Graduated and host-controlled participation. The service should support multiple levels of engagement, allowing travellers to begin with lower-threshold formats and deepen involvement by choice, while hosts retain agency over the format, boundaries, and cultural framing of their participation.

Taken together, these principles translate the criteria and objectives into an operational design orientation, providing the basis for the offering map, user-centred framing, and interface logic developed in the following sections.

7.2 The offering map: connecting digital and physical layers

The proposed service is articulated through an offering map that sets out what the service provides to users across digital and physical environments. As shown in Figure 53, the offering is organised around two interconnected sides: a digital side, where users discover, plan, and decide before the trip, and a physical side, where they participate in food experiences within local contexts during the trip. The relationship between the two sides is not linear but cyclical: digital guidance leads to physical participation, and participation in turn feeds back into the digital environment, forming a continuous loop of interaction and value.

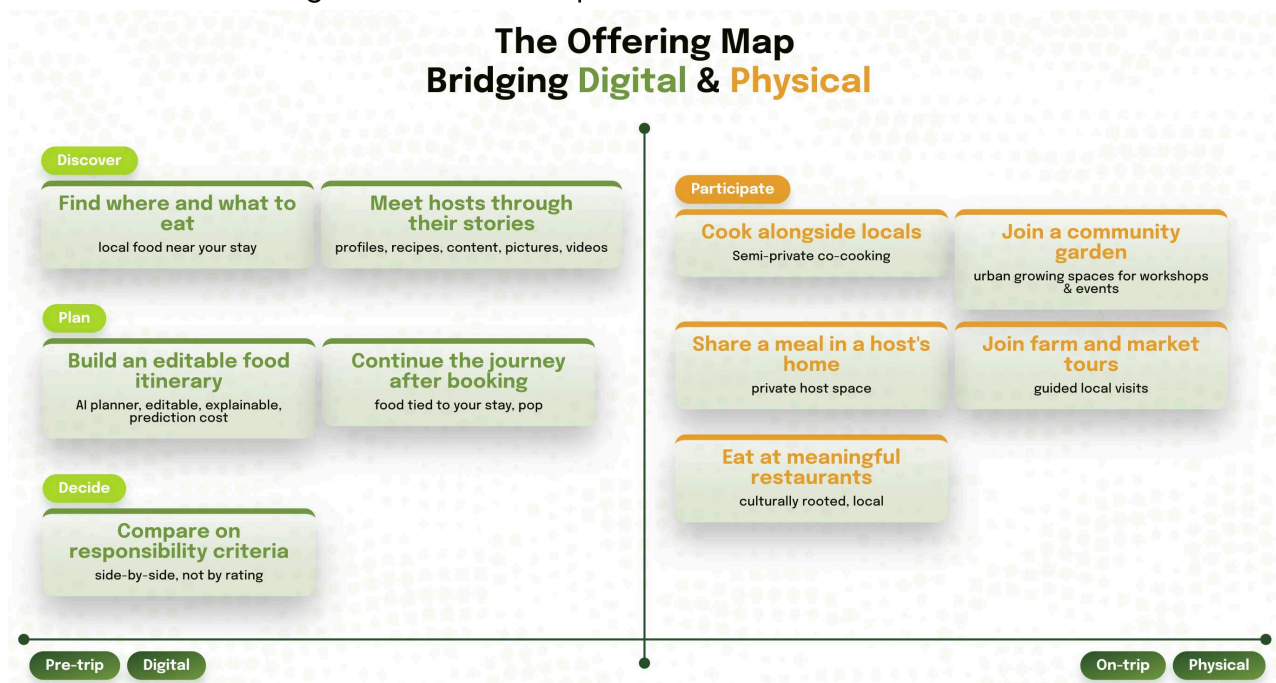


Figure 52: Offering map

7.2.1 The digital layer: Discovering, Planning, and Deciding

The digital side is where users first encounter, interpret, and navigate food-related opportunities. It provides a set of features grouped into three value clusters, discover, plan, and decide, that move the traveller from exploring options to choosing among them.

The **discover** features let users find where and what local food they can experience near their stay, organised through responsibility-oriented categories that surface local value over popularity. Users can also meet hosts directly through their stories, recipes, and cultural content (videos and pictures), so each host appears with a real identity

and voice. Even when direct booking is not yet possible, these features provide destination-specific food knowledge that helps users develop a sense of place before they arrive.

The **plan** features support the traveller in building a coherent food itinerary. An AI journey planner brings together inputs such as budget, dietary needs, location, and personal values and translates them into explainable, predictable and editable suggestions, accessible from simple keywords or guided prompts. A journey-continuation feature ensures the service does not end at booking, connecting the accommodation stay to relevant food experiences so the trip extends into a more continuous engagement.

The **decide** feature introduces comparison into the process. Instead of relying on ratings alone, it presents experiences side by side on responsibility criteria, sustainability, community benefit, and cultural value, so users can evaluate options on what actually matters to them.

7.2.2 The physical layer: experience and local engagement

The physical side is where the journey planned digitally becomes real. It groups the participation features into a single cluster of formats that reflect different levels of comfort, intimacy, and social interaction: cooking alongside locals in semi-private spaces, joining community urban gardens, sharing a meal in a host's private space, joining farm and market tours, and eating at culturally meaningful local restaurants. This range is intentional. Meaningful food participation does not depend on a single model, and offering multiple formats allows different travellers to engage in ways that feel right for them.

Hosts and local food actors are central to this side. They are not simply service providers but storytellers and cultural contributors who bring local knowledge, memory, and everyday food practices into the experience. Their presence is what gives the physical side its cultural depth and distinguishes it from conventional food tourism consumption.

This side also generates value beyond the individual traveller. Through local economic participation, cultural preservation, and knowledge exchange between visitors and residents, the service contributes to a more reciprocal relationship between tourism and the communities it moves through.

7.3 User-centered framing

7.3.1 Personas

To ground the service concept in real human needs, two representative personas were developed based on the research findings. Yuki represents the traveller perspective — a structured planner who needs guided personalization that remains transparent and adjustable. Sofia represents the host perspective — a local food actor who wants controlled, meaningful engagement with guests on her own terms. Together they illustrate the two sides of the service relationship and the specific needs and barriers the EcoFood Experience is designed to address.

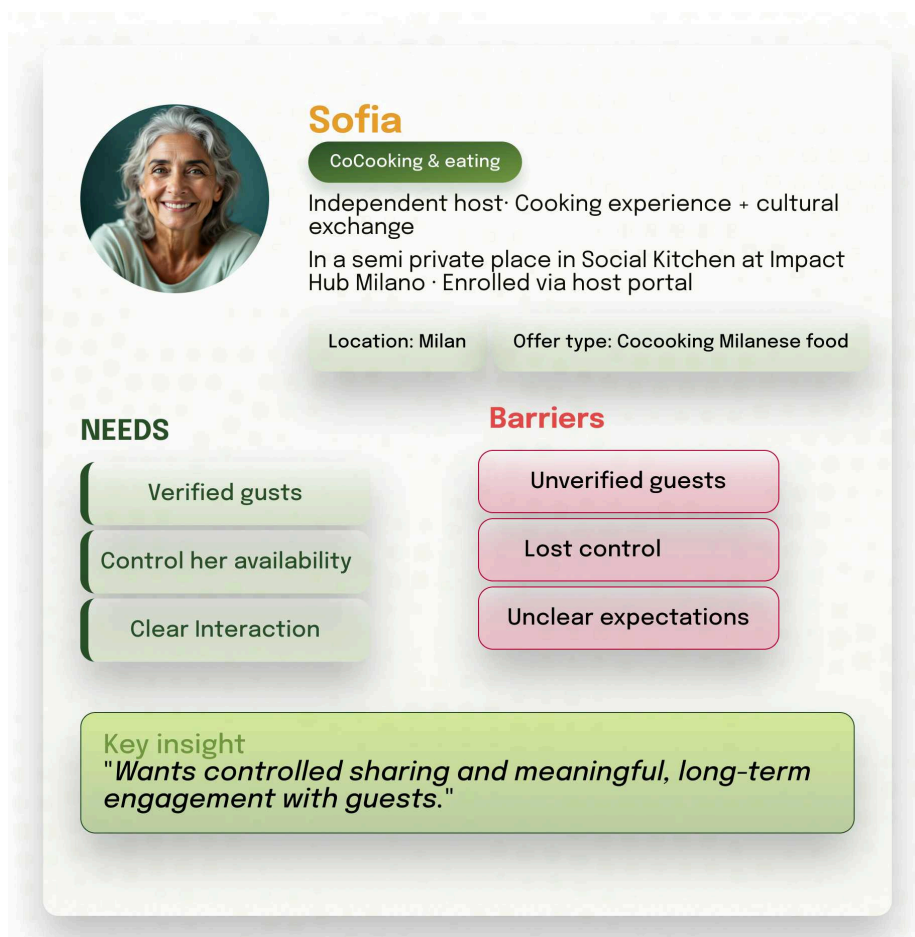


Figure 53: Persona cards —Sofia (Host)

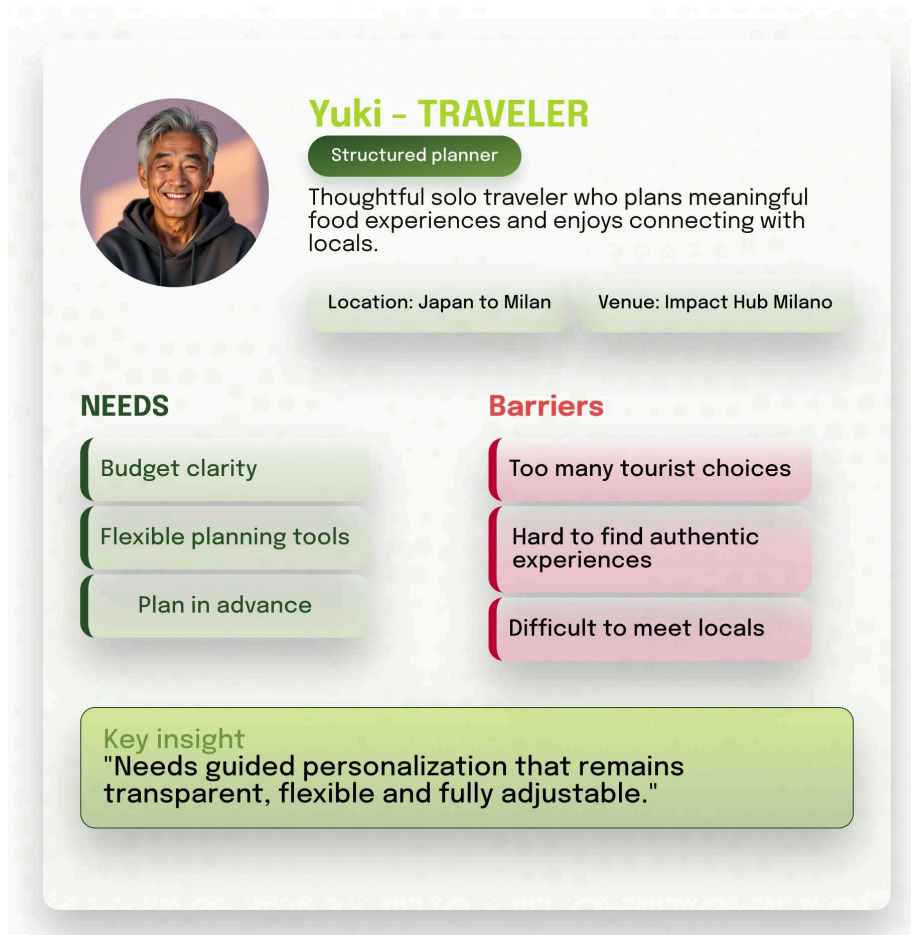


Figure 54: persona cards — Yuki (traveller)

7.3.2 User journey

The user journey maps how Yuki and Sofia move through the service across four stages: entry point, customization, experience, and post-experience. Rather than following separate paths, their journeys are designed to converge and support each other at each stage — what Sofia needs to feel in control directly shapes what Yuki experiences as guided and trustworthy.

The map shows how current frictions on both sides are addressed through specific system responses. Where Sofia struggles to reach the right travellers and manage expectations. Where Yuki faces too many decisions and rigid packages, the service responds with personalized suggestions, editable itineraries, and structured comparison. The result at each stage moves both actors toward greater trust, comfort, and continued engagement.



Figure 55: Yuki and Sofia user journey – entry point, customization, experience, and post-experience

7.3.3 Service blueprint

The service blueprint goes one layer deeper than the user journey. Where the journey shows what the traveller and host experience, the blueprint reveals what holds that experience together beneath the surface: the visible frontstage, the host's backstage preparation, and the systems and partners that quietly make a trusted encounter possible. It is organised across six stages, trigger and entry, discover and plan, compare and decide, book, live experience, and reflect and continue, and read vertically through the layers separated by the lines of interaction, visibility, and internal interaction.

Reading it vertically shows how much sits beneath a single visible action. At the trigger stage, the traveller sees only an Ecobnb confirmation and an invitation to continue with food; beneath it, this depends on the host having enrolled and set availability through the host portal, on Ecobnb passing booking context, location, dates, stay, into the system, on host verification, and on prior collaboration with municipalities and semi-private venues such as social kitchens and urban gardens. The same pattern defines the compare and decide stage: the traveller sees comparison cards with sustainability and community scores and host profiles, while underneath the support layer performs the responsibility scoring, applies certifier signals, and structures the information so responsibility becomes comparable rather than decorative.

This dependency continues through the journey. When the traveller attends, cooks, and eats with the host, that encounter rests on backstage preparation — the host readying ingredients, space, and story, and managing timing and group size — and on support processes that are never seen, including local producers supplying the venue, safety and certifier standards, and calendar synchronisation. At the reflect and continue stage the loop closes: the traveller's review, saved recipes, and followed hosts feed back through content management and value tracking, improving how future matches are made.

What this makes clear is that a smooth, responsible food experience is never the result of a single feature. It depends on alignment across every layer at once — the traveller's intent, the host's boundaries, and the guidance, verification, and local partnerships underneath. This systemic logic is what the following sections translate into concrete design: the interface and interaction decisions through which each of these layers becomes tangible to the traveller and the host.

EcoFood Experience — Service Blueprint						
	1. Trigger / Entry (post Ecobnb booking)	2. Discover & Plan	3. Compare & Decide	4. Book Experience	5. Live Experience	6. Reflect & Continue
Physical Evidence / Touchpoints	Ecobnb confirmation · EcoFood prompt pop up · app notification	Hero section · AI chat · experience categories (where / why / what)	Comparison cards · sustainability & community scores · host profiles	Booking request · expectations & rules · confirmation	Venue (co-cooking / market / farm / restaurant) · food · host · group	Review comment · creator profile + recipe shop · impact dashboard
Traveller Actions	Confirms eco-stay · sees invitation to continue with food	Enters diet, budget, values, ... · chats / browses	Compares options on responsibility · checks host identity · selects	Sends request · agrees to expectations · gets confirmation	Attends · cooks, learns, eats together · engages with host	Leaves review · saves recipes traveller profile · follows host · plans next trip
Frontstage (Visible)	Post-booking activation · dual entry (manual search / AI planner)	AI Journey planner with previous data builds an explainable itinerary · discover layer	Comparison tool · Discover by local hosts · explainable pick	Booking flow · clear rules shown · host accepts / messages	Host welcomes, teaches, shares stories · guided structured format	Review flow · creator + recipe shop · journey continues · suggestions
Backstage — Host	Host enrolled earlier · availability set via host portal	Host profiles, recipes, videos & availability feed the system	Host has set boundaries, format & conditions (semi-private, verified guests)	Host reviews verified guest · accepts · prepares space & menu	Host preps ingredients, space & story · manages timing & group	Host publishes content · keeps contact · builds a following
Support Processes & Partners	Ecobnb shares booking context (location, dates, stay) · host verification · system collaborate with municipalities & semi-private spaces (social kitchens, cultural hubs, urban gardens) to provide venues	System matches traveller needs, host conditions & responsibility criteria	Responsibility scoring · data transparency · certifier signals	Guest verification · mutual matching · payment · calendar sync	Local producers / farmers supply · venue · safety & certifier standards	Feedback loop feeds AI · content management · value tracking to better matches

Figure 56: Service blueprint of the EcoFood Experience

7.4 Interface and interaction design

This section presents the interface and interaction design of the EcoFood Experience service, developed as an integrated layer within the Ecobnb platform. Each design decision is directly grounded in evidence gathered during Phase 2 of the research, combining findings from the traveller and host questionnaires with insights derived from the comparative platform analysis. Rather than describing interface elements in isolation, this section traces how each component responds to a specific gap or need identified in the research, making the connection between evidence and design explicit throughout.

The interface is structured as a sequence of seven interconnected design steps, each addressing a distinct dimension of the responsible food tourism journey. Together, they form a coherent system that extends the logic of responsible travel beyond the accommodation booking phase and into the discovery, evaluation, and participation in local food experiences.

7.4.1 Ecobnb as entry point: extending the responsible journey post-booking

The first and most fundamental design decision concerns where the EcoFood Experience service enters the user's journey. The platform analysis conducted in Chapter 5 identified Ecobnb as the most strategically coherent entry point, owing to its strong and consistent sustainability positioning across 48 countries and its established community of verified responsible hosts. However, the same analysis revealed a critical structural limitation: on Ecobnb, responsibility ends at the moment of accommodation booking. Once a stay is confirmed, the platform provides no further guidance toward locally grounded food experiences, leaving the responsible journey incomplete at the very moment it could become most meaningful.

This gap is not a peripheral issue. It reflects a systemic disconnection within the current platform landscape, where the values that motivate a traveller to choose a responsible stay are not carried forward into the decisions they make about food, exploration, and community participation during the trip itself. In response, the EcoFood Experience is designed to activate precisely at this post-booking moment, introducing food-related participation as a natural and optional extension of the responsible stay rather than as a separate service the traveller must seek out

independently. The interface therefore does not replace the Ecobnb experience but extends it, building on existing trust and ethical positioning to offer a more continuous and coherent responsible journey.

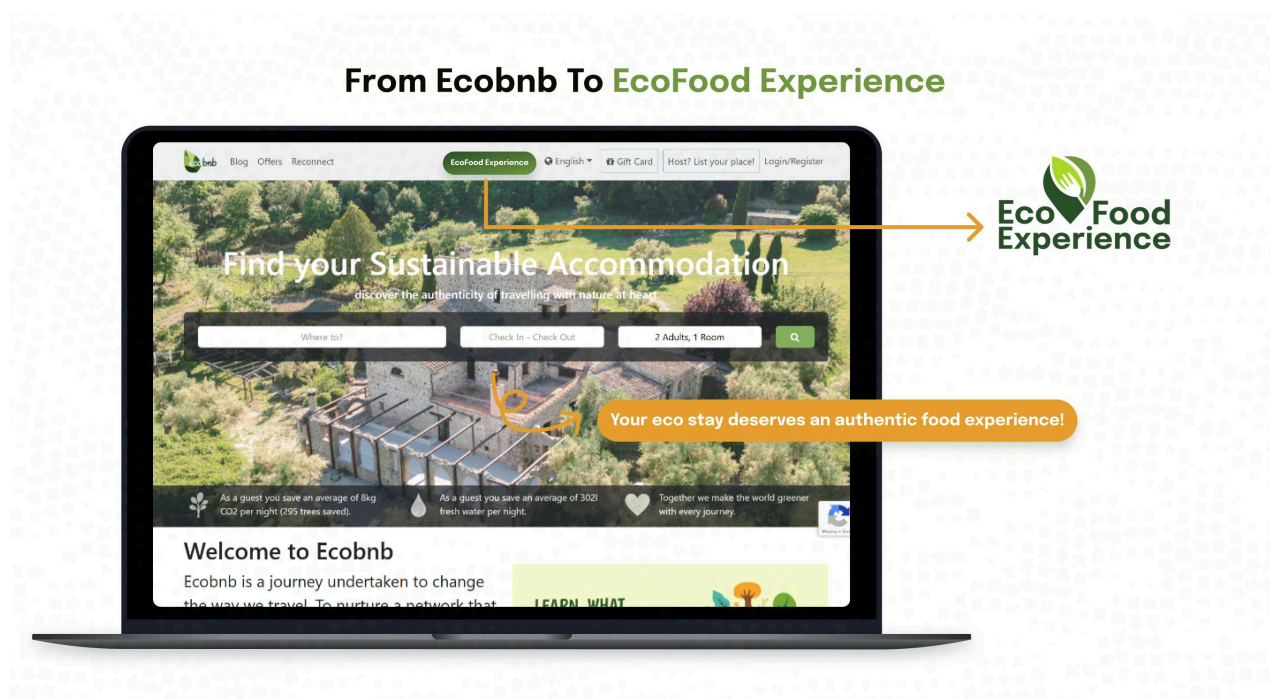


Figure 57: Ecobnb Homepage —Used as Entry Point for the EcoFood Experience Service Integration

7.4.2 Hero section: dual entry for manual search and AI-assisted planning

The dual entry structure reflects a deliberate refusal to impose a single mode of interaction. Travellers plan differently — some want guided support in an unfamiliar destination; others prefer to explore on their own terms. Forcing a choice between these modes would replicate exactly the rigidity that existing platforms already fail at.

The AI component is therefore positioned as optional and transparent from the outset, not as a default path. Alongside this, a brief explanation of how the system works is embedded directly in the hero section — addressing the trust gap that the platform analysis identified: users currently distrust AI recommendations precisely because the logic behind them is never made visible. Making the system legible from the first interaction is the foundation on which responsible discovery can be built.

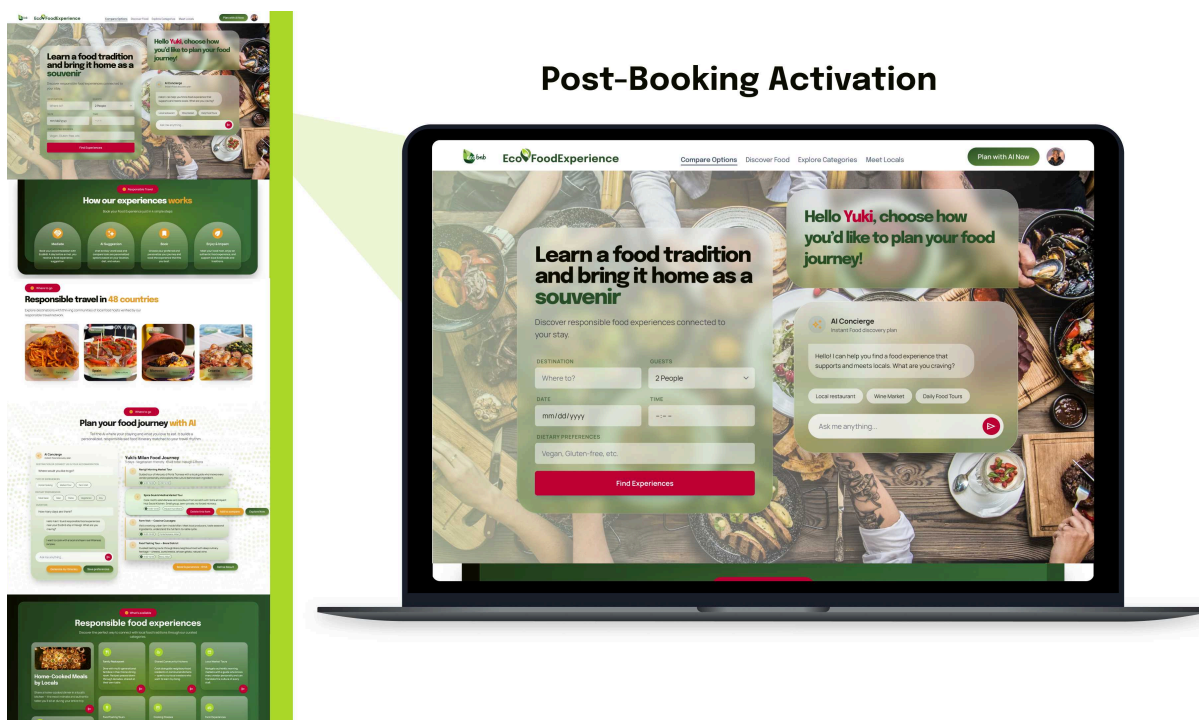


Figure 58: EcoFood Experience — Hero Section: Dual Entry Interface for Manual Search and AI-Assisted Planning

7.4.3 AI journey planner: personalized and explainable itinerary building

What separates this planner from existing tools is not the technology but the logic behind it. Rather than ranking by popularity or platform revenue, the system builds around the user's actual situation — anchored to their Ecobnb stay, dietary needs, and expressed values. This is what the platform analysis identified as missing: not AI as a feature, but AI as genuine mediation.

Editability is equally central to the design. Travellers distrust systems that appear to decide on their behalf, so every suggestion remains revisable, saveable, or removable at any point — positioning the AI as an assistant, not an authority.

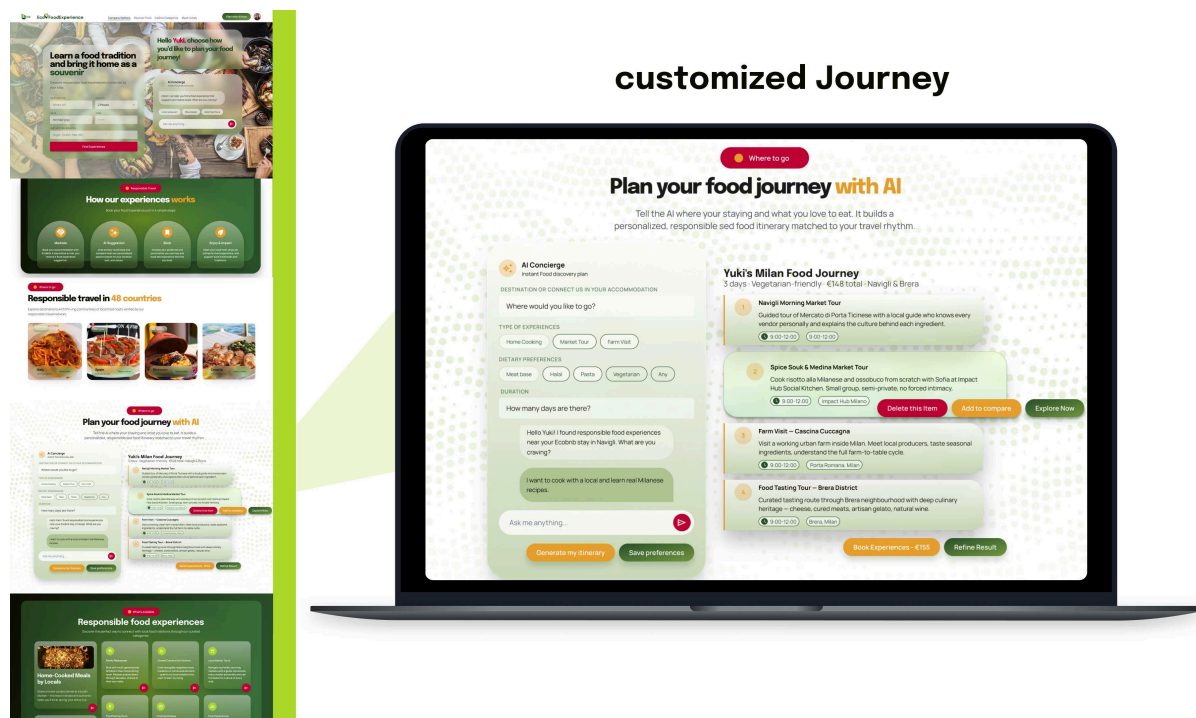


Figure 59: EcoFood Experience — AI Journey Planner: Conversational Interface and Modular Food Itinerary Building

7.4.4 Responsible types of experiences: answering where, why, and what

The categorization does more than organize options – it reframes how discovery works. Instead of sorting by rating or price, the interface structures experiences around the three questions travellers actually ask: where, why, and what. This directly counters what the analysis revealed: platforms defaulting to popularity logic, while formats like community systems, farm visits, and semi-private spaces remain effectively invisible.

The goal is not more options, but greater contextual intelligence in how those options are presented and understood.



Figure 60: Introduce Popular type of experience in website



Figure 61: Introduce Popular type of experience in website

7.4.5 Comparison tool: responsibility as a visible decision criterion

The tool solves a structural problem: responsible values currently have no mechanism at the point of decision. Ratings and price dominate every existing platform, while sustainability, host earnings, and community benefit remain invisible.

By making these criteria comparable side-by-side, the interface transforms responsibility from aspiration into actionable information. The recommended option is explained, not just flagged – the traveller always sees why, and always decides.

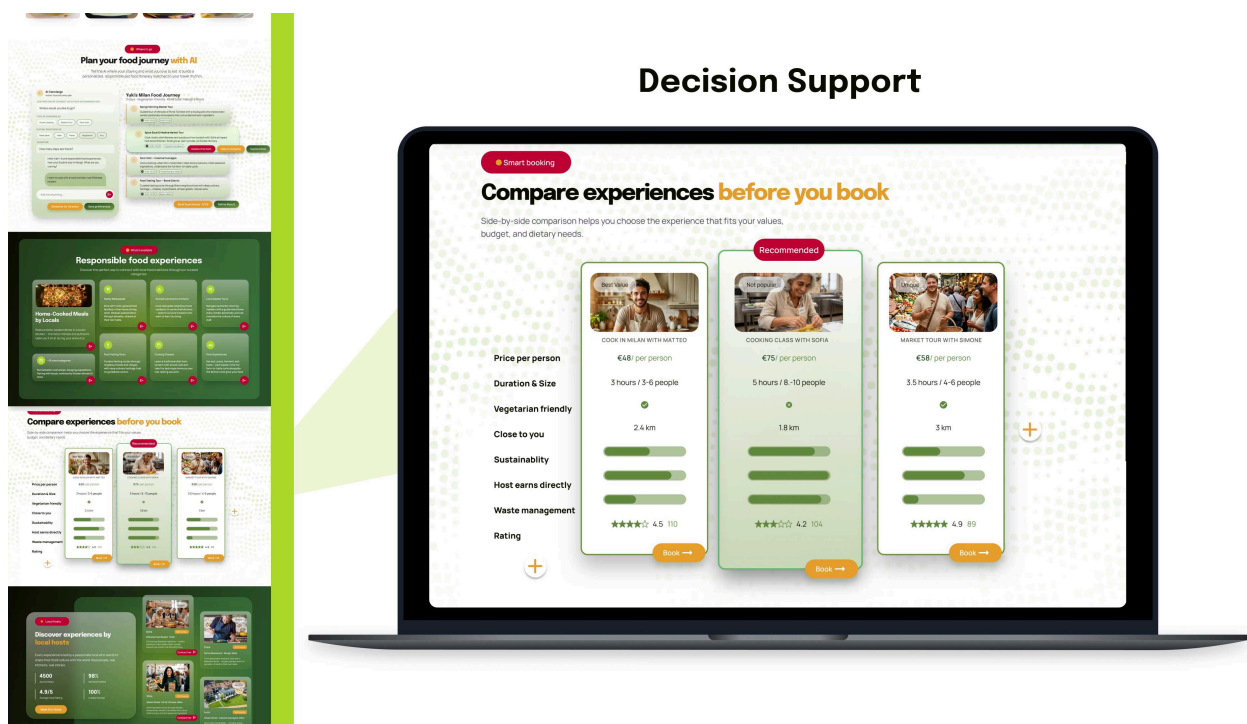


Figure 62: EcoFood Experience — Comparison Tool: Side-by-Side Evaluation by Sustainability and Responsibility Criteria

7.4.6 Discover by local hosts: real identity, real boundaries

Current platforms reduce hosts to functional listings, no identity, no story, no stated boundaries. This creates friction on both sides: hosts struggle to attract the right travellers, while travellers hesitate without knowing what they are actually entering.

The design response makes identity and boundaries visible from the outset. Hosts appear as cultural mediators with a clear profile, motivation, and format — not as anonymous providers. Stating the space and conditions of each experience upfront protects host autonomy and removes traveller hesitation before it becomes a barrier to participation.

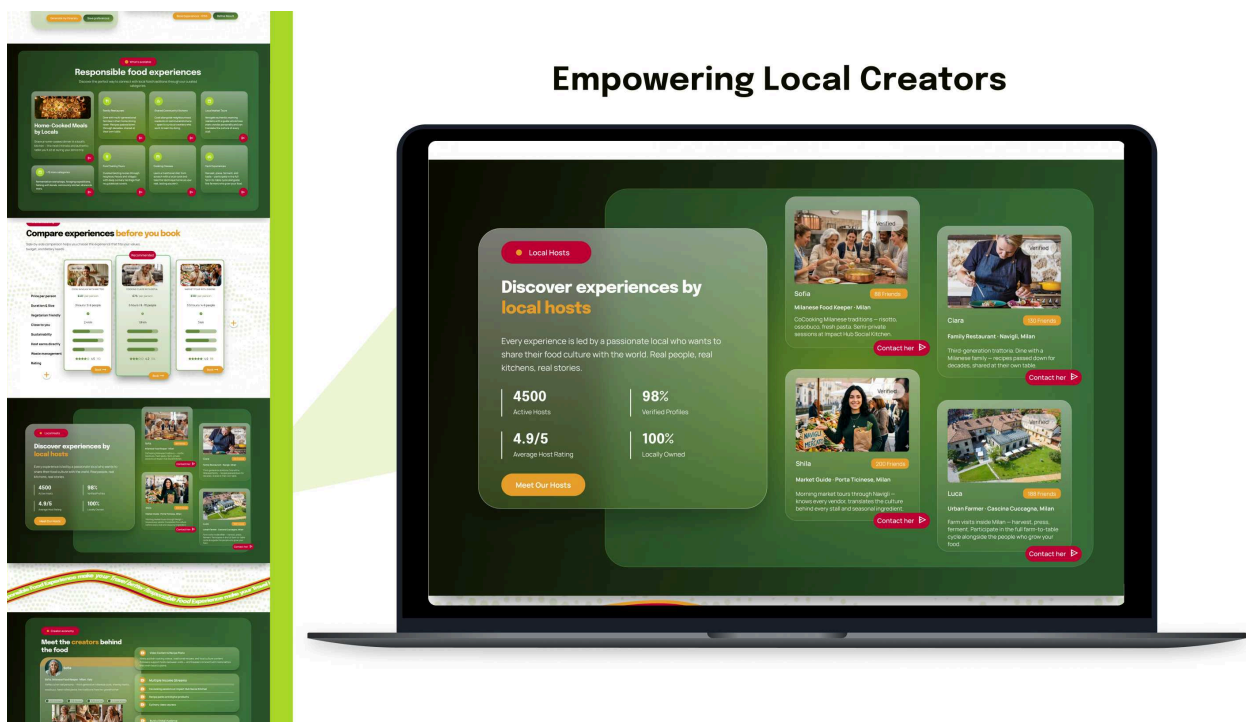


Figure 63: EcoFood Experience — Local Host Discovery: Identity-Led Profiles and Transparent Participation Boundaries

7.4.7 Meet the creators: a social and storytelling layer

The creator layer reverses how hosts are framed — from vendors to storytellers. The platform analysis showed this distinction is systematically absent everywhere else, despite hosts being motivated by cultural exchange, not volume.

Giving hosts space to publish recipes, videos, and stories builds trust through visibility, extends engagement beyond single bookings, and opens income streams that align with their actual motivations. The community impact area completes this by making the consequences of each booking tangible — connecting individual choices to collective outcomes.

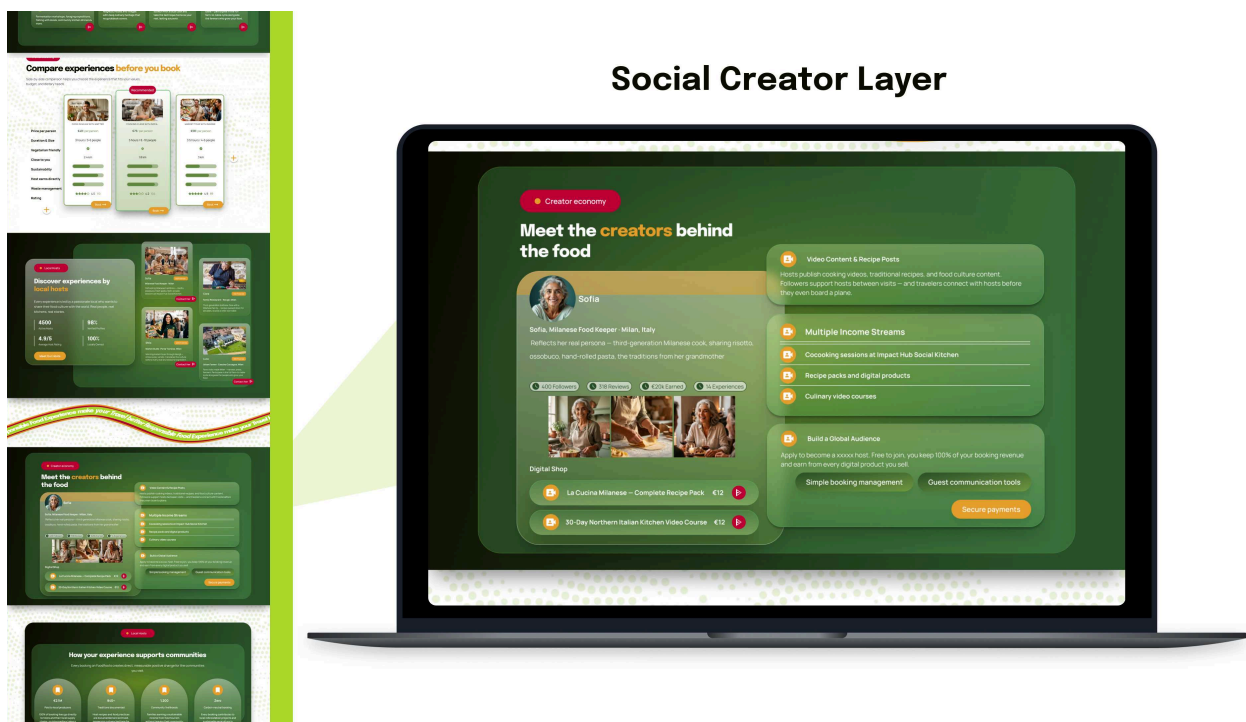


Figure 64: EcoFood Experience — Creator Layer and Community Impact: Host Storytelling, Digital Content, and Transparency Dashboard

7.5 Interface and interaction design application

This part takes the design principles and the seven interface steps from the previous section into the interface itself, presenting the EcoFood Experience as a set of working screens inside the Ecobnb platform. Rather than treating these screens as separate mockups, they are read here as a single connected journey. The same logic that runs through the research carries into the interface: the responsible stay continues past the booking, AI mediation stays transparent and under the traveller's control, responsibility becomes something visible at the point of choice, and local hosts keep a real identity along with clear boundaries. Each group of screens maps onto one moment in this food journey, beginning when the traveller confirms an accommodation booking on Ecobnb and ending where they discover, compare, and reach the people behind the local food experiences.

Section 7.4 was concerned mainly with the reasoning behind each component; here the focus moves to the screens themselves, to how the traveller actually moves through them, and to the way the layout organises four core areas of the service: the entry point, the planning and comparison layer, the discovery layer, and the layer dedicated to local hosts and creators.

Ecobnb as entry point

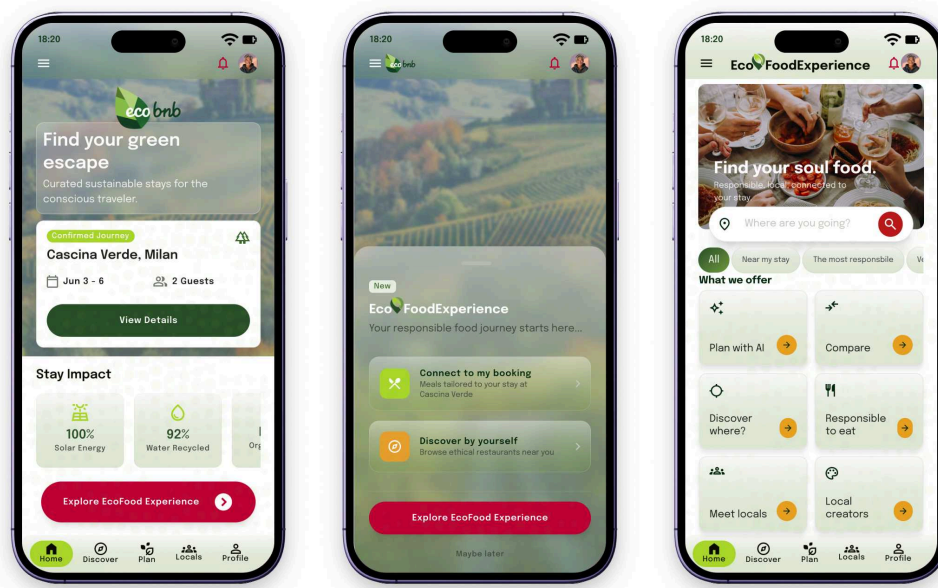


Figure 65: EcoFood Experience — Ecobnb as entry point: the confirmed stay and stay-impact view (left) and the post-booking activation offering dual access through "Connect to my booking" and "Discover by yourself" (right)

Plan with AI & cpmaraision

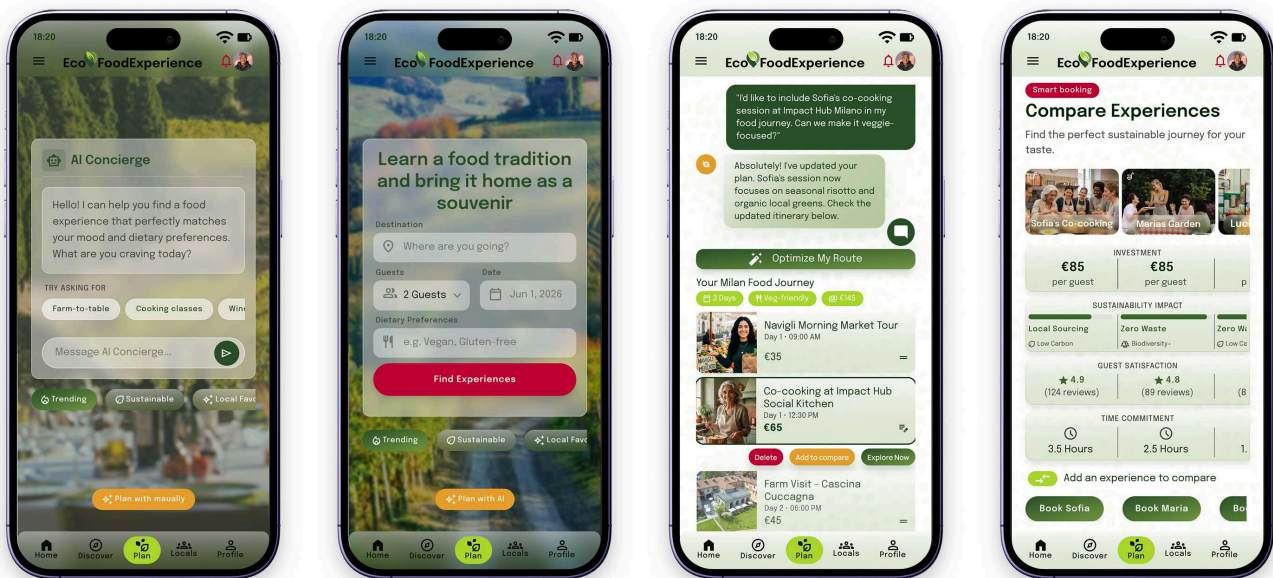


Figure 66: EcoFood Experience — Plan with AI and comparison: AI Concierge entry, manual destination search, conversational and editable itinerary building, and side-by-side comparison of experiences by investment, sustainability impact, guest satisfaction, and time commitment

Discover to what is available & where to go

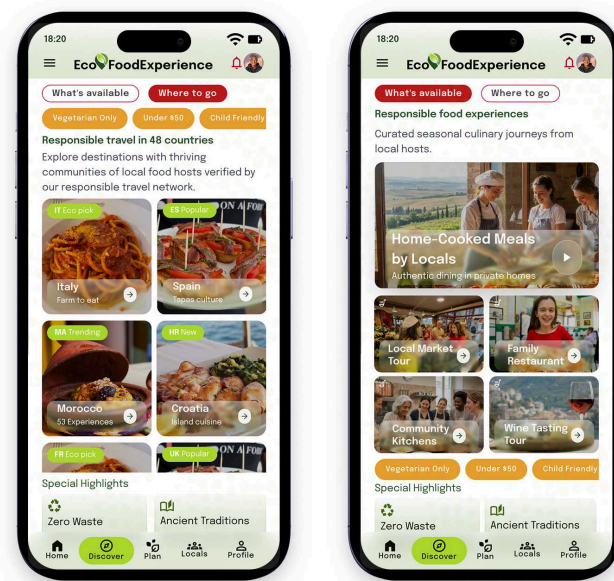


Figure 67: EcoFood Experience — Discover: dual "What's available" and "Where to go" modes, presenting responsible destinations across countries and curated seasonal food experiences from local hosts

Locals hosts & creators

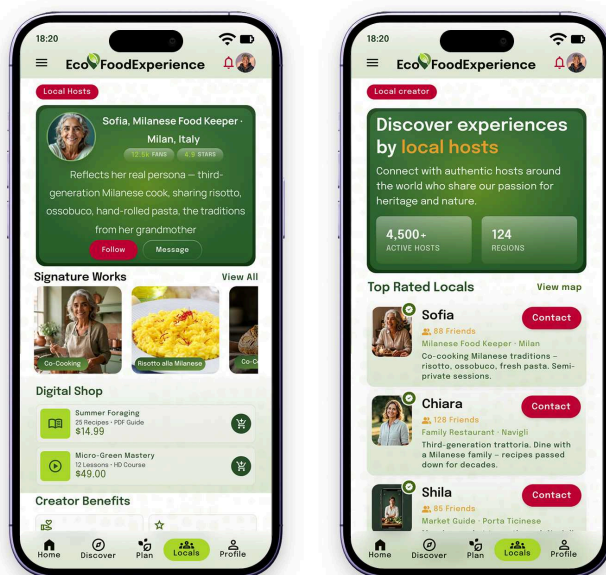


Figure 68: EcoFood Experience — Locals: the local host and creator profile with signature works and digital shop (left) and the local hosts directory with verified, identity-led profiles (right)

8

**Discussion
Limitations
Conclusions**

8 — Discussion & conclusions

8.1 Discussion of findings

The findings of this research suggest that the main limitation of current tourism platforms is not the absence of content, but the absence of mediation. While food experiences, sustainability values, and local participation already exist across different systems, they remain fragmented and difficult to navigate within a coherent journey. As a result, users are often exposed to a large number of options without meaningful guidance, leading to random or convenience-driven choices.

A. Three core system ideas

In response, this research proposes a shift from passive discovery toward active mediation. The proposed service is structured around three core ideas that address the lack of mediation identified in current tourism platforms.

First, AI-based keyword guidance. supports users in entering the system without requiring complex interaction, reducing cognitive load and helping them navigate available options.

Second, the comparison layer. introduces responsibility as a visible decision factor, allowing users to evaluate experiences beyond ratings and price.

Third, the system extends the travel journey. by connecting accommodation, food experiences, and post-visit engagement, transforming isolated actions into a continuous process. Together, these elements move the platform from simple exposure of options toward structured and meaningful decision-making.

B. From extractive to generative tourism

Traditional tourism platforms tend to operate in an extractive way, where users consume experiences and leave without continuity or lasting connection. In contrast, the proposed approach supports a more generative model, where engagement develops over time through learning, interaction, and participation.



Figure 69: Generative tourism plan — the author's own interpretation of how the EcoFood Experience shifts food participation from extractive toward generative tourism)

While the broader distinction between extractive and generative tourism is established in the literature, the following figure represents the author's own interpretation, developed specifically for this research. It maps how the EcoFood Experience is intended to move food participation away from an extractive logic, one-off consumption that leaves little behind, toward a generative one, in which engagement produces ongoing cultural, social, and economic value for hosts and travellers. This interpretation is grounded in the findings of Chapter 5 and translates them into a forward-looking model of how the service is meant to operate.

C. Inside-Out vs Outside-In approach

Most existing platforms follow an outside-in logic, where user demand shapes the structure of the offer. This often leads to standardized and commercially driven experiences. In contrast, the proposed system introduces an inside-out approach, where local actors, their knowledge, and their boundaries play a central role in shaping the experience. By doing so, participation becomes more balanced, and local value is not reduced to a product, but becomes part of the structure of the service itself

D. The social and creator layer (Future potential)

The integration of a social and creator layer represents an important future direction. By allowing local actors to share content such as videos, stories, or food preparation processes, the platform can strengthen trust and cultural visibility. This layer has the potential to evolve into a more structured media environment, where local knowledge is not only presented, but actively produced and distributed, supporting new forms of engagement and connection.

E. Real-world observation

This research is also informed by my direct observation. Through working in a restaurant environment in Milan, particularly during periods of increased tourism activity linked to events such as the Winter Olympics 2026, it became evident that many visitors make decisions among a large number of options without clear criteria.

Choices are often random, disconnected from local context, and rarely lead to lasting engagement. This observation reinforces the need for systems that do not only provide access to options, but support users in understanding, selecting, and continuing their experience in a more structured and meaningful way.

8.2 Ethical reflection on the proposed service

Having presented the full service concept, it is now possible to reflect on how far it meets the ethical commitments that guided its design. The concept treats trust as a structural responsibility rather than a by-product of ratings or reviews: verification, clearer role definition, and contextual guidance are embedded into the service itself, so that participation becomes more legible and mutually respectful before interaction takes place. Host autonomy is supported through differentiated participation formats rather than a single home-based model, and cultural integrity is protected by framing food participation as encounter and learning rather than packaged authenticity.

At the same time, these commitments remain partly aspirational. Because the service was not co-designed with host communities and has not been tested in real conditions, its capacity to genuinely protect autonomy, avoid cultural commodification, and distribute value fairly cannot yet be confirmed. These tensions are returned to in the limitations and future research sections.

8.3 Contributions of the research

This research contributes at multiple levels. Conceptually, it reframes responsible food tourism as a mediated system, where sustainability, participation, and decision-making are interconnected rather than treated as separate elements.

At an analytical level, it proposes a framework that brings together environmental, social, technological, and commercial dimensions, allowing platforms to be evaluated beyond isolated features.

At a design level, the research introduces the idea of a service layer that operates across existing platforms, extending their functionality without requiring a complete redesign.

Finally, at a behavioral level, it suggests a shift from unstructured exploration toward guided and traceable engagement, supporting more conscious and informed participation in local food culture.

8.4 Limitations

8.4.1 Methodological limitations

This research has several limitations. First, the empirical analysis is based on a limited number of platforms and case studies, which may not fully represent the diversity of global tourism systems. Second, user research was conducted within a constrained sample, and therefore reflects specific perspectives rather than universal behaviors.

In addition, the design proposal remains conceptual and has not been tested through real-world implementation or user validation. The AI-based mediation system, in particular, is explored at a conceptual level rather than as a fully developed technical solution.

Finally, the research focuses primarily on the Italian context due to data availability. Other cultural contexts, including those with different tourism dynamics, were not explored in depth.

8.4.2 Critical reflection on the tourism system

Beyond these methodological limits, a more fundamental tension must be acknowledged. This thesis is built on a framework of social responsibility, yet the service it proposes operates within, and depends on, the very tourism system whose effects responsible tourism seeks to mitigate. By making local food practices more visible, discoverable, and bookable, the service could contribute to the same dynamics it aims to counter.

Three risks deserve explicit attention. First, **touristification**: increasing the discoverability of local food experiences may draw greater tourist flows toward previously everyday, non-touristic settings, gradually reshaping them around visitor expectations. Second, the **extraction of local resources**: even a responsibility-oriented platform channels external demand toward local hosts and producers, and without careful governance this demand can deplete the social and material resources it relies on rather than regenerate them. Third, the **transformation of food services into tourist-only offerings**: as local restaurants, markets, and home-based experiences gain value through tourist participation, they may progressively orient themselves toward visitors and become less accessible, economically or culturally, to the residents they originally served. This is the dynamic that critical tourism scholarship describes as the commodification of gastronomic culture (Cheng et al., 2025) and, in

its intensified form, "over-gastronomy," where food heritage is increasingly staged for consumption rather than lived (Şengül et al., 2025).

The service includes features intended to limit these effects, host-defined boundaries, semi-private and everyday formats rather than only commercial venues, responsibility metrics, and a logic of gradual rather than maximised participation. However, these are mitigations, not guarantees. Whether responsible intent translates into responsible outcomes depends on factors largely outside the scope of a design proposal: platform governance, the scale and pace of adoption, local regulation, and the distribution of economic benefit over time. A design framework can make responsible choices more visible and more likely, but it cannot, on its own, prevent a tourism system from reproducing extractive patterns.

Acknowledging this does not invalidate the proposal, but it situates it more honestly. The EcoFood Experience should be understood not as a solution that resolves the contradictions of tourism, but as an attempt to shift the balance within a system whose tensions remain unresolved — and which would require ongoing critical monitoring, not only good design, to keep responsibility from collapsing back into consumption.

8.5 Future Research and Design Directions

Future research can explore how the proposed service might be implemented and tested in real-world contexts, particularly through prototyping and user validation. This would allow evaluation of how AI-based guidance, comparison tools, and journey continuity affect user behaviour and decision-making, and would test whether the responsible intentions of the design hold up in practice.

A second direction concerns scalability across different cultural contexts. While this research focuses on a specific setting, the proposed model has the potential to be applied to destinations that are currently less visible in global tourism systems. Contexts with strong cultural and gastronomic identities, in particular, could benefit from structured systems that support responsible participation from the early stages of tourism development, before extractive patterns become established.

From a personal and contextual perspective, the researcher's own background motivates a specific interest in the Iranian context as a direction for future application. Iran offers a particularly fitting case for the proposed model: it has a rich and regionally diverse food culture and strong traditions of domestic hospitality, yet its local food knowledge remains largely underrepresented on mainstream digital

tourism platforms. In such a context, scalability is not only a technical question but also a social one. A guidance-based platform of this kind could contribute to the visibility and economic participation of local communities — including women, who play a central role in Iranian food culture and hospitality but are often excluded from formal tourism economies. By enabling controlled participation, storytelling, and locally grounded economic engagement, such systems could support more inclusive forms of tourism development in settings where this potential is currently untapped.

Finally, future work could extend the framework beyond food tourism to other forms of alternative tourism, such as eco-tourism or agro-tourism, where similar challenges of guidance, visibility, and participation arise. In this sense, the proposed service can be seen as a starting point for broader systems that connect digital platforms with real-world cultural and environmental practices.

8.6 Final conclusions

This research has shown that responsible food tourism is not only a matter of offering sustainable options, but of making those options understandable, accessible, and meaningful within the travel experience.

By introducing a mediated service layer, the proposed approach connects fragmented elements of the tourism journey and supports more informed and context-aware decision-making. In doing so, it shifts the role of platforms from passive intermediaries to active facilitators of participation.

Ultimately, the value of this approach lies in its potential to shape behavior over time. When users are supported in making more conscious choices, these patterns can extend beyond a single trip, contributing to a more responsible and connected form of tourism across different contexts.

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