



## Kars Gruyere Experiences of Foreign Tourists Visiting Kars Boğatepe Village

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### Article History

Received: 26.06.2020

Accepted: 16.09.2020

### Keywords

Kars gruyere

Cheese

Boğatepe village

### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to measure the experiences of foreign tourists about cheese, which is an under researched subject in the literature of gastronomy tourism in our country. In alignment with this purpose, five semi-structured, open-ended questions were asked to 19 tourists (Kyrgyzstan, Greece, Azerbaijan, Italy and Georgia) who came to visit Kars in order to experience the Kars gruyere produced in the Boğatepe Village in Kars. The interviews were conducted face-to-face by the researcher using the form between February 2, 2019 and January 10, 2020. Based on the results, it was identified that the foreign tourists who visited the Boğatepe Village to experience Kars gruyere were educated, middle and upper class, middle aged, and competent in terms of cheese tasting. In addition to cheese tasting, foreign tourists evaluated the Boğatepe Village in terms of tourism and thought that transportation and accomodation options (opportunities) were insufficient.

### Article Type

Research Article

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DOI: 10.21325/jotags.2020.629

## INTRODUCTION

New tourism types that are involved with the environment, cultural heritage, regional identity, that are gravitating to rural areas, and especially rural and agro tourism types started to develop in the 1980's (Xin, 2007, p. 5). Agro tourism is closely related to gastro tourism in terms of "agriculture", "culture", and "tourism". Gastronomy tourism is one of the sources of this tourism type rather than being a type of agro tourism. *Agriculture* provides food; *culture* provides history and authenticity, and *tourism* provides infrastructure and services. These three components are the main factors that constitute gastronomy tourism (Du Rand & Heath, 2006, p. 209). The rapid development of the world tourism market and the increase of vacation opportunities and purchasing power of employees caused the demands of travelers to change. Regional identity, environmental/life difference, cultural heritage, belief systems, and local food cultures make important contributions to touristic destinations. Gastronomic values, which are among the local and cultural products of regions, have become an important component in the national and international tourism movements of that region (Everett & Aitchison, 2008, p. 150; Öney, 2013, p. 170).

The city of Kars is a destination that tries to stand out with its gastronomic and geographically registered products and to increase its competitiveness. Kars is very famous for its kashar cheese, honey, gruyere and Kağızman apple. The best known of these products is the Kars gruyere, which is produced with the efforts of a small number of producers in Boğatepe Village. In this context, it is aimed to measure the evaluations of foreign tourists who experienced the Kars gruyere.

### Kars Gruyere Cheese

Kars gruyere is a type of hard cheese similar to the Swiss Emmental cheese in terms of its form, production process and production technologies used. It is the city of Greyerz (Gruyere) in the Freiburg Alps that gave its name to the Kars gruyere. The Germans and the Swiss call the old town of Gruyere that is in the center of the Freiburg Alps, Greyezer. This cheese, known as Gravyer in Turkey, is known as Groyer in Austria, Graviera in Greece, Grojer in Yugoslavia and Poland and Perniön Gruyere in Finland (Topuk, 2014, pp. 3-4).



**Figure 1:** Kars Gruyere Cheese (www. aa.com.tr)

Gruyere cheese is one of the most nutritious cheeses that can be obtained as a result of a very laborious production process that takes six to seven months and requires a one-year period to mature. During the lactation period, around 18,000 liters of milk can be obtained in Boğatepe Village and 10,000 liters of it are used in the production of gruyere

cheese. Since 17 kg of milk should be used to produce one kilogram of gruyere cheese, there is a production of gruyere cheese that exceeds half a ton daily in Boğatepe Village (Arınç, 2018, pp. 14-16). Kars gruyere reaches the desired taste and color with the milk of Zavot cows. The milk of this breed, which has a fat content of 4 percent, gives the cheese its aroma and yellow color, which are the most important features of the gruyere. Gruyere cheese differs from kashar cheese with its production method. Kashar cheese is produced by kneading it in a shorter time than gruyere cheese, with less milk and keeping it in the brine pool for a shorter time (Bal Onur & Aksoy Biber, 2015, p.189).

### Boğatepe Village

The settlement of Boğatepe Village, which includes the reflections of the Turkish-Russian common history, dates back to the residence of the Doukhobors and Malacans, who were exiled outside the Tsarist lands, to the Ardahan-Kars region since 1839. When it was understood that the Zavot villages established for Malacans during the occupation years (1876-1878) were suitable for the production of gruyere cheese, gruyere cheese facilities started to be established in the villages starting in 1880. Malacans, who are helpful and well-equipped with social, agricultural and cultural knowledge, are known as a community familiar with gruyere cheese. For this reason, Malacans contributed to the indigenous people of Ardahan-Kars region in terms of beekeeping, dairy farming, cattle breeding and horse breeding in addition to gruyere cheese (Akça & Kıvanç, 2017, p. 37; Arınç, 2018, p. 11).

Over time, planned animal husbandry started in the region due to the Russian administration's comparison of the Ardahan-Kars plateau to the Swiss Alps. They have succeeded in obtaining Zavot breed cattle by crossing the domestic breed cattle of Eastern Anatolia with the foreign breed of cattle they brought from Europe. A Swiss cheese producer was sent to Ardahan-Kars region by the Russians for investigation to conduct necessary research. Seeing that Büyükdavot Village is suitable for the production of gruyere cheese, the cheese producer decided to establish the first gruyere cheese plant in 1880. For about 40 years, the number of gruyere factories called Zavot exceeded 50 in that period, while today the number of factories decreased to 2 (Süvari, 2013; Arınç, 2018, p. 12).



**Figure 2:** Boğatepe Cheese Museum ([www.aa.com.tr](http://www.aa.com.tr))

Turkey's first and only cheese museum is located in the village whose name was changed to Boğatepe in 1936. An area used as a dairy has been restored and turned into a museum. The museum, which was restored with the support of Millenium Development Goals fund from the United Nations Development Programs, consists of three sections. In the first section, writings and pictures about the history of cheese are presented while in the second

section, information on cheese production is provided. In the third section, an area called "Kadın Bakkal" is located, where presentations and tastings of the cheese produced are offered, and old scales and cheese molds are displayed (Mankan, 2017, p. 648).

## Method

The aim of this study is to qualitatively examine the mentioned experiences of foreign tourists who visit the Boğatepe Village of Kars in order to experience the Kars gruyere and to obtain information about the general profiles that define the demographic and personality characteristics of the tourists visiting the destination. On the other hand, it is aimed to determine the level of knowledge and passion of the visitors who come to experience cheese and the effect of cheese as a travel motivation tool. In qualitative research, the suitability of the sample to the subject and the amount of information needed are considered. Therefore, it is concluded that the sample size cannot be precisely calculated in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1992; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Tourists who volunteered to participate were included in the research. It is assumed that this premise will increase the quality of work in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). As of 2019, among 8779 foreign tourists who visited Kars ([www.ktb.gov.tr](http://www.ktb.gov.tr)), 19 foreign tourists who visited Boğatepe Village and who could share their opinions about cheese participated in the study.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected through using the interview technique in the study. The interview form consists of five questions based on the literature (Charters & Ali-Knight, 2002; Carmichael, 2005; Getz & Brown, 2006; Pratt, 2014; Akdağ, 2015). The interview form was prepared in English. The questions to be answered by foreign tourists who experienced Kars gruyere are as follows:

1. What is your level of interest in the cheese experience? Which of the cheese(s) you have experienced so far reflect your taste?
2. Has cheese experience ever been a primary motivation of travel for you in the past years?
3. How did your visit to Boğatepe Village contribute to your understanding of cheese types and your passion for cheese?
4. Did you visit the Boğatepe Cheese Museum?
5. How did you hear about the Kars gruyere and Boğatepe Village which is the production center? Did your visit meet your expectations?

The interviews were held between February 2, 2019 and January 10, 2020, through face-to-face communication with foreign tourists. Descriptive statistics were used in analyzing the data. 19 people whose only reason to travel to Kars was to visit Boğatepe Village and experience the cheese were included in the study.

## Findings

### Findings on the Participants' Demographic Variables

The results of descriptive statistics (Table 1) completed to define the demographic and personal characteristics of participants showed that the majority of the participants were male (89.5%), married (79.0%), age of 47 and over

(47.3%), high school graduate (79%), Georgian (36.9%), with an income of \$501- \$1,500 (52.7%), and retired (36.8%).

**Table 1:** Distribution of Foreign Tourists by Demographic Characteristics

	F	%		F	%		F	%
<b>Gender</b>			<b>Marital Status</b>			<b>Country of Residence</b>		
Female	2	10.5	Married	15	79.0	Kyrgyzstan	2	10.5
Male	17	89.5	Single	4	21.0	Greece	3	15.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>	Azerbaijan	3	15.8
<b>Age</b>			<b>Education</b>			Italy	4	21.0
25and younger	1	5.3	High School	2	10.5	Georgia	7	36.9
Between 26- 35	3	15.8	Undergraduate	15	79.0	<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>
Between 36-46	6	31.6	Graduate	2	10.5	<b>Profession</b>		
47 and older	9	47.3	<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>	Civil servant	5	26,3
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>Monthly Income</b>			Business person	3	15,8
			500\$ and below	2	10.5	Retired	7	36,8
			501\$- 1500\$	10	52.7	Business owner	4	21,0
			1501\$-2500\$	3	15.8	<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>
			2500\$	4	21.0			
			<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>			

### Findings on The Participants' Opinions on Kars Gruyere Cheese

The first question that was asked foreign tourists visiting Boğatepe Village to experience the Kars gruyere cheese was; *“What is your level of interest in the cheese experience? Which of the cheese(s) you have experienced so far reflect your taste?”* When the responses provided to the question were analyzed, it was determined that 73.7% of the foreign tourists were individuals who were enthusiastic about cheese tasting. 26.3% of the participants stated that they tasted almost all the world cheeses and that they visit the production regions of cheeses they taste when they get a chance. One Italian participant (P9) expressed their passion for cheese in addressing the first question as: *“I think cheese is a taste that can be consumed every meal. Also, it fits perfectly when consumed with many beverages and foods. Speaking for myself, I find the raclette cheese of France, a semi-hard cheese, and the gouda cheese of the Netherlands, which has a soft texture, to suit my taste. However, I think that cheese is one of the most important indicators of a culture. For this reason, it will be a great memory for me to both experience and witness the cheese produced under difficult conditions such as Kars gruyere.”*

The opinions of the Georgian participant (P5) on cheese are as follows. *“From time to time, we produce cheese amateurishly in our homes with cheese yeasts. But there are such cheeses that it is unthinkable to imitate them at home. As for the production of these cheeses, it is very difficult to access the cheese itself. As a neighboring country, I wanted to experience the Kars gruyere, which is said to be very close to French gruyere and Swiss emmental cheese in terms of taste. I can say that its taste is quite good.”*

The statements of the Azerbaijani participant (P7) on cheese: *“I’m in restaurant management. My customers say they want to consume more than one type of cheese in their orders. I try to meet these requests as much as I can. When we served France gruyere and Kars gruyere side by side, we saw that the customers liked this cheese very much. Previously, I was just getting Kars gruyere by ordering only. Now I wanted to witness its production with my own eyes. I am quite satisfied with the result.”*

*French gruyere is always one of my favorite cheeses, and after I started serving Kars gruyere, I was impressed with this cheese just like my customers. My first visit for Kars is for cheese but obviously this will not be the last."*

Another Italian participant (P12) expressed their love for cheese as follows: *"Cheese is a true companion for me. During my travels, there is always cheese among my snacks in my bag. Apart from that, I always end my meals with cheese. This can often be done with a glass of drink as well as sometimes with a piece of crackers. Kars is one of the dozens of cities I came to experience cheese only. Boğatepe is really an incredibly sweet village. Their cheese services are also unusual. It is generally consumed with a cup of tea at breakfast. I also loved this duo."*

A Greek participant (P15) expressed their cheese travel as follows: *"I like hard cheeses because of my taste, but you can see almost all kinds of cheese on my table. Cheese is such a product that I carry it in my bag instead of crackers. There are times when I feel like I have to eat 3-4 times a day, so I always add cities that are famous for their cheese on my holiday routes. Kars is one of these cities. I loved both the Kars gruyere and the Kars kashar."*

### **Findings on Participants' Opinions About Kars Gruyere as A Tool of Travel Motivation**

In order to determine the position of cheese as a motivational tool for the participants' travels, the question of *"Has cheese experience ever been a primary motivation of travel for you in the past years?"* was asked to participants. 63.2% of the participants had 1-3 travels in the last two years for cheese purposes. Kars gruyere experience is one of these trips. In relation to this question asked to participants, the participant numbered P15 responded by saying *"In the last two years, after visiting France and Italy, my last trip was to Turkey for cheese purposes"* while P11 responded, *"I travel with the motivation of tasting cheese when I get a chance. I went to Italy two years ago for this purpose."*

Participants P19 and P17 provided information on their travels by stating; *"Cheese can be the primary travel motivation factor for us, and thanks to these travels, we learned a lot about cheese."*

### **Findings on Participants' Opinions About Boğatepe Village**

Participants who visited Boğatepe Village to taste Kars gruyere were asked the question of *"How did your visit to Boğatepe Village contribute to your understanding of cheese types and your passion for cheese?"*

Regarding the question, the participants numbered P13 and P14 conveyed their opinions as follows: *"Kars gruyere provided us with many ideas about cheese. I think everyone should try the taste and smell it leaves on the palate. We bought a lot of gruyeres on our visit. When we return home, we are planning to have a cheese tasting for our friends and come back with a small tour next year."*

Participant number 5 described their experience of Boğatepe Village as *"I provide training on cheese to waiters in the restaurant I manage. I often try to provide information on cheese to our customers as well. I think Kars gruyere should be recognized in the world"* while participant number 16 summarized their opinions by stating, *"My passion for cheese increases with each experience. The gruyere of this place is really delicious."*

All participants responded with "Yes" to the question of *"Did you visit the Boğatepe Cheese Museum?"* The common thoughts of the participants about the museum are that in all their museum visits, none were dedicated to cheese. It was determined that only two of the participants visited the kitchen museum called Museo dell'Olivo, located in the Liguria region of Italy before.

The fifth and final question of the study is “*How did you hear about the Kars gruyere and the production center Boğatepe Village? Did your visit meet your expectations?*” In response to the question, the participant P5 shared their opinion by “*I have been serving Kars gruyere in my restaurant for 9 years. I wanted to visit the production site of this cheese, which I learned with the advice of an important customer. My visit was excellent in terms of taste, but the village is very difficult to reach, and there is no place to stay here.*” Participant P14 mentioned the lack in the village by saying, “*A Turkish friend had recommended Kars gruyere years ago because of my passion for cheese. I liked the gravy, but there is not enough production in the village except for a few major villagers.*”

Participants no. P7, P11, P16 and P19 stated that they were aware of the Kars gruyere through another cheese producer. They stated that they found Boğatepe Village, which is the production center, with their own efforts and that their expectations from their travels were met in a perfect way in terms of taste.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Based on the findings obtained as a result of this study focusing on the experiences of foreign tourists tasting Kars gruyere, which is produced with the efforts of a small number of producers in Boğatepe Village, it was determined that foreign tourists who visited Boğatepe Village for cheese tasting were very enthusiastic about tasting and that they spend time and money for the passion of cheese tasting. According to Murray (2008, p.7), one of the behaviors of gastro-tourists is visiting cheese factories. This finding overlaps with the study of Hjalager (2004, pp.195-201). Based on the gastronomic tourism lifestyle model they presented regarding the food and beverage preferences and attitudes of the tourists, the author divided the types of gastro-tourists into four. Of these four gastro-tourists, the existentials are fond of visiting cheese producers. Similarly, according to Redl (2013), young gastro-tourists like to visit cheese factories.

Foreign tourists' visits to different destinations and demands for cheese experience accelerate the scientific and cultural development of the subject. Considering this demand in terms of Turkey, it is seen as an important beginning for the formation of a new alternative tourism. At the same time, it is foreseen that the fact that the Kars gruyere can't be produced anywhere else in Turkey would lead to gastronomy tours.

It is possible to say that this study is an original study since it has not been possible to find a study conducted for domestic or foreign tourists traveling for the purpose of cheese experience. Based on the findings obtained in the study, the following recommendations for researchers and practitioners were developed.

➤ Considering the experiences of foreign tourists participating in the study, the information they obtained about Kars gruyere and Boğatepe Village was realized as a result of their own efforts or with the recommendation of friends. It is possible to increase national and international awareness by effectively marketing and promoting the Kars gruyere, which is produced in Boğatepe village under suitable conditions.

➤ The lack of accommodation facilities in the village shortens the stay of tourists visiting the village. The construction of accommodation facilities equipped with the necessary equipment for tourists to meet their own food and beverage needs, such as apart-hotels or bed and breakfast suitable for the village settlement will meet the tourists' overnight needs and increase their overnight stays in the village.

➤ Transportation difficulties is one of the most frequent issues voiced by tourists regarding Boğatepe village visits. Lack of public transportation vehicles from the center and surrounding districts of Kars during the day is a



problem for those who want to visit the village. If the Kars Municipality takes steps and works to facilitate transportation to the village, this will contribute positively to the tourist experience in terms of making better use of their limited time and their intention to visit again.

➤ All of the foreign tourists participating in the study visited the Boğatepe Cheese Museum, but it is one of the shortcomings of the village in terms of being the only place for touristic activity. In order to make the museum more attractive, the recognition of the museum can be increased through efforts such as hosting special events that will increase its popularity and creating social activity areas. Tourist activities and experiences in the village can be increased by restaurants and organizing events such as folk dances that will enrich the gastronomic experiences of the visitors.

This research is limited to foreign tourists visiting Boğatepe Village between February 2, 2019 and January 10, 2020 to experience Kars gruyere. It should be noted that the results obtained in this study, which took place with a small number of tourists in a long period of time, can be generalized but the limitations of the research should be considered. Therefore, it is thought that this research, which is carried out in a limited sample in Kars Boğatepe Village, may contribute to the literature in a larger sample and in terms of repeating the studies to be carried out by different researchers and comparing the results. On the other hand, it is thought that this study will contribute to the literature since there is no previous study addressing domestic or foreign tourists traveling for the purpose of experiencing cheese.

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