



GASTRONOMY AND THE CREATIVE CITY A Partnership for Urban Attraction

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ABSTRACT

Gastronomy has emerged as a strategic pillar in the construction of urban identity. This article explores the role of gastronomy not only as a cultural expression, but also as a driver of tourism, city branding and economic development, all contributing to retain and attract talent. Based on comparative data from 175 cities worldwide, the study examines how gastronomic practices and events shape the external perception and attractiveness of urban environments. This study also analyzes how various local gastronomic agents, ranging from chefs and food producers to markets and culinary festivals, contribute to crafting a distinctive urban identity. This leads to the development of cultural authenticity, economic vitality and community engagement. The article highlights gastronomy's potential as a strategic asset for sustainable urban development and for enhancing the global visibility of creative cities.

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1. Why Gastronomy in Cities

The 21st century has witnessed a growing recognition of culture as a key driver of urban competitiveness. In this context, gastronomy has emerged not only as a matter of taste or tradition, but as a strategic tool for urban development, identity formation and territorial branding. As cities increasingly compete to attract visitors, investment and talent, the role of food culture in shaping urban narratives and lived experiences has become central (World Food Travel Association, 2023).

Gastronomy enhances urban distinctiveness by reinforcing cultural heritage, showcasing regional resources and offering immersive, sensory-rich experiences. Culinary identity often becomes a city's symbolic signature, turning everyday practices, such as cooking, dining and visiting markets, into high-value cultural assets within the tourism and creative economy. Embedded in a wider ecosystem that links agriculture, sustainability, hospitality and the creative industries, gastronomy relies on more than chefs and restaurants. Its success also depends on territorial resources, community vitality and integration into urban policy agendas (UNESCO, 2023).

This section explores how gastronomy has become a foundational pillar of urban identity and how it contributes to positioning cities as creative, vibrant and globally connected destinations.

1.1. Which cities are leading the way in gastronomic investment for branding and tourism?

Cities around the world are increasingly recognizing gastronomy as a strategic resource to strengthen their identity and global attractiveness. Whether through branding initiatives, the revitalization of food-related heritage or the development of culinary experiences for visitors, gastronomy is being integrated into urban agendas as both cultural and economic asset (Zhang et al., 2022).

These investments reflect a dual perspective: on the one hand enhancing urban identity and symbolic value through food culture and, on the other, stimulating tourism and economic activity through experiential gastronomy. This section explores how cities, both internationally and nationally, are implementing concrete actions to leverage gastronomy in line with these to strategic goals.

1.1.1. Cities Investing in Gastronomy for Identity and Branding

A report by the (World Food Travel Association, 2023) found that cities investing in gastronomic branding and culinary infrastructures experienced an average 18% increase in international recognition on city reputation metrics.

1.1.1.1. International Level

- Tokyo, Japan: Tokyo has established itself as a global food capital by supporting both high-end gastronomy and traditional culinary culture. Government programs promote *washoku* (recognized by UNESCO), while the revitalization of food districts like *Tsukiji* positions gastronomy as a core component of the city's brand identity and soft power (UNESCO, 2023).
- Florence, Italy: Florence integrates Tuscan cuisine into its cultural and tourism strategies. Investments in traditional markets like Mercato Centrale and campaigns around local products (olive oil, wine, cured meats) reinforce a brand identity rooted in authenticity, history, elegance and regional pride.
- Melbourne, Australia: Known for its diversity, Melbourne promotes itself as a multicultural food destination. Public support for food festivals, innovation labs, and urban food projects allows the city to express creativity, openness and quality of life through gastronomy.

Buenos Aires, Argentina: The city leverages its blend of European and Latin American cuisines to construct a strong cultural identity. Projects like *Café Notables*, food heritage mapping and gastronomic corridors have helped reposition Buenos Aires as a culinary capital in the Southern Cone.

Illustration 1. Photo by Jan T. D.



Source(s): <https://www.pexels.com/es-es/foto/frutas-en-rodajas-en-bandeja-1132047/>

1.1.1.2. National Level (Spain)

Bilbao: Bilbao, and the Basque country by extension as metropolitan area, has redefined its post-industrial identity through Basque gastronomy. The success of world-class restaurants (e.g., Azurmendi, Nerua), the transformation of local markets like Mercado de la Ribera and a strong *pintxo* culture have turned food into a pillar of the city's brand (Drašković, 2016).

Barcelona: The city has used gastronomy to reinforce its Mediterranean identity. With investments in iconic markets (La Boquería, Sant Antoni), support for sustainability initiatives and promotion of culinary innovation, Barcelona positions itself as both traditional and forward-looking.

Madrid: Madrid has embraced gastronomy as a key aspect of its cosmopolitan identity. The revitalization of historic markets, growth of gastronomic incubators and city-supported food festivals strengthen Madrid's image as vibrant, diverse and rooted in both heritage and innovation.

1.1.2. Cities Investing in Gastronomy to Attract Tourism

A study by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2023) revealed that cities promoting gastronomy as a core component of their tourism strategies see a 20–25% increase in tourist engagement and local spending. Culinary tourism is no longer a niche activity—it has become a key driver of urban tourism in destinations worldwide.

1.1.2.1. International Level

Lima, Peru: Lima has become a global culinary hotspot, thanks to its fusion of indigenous, Spanish, African and Asian influences. The city promotes food tourism through festivals like *Mistura* and world-renowned restaurants such as Central and Maido. Government-supported campaigns have positioned Lima as Latin America's gastronomic capital.

Bangkok, Thailand: Bangkok's vibrant street food scene is a major draw for international visitors. Night markets like Yaowarat, curated food tours and national branding initiatives such as "Amazing Thai Taste" have elevated the city as a top global food tourism destination (World Food Travel Association, 2023).

Istanbul, Turkey: Istanbul leverages its Ottoman and Mediterranean culinary heritage to attract tourists through Turkish breakfast experiences, spice bazaar tours and Bosphorus food cruises. The city has also invested in culinary museums and digital storytelling to connect food with cultural identity.

1.1.2.2. National Level (Spain)

Valencia: Internationally known as the birthplace of *paella*, Valencia has developed a strong gastronomic tourism strategy. Events such as “World Paella Day”, guided tours through the Albufera rice fields and hands-on cooking workshops attract thousands of visitors seeking authentic culinary experiences.

Bilbao: Basque country promotes its Basque culinary excellence through *pintxos* routes, food markets like Mercado San Martín or Mercado de la Bretxa (San Sebastián) and the prestige of Michelin-starred restaurants such as Azurmendi. Gastronomy plays a central role in the city’s tourism development and cultural positioning. Madrid: Madrid has embraced food tourism through a combination of tradition and innovation. Events like *Gastrofestival*, gastronomic neighborhoods such as La Latina and Chamberí and the revitalization of historic markets have turned the city into a key destination for food-driven travel.

These examples demonstrate how gastronomy has become a strategic pillar in urban tourism development. By integrating food culture into their visitor experience, cities not only attract tourists but also promote deeper cultural engagement. Culinary tourism enhances local economies, supports cultural preservation and strengthens a city’s global appeal. As such, investing in gastronomy is no longer optional, it is a key element of competitive urban tourism strategies.

2. Hypothesis to be studied

This research aims to explore the role of gastronomy as a strategic element within the framework of creative cities. The following hypothesis will guide the study and serve as a foundation for the subsequent analysis:

2.1. Gastronomy Richness drives City Branding. Creating Identity

In recent decades, city branding has become a strategic necessity for urban environments seeking to stand out in an increasingly globalized and competitive world. Traditional methods of positioning, based on visual identity slogans or architectural landmarks, are no longer sufficient to build a distinctive and attractive urban image. Instead, cities are progressively turning to their cultural assets to construct their narratives in a more holistic way (Quinn et al., 2014). Within this cultural shift, gastronomy has gained particular relevance as a tool for differentiation, recognition and emotional connection (Place Branding for and Through Gastronomy, 2021). “One is attracted by sight beloved by stomach”—says a Spanish folk aphorism.

Gastronomy brings a symbolic and experiential dimension that links people to place. A city’s culinary culture can encapsulate its history, climate, geography, economy and social diversity. Through food, cities express who they are and what they represent. As Richards notes (Richards, 2017), gastronomy offers “a narrative of place” that is increasingly valued in the creative economy.

- *The Cultural Power of Everyday Food*: Culinary practices, when framed intentionally, evolve from daily habits into meaningful expressions of identity. Rather than remaining background elements of everyday life, actions such as visiting food markets, preparing traditional dishes or celebrating local recipes become curated moments that reflect and reinforce a city’s cultural narrative. These practices, shaped by both tradition and innovation, help communicate authenticity, creativity and sustainability to the world.
- *Urban Icons and Strategic Positioning*: Chefs, public markets and gastronomic events are now treated as cultural landmarks. Cities like Bilbao (Basque Country) and Florence have used their food culture not only to promote local excellence, but also to build internationally recognizable brands tied to heritage, innovation and quality of life. Countries like Italy, Greece or cities like Frankfurt, Hamburg, Bordeaux, Maine, Brussels, Vienna, Bologna, Parma, Gorgonzola, Chantilly, La Mancha, Kobe, Philadelphia, York, Cheddar, Worcestershire, Cognac, Champagne, Modena, Edam, Gouda, Naples, Dijon are clearly recognized by the food/drink they give their names. They enjoy direct name transfer, also associated to some kind of protected-origin rules about product authenticity, which gives them global diffusion, as the product travels around the world.

- *Reinforcing Civic Identity and Cultural Continuity:* Gastronomy fosters pride among residents and contributes to the transmission of local values across generations. It strengthens a city's internal identity, helping communities feel more rooted and engaged within the urban fabric.
- *Gastronomy as a Participatory Experience:* Unlike visual symbols or slogans, food engages the senses directly. It can be shared, remembered and emotionally experienced. This participatory nature of gastronomy creates deeper connections between the city and its audiences, turning city branding into a lived experience. Web4 City experiences are likely to be increasingly centered in gastronomy.
- *Gastronomy as a Soft Power in Global Competitiveness:* Food operates as a form of soft power in the international sphere. By exporting culinary symbols, such as regional products, chefs or food philosophies, cities can extend their influence, build prestige and attract global attention. Gastronomic identity becomes a tool not only for tourism and branding, but also for cultural diplomacy and strategic visibility.
- *Driving Innovation through Culinary Creativity:* The integration of gastronomy into the creative city model also fosters innovation. Culinary spaces, such as experimental kitchens, food labs, specialized culinary Universities or gastronomic festivals, encourage interdisciplinary collaboration, entrepreneurship and knowledge exchange. These dynamics position gastronomy as an attractive force within the creative industries ecosystem.

In this sense, gastronomy functions as a multidimensional asset: it is heritage, economy, culture and communication. Its ability to connect the symbolic with the material and the local with the global, makes it a cornerstone of urban identity in the 21st century.

2.2. Affordable Good Food Enhances Urban Equity and Healthy Communities

Access to affordable, high-quality food is a key driver of urban equity and well-being. Cities that ensure all residents have access to nutritious and culinary relevant meals, foster social cohesion and reduce health disparities. Affordable gastronomy is not only a matter of pricing but also of strategic urban planning, where the location of markets, public initiatives and transport links play a crucial role.

A lack of access to healthy and affordable food often results in *food deserts*, which have been linked to higher rates of obesity and chronic diseases in urban populations (VeryWell Health, 2024). Global organizations such as (World Bank, 2017) emphasize that inclusive food systems are essential for sustainable urban development, highlighting that affordable and healthy food is a fundamental right and a pillar of city livability.

Moreover, when food is accessible to all, it enhances local economies by supporting small producers and fostering short supply chains. It also encourages the development of inclusive public spaces, such as neighborhood markets and communal dining programs, which become meeting points that reinforce civic identity and social integration. In this sense, affordability becomes not just a socioeconomic concern, but a cultural and spatial one that directly shapes the everyday experience of city life.

Thus, affordable good food contributes not only to public health but also to the creation of inclusive, creative and resilient urban communities.

2.3. Gastronomy drives High Quality Tourism & Economic Development

Tourism has evolved from a passive consumption of sights to an active search for meaningful experiences. In this context, gastronomy has gained a central role in shaping urban tourism dynamics. Researchers estimate that for approximately 15% of tourists, gastronomy is a primary motivator in their destination choice (Hyun & O'Neill, 2019). Travelers increasingly choose destinations not only for their monuments or climate, but for the promise of authentic flavors,

local products and unique food-related experiences (UCF, 2023). Gastronomy has become both a reason to visit and a way to connect emotionally with a place.

- *Food as a Motivator for Travel:* Culinary tourism is no longer a niche. Studies show that a significant percentage of tourists now consider gastronomy a primary factor in choosing a destination. From tasting local street food to booking high-end restaurants, food shapes itineraries and influences travel decisions.
- *Food as a Gateway to Local Culture:* Gastronomy allows tourists to understand a place from the inside. Through traditional recipes and regional ingredients visitors gain insight into the city's history, social fabric and way of life. This cultural depth adds meaning to the tourist experience and creates stronger emotional connections with the destination.
- *Culinary Experiences Beyond the Plate:* Markets, food tours, cooking classes and festivals turn gastronomy into immersive and educational activities. Almost half of travelers engage in culinary-cultural activities such as cooking classes and food festivals (MDPI, 2023).
- *Gastronomic Tourism and Seasonality:* Unlike weather-dependent attractions, food culture is available year-round. Seasonal culinary events—like wine harvests or truffle fairs—help smooth visitor flows and generate income in off-peak seasons (Sciencedirect, 2024).
- *Boosting the Hospitality and Creative Economy:* Restaurants, food tours, artisanal producers and gastronomic content creators all contribute to a growing sector that blends tourism and the creative economy. Supporting gastronomy helps cities create jobs and diversify their tourism offer with high cultural value.

In summary, gastronomy has become a powerful tool for enhancing urban tourism by offering immersive, meaningful and culturally rooted experiences. Beyond its economic impact, food allows cities to tell their stories, reinforce their identity and engage visitors on a sensory and emotional level. As tourism becomes increasingly experience-driven, gastronomy stands out not only as a differentiating factor, but as a strategic asset for cities seeking to position themselves in a global and competitive landscape.

2.4. Gastronomic fosters – Intercultural Exchange & Global Connectivity

In a world increasingly defined by mobility, migration and cultural hybridity, gastronomy has emerged as a key medium for intercultural exchange. Through food, cities offer spaces for dialogue, identity negotiation and mutual understanding, functions that extend far beyond tourism and consumption. Gastronomy can serve as a bridge between cultures, reinforcing social cohesion locally and projecting global connectivity internationally (EHL Insights, 2017).

Many cities have incorporated multicultural gastronomy into their branding and diplomacy strategies. Toronto, for example, is recognized as one of the world's most multicultural cities—with over 200 ethnic cuisines thriving across its neighborhoods (Destination Toronto, 2024). Culinary events, such as food festivals or immigrant-run markets, serve not only as cultural showcases but also as platforms for social inclusion.

Similarly, Tel Aviv highlights its fusion food culture—where Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and European influences blend—as part of its urban identity and international image. These culinary dynamics foster openness, attract both tourists and talent, and bolster cultural diplomacy efforts.

In Spain, Valencia leverages its traditional and immigrant culinary influences through events like “Bonic/a Fest,” which celebrates diversity in its central market. The city promotes gastronomy as a tool for integration, combining paella culture with international food offerings in urban festivals and local initiatives.

By embracing gastronomic diversity, cities are not only responding to demographic change but actively building a narrative of openness and cosmopolitanism. Gastronomy thus becomes a form of cultural infrastructure—one that enhances global connectivity while fostering everyday intercultural dialogue.

Illustration 1. Photo by: Daniela Elena Tentis

Source(s): <https://www.pexels.com/es-es/foto/ensalada-de-verduras-con-pan-de-trigo-al-lado-1213710/>

2.5. Impact of Gastronomy Quality on Quality of Life

The quality of a city's gastronomy is closely linked to the perceived quality of life among its residents. Food is not only nourishment, it is culture, leisure, routine and celebration. A rich and accessible gastronomic landscape contributes to social life, urban experience and public health, making cities more livable and socially vibrant.

Culinary environments shape how people interact with their surroundings. Cities with diverse, affordable, and high-quality food options tend to foster more active public spaces, encourage sociability and generate a sense of community. In Helsinki, for instance, the rise of local food movements and public food events like Restaurant Day have helped transform the city into a more participatory and socially engaged environment (Big in Finland, 2020).

Taipei also offers a compelling example: its network of night markets not only boosts the local economy but also plays a central role in daily social life, offering shared cultural spaces for locals and visitors. These gastronomic hubs support informal social interaction, leisure and urban identity.

In Spain, Bilbao has experienced a revitalization of social life through its gastronomic culture. Pintxos bars, culinary tourism and gastronomic societies (txokos) are not only economic engines but also spaces for everyday connection and cultural continuity. The accessibility and centrality of food in urban life enhance emotional ties to the city and support well-being.

Thus, the quality of gastronomy impacts more than tourism or branding, it directly influences social inclusion, urban vitality and the mental and emotional health of city dwellers.

2.6. Gastronomy activates – Territorial Resources & Geographic Advantage

Gastronomy is deeply rooted in territory. It reflects the geography, biodiversity, climate and cultural practices of a place. When cities harness their culinary heritage strategically, they activate their surrounding territorial resources, such as agricultural landscapes, local ingredients and traditional production methods, transforming them into engines of development and identity (Aguirre Sosa et al., 2023).

Cities that embrace their geographic and culinary specificity can create value chains that connect urban consumption with rural production. For example, Lima has built its international culinary reputation by valorizing native ingredients from the Andes and Amazon, such as *quinoa*, *aji amarillo*, or *maca*, thereby promoting biodiversity and empowering rural communities (Aguirre Sosa et al., 2023). This strategy strengthens territorial identity while opening global markets for local products.

Similarly, Florence leverages its Tuscan gastronomic heritage to promote regional identity and agro-tourism. Studies on rural tourism in Tuscany show that agritourism, focused on food and wine, has significantly contributed to local economic revitalization, combining cultural authenticity, sustainable land use and tourism growth (Randelli et al., 2009). The emphasis on Chianti wine, olive oil and traditional recipes reinforces both the urban brand and rural economies.

In Spain, Córdoba connects its gastronomy to its Andalusian territory, emphasizing ingredients like olive oil or traditional *salmorejo*. The city's gastronomic tourism routes not only spotlight local restaurants, but also producers, cooperatives and PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) initiatives, enhancing the value of the broader region.

Gastronomy, therefore, becomes a territorial strategy. It links cities to their ecological and cultural context, transforming local geography into a resource for sustainable development, differentiation and competitiveness.

2.7. Good Gastronomy also drives Healthy Cities

Beyond its cultural and economic roles, gastronomy can significantly influence urban health. Cities that promote high-quality, balanced diets as part of everyday life can leverage gastronomy as a public health tool. In this sense, healthy food becomes part of urban planning, sustainability and citizen well-being strategies (World Health Organization, 2003).

One of the clearest examples is the promotion of the Mediterranean diet, recognized by (UNESCO, 2023) as intangible cultural heritage and widely regarded as one of the healthiest dietary models. Cities in Mediterranean regions such as Athens and Nice incorporate this identity into food education programs, market structures and public policies that support local, seasonal and minimally processed foods.

Helsinki, although outside the Mediterranean, has implemented policies that link gastronomy to health outcomes, through organic school meals, sustainable food procurement and promotion of plant-based diets. These efforts align gastronomy with both environmental sustainability and citizen health.

In Spain, Málaga is increasingly positioning itself as both a gastronomic and a healthy city. Its coastal cuisine, centered on fresh fish, olive oil, fruits and vegetables—naturally aligns with Mediterranean dietary principles. Public initiatives such as *mercados saludables*, school-based nutrition education and slow food festivals reinforce the connection between food and health at the urban level (Mediterranean Diet Foundation, 2023).

In parallel, new models of healthy and sustainable dining are emerging from the private sector. One notable example is the restaurant initiative *Low Food*, present in several medium-sized Spanish cities. These restaurants are based on philosophy of proximity, seasonality and nutritional balance. Their menus prioritize vegetables, legumes and whole grains, while avoiding ultra-processed products and offering plant-based options at affordable prices. By collaborating with local farmers and producers, *Low Food* strengthens the urban-rural connection and ensures that healthy eating is not only aspirational but accessible. In cities like Zaragoza and Gijón, *Low Food* has become a benchmark for everyday healthy dining, attracting both residents and visitors who seek flavorful yet responsible food options. Its presence also stimulates a broader shift in local food culture, inspiring other establishments to adopt similar values.

Thus, gastronomy is not just about pleasure or identity, it becomes a cornerstone of healthier, more sustainable and more livable cities, contributing directly to public health, social cohesion and urban resilience (EAT-Lancet Commission, 2019).

3. Research & Findings

An arduous study of the mentioned subjects has led to a process of investigation and analysis by which certain conclusions may be established.

3.1. Research Methodology

The search criteria used corresponds to the exploration of 175 cities around the globe, which are included at the Worldwide Observatory for Attractive Cities (Ondiviela, 2024). They will enable the comparison according to different parameters, and therefore the extraction of correlations between those results and city branding and attractiveness.

The list of cities and their corresponding countries from which the data was obtained is shown in the Appendix.

3.2. Research

In the context of the global knowledge economy, cities compete to attract not only tourists and investors, but also high-skilled professionals and members of the so-called “creative class”. According to urban theorist Richard Florida (Florida, 2002), one of the key drivers for talent attraction is quality of life, an area where gastronomy plays a surprisingly influential role.

Food culture contributes to the overall livability of a city by enhancing its cultural offering, urban experience and everyday pleasures (Culinary Institute of America, 2024). Cities that cultivate a vibrant gastronomic identity often appeal more strongly to professionals seeking lifestyle quality alongside career opportunities. As Florida (Florida, 2002) highlights, creative individuals tend to gravitate towards culturally rich, open and diverse environments.

For example, Melbourne and Montreal are both recognized not only for their innovation ecosystems but also for their dynamic food scenes, which range from fine dining to multicultural street food. These cities regularly rank high in international indexes of quality of life and talent competitiveness (INSEAD, 2023). Their gastronomic vibrancy is not merely a background element, but an active part of their urban attractiveness strategy—offering experiences that extend beyond professional development.

Illustration 3. Photo by Manuel Cusido



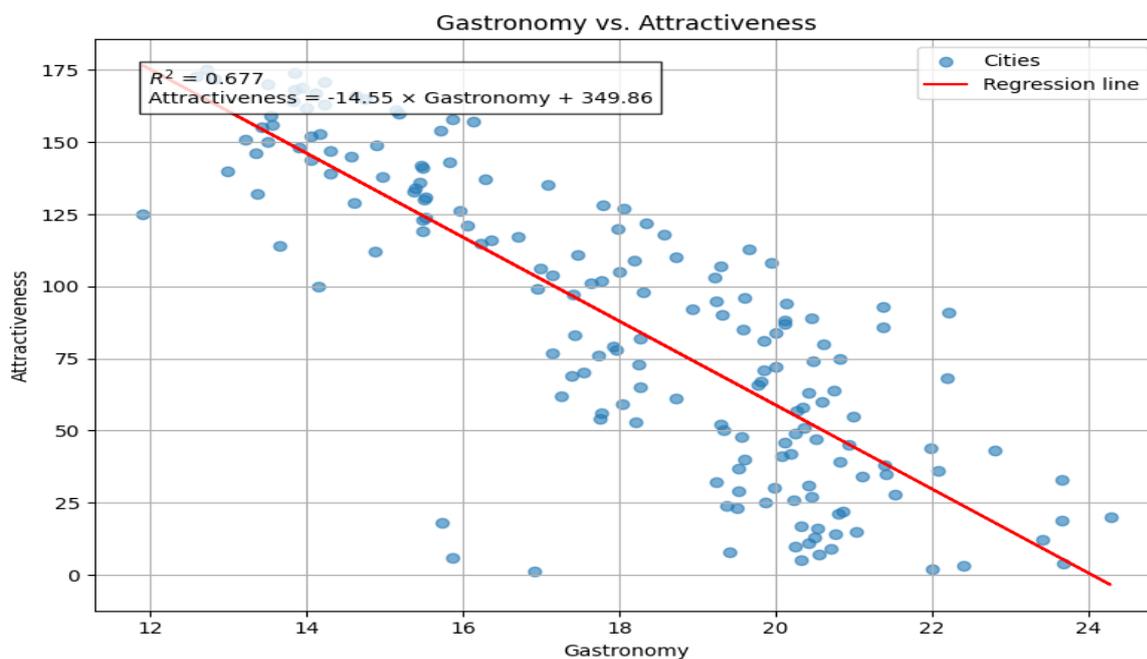
Source(s): <https://www.pexels.com/es-es/foto/comida-fuego-peces-pescados-20957175/>

In Spain, Malaga has increasingly positioned itself as a lifestyle city, combining coastal living with a strong gastronomic tradition rooted in Andalusian and Mediterranean cuisine. Its culinary scene, bolstered by local markets, seafood culture and contemporary restaurants, plays a key role in attracting remote workers, entrepreneurs and international talent. Events such as Malaga Gastronomy Festival also support its image as a city that blends quality of life with cultural sophistication.

In this way, gastronomy acts as both a lifestyle marker and a soft power tool, supporting cities' ambitions to become magnets for creative professionals and international talent.

To further support the quantitative analysis, a visual exploration was carried out to evaluate how the gastronomic index relates to key dimensions of urban performance. While statistical models offer strong evidence, graphical representation allows for a more intuitive understanding of the trends and consistencies within the data. The following scatterplots display the relationship between the cities' gastronomic profiles and their respective scores in attractiveness, magnetism and identity. This step provides an additional layer of interpretative clarity, showing how cities with higher gastronomic capital tend to cluster toward the upper ends of these strategic urban indicators.

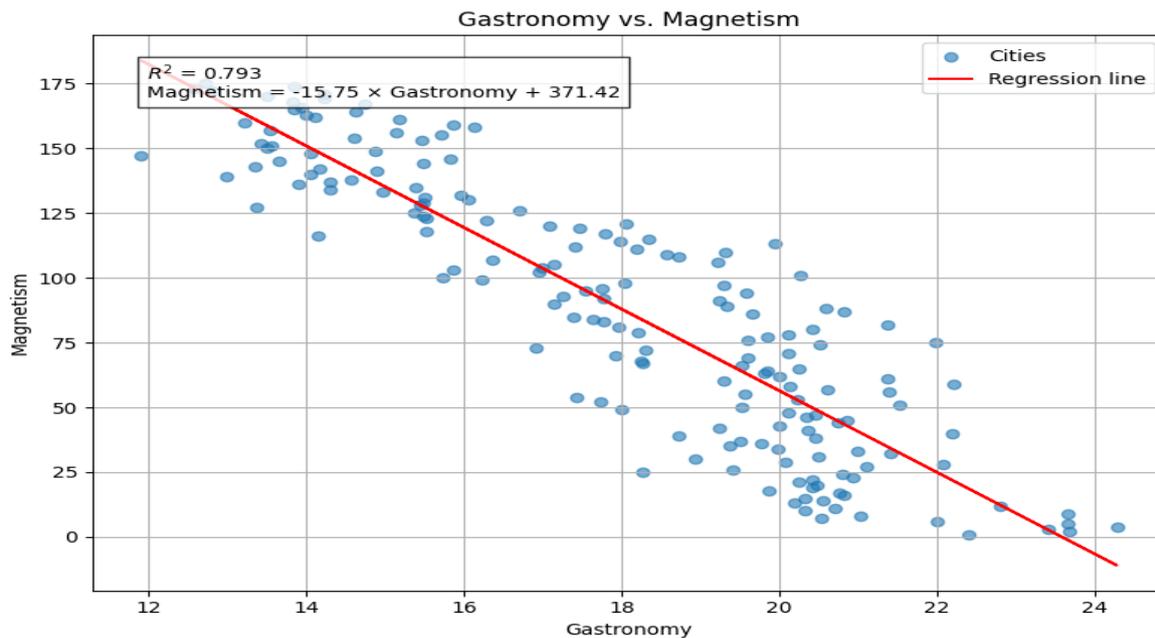
Figure 1. Gastronomy's Correlation with Attractiveness.



Source: Own elaboration, 2025

This visualization illustrates a meaningful linear relationship between Gastronomy and Attractiveness, with a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.677$. Although this correlation is not as strong as the ones observed with Magnetism and Identity, it remains significant, particularly because attractiveness tends to be influenced by a broad spectrum of variables that are often more diffuse and difficult to quantify — such as cultural reputation, architectural quality or even perceived quality of life. The fact that gastronomy alone explains such a considerable share of the variance in attractiveness demonstrates its growing role as a central symbolic asset of the city.

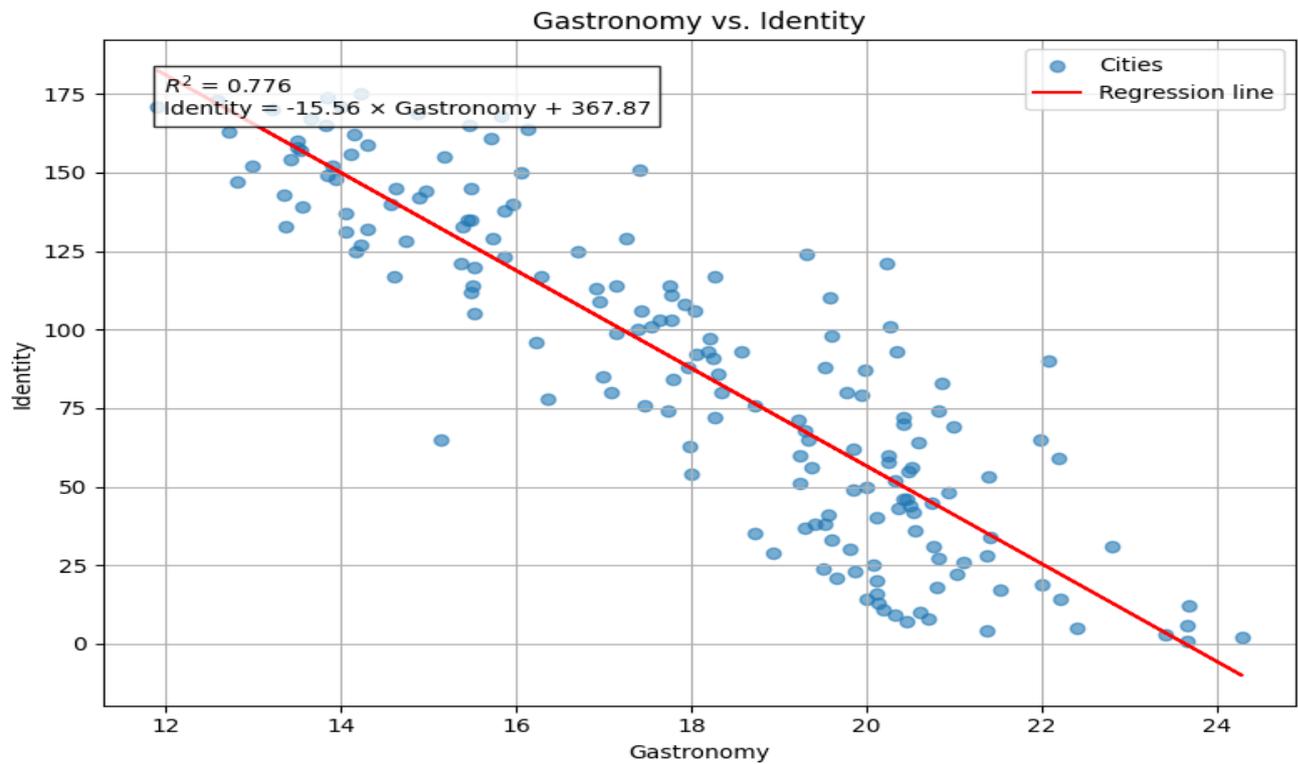
The regression line shows that cities with stronger gastronomic ecosystems are systematically rated as more attractive. This suggests that food is not simply a matter of culinary excellence but an integral part of how urban environments are experienced, narrated and consumed. Gastronomy becomes a channel through which cities communicate openness, creativity, and cosmopolitan values. Even in the presence of many other factors shaping attractiveness, the clear positive association underlines food's ability to enhance the desirability and perceived prestige of a city.

Figure 2. Gastronomy's Correlation with Magnetism.

Here the association is particularly strong, with a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.793$, making it the most robust of the three relationships. Magnetism, understood as a city's ability to attract talent, visitors, investment and global recognition, appears to be closely tied to the strength of its gastronomic scene. The clustering of data points along the regression line reinforces the consistency of this connection: regardless of other differences, cities with vibrant gastronomic ecosystems demonstrate higher levels of magnetism.

This pattern suggests that gastronomy operates as both a soft-power resource and a competitive advantage. It acts as a universal cultural language that resonates across borders, drawing individuals who seek unique experiences, symbolic authenticity and cultural capital. Gastronomy, when embedded into policies, events and narratives, becomes a magnet not only for tourists but also for entrepreneurs, creatives and professionals seeking dynamic and innovative environments. The strength of the correlation indicates that investment in food culture can have direct implications for a city's global positioning and long-term attractiveness to diverse audiences.

Figure 3. Gastronomy's Correlation with Identity



Source: Own elaboration, 2025

The third visualization shows a strong and consistent relationship between Gastronomy and Identity, with a coefficient of determination of $R^2 = 0.776$. This suggests that the degree to which a city cultivates and promotes its food culture is closely tied to the strength of its urban identity. Cities that institutionalize gastronomy as part of their cultural and symbolic fabric tend to display clearer, more recognizable and more resonant identities, both locally and internationally.

The positive slope of the regression line emphasizes how food contributes to the process of meaning-making in urban spaces. Gastronomy becomes not only a reflection of history and tradition but also a forward-looking strategy that integrates inclusivity, creativity and innovation. Cities that articulate their identity through food are able to communicate uniqueness, build narratives of belonging and differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive urban landscape. By embedding gastronomy into festivals, policies and everyday practices, these cities transform food into a marker of cultural authenticity and a cornerstone of collective identity.

3.3. Findings

The longitudinal analysis of 175 cities from the Worldwide Observatory for Attractive Cities (Ondiviela, 2024), covering the period 2020 to 2025, provides robust evidence that gastronomy is a key driver of urban competitiveness, identity and sustainability. The continuous analysis over six years confirms that cities investing in their culinary culture, whether through traditional heritage, innovation, accessibility or global positioning, achieve better outcomes in attractiveness, magnetism and profitability. Each of the seven hypotheses have been tasted against real performance data and the results point to a strong correlation between gastronomy and holistic urban appeal.

Cities that embedded their gastronomic identity into the fabric of their brand experienced notable increases in magnetism. Between 2020 and 2025, places like Florence, Tokyo and Madrid strengthened their symbolic capital by highlighting local culinary traditions. Florence's magnetism index grew from 7.65 to 7.91, while Tokyo rose from 8.13 to 8.34 and Madrid from

8.61 to 9.67. These upward trends align with their growing international reputation as culinary cities, where food heritage is not only preserved but actively promoted through events and tourism marketing. The ability to anchor urban identity in culinary narratives appears to enhance resonance, cultural uniqueness and global distinctiveness.

Efforts to make food systems more inclusive also delivered measurable improvements in equity and livability. Valencia, for example, revitalized its public market network and launched neighborhood-based food programs that promoted accessibility to healthy, affordable ingredients. As a result, its profitability index increased from 6.34 to 6.46 and its magnetism index climbed from 8.43 to 8.47. Similarly, Malaga saw gains in both metrics through sustained promotion of the Mediterranean diet across educational and community platforms. These cases suggest that gastronomy serves not only symbolic or economic purposes but also reinforces social cohesion and public well-being when deployed as a policy lever.

Economic outcomes tied to culinary tourism stood out clearly in the dataset. Cities that developed structured gastronomic offerings, from festivals to culinary schools and local food experiences, showed consistent increases in their average monthly wages. Rome improved from 2.684\$ per month in 2020 to 2944\$ per month in 2025, bolstered by its multicultural food scene and year-round programming. Madrid, likewise, leveraged events like Gastrofestival and the reactivation of iconic food markets to rise from 2.551\$ per month in 2020 to 2.727\$ per month in 2025. Across the board, cities that treated food as a serious economic asset benefitted from higher tourist retention, seasonal desynchronization and diversified revenue streams.

Culinary diversity also emerged as a driver of intercultural dialogue and global connectivity. In cities like Toronto and Rotterdam, food was used not only to celebrate heritage, but to foster social inclusion and cosmopolitanism. Toronto's connected city index rose from 7.33 in 2020 to 8.03 in 2025, while Rotterdam climbed from 7.35 to 9.05, both cities framing their multicultural foodscapes as reflections of civic openness. In Valencia, the intersection of Mediterranean and global influences helped reshape its urban identity into one of hospitality and hybridization. These cases highlight how gastronomy supports soft power diplomacy and internal social cohesion, amplifying global appeal.

Beyond identity and economy, culinary richness also correlates with perceived quality of life. Cities like Zurich and Vienna consistently performed well in their quality-of-life index, not only due to economic or cultural strength, but because gastronomy has deeply integrated into daily life. This can be reflected in the increase in their quality-of-life index. Zurich rose from 6.85 in 2020 to 8.71 in 2025, while Vienna climbed from 7.69 to 8.54. Community-based initiatives in Helsinki and Taipei, like informal street food events and neighborhood cooking groups, further demonstrate how food fosters belonging, engagement and emotional attachment to place.

Geographic and territorial embeddedness of gastronomy provided another path to urban resilience and branding. Cities that tied their culinary culture to regional ecosystems saw broader and more sustained benefits. Florence, for example, leveraged its links to the Tuscan countryside through wine trails and PDO-certified products, pushing its profitability index from 3.80 to 4.55. Lima did the same with Andean and Amazonian products, while Cordoba and La Rioja capitalized on agro-tourism and culinary heritage routes. This strategy not only enhances authenticity and sustainability but anchors the city in a larger territorial identity that reinforces economic integration.

Finally, cities that aligned gastronomy with public health and environmental sustainability demonstrated that food can be a critical infrastructure for long-term well-being. Helsinki led this effort by implementing organic, plant-based school meals and local procurement systems, contributing to a 12% (Kuusipalo & Manninen, 2023) reduction in childhood obesity and life expectancy index from 7.84 to 8.22 (normalized data). In Malaga, city-led efforts to normalize healthy eating habits and promote traditional diets resulted in increased magnetism and community engagement. These initiatives show that food, when embedded in wellness and climate policy, serves both preventive health and sustainability agendas simultaneously.

Overall, the findings across the six-year period demonstrate consistent and multi-dimensional relationships between gastronomy and the performance of cities in terms of identity, equity, tourism, livability sustainability and health. While variations exist across regions and policy models, the accumulated evidence points to food culture as a relevant and measurable component of urban competitiveness. These results lay the foundation for a broader reflection on the strategic role of gastronomy in contemporary city-making, which will be further explored in the conclusions.

To further examine the relationship between gastronomy and urban well-being, the following table compares eight global cities based on two indicators: their Health and Lifestyle Conditions Index (HLC Index) and the total number of Guru Restaurants, used here as a proxy for the visibility and density of their gastronomic offering. This comparison aims to explore whether a high concentration of culinary establishments aligns with higher urban health outcomes, or whether the two dimensions operate independently.

Table 1. Guru Restaurants and Health Index in Global Cities.

City	HLC Index	Guru Restaurants
Tokyo	7.71	13854
Paris	8.93	4451
Barcelona	8.08	2144
Copenhagen	8.97	514
Bilbao	8.08	325
New York	7.57	3635
Mexico City	3.32	4601

Source: Own elaboration, 2025

The comparative data in *Table 1* reveals a complex relationship between the concentration of gastronomic establishments and urban health conditions. On one end of the spectrum, Tokyo stands out with the highest number of listed restaurants and a strong health index, suggesting a successful integration of gastronomy into daily urban life in ways that reinforce both cultural richness and well-being. Paris follows a similar pattern, maintaining a dense and prestigious food scene alongside a very high HLC score, indicating that robust culinary infrastructure can coexist with positive health outcomes when accompanied by strong public services and regulatory frameworks.

By contrast, cities like Mexico City present an inverse pattern: it ranks among the top in terms of gastronomic density, yet its HLC Index scores is significantly lower. This disjunction may reflect broader urban inequalities, where a vibrant culinary culture thrives, but access to health care, food safety or balanced nutrition may be unevenly distributed. The case of New York further complicates the picture, as it demonstrates that both a high restaurant counts and a middling health score, raising questions about affordability, food desserts and systemic disparities within otherwise wealthy urban contexts.

Meanwhile, Copenhagen and Bilbao offer a different model: cities with comparatively fewer restaurants but very high health scores. This suggests that gastronomic visibility is not the only driver of urban health. In these cases, strong food governance, sustainability polices and cultural values around eating habits likely play a larger role than sheer volume. Barcelona, sitting somewhere in between, reflects the dynamics of a city where food, identity and well-being intersect in a more balanced, though still evolving, manner.

Together, these cases reinforce a key idea: that gastronomy, while central to urban culture and symbolic identity, does not operate in isolation. Its influence on health and quality of life is not determined by the sheer number of restaurants a city offers, but by the quality, nutritional value, accessibility and cultural integration of its food system. A dense foodscape may signal creative

vibrancy and economic opportunity, yet without attention to equity, affordability and dietary health, it can fail to support broader public well-being. In this sense, cities must go beyond culinary visibility to ensure that gastronomy is meaningfully embedded in urban policy, sustainability strategies and inclusive public health agendas.

In conclusion, the six-year comparative analysis from 2020 to 2025 offers strong empirical support for the link between gastronomy and urban success. Cities that strategically invested in their food systems, culturally, socially, economically and ecologically, outperformed others in key metrics of appeal and vitality. Gastronomy is no longer a secondary attribute or cultural curiosity, it is a core dimension of urban identity, equity and resilience. As the data shows food is not only something cities serve, but also something cities are.

3.4. Known Biases

Biases illustrate the methodological and interpretive challenges of assessing the impact of gastronomy on urban identity, attractiveness and health. Acknowledging these limitations is essential to avoid overgeneralization and to better contextualize the findings.

- **Perception Bias:** Research on gastronomic cities tends to highlight success stories, awards and visibility in global rankings, often overlooking issues such as food insecurity, nutrition inequality or socio-spatial exclusion. This focus on prestige may distort the urban food narrative (Richards, 2015).
- **Economic Bias:** Higher-quality or more sustainable food is frequently associated with higher costs, making it inaccessible to significant portions of the urban population. Studies show that energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods tend to be cheaper, while healthier options are more expensive and socioeconomically stratified (Darmon & Drewnowski, 2008). This creates a gap between a city's culinary reputation and its population's actual access to good nutrition.
- **Selection Bias:** Much of the existing literature focuses on prominent cities with established culinary status, such as Paris, Barcelona or Tokyo, leading to findings that may not generalize to smaller or less globally recognized urban contexts (Bell & Hollows, 2005).
- **Confounding Variables:** Factors such as income inequality, food education, local governance and health infrastructure also influence both gastronomy and urban well-being. Ignoring these interconnected elements can lead to misleading or partial interpretations (Mikkelsen, 2011).
- **Cultural Bias:** Global standards of culinary excellence tend to privilege Western fine dining aesthetics while undervaluing other forms such as street food, traditional cuisines or informal networks. This limits cross-cultural comparability and can reproduce forms of symbolic exclusion (Johnston & Baumann, 2015).

4. Conclusions. Discussion

This study has explored the strategic role of gastronomy in shaping the creative and symbolic identity of cities. Moving beyond its traditional association with tourism and consumption, gastronomy has been framed here as an urban asset, one that influences attractiveness, magnetism and identity in meaningful and measurable ways. Through a six-year comparative analysis of 175 cities, we have demonstrated that food-related investments and cultural positioning are not marginal elements, but central levers of urban distinction.

Quantitative data showed clear correlations between the Gastronomy Index and key performance indicators, with particularly strong relationships in the cases of Magnetism and Identity. Cities that prioritize gastronomy not only as economic activity but as a cultural infrastructure, through public policy, international branding and inclusive experiences, tend to perform better in symbolic capital and creative visibility.

However, the study also reveals the limits of purely quantitative interpretation. The final analysis comparing health conditions with the number of restaurants highlighted that gastronomic density does not guarantee urban well-being. Cities like Mexico City, despite vibrant

food cultures, faced health challenges that stem from inequality, nutrition gaps and systemic issues. Meanwhile, cities like Copenhagen or Bilbao show that fewer restaurants, if supported by sustainable food policies and accessible quality, can coincide with stronger health outcomes.

These findings reaffirm that gastronomy, while powerful, does not act in isolation. Its impact depends on integration into urban planning, equity frameworks and identity narratives. When embedded thoughtfully, gastronomy can be the catalyst for creative, inclusive and resilient urban futures.

In the end, food is more than a taste or tradition, it is language cities use to speak to the world and to themselves.

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6. Appendix – List of Studied Cities

City	Country
Buenos Aires	Argentina
Córdoba	Argentina
Sydney	Australia
Melbourne	Australia
Adelaide	Australia
Canberra	Australia
Vienna	Austria
Linz	Austria
Manama	Bahrain
Minsk	Belarus
Brussels	Belgium
Antwerp	Belgium
La Paz	Bolivia
Brasilia	Brazil
Sao Paulo	Brazil
Rio de Janeiro	Brazil
Sofia	Bulgaria
Vancouver	Canada
Toronto	Canada
Ottawa	Canada
Montreal	Canada
Santiago	Chile
Shanghai	China
Beijing	China
Guangzhou	China
Shenzhen	China
Chengdu	China
Chongqing	China
Shenyang	China
Wuhan	China
Suzhou	China
Tianjin	China
Harbin	China
Medellín	Colombia
Bogota	Colombia
San José	Costa Rica
Zagreb	Croatia
Prague	Czech Republic
Copenhagen	Denmark
Aarhus	Denmark
Santo Domingo	Dominican Republic
Quito	Ecuador
Cairo	Egypt

Tallinn	Estonia
Helsinki	Finland
Tampere	Finland
Espoo	Finland
Oulu	Finland
Paris	France
Lyon	France
Marseille	France
Nice	France
Bordeaux	France
Lille	France
Tbilisi	Georgia
Berlin	Germany
Munich	Germany
Dusseldorf	Germany
Frankfurt	Germany
Hamburg	Germany
Stuttgart	Germany
Cologne	Germany
Accra	Ghana
Athens	Greece
Hong Kong	Hong Kong
Budapest	Hungary
Mumbai	India
Bangalore	India
New Delhi	India
Hyderabad	India
Jakarta	Indonesia
Dublin	Ireland
Tel Aviv	Israel
Jerusalem	Israel
Milan	Italy
Rome	Italy
Florence	Italy
Torino	Italy
Tokyo	Japan
Yokohama	Japan
Osaka	Japan
Nagoya	Japan
Kuwait City	Kuwait
Riga	Latvia
Vilnius	Lithuania
Luxembourg	Luxembourg
Kuala Lumpur	Malaysia
Mexico City	Mexico

Monterrey	Mexico
Guadalajara	Mexico
Casablanca	Morocco
Rabat	Morocco
Amsterdam	Netherlands
Eindhoven	Netherlands
Rotterdam	Netherlands
Den Haag	Netherlands
Auckland	New Zealand
Wellington	New Zealand
Oslo	Norway
Bergen	Norway
Stavanger	Norway
Panama City	Panama
Asuncion	Paraguay
Lima	Peru
Manila	Philippines
Warsaw	Poland
Wroclaw	Poland
Lisbon	Portugal
Porto	Portugal
Doha	Qatar
Bucharest	Romania
Moscow	Russia
St Petersburg	Russia
Riyadh	Saudi Arabia
Belgrade	Serbia
Singapore	Singapore
Bratislava	Slovakia
Ljubljana	Slovenia
Cape Town	South Africa
Durban	South Africa
Johannesburg	South Africa
Seoul	South Korea
Barcelona	Spain
Madrid	Spain
Málaga	Spain
Valencia	Spain
Bilbao	Spain
Zaragoza	Spain
Santander	Spain
Seville	Spain
Stockholm	Sweden
Gothenburg	Sweden
Malmo	Sweden
Zurich	Switzerland

Geneva	Switzerland
Bern	Switzerland
Basel	Switzerland
Taipei	Taiwan
Bangkok	Thailand
Tunis	Tunisia
Istanbul	Turkey
Ankara	Turkey
Kiev	Ukraine
Dubai	United Arab Emirates
Abu Dhabi	United Arab Emirates
London	United Kingdom
Edinburgh	United Kingdom
Birmingham	United Kingdom
Liverpool	United Kingdom
Manchester	United Kingdom
Belfast	United Kingdom
Bristol	United Kingdom
Nottingham	United Kingdom
Glasgow	United Kingdom
San Francisco	United States
Boston	United States
New York City	United States
Washington, D.C.	United States
Chicago	United States
Seattle	United States
Los Angeles	United States
Baltimore	United States
Philadelphia	United States
Dallas	United States
Phoenix	United States
Houston	United States
Atlanta	United States
Miami	United States
Denver	United States
Las Vegas	United States
Kansas City	United States
Honolulu	United States
Montevideo	Uruguay
Ho Chi Minh City	Vietnam
Hanoi	Vietnam