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**Accessibility in Experiential Food and Wine Tourism:
Perspectives of Visitors with Visual Impairments**

FINAL MASTER PROJECT

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[Date of presentation: June 19, 2026]

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Abstract

Despite growing scholarly and industry interest in accessible tourism, existing research has largely focused on physical infrastructure and regulatory compliance — leaving the experiential, sensory, and relational dimensions of participation comparatively unexplored. This gap is especially evident in food and wine tourism, where meaningful engagement depends not only on access to places, but on multisensory and social dimensions of the experience. This study asks: how do visitors with visual impairments perceive accessibility in experiential food and wine tourism, and what design implications emerge from their accounts?

Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with blind and visually impaired adults and the data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Three higher-order themes emerged: conditions of participation; designing inclusion within the experience; and meaning, belonging, and identity. Participants identified barriers spanning transport, information access, companion dependence, staff communication, environmental design, and tasting formats. Equally, they foregrounded the role of multisensory engagement, social inclusion, dignity, and autonomy in shaping meaningful experiences.

The study advances accessible and experiential tourism literature by surfacing demand-side evidence from an underrepresented group and by demonstrating that inclusive design and high-quality experiential design are mutually reinforcing rather than competing objectives. Eight principles for inclusive food and wine experience design are proposed for operators and experience designers. Lastly, the study argues that accessibility should be reconceptualized as a constitutive dimension of experience design — a reframing with implications for how practitioners understand quality, inclusion, and the design of experiences more broadly.

1. Introduction

The growing diversity of tourism demand has brought questions of accessibility increasingly to the center of destination management research and practice. According to the World Health Organization (2023), approximately 1.3 billion people — around 16% of the global population — experience a disability, a figure that encompasses a wide range of physical, sensory, and cognitive conditions. This proportion is expected to grow as populations age: by the late 2070s, the number of people aged 65 and over worldwide is projected to reach 2.2 billion (United Nations, 2024). Given that age-related sensory and physical changes frequently give rise to access needs, the implications for tourism providers and destination managers are significant. Accessible tourism — understood not merely as the removal of physical barriers but as the design of tourism experiences that support equitable and dignified participation — has emerged as both a social imperative and a strategic concern for the tourism sector (UNWTO, 2016; Darcy & Dickson, 2009). This recognition is increasingly reflected at the legislative level: the European Accessibility Act (Directive EU 2019/882), which became binding across all Member States in June 2025, extends harmonized accessibility requirements — including digital booking services, travel information, and passenger transport, shifting from voluntary good practice toward legal obligations (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2019).

Within this broader context, experiential food and wine tourism occupies a particularly interesting position. Experiential food and wine tourism refers to activities centered on participatory engagement with local food and wine culture, including wine tastings, olive oil tastings, farm visits, agritourism experiences, and producer-led tasting activities. Such experiences have emerged as a significant segment of the tourism industry, with culture, authenticity, and engagement with local culinary heritage identified as primary motivating factors for participation (Ellis et al., 2018). These activities are valued precisely because they are participatory, multisensory, and relational, bringing visitors into direct contact with local producers, cultural traditions, and the sensory character of place (Agapito et al., 2013, 2014; Carvalho et al., 2021). In Tuscany specifically, where most of the participants in this study reside, food and wine experiences in rural settings have been shown to be particularly valued for their social dimension and connection to local food culture (Fanelli, 2020).

Yet despite the growth of experiential food and wine tourism, the accessibility of these activities for people with visual impairments has received little attention in research or practice. How blind and visually impaired visitors experience or are excluded from these activities — and how such

experiences might be designed to enable meaningful participation — has yet to be systematically examined (Noghan et al., 2024; Kim & Sohn, 2023).

This study investigates how visitors with visual impairments perceive accessibility in experiential food and wine tourism, and what design insights emerge from their lived experiences. It adopts a demand-side perspective, treating participants' accounts as a primary source of knowledge about what accessible participation looks like, what prevents it, and what would make it possible. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with blind and visually impaired adults recruited through the *Unione Italiana dei Ciechi e degli Ipovedenti* (Italian Union of the Blind and Partially Sighted), and the data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019; 2021).

Main research question: How do visitors with visual impairments perceive accessibility in experiential food and wine tourism, and what design insights emerge from their lived experiences?

Sub-question 1: What barriers do visitors with visual impairments encounter in experiential food and wine activities — such as wine tastings, olive oil tastings, farm visits, and food product tastings?

Sub-question 2: How do visitors with visual impairments conceptualize a socially accessible tourism experience?

Sub-question 3: What design principles can be derived from visitors' experiences and expectations?

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature across four bodies of scholarship: experiential tourism and experience design, accessibility in tourism, and human-centered and inclusive design. Chapter 3 describes the methodology, including the conceptual framework, research approach, and analytical method. Chapter 4 provides contextual background on experiential food and wine tourism in Italy. Chapter 5 presents the findings of the thematic analysis across three higher-order themes and nine subthemes. Chapter 6 presents the conclusions, including eight design principles for inclusive food and wine experience design, the theoretical contributions of the study, its limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework on Tourist Experiences and Accessibility

This chapter reviews the main academic debates pertinent to the study of socially accessible experiential gastronomy tourism: experiential tourism and experience design, gastro-tourism, accessibility in tourism, and human-centered and inclusive design. These research streams provide the theoretical foundations to understand how food and wine tourism experiences are designed, how accessibility considerations influence participation in such activities, and how an accessible

perspective can inform more inclusive experience design. The chapter concludes by identifying gaps in literature and presenting the conceptual framework guiding the study.

2.1 Experiential Tourism and Experience Design

2.1.1 *Experiential Tourism*

Recent research has examined tourists' participation in memorable and meaningful tourism experiences, highlighting their active pursuit of immersive activities (Hosany et al., 2022). This shift is part of a larger change among consumers, described as the experience economy, a term proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1998), who argue that economic value increasingly derives from staged experiences rather than goods or services alone. According to this perspective, successful experiences combine four experiential realms: entertainment, education, escapism, and aesthetics. Individuals interact with experiences in different ways, ranging from passive enjoyment to active participation (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Mehmetoglu & Engen, 2011).

Experiential gastro-tourism activities frequently involve direct interaction with local culture and people. Examples include cooking classes, food tastings, farm and winery visits, and guided culinary tours, all of which encourage active participation and hands-on engagement rather than passive observation (Dixit & Prayag, 2022). These activities are often co-created through interactions among tourists, service providers, and the surrounding environment (Sugathan & Ranjan, 2019). As a result, they acquire meaning and value derived from the activity itself, social interactions, and post-activity reflection (Kim et al., 2012). Furthermore, Memorable Tourism Experiences (MTEs) are widely recognized as critical drivers of destination competitiveness (Tung & Ritchie, 2011) and as promoters of visitor loyalty (Kim, 2018).

2.1.2 *Experience Design, Co-creation, and Social Interaction*

Although memorable and emotionally impactful tourism experiences are inherently subjective, they can be intentionally designed. Research demonstrates that many tourism activities are structured and deliberately organized by providers through specific settings, rules, objects, and interactions (Duerden et al., 2015). However, experiences cannot be fully controlled or delivered; instead, providers establish conditions that enable the co-creation of meaningful and memorable experiences (Campos et al., 2018; Sugathan & Ranjan, 2019).

Structured tourism experiences typically unfold across three main phases: anticipation, when participants form expectations before the activity; participation, when the experience takes place; and reflection and integration, when participants interpret and remember the experience afterward.

Research suggests that tourism providers frequently concentrate on the participation phase while overlooking the importance of anticipation and pre-travel co-creation (Eletxigerra et al., 2021; Duerden et al., 2015).

Tourism experiences are further shaped by interactions among participating tourists. Much of the value generated during tourism experiences arises from customer-to-customer interactions, which produce affective, social, and network value outcomes — including emotional connections, shared experiences, and the formation of social bonds (Rihova et al., 2018). This social dimension is especially significant in experiential food and wine activities, where socializing, bonding, and knowledge sharing are central motivations for participation (Goolaup et al., 2025; Carvalho et al., 2023).

2.1.3 Experiential Design in Food and wine Tourism

Gastronomy tourism centers on food and drink as a primary motivation for travel. Hall and Sharples (2003) define it as travel motivated by the desire to taste and experience the food products of a particular region, while Williams et al. (2014) broaden this definition to emphasize the intentional pursuit of authentic and memorable culinary experiences. Beyond individual consumption, food also carries important social, cultural, and economic meanings (Cavicchi & Stancova, 2016; Hall & Sharples 2003). As a result, gastronomy tourism has become an increasingly important tourism segment, in which food and drink experiences function not as supplementary amenities but as central travel motivations (Hall & Sharples, 2003; Dixit & Prayag, 2022). These experiences are commonly described as hedonic, shaped by pleasure and sensory enjoyment, while also encompassing educational and cultural dimensions (Lin et al., 2021). Food and wine tourism represents a strongly experiential form of tourism due to its emphasis on multisensory engagement, cultural immersion, and social interaction (Ellis et al., 2018; Dixit & Prayag, 2022).

2.2 Accessibility in Tourism

2.2.1 Concept of Accessibility in Tourism

Accessibility in tourism refers to the ability of individuals to participate in tourism activities regardless of physical, sensory, cognitive, or social limitations. In the European Union, nearly a quarter of adults — 23.9% of people aged 16 and over — live with a disability, a figure that rises sharply with age, reaching 72.3% among those aged 85 and over (Eurostat, 2025). This age-related pattern has direct implications for tourism: as markets age, the proportion of visitors with access requirements grows correspondingly. This reinforces the argument that accessible design is not a niche concern but a structural requirement of any tourism system serving a broad population. In the

European Union, tourists aged 65 and over already accounted for nearly one in four tourism nights taken by EU residents in 2018, yet more than half of Europeans in this age group — 51% — did not participate in tourism at all that year, compared with 32% of people aged 15 to 64 (Eurostat, 2020). This participation gap may also depend on accessibility concerns, which could translate into exclusion from tourism. Furthermore, the absence of clear and reliable accessibility information presents a significant barrier for prospective visitors with disabilities, shaping their decisions about whether to travel at all (Buhalis & Darcy, 2011). Service-related barriers are equally important: as the accessible tourism literature consistently identifies, insufficient awareness among tourism staff of the needs of visitors with disabilities can negatively affect the quality of the experience, reducing satisfaction and discouraging repeat participation (Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2021; Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020).

2.2.2 Standards and Policy Frameworks

The international rights-based foundation for accessible tourism is strongly shaped by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), which treats accessibility as essential to the equal enjoyment of human rights. Article 30 recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to participate in cultural life, recreation, leisure, and sport on an equal basis with others. At the European level, the European Accessibility Act (Directive EU 2019/882) extends harmonized accessibility requirements across products and services, with Member States required to apply it from 28 June 2025.

In Italy, where this study takes place, physical accessibility is addressed primarily by Legge 13/1989 and its technical specifications (D.M. 236/1989). More recently, two legislative decrees issued in 2024 — D.lgs. 20/2024 and D.lgs. 62/2024 — introduced a new legal definition of disability grounded in the social model and established a National Guarantor Authority for the rights of persons with disabilities (Repubblica Italiana, 2024). At the international level, ISO 21902:2021 Accessible Tourism for All establishes the first global standard specifically dedicated to accessible tourism.

However, legal and standard-setting frameworks tend to concentrate most clearly on the built environment, digital accessibility, and formal compliance. This gap has potential implications for experiential tourism contexts such as wine tourism and gastronomic experiences, where the tourism product is defined not only by physical accessibility but also by sensory, social, and cultural accessibility — and by the ability to participate meaningfully in the activity itself. It is precisely this dimension that the present research intends to explore.

2.2.3 From Physical Accessibility to Social Accessibility

Recent research suggests that accessibility in tourism should not be understood only in terms of physical access and lack of barriers, but also as a wider issue of social inclusion, participation, and justice. Inclusive tourism theory frames accessibility as part of an effort to reduce the marginalization of people with disabilities, addressing both physical and socio-cultural barriers that prevent full participation (Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020). This perspective is consistent with the concept of capability in tourism, which argues that accessibility should be evaluated in terms of the real opportunities people have to participate in tourism experiences that they value, independently and with dignity (Kim & Adu-Ampong, 2024). This rights-based understanding of accessibility extends to questions of citizenship and social justice: tourism participation is not a luxury but a dimension of social life to which all people are entitled, and exclusion from it represents a form of civic marginalization (Richards, Pritchard & Morgan, 2010).

Social accessibility can be understood as the extent to which tourism experiences are inclusive, welcoming, and realistically accessible to diverse groups of visitors. Accessibility extends beyond physical infrastructure to encompass social attitudes, power relations, and the conditions that enable or constrain participation (Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020). For the purposes of this study, social accessibility is understood as the extent to which an experiential food and wine tourism activity is genuinely open to participation by people with blindness or visual impairments — not merely in a legal or physical sense, but in terms of the quality of their experience and their ability to participate fully and on equal terms with other guests.

2.2.4 Accessibility and Experience Design

In experiential tourism contexts, accessibility is closely related to how tourism experiences are designed and delivered. Leisure constraints theory, as developed by Crawford and Godbey (1987) and extended by Crawford, Jackson and Godbey (1991), provides a useful framework for understanding how barriers may influence participation. It categorizes hurdles to leisure and travel into three distinct areas: intrapersonal constraints (internal psychological factors such as lack of self-confidence or negative past experiences), interpersonal constraints (social dynamics such as the attitudes of companions or difficulty finding a travel partner), and structural constraints (external and practical obstacles such as high costs, lack of transportation, or lack of accessible information).

These constraints can emerge at different stages of the tourism value chain, from the pre-travel phase to the on-site experience to the post-travel phase. Insufficient staff training, inadequate provision of accessible services, and lack of reliable information for people with disabilities are some of the key issues identified and can not only damage the experience itself but also reduce self-confidence and discourage future travel (Nigg et al., 2024).

2.2.5 Multisensory and Experiential Accessibility

Recent perspectives argue that tourism experiences are embodied and multisensory, involving sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch (Agapito et al., 2013). Experiential food and wine tourism provides a particularly strong example of a multisensory tourism experience. Food-related activities engage visitors through sensory stimuli and cultural dimensions, contributing to the overall experience (Ellis et al., 2018). From an accessibility perspective, multisensory design delivers considerable opportunities to create more inclusive tourism environments. By adopting diverse sensory elements and alternative modes of participation, tourism providers can design experiences that accommodate different abilities and preferences without requiring visitors to conform to a single mode of engagement. However, while the theoretical potential of multisensory design for accessible tourism is increasingly recognized, empirical research examining how such design principles can be practically implemented in gastronomy and wine tourism settings remains limited — a gap that the present research directly seeks to address.

2.2.6 From Compliance to Inclusive Design

Accessibility in tourism has traditionally been approached through a compliance-oriented framework, focused on meeting minimum legal standards and removing physical barriers (Hua et al., 2025). Inclusive design offers an alternative paradigm that seeks to address the limitations of compliance-based approaches by recognizing human diversity as central to the design process (Imrie, 2012). Moreover, inclusive design can generate broader benefits through what Blackwell (2017) describes as the curb-cut effect, whereby interventions originally intended for specific groups ultimately benefit a much wider population.

2.3 Human-Centered Design and User Perspectives

2.3.1 Human-Centered Approaches to Tourism Experience Design

Tourism experience research has increasingly recognized that meaningful, high-quality experiences cannot be designed from the supply side alone. Stankov and Gretzel (2020) argue that tourism innovations frequently suffer from a lack of human-centered design. Tussyadiah (2014) highlights human-centeredness as a core pillar of tourism design, alongside the need for a holistic view and iterative processes that improve through continuous feedback.

2.3.2 Tourist Expectations and the Anticipatory Dimension

Tourism scholars have increasingly recognized that the tourist experience does not begin at the destination but at the anticipation and planning stage. Larsen (2007) argues that tourist experiences are intrinsically shaped by prior expectancies, and that the anticipatory phase is as analytically significant as the experience itself. The anticipatory dimension is particularly consequential for travelers with access needs. Unlike non-disabled tourists, who may tolerate a degree of uncertainty

about a destination, tourists with disabilities frequently undertake extensive pre-travel research and planning to assess whether a site will be navigable and welcoming (Deville & Kastenholz, 2018; Devile et. Al, 2024).

2.3.3 Centering the Voices of People with Disabilities

Scholars emphasize that people with disabilities should not be viewed as a uniform group defined solely by their impairments, but rather as individuals with diverse needs, preferences, and capacities for participation (Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020; Small et al. 2012) show that the tourism experience for travelers with vision impairments is constructed through embodied and multisensory engagement, highlighting dimensions that traditional accessibility frameworks may not fully recognize. This body of research reflects a broader shift from the medical model of disability toward the social model, which emphasizes how barriers are produced through environmental design and social attitudes rather than located within the individual.

2.4 Research Gap

Research in this field has tended to focus on accessibility provision from the perspective of providers — infrastructure, regulatory compliance, and physical barriers (Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2021). The lived experiences and expectations of travelers with disabilities have received comparatively less systematic attention (Nigg et al., 2024; Devile et al., 2024). As a result, current design guidance lacks sufficient evidence of what users themselves consider to be a socially accessible experience.

Within this broader gap, research specifically addressing the experiences of visitors with visual impairments remains particularly limited. While some studies have begun to explore how this group experiences tourism — including the barriers they encounter and the social dimensions of travel (Richards et al., 2010; Devile & Kastenholz, 2018) — Kim and Sohn (2023) observe that sensory impairment groups, including those with visual impairments, have been largely overlooked compared to physical disability. Moreover, scholars have noted that tourism research has traditionally been oriented around the act of seeing, meaning that the psychological and sensory dimensions through which visually impaired tourists construct and experience tourism remain poorly understood (Noghan et al., 2024).

This gap is more pronounced still in the context of experiential food and wine tourism. To the best of the author's knowledge, no published study has examined how blind and visually impaired visitors experience or are excluded from experiential food and wine tourism activities. This absence is significant: these activities are inherently participatory, multisensory, and socially interactive —

characteristics that make them particularly relevant for inclusive design research, and that suggest they may be especially amenable to accessible design.

By interviewing blind and visually impaired participants directly, this study explores their expectations, the barriers they encounter, and their understandings of meaningful participation. It thereby generates the demand-side evidence currently missing from both accessible tourism research and experiential food and wine tourism literature — and provides an empirical basis for testing whether inclusive design in this context can enhance experiential quality more broadly. A final dimension of the gap concerns the wider relevance of inclusive design. Research consistently shows that features developed for people with specific impairments often benefit a much wider population — the curb-cut effect (Blackwell, 2017). In the context of experiential food and wine tourism, where multisensory engagement is already central to the experience (Agapito, Mendes & Valle, 2013), the gap this study addresses may therefore have implications beyond the specific group it examines.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Framework

This study draws on the bodies of literature discussed in chapter 2. Each contributes a distinct perspective, and together they form a framework that moves from understanding what experiential gastronomy tourism is to identifying how some users may be excluded from it and asking how it might be designed differently.

The first perspective is experiential tourism theory. Drawing on Pine and Gilmore's (1999) foundational work on the experience economy, and developed through tourism-specific scholarship on multisensory engagement (Agapito et al., 2013, 2014), memorable experiences (Kim et al., 2012), and the anticipatory dimension of tourist experience (Larsen, 2007), this body of literature establishes what a tourism experience actually consists of. Small, Darcy and Packer (2012) extended this to show that for tourists with visual impairments, the embodied dimensions of experience are especially significant, and that conventional accessibility analysis may fail to capture them.

The second perspective is accessible tourism and leisure constraints theory. Leisure constraints theory, originating with Crawford and Godbey (1987) and extended into tourism contexts by Crawford, Jackson and Godbey (1991) and more recently by Nigg et al. (2024), identifies three categories of barrier — intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural — that operate across the different stages of the tourism journey. Gillovic and McIntosh (2020) argue that accessibility in

tourism must move beyond minimum compliance toward genuine inclusion — a shift that requires embedding accessible design principles into destination planning from the outset. Hua et al. (2025) point out that much of current accessibility provision is driven by compliance rather than by a genuine concern for experience quality.

The third perspective is human-centered and inclusive design. Tussyadiah (2014) and Stankov and Gretzel (2020) establish that tourism experience design should begin with the needs and perspectives of users. Blackwell (2017) adds that designing for excluded users tends to produce improvements that benefit everyone — the curb-cut effect. In this study, this perspective connects the findings to the recommendations: the barriers participants describe are treated as design problems, and the conclusions in Chapter Six are framed as inclusive design principles.

Experiential tourism theory establishes the standard against which accessibility is measured — full, embodied, multisensory participation. Accessible tourism and constraints theory diagnoses the distance between that standard and the current reality for participants. Inclusive design provides the orientation for moving from diagnosis to recommendation. The interview data sits at the intersection of all three: participants are asked about their experiences (experiential tourism theory), the barriers they have encountered (constraints theory), and what they imagine a well-designed inclusive activity would look like (inclusive design).

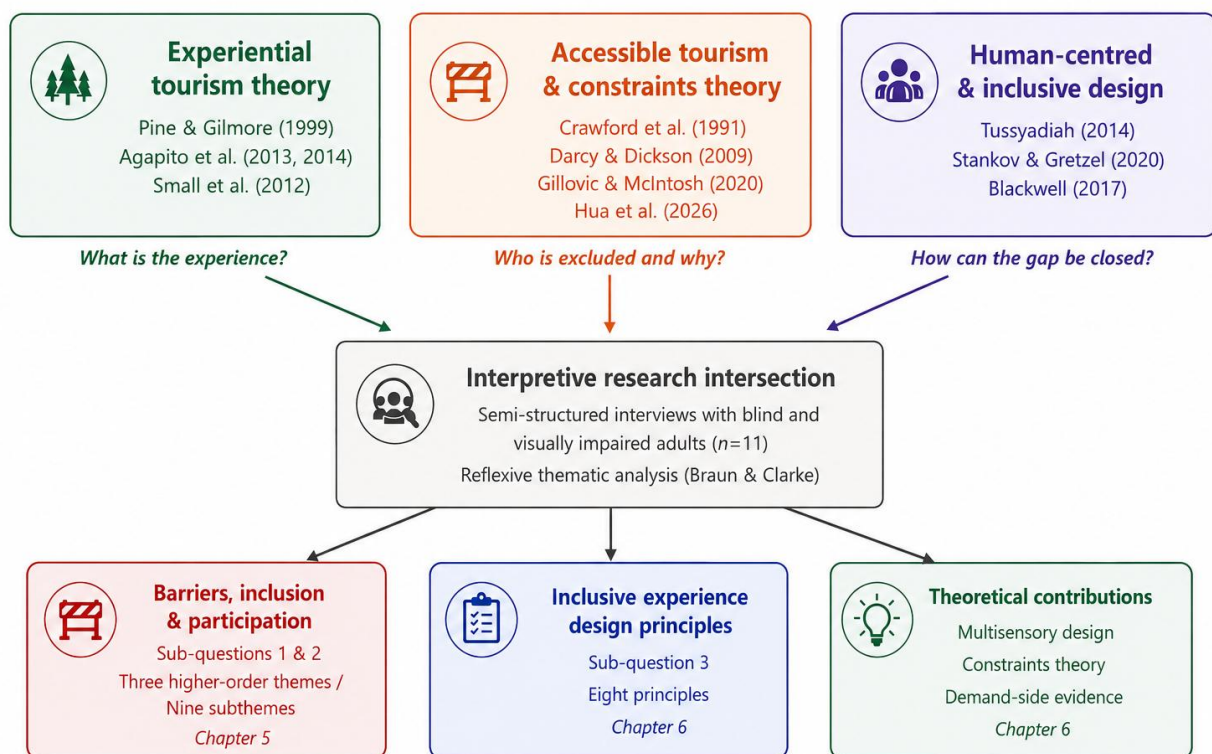


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

3.2 Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative and exploratory research approach to investigate barriers and expectations related to socially accessible experiential tourism activities. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited to exploring individual experiences, perceptions, and meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because accessible experiential food and wine tourism remains relatively underexplored in the literature, an exploratory approach allows for in-depth investigation of participants' perspectives on participation barriers and expectations, rather than testing predetermined hypotheses.

The research is informed by a user-centered perspective, which prioritizes understanding users' needs and experiences as the starting point for service and experience design (Tussyadiah, 2014; Stankov & Gretzel, 2020). As the literature review established, tourist expectations are formed well before arrival and shape how the experience is ultimately evaluated (Larsen, 2007). For tourists with access needs, the gap between anticipated and actual conditions is often where inclusion or exclusion is decided (Deville et al., 2024). Capturing this dynamic required speaking directly with tourists rather than relying on provider or policy accounts.

3.3 Research Design

The study uses semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data from individuals who participate in or are interested in participating in experiential gastrotourism activities. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to describe their experiences and perceptions in their own words, while still providing a consistent structure across interviews (Bryman, 2016). This method is particularly appropriate for exploring topics such as barriers to participation and perceptions of accessibility, which tend to vary considerably between individuals and are difficult to capture through more structured approaches. The interview guide provides a common framework across all interviews, while the format allows flexibility to follow up on unexpected or particularly relevant topics as they emerge in conversation. The interview guide is included in full in Appendix A.

A total number of thirteen interviews were conducted: Eleven interviews took place in person, in Italian, between April and May 2026. One additional interview was conducted in Italian by telephone in May 2026. A further interview, with a non-Italian participant, was conducted online (using Google Meets) in English in April 2026. The interviews conducted in Italian were translated into English by the researcher prior to analysis. While the researcher is confident in the accuracy of the translations, it is acknowledged that some nuances of expression may have been altered in the

translation process. This limitation is discussed further in Section 6.5. Interviews typically lasted between 35 minutes and one hour.

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, using the Unione Italiana dei Ciechi e degli Ipovedenti (the Italian Union of the Blind and Visually Impaired) as the primary recruitment channel. The association was contacted directly, and members were invited to participate on a voluntary basis. Some participants then suggested further contacts within their network, enabling a degree of snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria were intentionally broad: participants were required to have visual impairment or blindness, and to be adults. No prior experience of food and wine tourism activities was required as an inclusion criterion. This decision was deliberate: restricting the sample to participants with prior experience would have excluded people who had wanted to participate but had not done so — precisely the group whose reasons for non-participation are most relevant to this study. Their non-participation is not an absence of data — it is analytically significant in its own right, reflecting how structural, interpersonal, and logistical barriers operate at their most decisive, before the experience even begins. For participants with no prior experience of food and wine tourism activities specifically, the interview explored their experience of tasting food and drink in other similar contexts — such as restaurants or public events — in order to generate relevant reflections on the tasting dimension of the activity. While this does not replicate direct experience of food and wine tourism, it ensured that all participants could contribute meaningfully to the analysis of how tasting experiences are designed and what would make them more accessible. The chosen sample size is consistent with the depth-oriented approach of reflexive thematic analysis, in which the quality and richness of accounts is prioritized over numerical representativeness (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

FROM DATA TO INTERPRETATION: THE ANALYTIC PATHWAY IN REFLEXIVE TA

An example of how interview data were transformed through reflexive thematic analysis

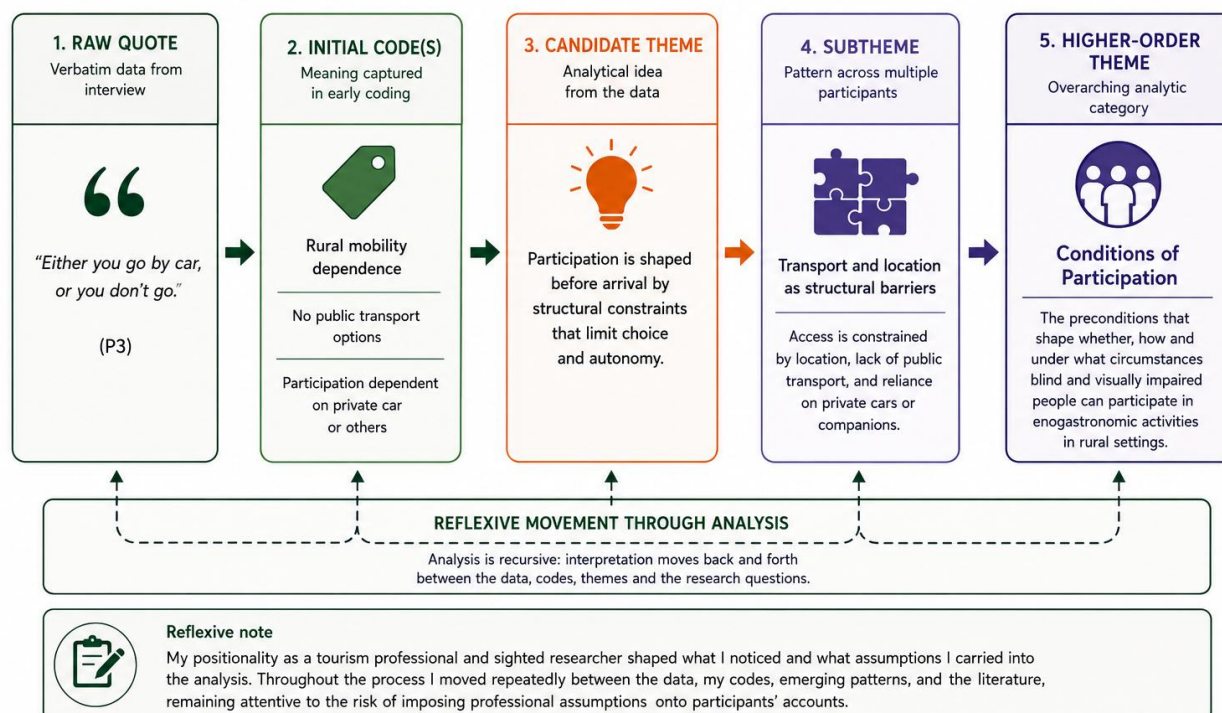


Figure 2: The analytic pathway in reflexive thematic analysis

3.4 Positionality and Reflexivity

As a tourism and gastronomy professional based in Italy, I bring both proximity and distance to this research. My professional experience within the industry that forms the subject of this study provides existing knowledge of how experiential food and wine activities are designed, marketed, and delivered. This familiarity serves as a resource, informing my understanding of the operational and relational dimensions of activities such as wine tastings, cooking classes, and farm visits. However, it also carries risk, as familiarity can generate assumptions that may narrow the interpretive lens through which participant accounts are read. Throughout the research process, I have treated my professional knowledge as context rather than conclusion.

I do not have a disability and am therefore researching a group to which I do not belong. This outsider position requires particular care. While I cannot claim experiential understanding of navigating tourism environments with a visual impairment, I possess a situated awareness of exclusion, having personally encountered activities and spaces that were not designed with all participants in mind. Throughout the research process, I have remained conscious not to allow this partial identification to substitute for genuine attentiveness to participants' own accounts.

I began this research with two prior assumptions that warrant acknowledgment. First, I believed that disability functions primarily as a socially limiting condition, a perspective that the literature reviewed in chapter two has complicated, particularly through the social model of disability. Second, I was uncertain whether all experiential gastronomy activities could realistically be made fully inclusive. This uncertainty is not a weakness in the research design but a productive starting point: the aim of this study is to generate empirical evidence that can inform what inclusive design might look like in practice, and such evidence is more valuable if the researcher has not foreclosed the question in advance.

This research is motivated by both academic and professional commitments. I hope that the findings will contribute not only to the accessible tourism literature but also to the practical work of designing experiences that enable broader participation. I am aware that this dual motivation may incline me toward optimistic interpretations, and I have sought to balance this inclination with fidelity to participants' actual reports.

3.5 Research Quality and Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study was evaluated using the criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through the use of semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words. Transferability was supported by providing sufficient contextual detail about the participant group, the research setting, and the analytical process. Dependability and confirmability were addressed through reflexive thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019; 2021), which treats themes as actively constructed through the researcher's sustained and iterative engagement with the data. Researcher subjectivity is understood not as a source of bias to be minimized but as an integral and acknowledged resource in the analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The analytical process followed the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke — familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, constructing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the analysis — understood as a recursive and reflexive process. Themes were grouped into overarching categories, to facilitate understanding. Analytical decisions and their rationale were documented throughout, creating an audit trail of interpretive choices (Nowell et al., 2017).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Participation was entirely voluntary. All participants were informed about the purpose, scope, and expected duration of the study before agreeing to take part, and were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time and without consequence. Given that participants included older adults and

individuals with disabilities — groups that may have had prior experiences of marginalization — care was taken to ensure that the interview format was flexible and accessible. Interview length and format were adapted to participants' individual needs and preferences. All data were treated confidentially and participants' identities were fully anonymized in the final thesis. Interview recordings and transcripts were used solely for academic purposes and stored securely in accordance with data protection principles. Participants were not asked to disclose diagnostic or medical information beyond what they themselves chose to share in. The study was conducted in a manner consistent with established principles of ethical qualitative research (Bryman, 2016).

4. Research Context: Experiential Food and wine Tourism in Italy

4.1 The Italian Food and wine Tourism Offer

Italy is one of the world's leading destinations for food and wine tourism, combining internationally recognized food and wine traditions with a strongly territorial identity. Across Italy, tourism has increasingly shifted toward experiential forms in which visitors seek participatory and immersive engagement with local culture rather than passive sightseeing (Garibaldi, 2025). Wineries, farms, and agritourism establishments have become the primary vehicles for this kind of experience, offering activities such as guided wine tastings, winery and vineyard tours, olive oil tastings, and food production demonstrations. These activities typically take place in small group settings, involve direct interaction between visitors and local producers, and emphasize hands-on participation. In Tuscany specifically — where most participants were recruited — agritourism facilities are particularly valued for their gastronomic offer, health benefits, and social experience (Fanelli, 2020). The characteristics described in this chapter — rural locations, historic buildings, small-group formats, relational service models — are broadly representative of the Italian food and wine tourism sector as a whole. The chapter therefore provides contextual grounding for the type of activities examined in this study, and the sort of venues participants typically explored.

4.2 Characteristics of the Setting and Their Relevance to Accessibility

The physical and operational characteristics of Italian food and wine tourism make it a particularly relevant context for examining questions of social accessibility. Most activities take place in rural or agricultural settings — farmhouses, historic estates, and production facilities — that were not originally designed for tourism and are rarely served by public transport (Garibaldi, 2025). The buildings themselves are frequently historic, meaning that accessibility retrofitting is constrained by preservation requirements (Ruiz-Rodrigo et al., 2024). Terrain is often uneven, outdoor environments predominate, and participants are frequently expected to stand, walk, or move

between spaces as part of the activity. These characteristics create a specific combination of physical, logistical, and communicative demands. Unlike urban cultural tourism, where accessible infrastructure is more commonly available, experiential food and wine tourism in rural Italy presents barriers that begin before the visit even starts — most notably in terms of transport — and continue throughout the experience in terms of navigation, physical environment, and service design.

At the same time, the relational and small-group format of these experiences means they also hold particular potential for inclusive design. Because they are built around direct interaction between hosts and participants rather than fixed physical infrastructure (Carvalho et al., 2021; Carvalho et al., 2023), they are contexts in which relatively modest changes to how experiences are communicated and structured can make a significant difference to the quality of participation. The inherently multisensory nature of tasting activities — centered on smell, taste, touch, and sound rather than vision — further suggests that this type of experience may be particularly amenable to accessible design. It is this combination of structural challenge and experiential openness that makes the Italian food and wine setting both a productive and a necessary context for the present study.

5. Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the findings of the reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis generated three higher-order themes and nine interconnected subthemes that collectively address the first and second research sub-questions: the barriers participants encounter in experiential food and wine tourism, and how participants conceptualize an accessible tourism experience.

Participant Profiles:

Name	Age	Impairment Type	Onset	Travel Frequency	Prior Food and wine Experience	Date of Interview
P1	60	Visual impairment	Congenital	Frequent	Extensive — organizes accessible tastings	April 2026
P2	48	Blind	Congenital	Very frequent	Extensive — plans food experiences on every trip	April 2026
P3	66	Visual impairment	Congenital	Monthly	Moderate — attended several tastings	April 2026

P4	65	Blind	Congenital	Monthly	Moderate — wine and food tours	April 2026
P5	75	Blind	Congenital	Frequent	Limited — tastings many years ago	May 2026
P6	61	Visual impairment	Acquired (progressive)	Infrequent	Moderate — winery visit, outdoor events	May 2026
P7	70	Visual impairment	Acquired (2015)	Moderate	Limited	May 2026
P8	75	Visual impairment	Lifelong (diagnosed age 12)	Infrequent	None — restaurant experience only	April 2026
P9	69	Blind	Acquired (adulthood)	Rare	None — aspirational interest	April 2026
P10	80	Blind	Acquired (progressive)	Rare	Limited — dairy visit years ago	May 2026
P11	76	Visual impairment	Acquired (recent)	Infrequent	None	May 2026
P12	61	Visual impairment	Congenital (progressive)	Frequent	Limited — food fairs, agritourism dinners	May 2026
P13	39	Visual impairment	Congenital (progressive)	Very frequent	Extensive — sommelier, regular winery visitor	May 2026

Figure 3: Participant profiles

5.1 Overarching Themes

The first Overarching theme concerns the conditions that make participation possible before the experience begins, including: transport; companionship; and access to reliable information. The second examines how inclusion is produced or undermined through the design and delivery of the experience itself, including: staff communication; physical environments; and tasting formats. The third explores the deeper meanings participants attach to participation, focusing on multisensory engagement, social belonging, dignity, and autonomy.

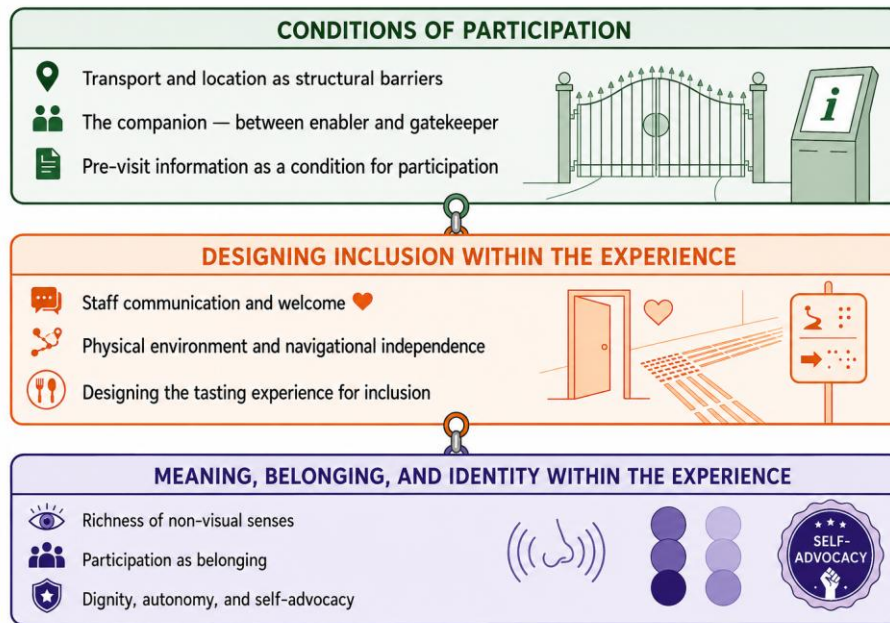


Figure 4: Illustrative Thematic Map of Participation in Experiential Food and wine Tourism Activities

The findings listed in this chapter suggest that accessibility in experiential food and wine tourism is experienced as a relational and design issue that shapes whether participants feel enabled to participate, welcomed, capable, and included. Together, the themes demonstrate that participation in experiential food and wine tourism unfolds as a connected process shaped simultaneously by structural conditions, relational interactions, and experiential meaning.

5.1.1 Reflexive Opening

Approaching this analysis, I brought assumptions shaped by professional experience in the tourism and gastronomy industry. I entered the research assuming that many experiential food and wine activities would be fundamentally difficult to make inclusive for people with visual impairments. The interviews complicated this assumption considerably. What repeatedly emerged was that exclusion often originated not from blindness itself, but from the design of the activity: the layout of a room, the format of a buffet, the absence of verbal communication, or staff unfamiliarity with accessibility needs. Before beginning this research, I understood intellectually that design produces barriers; however, I had not fully appreciated what that meant. I realize how addressable many of those barriers can be, nor how relatively minor adjustments shape participants' sense of inclusion. My professional background also introduced a tension into the analysis. As someone familiar with the operational realities of experiential food and wine tourism in Italy, I am aware that providers frequently work within constraints of time, labor, historic infrastructure, and limited financial

resources. Throughout the analytical process, I attempted to balance fidelity to participants' accounts with awareness of these practical realities and the potential financial cost of accessible design. Finally, I want to acknowledge the emotional register of this research. Listening to participants describe dependence on others, repeated experiences of exclusion, and the gradual narrowing of social participation that inaccessible environments can produce was sometimes emotionally difficult. Throughout the analysis, I tried to ensure that any emotional responses sharpened rather than distorted my interpretation of participants' accounts.

Overview of Overarching Themes and Subthemes

Overarching Theme	Subthemes
Conditions of Participation	Transport and location as structural barriers The companion — between enabler and gatekeeper Pre-visit information as a condition for participation
Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Staff communication and welcome as the foundation of inclusion The physical environment and navigational independence Designing the tasting experience for inclusion
Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience	The richness of non-visual senses in food and wine The social dimension — participation as belonging Dignity, autonomy, and self-advocacy

Figure 5: Overview of Overarching themes and subthemes

5.2 Overarching Theme 1: Conditions of Participation

The first theme concerns the conditions that determine whether participation becomes possible before the tourism experience itself begins. Across the interviews, participants consistently described accessibility as something shaped long before arrival at a venue. Transport availability, dependence on companions, and access to reliable information collectively functioned as gatekeeping conditions that either enabled or prevented participation altogether. If these conditions

were missing, participants were effectively excluded from experiential food and wine tourism before questions of physical accessibility or service quality even became relevant.

5.2.1 Transport and Location as Structural Barriers

For most participants, the question of whether to participate in an experiential food and wine activity was determined not just by interest in the activity itself, but by whether the venue could realistically be reached. Experiential gastronomy tourism in Italy frequently takes place in rural or agricultural settings poorly served by public transport. Since participants with visual impairments do not drive, transport emerged as a structural barrier operating before the experience itself begins.

P3 described this clearly: “the most important thing for us is knowing how to get there... these places are always outside [of the city]. Someone has to drive you, either you go by car, or you don't go.” Similarly, P9 explained: “I don't travel. Because my wife doesn't even have a driver's license.” Although he expressed enthusiasm for visiting agritourism settings and farmhouses, participation remained impossible because transport was unavailable.

Several participants nevertheless described practical solutions capable of reducing this barrier. P1, who organizes accessible events himself, explained that in one case a producer brought the tasting experience directly to an accessible venue: “he brought the dishes, I had a large table ready for him.” In other cases, participants rented a minibus and the services of a driver, to reach a remote winery. P13, speaking from his experience as president of the local blind association, added an important relational dimension to this barrier. Many members, he observed, already depend on others for essential needs such as medical appointments, and are reluctant to ask for yet another favor for something as non-essential as leisure. The transport barrier is therefore not only logistical — it is emotionally burdensome in a way that compounds the reluctance to participate.

5.2.2 The Companion — Between Enabler and Gatekeeper

For nearly all participants, experiential food and wine tourism was described as an activity that is dependent on the presence of a companion. Companions provide transport, orientation, environmental description, and emotional reassurance. Yet the findings also revealed a more complex dynamic: the same companion relationship that enables participation can simultaneously restrict independence and limit opportunities.

Several participants described situations in which participation depended entirely on whether a spouse, family member, or friend was willing to accompany them. P10 explained: “you need a partner to go to these places. Not alone. And my husband doesn't want to come.” Similarly, P8 described how her husband's anxiety about unfamiliar environments prevented outings altogether.

The companion relationship therefore operates ambiguously: it enables participation while simultaneously limiting control over decision-making.

Participants also emphasized that companions are not substitutes for accessibility provision. P7 observed that the companions themselves are often unfamiliar with the venue and may not always know how best to assist. Therefore, staff support remains essential even when a companion is present.

The findings further revealed tensions surrounding overprotection and autonomy. P7 described travelling independently without informing her daughter because she anticipated being discouraged from going. Here, family support also led to limiting self-determination.

Across the interviews, companion relationships emerged as emotionally and practically significant, simultaneously enabling social participation while reinforcing dependence and unequal access to mobility.

5.2.3 Pre-Visit Information as a Condition for Participation

Participants consistently described access to accurate and practical pre-visit information as a prerequisite for participation itself. Decisions about whether to attend an activity were shaped long before arrival, through processes of anticipation, planning, and risk assessment. The information participants considered essential was highly specific: transport routes, terrain conditions, accessibility of entrances and bathrooms. Participants emphasized that they were not seeking perfect accessibility, but honest and detailed communication.

P6 described arriving at an outdoor event only to discover that the venue required a lengthy uphill walk through uneven terrain. She felt unsafe, and worried that she and her friend, who is blind, would fall and hurt themselves. “I am visually impaired, my friend is blind, and my husband had to help us both. They didn't tell us it's a 20-minute walk through these fields....For goodness sake, the idea was nice, host a concert outside, they brought a piano into the middle of the woods, I understand the effort, but if you do something like that the route has to be suitable, and it absolutely wasn't.”

Participants emphasized that accessibility information is an indispensable prerequisite for participation itself. Inaccurate or vague communication generated anxiety and undermined trust. P2 explained that honest acknowledgement of accessibility limitations would increase rather than reduce his trust in a provider. P12 noted that she dedicates time to research venues in advance and avoids venues she anticipates will be problematic — even when travelling with a sighted companion. 'I'm afraid of the steps... If the wine cellar isn't well-lit, I won't go.' The findings align

with Larsen's (2007) argument that the anticipatory phase is central to tourism experience formation. For participants with visual impairments, inclusion or exclusion is often determined before arrival through the availability — or absence — of trustworthy information.

5.3 Overarching Theme 2: Designing Inclusion Within the Experience

The second theme concerns the experience itself: how inclusion is actively produced or undermined through communication practices, environmental design, and the structure of the activity. Across the interviews, participants consistently described accessibility not just as the presence or absence of specialist infrastructure, but as the cumulative effect of small relational and organizational decisions.

5.3.1 Staff Communication and Welcome as the Foundation of Inclusion

One finding emerged with particular clarity across the interviews: the central importance of staff behavior. Participants consistently described the staff's approach and communication style as the most important factors shaping whether they felt included and reassured. P6 offered a clear description of what effective communication should look like in practice: “[they] have to speak — good evening, have a seat, can I help you? Stand to the side, not in front, tell us to watch out because there's a step, now turn to the right... they should accompany what they are doing with their voice so you know what's going on...”. As P13 observed, “Better one word too many than one too few.” Other participants emphasized that verbal communication functioned not only practically but emotionally. P5 explained that “the voice is very important for a blind person,” highlighting how tone, warmth, and attentiveness communicate welcome and reassurance. The negative effect of unfriendly or nervous staff could lead to a significant adverse reaction: “If someone feels they are judging him or angry with him, short with him, next time he won't come. He won't leave the house”, said P3.

Participants also noted interactions shaped by awkwardness or discomfort. P2 observed that some staff members respond naturally and empathetically, while others “basically freak out” when encountering a visually impaired guest. “They make it more complicated than it has to be,” he said. “They get nervous and say that they have never worked with someone blind”, added P6.

Several participants further emphasized that companions should not be treated as replacements for staff. As P8 explained, companions are “like me — they don't know the place.” Staff support therefore remained essential, always, even when participants travelled with others. P13 described another aspect of this issue, noting that sometimes, staff ignore him and only speak to his companion: ‘I am an independent adult. Ask me directly.’ He noted that this happened not only in

tourism contexts but in medical settings as well — suggesting a broader social pattern of treating visually impaired people as less than full interlocutors.

The findings suggest that inclusion in experiential food and wine tourism is deeply relational. Having attentive and communicative staff was consistently described as indispensable for accessibility.

5.3.2 The Physical Environment and Navigational Independence

Participants described the physical environments in which experiential food and wine tourism takes place as either difficult to navigate, or unreachable to the degree that they undermine independence. Historic buildings with stairs and no stair railing, uneven terrain, and cluttered layouts collectively shaped how confidently participants were able to move through space and participate autonomously. Stairs emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned obstacles. Participants repeatedly described descending stairs as especially difficult. Others discussed challenges associated with bathrooms, indicating that because they were unfamiliar with the layout, they had to touch several surfaces to find the light switch, or the flush button. While often expressed in a joking tone, participants' frustration was evident. "I clean their toilets for them with my hand when I look for the switch," joked P1. "But it would be easier if someone walked with me to the bathroom and showed me where the faucet is, where is the switch." P12 offered a specific and honest account of what environmental accessibility means in practice, describing the conditions that would allow her to use a bathroom independently: no steps, automatic lighting, a door that contrasts visually with the surrounding wall. 'I ask where is the bathroom, they say the white door at the end of the corridor. I can't tell the difference between the white and the grey door,' she noted. 'When you're somewhere, it's always nicer to be able to access the bathroom independently. But independence for a visually impaired person must have certain prerequisites.'

P5 frequently downplayed barriers and described blindness primarily as a normal way of engaging with the world. When asked what might stop a blind person from participating in an activity, she replied "nothing". However, closer analysis suggests that this apparent ease reflects a lifetime of adaptation and competence-building rather than the absence of barriers themselves. P8 similarly initially claimed that "nothing prevents" blind and visually impaired people from participating in these activities. Yet as the interview progressed, she described numerous barriers involving stairs, inaccessible environments, and dependence on companions.

P11 and P9 mentioned that minor adaptations may be of great assistance: installing rails, marking a set course to follow with a cane were effective strategies. P2 described his sense of ease in environments intentionally designed for blind guests: "I can let my guard down... I felt like at

home.” In other cases, participants explained that they simply need more time to adjust to the surroundings: P13 described how as a person with low vision, the transition from bright outdoor environments to the dim lighting of a cellar (during a winery tour) poses a challenge. 'It takes two or three minutes for my eyes to adjust. I can't see. So especially if it's a group, I'll wait in the back, rather than holding up the group.”

The findings suggest that accessible environmental design does not necessarily require radical architectural transformation. Rather, participants consistently highlighted the importance of clarity, predictability, clear indications, hand rails, staff assistance, and environmental organization in supporting independent participation.

5.3.3 Designing the Tasting Experience for Inclusion

Once participants were seated, the design of the tasting activity itself became central to whether they could participate comfortably and independently. Buffets, for example, were repeatedly described as exclusionary. Participants explained that self-service formats require navigating crowded shared surfaces, identifying unfamiliar foods visually, and reaching across spaces not knowing where objects are. These situations produced discomfort and anxiety, particularly because participants feared touching other guests' food or knocking objects over.

P2 articulated this especially clearly: “you don't want to touch something you shouldn't be touching... it's not fair to the other participants that you're touching their food.” P1 similarly noted that in a mixed group, several visually impaired guests might rely on a single sighted person to serve food, “but that’s not fair to that person.” P12 noted that “Buffets are a visual experience...But it can’t be for me”.

By contrast, participants praised plate service combined with verbal explanation of each dish as the most inclusive format. P3 explained: “I prefer it if they serve me [my plate] rather than having to reach out [to the group plate] and take my portion.” P5 and P10 echoed the same sentiments, noting that plate service reduced anxiety and allowed them to focus on the experience itself.

Participants also emphasized the importance of narration during the tasting. Narration was listed as essential both for logistical purposes, but also as part of the experience, allowing participants to learn about ingredients, flavors, production methods, and regional characteristics of the food and wine in front of them. P2 described the frustration of consuming products without explanation: “I can’t see what’s on the plate. I can’t read the label. Maybe I eat something and I don't know what I ate — I really hate that. I want to understand.”

Several participants described structured and sequential tastings positively because they reduced confusion and created predictable rhythms within the activity. P1 described guided tastings, where products were introduced individually and discussed collectively, as ideal formats. Participants additionally highlighted the importance of touch. P9 and P4 described handling wine glasses and products as a way of understanding objects independently and recognizing them afterwards.

P13 offered an account that illustrates the importance of sensory description: At a tasting organized by the association, a truffle was served. He assumed, as he always had, that other participants would be familiar with what a truffle is — until he realized that the [blind] person next to him had never touched one. “I took it for granted that he knew what it was”. To remedy, he proceeded to describe the truffle's texture in detail. The account illustrates two things simultaneously: the ease with which providers assume shared visual references, and the value of sensory description for all participants. Lastly, P2 noted the importance of touch. While touching food is often frowned upon, it is a fundamental strategy for people with visual impairments. “In India, you have more freedom to touch the food, you’re required to touch your plate and it's okay. I loved India. I felt so much more comfortable there,” he said.

5.4 Overarching Theme 3: Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience

The third theme moves beyond the practical conditions of participation and examines what participation itself means to participants. While the earlier themes focus primarily on barriers and design practices, this theme explores the emotional, sensory, and social significance participants attached to experiential food and wine tourism. Across the interviews, participants consistently described these experiences not simply as opportunities to consume food and wine, but as opportunities for multisensory engagement, social participation, dignity, and belonging.

5.4.1 *The Richness of Non-Visual Senses in Food and wine*

Several participants described themselves as curious, even if they did not use the word itself. “I love anything that’s new,” said P3. “I like to try new things,” said P4. “I read books all the time,” said P8. Their interest in exciting activities and breaking out of the ordinary was clear. As for the experience itself, smell, taste, touch, and sound were regarded as meaningful sensory dimensions in their own right — not merely as substitutes for sight. This finding reframed the relationship between visual impairment and experiential food and wine tourism. Rather than focusing solely on what blind and visually impaired participants cannot access, the interviews highlighted what participants can access through non-visual sensory engagement. Some prided themselves on their highly developed senses “I have an excellent nose,” said P10. Others described strong awareness of

smell, texture, atmosphere, and sound within tourism environments. P6 described recognizing weather changes through smell and noticing distinctive sensory characteristics inside wine cellars. P5 described how she could tell a room's design through the smell of the flowers and the candles, or the texture of the tablecloth. When asked to describe her ideal experience, she began by explaining how important esthetics are to her. "I can't see with my eyes, but I have a whole world that I see inside my head," she explained. This account resonates with Noghan et al.'s (2024) argument that visually impaired tourists actively construct tourism experiences through imagination, sensory memory, and mental imagery — drawing on prior knowledge, embodied cues, and narrative to build internal representations of places and activities that sight alone does not provide. P8's reflection that 'I travel with my mind' captures this same process: the tourism experience is not absent without vision, just differently constructed. P12 described this orientation most clearly in the context of food fairs: '...the buzz, the people, the chatter — that's mine. My hearing tries to make up for the lack of sight.' While participants acknowledged that visual elements are an important part of food and wine tourism, their vivid descriptions of smell, mouthfeel and flavor made it clear that a food and wine experience can be fully enjoyed without seeing the food or wine, as well. The findings therefore suggest that experiential food and wine tourism may be particularly well suited to inclusive design precisely because it is inherently multisensory. This finding aligns with Agapito et al. (2013; 2014) work on the multisensory dimensions of tourist experiences (destination "sensespaces") and with Small, Darcy and Packer's (2012) argument that embodied and multisensory engagement are central to the tourism experiences of travelers with visual impairments.

5.4.2 The Social Dimension — Participation as Belonging

Participants consistently described experiential food and wine tourism not just as an opportunity to consume food and wine, but as an opportunity to participate socially and feel included within collective experiences. The findings suggest that some participants valued experiential food and wine tourism less for the products themselves than for the social recognition and conviviality these activities enabled.

P9 described his ideal experience in unmistakably social terms: "even eating pizza together means being together. And chatting about this and that, while eating pizza." Similarly, P8 noted: "the ideal experience for me? We all know each other, even if we don't really know each other. We walk from table to table, we present ourselves, we talk." P12 described this motivation clearly, explaining that what she valued most about food fairs was their function as a social catalyst: "the people, the conversations, the shared atmosphere. Socially I like it a lot." Several participants described especially positive experiences occurring within groups composed partly or entirely of visually

impaired participants. These environments reduced anxiety and allowed participants to relax socially without needing to explain or justify their access needs.

Participants also highlighted how seemingly small moments of exclusion — such as staff forgetting to communicate directly with them or distributing inaccessible written materials — carried symbolic significance. P7 explained that equal treatment mattered deeply: “if you give a flyer to a sighted person, you have to give it to a blind person too. I will ask someone to read it for me, or I will use the app on my phone that translates it to sound.”

The findings suggest that accessibility in experiential tourism has a very strong social component. Participants need to feel socially recognized as legitimate and equal participants within the experience.

5.4.3 Dignity, Autonomy, and Self-Advocacy

The preceding themes converge in participants' reflections on dignity and autonomy, where barriers, social interactions, and design practices become emotionally and personally consequential. Across the interviews, participants consistently described a tension between needing assistance and wanting to maintain independence and self-respect. Importantly, participants did not reject assistance itself. Rather, they expected it and were frustrated when it wasn't offered. They were excited when assistance was offered in a meaningful way; P3 recounted happily of the basketball games he watched with a volunteer who narrated the entire match for him. However, it was important that assistance be offered in a respectful and patient manner, preserving dignity. P6 offered an example of this: a waiter who narrated actions naturally, as a matter of fact, which allowed her to participate comfortably without drawing excessive attention.

At the same time, participants also described how repeated experiences of exclusion could gradually reduce confidence and willingness to participate socially. P11 described anticipating limitations before attempting activities, while other participants discussed people they know who withdrew from unfamiliar environments after negative experiences. “Especially if they are older and they recently lost their eyesight,” said P1. “They are scared, and they don't want to leave the house. A little negative experience for them is big.”

The findings suggest that these internalized expectations of exclusion are socially produced rather than inevitable consequences of visual impairment itself. Repeated encounters with inaccessible environments shape how participants imagine their own possibilities for participation. This connects with the dynamic described by Small et al. (2012), the invisible emotional and practical labor that visually impaired tourists perform simply to participate — the constant planning, risk assessment, self-advocacy, and emotional management required before and during any tourism activity. This

labor is largely invisible to providers, as it is not voiced, and because those who find it most burdensome simply stop attending.

Participants nevertheless differed considerably in how they responded to these experiences. Some participants, particularly P1, P2, P5, and P13, demonstrated strong self-advocacy and framed accommodation to visually impaired clients as a legitimate expectation rather than a favor. Others described more cautious or withdrawn relationships with participation. Several participants emphasized that being born blind and losing your sight later in life are two very different experiences. In some respects, blind participants felt they were more experienced and confident. However, the variation in reacting to challenging situations did not map neatly onto congenital versus acquired impairment. Instead, confidence appeared more strongly connected to personal character and accumulated experiences.

5.4.4 A Note on Technology

Several participants discussed assistive technologies such as smartphone applications, QR codes, digital magnifiers, and AI-supported image recognition tools. Technology did not emerge as a central thematic concern, but rather as a useful instrument; a tool compensating for inaccessible environments. However, the growing potential of technology clearly positions it as a possible tool for building meaningful and accessible food and wine experiences. The findings suggest important opportunities for future research into how assistive and digital technologies might be integrated more systematically into gastro experiential tourism design.

5.5 Synthesis Across the Themes

The findings suggest that participation in experiential food and wine tourism unfolds across three interconnected levels. The first concerns whether participation becomes possible at all: transport availability, companion relationships, and access to reliable information already shape who is realistically able to participate. The second level concerns the design of the experience itself. Once participants arrive, inclusion is actively produced or undermined through communication practices, environmental design, and the structure of the tasting activity. The third level concerns the meaning participants attach to participation. Beyond practical accessibility, participants valued these experiences as opportunities for multisensory engagement, social belonging, dignity, and autonomy. Taken together, the themes suggest that accessibility in experiential food and wine tourism is a relational and design challenge shaped by how experiences are organized, communicated, and socially enacted.

6. Conclusions

This study explored how visitors with visual impairments perceive accessibility in experiential food and wine tourism, and what design insights emerge from their lived experiences. Drawing on thirteen semi-structured interviews with blind and visually impaired adults, analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019; 2021), nine sub-themes were actively developed and resulted in three overarching themes describing the conditions under which participation becomes possible and meaningful. This concluding chapter answers the three research sub-questions, presents eight inclusive design principles derived from the findings, discusses the study's theoretical contributions, acknowledges its limitations, and identifies directions for future research.

6.1 Answering the Research Questions

Sub-question 1: What barriers do visitors with visual impairments encounter in experiential food and wine activities — such as wine tastings, olive oil tastings, farm visits, and food product tastings?

The barriers identified in this study operate across the full tourism journey and correspond to all three of Crawford, Jackson and Godbey's (1991) constraint categories. Structural barriers are the most pervasive. Because many venues that offer experiential food and wine activities are located in rural areas, they are often inaccessible to non-drivers. Insufficient or vague pre-visit information prevents informed decision-making, while uneven terrain, stairs without handrails, poor lighting, and cluttered environments create physical risks for blind and visually impaired guests. Buffet, self-service, and unguided tasting formats create an additional barrier by limiting independent participation.

Interpersonal barriers are equally significant. Participation is often conditional on having a companion who is willing to attend, able to drive, and capable of providing guidance. When such support is unavailable, participation may be impossible regardless of the venue's accessibility. Poor staff communication compounds this problem: untrained staff who do not know how to guide, describe, or communicate with visually impaired guests can produce exclusion even in otherwise accessible spaces.

Intrapersonal barriers, though less visible, are deeply consequential. Participants described fear of falling, anxiety in unfamiliar environments, reluctance to ask for help, and an internalized expectation of diminished experience. Over time, repeated encounters with inaccessible environments can produce withdrawal from participation altogether — a process largely invisible to providers because the people most affected are those who no longer attend.

Sub-question 2: How do visitors with visual impairments conceptualize a socially accessible tourism experience?

Participants described social accessibility as operating across three interconnected levels. The first is infrastructural. Physical safety and environmental accessibility function as threshold conditions: without a safe and navigable environment, participation is impossible. No amount of warmth or hospitality can compensate for a venue that cannot be entered or navigated safely. Once these threshold conditions are met, accessibility becomes fundamentally relational. Participants emphasized the importance of proactive communication, warmth, attentiveness, and staff confidence. Environments with attentive and communicative staff were experienced as welcoming even when modest, whereas physically accessible venues with indifferent or nervous staff were experienced as exclusionary. The finding supports Richards, Pritchard and Morgan's (2010) argument that accessible tourism involves not only the removal of physical barriers, but also the creation of socially supportive and dignity-enhancing environments for people with visual impairments.

The third level is experiential. Participants described socially accessible food and wine experiences as sensorially rich experiences that foreground smell, taste, touch, and sound rather than relying primarily on visual presentation or visual aids. Importantly, non-visual senses were not described as substitutes for sight, but as independent sources of pleasure, meaning, and immersion.

Sub-question 3: What design principles can be derived from visitors' experiences and expectations?

The eight design principles presented in Section 6.3 are grounded directly in participant accounts and the study's conceptual framework. Together, they demonstrate that many of the adaptations required to make food and wine tourism accessible to blind and visually impaired guests can also enhance experiential quality for all participants. Verbal narration, guided tasting formats, and deliberate multisensory design shift experiences further along Pine and Gilmore's (1998) experiential spectrum from passive consumption toward active, immersive participation.

6.2 Eight Principles for Inclusive Food and wine Experience Design

6.2.1 Principle 1: Communicate before arrival — honestly and specifically

Pre-visit information is a core accessibility intervention. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of specific and honest information before deciding whether to attend: what the route involves, what the terrain is like, what the activity includes, and what limitations may exist. Vague reassurances were described as more harmful than honest disclosure because they create unpleasant surprises on arrival. Honest communication of limitations builds trust rather than discouraging

participation. Providers should include practical accessibility information in all activity listings and, where possible, contact guests directly before arrival to explain what to expect and ask whether they have specific needs. This finding aligns with Nigg et al.'s (2024) observation that insufficient information reduces self-confidence and discourages participation.

6.2.2 Principle 2: Understand arrival barriers; consider making transport part of the offer

Mobility and transport emerged as two of the most significant structural barriers in this study. While providers may not be able to offer free transport, they can reduce exclusion by incorporating transport into the offer, for a fee. Shuttle services from nearby train stations, partnerships with local taxi providers, designated meeting points, or group collection services can make participation feasible. At minimum, providers should communicate clearly where accessible transport arrives and how far it is from the venue.

6.2.3 Principle 3: Train intelligently and prioritize warmth and communication

Staff training emerged as the most consistently identified solution in this study. Participants emphasized the importance of technical accessibility knowledge, warmth, patience, confidence, and communication. Blind and visually impaired guests may feel anxious in unfamiliar environments where visual orientation cues are absent. Small interpersonal interactions therefore become highly significant. Participants valued staff who approached them proactively, spoke directly to them rather than to companions, described spaces and actions clearly, and offered assistance naturally without making them feel burdensome. This supports broader accessible tourism scholarship suggesting that accessibility is fundamentally relational, and that staff attitudes are as consequential as physical design (Small et al., 2012; Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020).

6.2.4 Principle 4: Design the table deliberately

Table design is an accessibility decision. Overcrowded or disorganized tables can be confusing and unsafe for blind guests, whereas simple and consistent layouts support independent navigation. Providers should minimize unnecessary objects, maintain stable glass placement, and leave clear spacing between items. The “clock method” — describing the location of objects using clock positions — can also help guests orient themselves independently.

6.2.5 Principle 5: Serve, don't display

One of the most practical design changes identified in this study is replacing buffet and communal-service formats with individual plate service. Buffets systematically exclude blind guests because food cannot be identified without touching it, navigating shared surfaces is difficult, and social norms discourage tactile exploration of communal food. Buffets also shift responsibility onto companions, transforming them from fellow participants into helpers. Plate service — with food brought directly to each guest, verbally described, and placed within reach — resolves many of

these problems simultaneously. Drinks should also be poured by staff. Although this may require slightly more staff attention, it does not significantly increase costs, particularly in the small-group settings typical of food and wine tourism.

6.2.6 Principle 6: Structure and narrate the experience

Guided, sequential tastings with clear verbal narration are more inclusive than open, visually led formats. Participants consistently described narration as central to meaningful participation. Providers should structure tastings around a clear sequence: orientation on arrival, verbal introduction of products, guided tasting, and explanation of origins, characteristics, and production processes. Visual materials such as menus, videos, or slides should always be accompanied by verbal descriptions. Where hygienically possible, participants should also be encouraged to touch and handle products. This principle benefits all guests and requires little beyond thoughtful preparation.

6.2.7 Principle 7: Foreground the non-visual senses

Food and wine is already, at its core, a multisensory activity. The pleasure of tasting wine, olive oil, cheese, and cured meats depends primarily on smell, taste, touch, atmosphere, and social interaction rather than sight alone. Participants repeatedly emphasized that once food or drink was in their hands, the experience became far more equal. In some respects, blind participants appeared to engage more deeply because of their heightened attention to non-visual sensory detail. This finding extends Agapito, Mendes and Valle's (2013; 2014) framework of multisensory tourism experience. The implication is not that blind guests require a separate version of the experience, but that deliberately foregrounding smell, taste, touch, sound, and atmosphere can create more immersive experiences for everyone. As P13 articulated: "By making experiential food and wine more experiential, you can....make everything more special — even for those who can see."

6.2.8 Principle 8: Design for dignity — anticipate needs, don't simply react to them

Inclusive design is not only about removing physical barriers or providing assistance when requested. It also involves anticipating needs before guests are forced to ask. Participants described how over time, repeat negative and excluding experiences produce a burden of emotional and practical labor. This aligns with Kim and Adu-Ampong's argument (2024), that accessibility should be evaluated according to whether it enables meaningful participation with autonomy and dignity. Therefore, providers should not ask only what accessibility regulations require, but what genuine hospitality demands.

6.3 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes four contributions to existing literature. First, it contributes demand-side empirical evidence to a field that has often been dominated by supply-side and compliance-oriented perspectives (as noted by Rubio-Escuderos et al., 2021; Nigg et al., 2024). By centering the perspectives of blind and visually impaired participants, the study generates design insights grounded in lived experience. In doing so, it also responds to calls for accessible tourism research that foregrounds the experiences of people with disabilities (Small et al., 2012; Devile et al., 2024). Second, the study contributes to multisensory tourism experience literature by demonstrating that experiential food and wine tourism is particularly well suited to inclusive design because of its inherently multisensory nature. The findings extend Agapito, Mendes and Valle's (2013; 2014) framework of sensory tourism experience to a specific and underexplored activity type. They also support Richards, Pritchard and Morgan's (2010) argument that visually impaired tourists experience tourism through embodied and multisensory engagement, showing that non-visual sensory dimensions are not merely compensatory, but central to the experience itself.

Third, the study extends leisure constraints theory by demonstrating how structural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal constraints compound one another in experiential food and wine tourism. Transport barriers and dependence on companions operate before the experience even begins, meaning that improvements to on-site accessibility cannot reach participants who never arrive. The findings also show that intrapersonal constraints — fear, anticipated exclusion, and withdrawal — are not independent of structural barriers but are produced through repeated encounters with inaccessible environments.

Fourth, the study contributes to both accessible tourism and experiential tourism theory by showing that inclusive design and high-quality experiential design are not competing priorities in food and wine tourism, but mutually reinforcing ones. Pine and Gilmore (1998) argue that memorable experiences emerge through active and multisensory participation rather than passive observation. The present study demonstrates that many accessibility-oriented interventions — including guided narration, tactile engagement, and the deliberate use of sound and atmosphere — also intensify experiential immersion for all participants. This reflects what Blackwell (2017) describes as the “curb-cut effect”: design interventions intended to include excluded groups often improve experiences more broadly. Designing for blind and visually impaired guests encourages providers to create more deliberate, narrated, and sensorially rich experiences overall. In this sense, accessibility is not a constraint on experiential design, but a means of strengthening it.

The study also has implications at the destination management level. Accessible food and wine tourism is not only a product design issue, but also a destination competitiveness issue. Blind and visually impaired travelers represent an underserved market segment that is often excluded by current provision. Importantly, accessibility influences not only the choices of disabled visitors themselves, but also those of their travel companions (Darcy & Dickson, 2009; Buhalis & Darcy, 2011). Moreover, accessibility should not be understood only in relation to permanent disability in the traditional sense, but also in relation to temporary impairments, age-related sensory decline, and reduced vision associated with demographic ageing (Imrie, 2012; World Health Organization, 2023). Given demographic ageing and the rising prevalence of disability across Europe, destinations that continue to treat accessibility as a compliance burden rather than a strategic design opportunity risk excluding a growing share of future visitors. This aligns with the UNWTO's (2016) position that accessibility is a central element of responsible and sustainable tourism development.

6.4 Limitations

The limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, with the exception of one participant (P2), the sample was recruited through local branches of Italy's national blind association. Participants therefore benefited from forms of institutional support and social connection that many people with visual impairments may not have access to. This has important analytical implications: individuals connected to disability associations are more likely to have maintained active social participation and developed strategies for navigating inaccessible environments. As a result, the study may underrepresent the experiences of the most excluded group — people with visual impairments who are socially isolated, lack institutional support, and have withdrawn from public participation following repeated negative experiences. The design principles proposed in this study are therefore grounded in the accounts of participants who, to varying degrees, have found ways to continue participating. For those absent from the data entirely, the barriers may be even more severe and the withdrawal more complete.

Second, most participants reside in Tuscany (Italy), and their experiences are based on Italian food and wine venues. The transferability of the findings to other national contexts should be approached with caution. At the same time, the conceptual framework and design principles proposed in this study — grounded in the experiential and relational dimensions of accessible tourism rather than in Italy-specific regulations or infrastructure — are likely to have relevance beyond the Italian setting. Future research examining experiential food and wine tourism accessibility in other national contexts would allow the transferability of these findings to be assessed more rigorously.

Third, this study focused primarily on tasting-based activities — wine, olive oil, cheese, and cured meat tastings — rather than cooking classes. Cooking classes, while commonly associated with experiential food and wine tourism, emerged during the analysis as presenting substantially more complex accessibility challenges, as they require tool use and the execution of potentially dangerous physical tasks in an unfamiliar kitchen environment. The design of accessible cooking class experiences for blind and visually impaired participants therefore represents a distinct research topic that the present study cannot address.

6.5 Directions for Future Research

Three directions for future research emerge from this study. The first and possibly most urgent direction is a supply-side study of how food and wine providers understand and approach accessibility. The demand-side focus was a deliberate methodological choice in the present study, as it set out to generate evidence about what blind and visually impaired participants themselves consider a socially accessible experience. However, this focus means that the proposed eight design principles have not been tested against the operational realities faced by providers. Understanding how experiential food and wine operators perceive accessibility, what financial, logistical, and cultural constraints they face in implementing changes, and what support or incentives might facilitate inclusive design would contribute to the findings and make the principles more practically actionable.

A second direction concerns the role of assistive and digital technologies in accessible food and wine experience design. Several participants in this study described technologies — smartphone applications, AI-supported image recognition, digital magnifiers, QR codes linked to audio descriptions — as useful tools for compensating for inaccessible environments. However, technology emerged as a secondary coping mechanism rather than a primary design feature: participants used it to navigate environments not designed for them, rather than experiencing it as an integral part of a deliberately designed inclusive experience. A dedicated study examining how such technologies could be embedded into food and wine experience design as a standard feature — rather than as a retrofit — would address this gap directly. Such a study would also test whether technological integration can substitute for or must complement the relational and human dimensions of accessibility that this study identifies as central.

A third direction concerns the companion relationship. This study captures this relationship exclusively from the perspective of blind and visually impaired participants, who described companions as simultaneously indispensable and constraining — enabling participation while also functioning as gatekeepers whose willingness, availability, and competence determined whether

participation was possible at all. This raises questions that only research focusing on companions could answer. How do companions experience the role? Do they feel burdened by it, or do they value it? And what could providers do to better support companions as co-participants rather than informal carers? Their perspectives would provide a fuller understanding of the interpersonal dynamics identified in subtheme 5.2, and might reveal design opportunities that this study could not identify from the demand-side perspective alone.

6.6 Proposal of Diffusion in Congresses and Journals

The findings of this research could be presented at academic conferences related to tourism, accessibility, destination management, and food tourism. Presenting the results at conferences would allow discussion of the findings with researchers and practitioners working in related fields.

In addition, the results could be adapted into a journal article and submitted to a peer-reviewed tourism journal, particularly those focusing on tourism experiences, gastronomy tourism, destination management, or inclusive tourism. The practical implications of the study could also be shared with tourism businesses and destination management organizations interested in developing more socially accessible tourism experiences.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. How often do you travel for leisure?
2. Apart from travel, do you do other leisure activities (for example sports, hobbies etc)? which? What is it that you like about them?
3. Do you typically participate in food and wine experiential tourism activities such as wine tasting, food tastings, farm tours?
4. Can you tell me about a food or wine tourism experience that you participated in and remember well?
Possible prompts (if needed): Where did it take place? What did the activity involve?
Who were you traveling with? How did you learn about or book the activity?
5. What aspects of that experience did you enjoy the most?
Possible prompts: Interacting with the hosts; The food or wine itself; Learning something new about food or wine; The atmosphere or setting; Interacting with other participants
6. Before participating in a food or wine tourism activity, what information do you usually look for?
Possible prompts: Description of the activity; Duration of the experience; Group size;
Physical requirements; information about accessibility
7. Have you ever encountered situations during a food or wine tourism activity that made participation more difficult or less comfortable as a person who is blind / visually impaired?
Possible prompts: The physical environment; Communication or explanations; The pace of the activity; Interaction with other participants; Services offered
8. What do you think might stop a person who is blind / visually impaired from participating in a food or wine tourism activity such as wine tasting, cooking class?
Possible prompts: Walking or standing requirements; Group size; Communication style or language; The physical layout of the space. Follow up: Are there types of food or wine tourism activities that you tend to avoid or hesitate to participate in?
9. In your opinion, what characteristics make a food or wine tourism experience feel comfortable, inclusive, and welcoming for participants who are blind / visually impaired?
Possible prompts: Host behavior; The atmosphere; Group dynamics; The explanations given to participants; The layout of the venue
10. If you could design the ideal food or wine tourism experience for yourself, what would it look like?
Possible prompts: Group size; Level of interaction; The physical setting;
The pace of the activity;
11. What could tourism providers such as wineries, farms and cooking schools do to make food and wine tourism activities more accessible to people who are blind / visually impaired?
12. Is there anything that you'd like to add?

Appendix B: Sample of Initial Codes — Illustrative Examples Across Interviews

The following tables present illustrative examples of initial coding generated during Phase two of the reflexive thematic analysis. In line with Braun and Clarke’s (2006; 2019; 2021) approach to reflexive thematic analysis, coding and theme development were recursive and interpretive processes rather than linear or purely procedural stages. The examples presented below are therefore illustrative rather than exhaustive. Codes are presented close to participants’ language and are shown alongside the higher-order theme and subtheme into which they were ultimately integrated during the later phases of analysis.

Participant	Data Segment	Initial Code	Overarching Theme	Subtheme
P10	“It takes two people. And my husband isn't really into those things”	Participation depends on having a willing companion	Conditions of Participation	The companion — between enabler and gatekeeper
P10	“The height of the steps is what conditions me”	Steps create fear and limit movement	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Physical environment and navigational independence
P10	“I don't like when restaurants have things to grab and go”	Buffet format creates uncertainty	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Designing the tasting experience for inclusion
P10	“an audio recording that tells you what’s on the table”	Audio recording supports orientation	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Designing the tasting experience for inclusion
P12	“The buffet is a visual experience. I don't have a visual experience — that can't be for me.”	Buffet format is inherently visual and excludes blind guests	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Designing the tasting experience for inclusion
P6	“accompany what you do with your voice”	Staff should verbally describe actions while helping	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Staff communication and welcome
P12	“The buzz, the people, the chatter — that's for me. My hearing tries to make up for the lack of sight”	Sound and social atmosphere replace visual experience	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience	Richness of non-visual senses
P6	“getting there was terrible...they didn't tell us it's a 20-minute walk on uneven terrain”	No warning about difficult route before arrival	Conditions of Participation	Pre-visit information as a condition for participation
P6	“the clock system”	Clock method helps orient food placement	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Designing the tasting experience for inclusion
P6	“it takes just a word, just a gesture, to make people feel judged, uncomfortable”	Small negative interactions discourage participation	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience	Dignity, autonomy, and self-advocacy
P4	“I want to know what's happening, where it is, if it's accessible”	Accessibility information determines decision to attend	Conditions of Participation	Pre-visit information as a condition for participation
P4	“they don't have to wait for you to call them”	Proactive staff support matters	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Staff communication and welcome

P4	“different compartments on the plate”	Organized plate layout supports independent eating	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Designing the tasting experience for inclusion
P4	“it doesn't really take much. And when it's done, it's better”	Small changes substantially improve participation	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Staff communication and welcome
P7	“I went to Genoa alone, without telling my daughter”	Family overprotection restricts autonomy	Conditions of Participation	The companion — between enabler and gatekeeper
P7	“it's fear”	Fear discourages participation	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience	Dignity, autonomy, and self-advocacy
P7	“being treated like everyone else”	Equal treatment defines inclusion	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience	Dignity, autonomy, and self-advocacy
P7	“warn them in advance”	Advance warning reduces uncertainty	Conditions of Participation	Pre-visit information as a condition for participation
P9	“I don't travel. Because my wife doesn't even have a driver's license”	Lack of transport prevents participation	Conditions of Participation	Transport and location as structural barriers
P9	“if this person is alone, they don't leave the house anymore”	Isolation increases without companions	Conditions of Participation	The companion — between enabler and gatekeeper
P9	“they don't make me feel like I'm visually impaired”	Being treated normally supports dignity	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience	Dignity, autonomy, and self-advocacy
P9	“even eating pizza together means being together”	Shared eating valued as social participation	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience	Participation as belonging
P3	“either you go by car, or you don't go”	Rural location limits access without a car	Conditions of Participation	Transport and location as structural barriers
P3	“once I'm there, there shouldn't be any problems”	Main barrier occurs before arrival	Conditions of Participation	Transport and location as structural barriers
P3	“I prefer it if they serve me my plate directly”	Direct service preferred over self-service	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Designing the tasting experience for inclusion
P3	“together we had a good time”	Peer-group participation creates comfort	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience	Participation as belonging
P8	“my husband doesn't like going anywhere”	Partner anxiety restricts participation	Conditions of Participation	The companion — between enabler and gatekeeper
P8	“the stairs, first of all — especially going down”	Descending stairs creates insecurity	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Physical environment and navigational independence
P8	“be informed about the place you're going to”	Advance information reduces uncertainty	Conditions of Participation	Pre-visit information as a condition for participation

P8	“a guide...who accompanies them to their tables”	Guided orientation supports inclusion	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Staff communication and welcome
P5	“the voice is very important for a blind person”	Tone and warmth communicate welcome	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Staff communication and welcome
P5	“I smell the candle, I smell the flowers”	Smell shapes atmosphere and enjoyment	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience	Richness of non-visual senses
P5	“I'd have to touch the piece to feel it”	Touch supports understanding and participation	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience	Richness of non-visual senses
P1	“Remember that what for others is visual, for those who cannot see must be — if possible — auditory, or tactile. Or descriptive — someone who helps you and describes how things are.”	Touch, smell and sound support understanding and participation	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience	Richness of non-visual senses
P11	“there is no knowledge that these things even exist”	Lack of awareness excludes potential participants	Conditions of Participation	Pre-visit information as a condition for participation
P11	“being visually impaired certainly limits what he can do”	Expectation of limitation discourages participation	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience	Dignity, autonomy, and self-advocacy
P12	“I'm afraid of the stairs... this affects my choice, if the cellar isn't well-lit, I won't go.”	Fear of inaccessibility leads to pre-emptive self-exclusion	Conditions of Participation	Pre-visit information as a condition for participation
P11	“I need transportation”	Transport is a prerequisite for participation	Conditions of Participation	Transport and location as structural barriers
P1	“you don't drive, and agritourisms are generally on the outskirts”	Rural tourism difficult without driving	Conditions of Participation	Transport and location as structural barriers
P1	“what's visual for you must be auditory or tactile for us”	Visual information should be translated into audio or touch	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Staff communication and welcome
P1	“never let people serve themselves from trays”	Self-service excludes blind participants	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Designing the tasting experience for inclusion
P1	“someone who has recently lost their sight...they isolate themselves, they stop going”	Newly blind participants more vulnerable to withdrawal	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience	Dignity, autonomy, and self-advocacy
P2	“I hate bad surprises where I do something and it doesn't work”	Predictability is essential for participation	Conditions of Participation	Pre-visit information as a condition for participation
P2	“I don't ask if it's okay. I pay for the same experience”	Accessibility framed as equal entitlement	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience	Dignity, autonomy, and self-advocacy

P2	“it's not result-based, it's experience-based”	Experience more important than performance	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Designing the tasting experience for inclusion
P2	“say that this event is not going to be accessible — be honest about what is and isn't possible. That gains my trust”	Honest disclosure builds trust	Conditions of Participation	Pre-visit information as a condition for participation
P12	“When you're somewhere, it's always nicer to be able to access the WC independently. But independence for a visually impaired person has certain prerequisites”	Independence requires specific design conditions	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Physical environment and navigational independence
P13	“I am an independent adult. Talk to me directly, not to my companion”	Being addressed through companion undermines dignity and autonomy	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience	Dignity, autonomy, and self-advocacy
P13	“Better one word too many than one too few.”	Verbal communication is fundamental, narrating the experience	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Staff communication and welcome
P13	“When I enter the wine cellar, it takes me two or three minutes for my eyes to adjust. So if it's a group, I hang out in the back to let other pass first”	Light transition from outside to cellar creates temporary blindness	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Physical environment and navigational independence
P13	“They already have to ask for favors for essential things. They don't want to ask for another favor for something that's more about leisure”	Transport barrier is not just logistical but emotionally burdensome	Conditions of Participation	Transport and location as structural barriers

Appendix C: Development of Overarching Themes and Subthemes

The following table outlines the interpretive development of themes across Phases 3–5 of the reflexive thematic analysis. In line with Braun and Clarke’s reflexive approach, themes were actively developed and refined through recursive engagement with the data.

Candidate Theme/Subtheme	Analytical Development	Final Overarching Theme/Subtheme	Rationale
Getting there is the biggest barrier	Retained and integrated into broader interpretive structure	Conditions of Participation → Transport and location as structural barriers	Operates before arrival and determines whether participation becomes possible at all
Dependence on companions	Refined through iterative analysis	Conditions of Participation → The companion — between enabler and gatekeeper	Companion relationship interpreted as simultaneously enabling and limiting participation
Information before arrival	Retained and conceptually strengthened	Conditions of Participation → Pre-visit information as a condition for participation	Information interpreted as prerequisite for participation rather than supplementary support
Staff welcome and communication	Retained and developed analytically	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience → Staff communication and welcome	Communication interpreted as relational foundation of inclusion
Physical barriers in the environment	Reconceptualized beyond descriptive accessibility issues	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience → Physical environment and navigational independence	Focus shifted toward independence, orientation, and normalization of exclusion
Designing the tasting activity	Retained and refined	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience → Designing the tasting experience for inclusion	Developed around contrast between buffet/self-service and structured narrated tastings
Non-visual sensory experience	Expanded theoretically during later analysis	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience → Richness of non-visual senses	Developed into broader argument regarding multisensory participation beyond sight

Social experience and conviviality	Retained and differentiated from dignity theme	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience → Participation as belonging	Focused specifically on social participation and collective experience
Dignity, independence, and confidence	Refined and strengthened interpretively	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience → Dignity, autonomy, and self-advocacy	Developed around participant agency and internalized exclusion
Conditions shaping participation before arrival	Developed into higher-order theme	Conditions of Participation	Multiple subthemes operated before the tourism experience itself
Inclusion through design and communication	Developed into higher-order theme	Designing Inclusion Within the Experience	Several themes concerned how inclusion is actively produced during the experience
Emotional and social meaning of participation	Developed into higher-order theme	Meaning, Belonging, and Identity Within the Experience	Themes interpreted as expressing deeper experiential meaning

Appendix D: Extended Participant Profiles

The following table presents extended participant profiles and an example of the aspect of the analysis to which each participant contributed most substantially.

Participant	Age	Impairment	Onset	Analytical Contribution	Representative Quote
P1	60	Visual impairment (monocular)	Congenital	Provided especially detailed reflections on accessible tasting design, transport solutions, and audio/tactile communication	“What’s visual for you must be auditory or tactile for us — explanation is fundamental.”
P2	48	Blind	Congenital	Strongly rights-based framing of accessibility and participation	“I don’t ask if it’s okay. I don’t care if it’s okay. I pay for the same experience.”
P6	61	Visual impairment	Acquired (progressive)	Detailed reflections on staff communication, orientation, and emotional dimensions of inclusion	“Accompany what you do with your voice.”
P4	65	Blind	Congenital	Emphasized proactive support and value of small design changes	“It doesn’t really take much. And if it’s done, it’s better.”
P5	75	Blind	Congenital	Rich reflections on sensory engagement and long-term adaptation	“I was born blind — I have a whole internal world of my own.”
P7	70	Visual impairment	Acquired	Highlighted family overprotection, fear, and equal treatment	“Inclusion for me means being treated well, the way you treat a customer.”
P3	66	Visual impairment	Congenital	Emphasized transport barriers and positive peer-group participation	“Either you go by car, or you can’t go.”
P8	75	Visual impairment	Lifelong	Nuanced the dominant narrative through tension between optimism and barriers	“I travel with my mind.”
P9	69	Blind	Acquired (adulthood)	Emphasized isolation Vs. social participation, and role of associations	“Besides food, which is important, the social side is also important.”
P10	80	Blind	Acquired (progressive)	Reflections on fear of falling, companion dependence, and inaccessible environments	“You need a partner or the opportunity provided by friends who take you to go to these places.”
P11	76	Visual impairment	Acquired (recent)	Highlighted awareness gaps and expectations of limitation	“There is no knowledge that these things even exist — there’s a lack of communication.”
P12	61	Visual impairment	Congenital (progressive)	Strong material on engagement, exclusion, and independence.	“If they design the WC that way, I can use it independently”
P13	39	Visual impairment	Congenital (progressive)	Dignity, staff communication, sensory description, and the curb-cut effect	“By making experiential food and wine more experiential, you can move beyond the visual aspect and focus on other senses, making everything more special — even for those who can see”