



From Field to City

What a Trailer Full of Bulgarian Roses Taught Us About Product-Based Tourism

How a pop-up event combining fine food tasting with a virtual journey to the Rose Valley turns a local ingredient into a reason to travel

HRC Culinary Academy, Sofia, Bulgaria · Educational project co-funded by the EU (Erasmus+ VET)

Tags: #VocationalEducation #ProductBasedTourism #CulinaryTourism #HORECA #Erasmus #SensoryEducation
#LocalDevelopment #ExperientialLearning

At the beginning of a training session developed as part of our educational materials for the tourism sector, we ask participants one question:

“What is your region’s most valuable product — and does even a single tourist hear about it before setting off?”

Most often, the answer to the second part of the question is no. This is precisely the gap that product-based tourism aims to fill. And this is precisely what a small trailer, parked in central Sofia for three days in June, set out to do.



Co-funded by
the European Union

Co-Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Foundation for the Development of the Education System (FRSE). Neither the European Union nor FRSE can be held responsible for them.



The Bulgarian Rose Is More Than a Souvenir

For most tourists visiting Bulgaria, the country's best-known natural product — the Damask rose (*Rosa damascena*), which defines the identity of the Rose Valley around Kazanlak and accounts for approximately 70–85% of global rose oil production — means a bottle of rose water on a shop shelf or a pink label on a jar of jam. A souvenir. Something to put in a bag and take home.

The founders of Rosey's Mark, a Bulgarian family brand specialising in edible rose products, have spent years encouraging people to see it differently. Their position is simple: the Bulgarian rose is a contemporary culinary ingredient, part of a cultural heritage, and a world of sensory experiences. These three dimensions do not need to be separated. Nor do you need to take a coach to the Rose Valley to experience them.

What is needed is a better story, told in the right place.

This idea shaped the Bulgarian Rose Pop-Up Experience, held from 12 to 14 June in Sofia's City Garden, beside the Ivan Vazov National Theatre. The event was organised by Rosey's Mark and HRC Culinary Academy. Admission was free and open to everyone. Yet the significance of this initiative extends far beyond three sunny days in a park.

Three Days, Three Pillars, One Ingredient

The experience was built around three complementary pillars. Each engaged a different sense and revealed a different side of the rose.

Pillar 1: A Fine Food Tasting Menu

The first pillar was a tasting menu created especially for the occasion by the chef instructors at HRC Culinary Academy. This was not a restaurant menu, but a tool for learning through the senses. Each item featured a different Rosey's Mark product and demonstrated a different culinary use of the rose: a spinach and rocket salad with a rose jam dressing; muhallabia, a Middle Eastern milk pudding scented with rose water; rose-infused cream cheese on sourdough toast with sautéed apples and honey; sparkling rose lemonade; and a rose and dark chocolate praline.

Each dish came with a story card: who grew the roses, when the petals were harvested, where they came from, and why that particular combination of flavours had been created. A spoonful of rose jam in a salad dressing is no mere culinary trick. When you know the people who picked the petals and the valley they came from, it becomes the start of a conversation.

Pillar 2: A VR Journey to the Rose Valley

The second pillar was a virtual reality experience that no shop shelf could offer. During the harvest season, a professional crew filmed a 360° video in the Rose Valley around Kazanlak: rose fields at dawn, people harvesting, falling petals, and distillation in progress. Visitors put on headsets in the heart of Sofia and suddenly found themselves standing among those fields, surrounded by the sounds of the harvest. The film received its first public screening at the event.

When they took off their headsets, the rose products in the trailer were no longer just souvenirs. They had become a way to return.

This is how the economics of sensory product-based tourism work: someone who has stood in a virtual rose field and smelled real petals is not simply buying jam. They are buying a way to revisit that memory. Here, VR does more than entertain — it helps tell a story, turning the 200 kilometres between Sofia and the Rose Valley into a four-minute experience.



Co-funded by
the European Union



Pillar 3: The Human Story

The third pillar was a person: a host who connected taste and imagery with the place, the season, and the venture's mission. Rosey's Mark founders Rositsa Paunova-Dlagnekova and Ina Abadjiyeva put it plainly:

"We have always wanted to show that the Bulgarian rose can be more than a symbol of our country: it can also be part of contemporary gastronomy and culture. Through this event, we wanted to bring the magic of the Rose Valley into central Sofia and make it part of city life — to present a cultural heritage that can be experienced in a new way."

What Does This Mean for Vocational Education?

For those attending the event — HORECA professionals, vocational education teachers, and hospitality and tourism students — this is more than a good story. It is a living case study illustrating the issues they explore during training.

It demonstrates that the greatest value of a local ingredient lies not in its price per kilogram, but in its potential to create an experience that a guest cannot have anywhere else. It shows that technology — even something as accessible as a VR headset — can support product-based tourism as well as entertainment. And it shows that you do not need a purpose-built attraction, a historic monument, or a large budget to introduce the identity of a place to people who might otherwise never discover it.

In the "Future Skills in the Tourism Services Industry" project, we work with hospitality and tourism professionals on precisely this way of thinking: how to move from delivering services to designing experiences, and from selling a product to telling a story that inspires someone to return to where it began. Over three days in June, the Bulgarian Rose Pop-Up Experience demonstrated this in a format that can be adapted by any vocational education institution, regional producer, or HORECA business in Europe.

A Model That Can Be Replicated

For vocational education practitioners across the EU, a particularly interesting aspect is that the event's structure can be transferred to another location. The ingredient is Bulgarian. The model is universal.

The three pillars — a tasting built around a local ingredient, a technological element that brings the place of production to the visitor, and a host who connects these experiences — could be developed around lavender in Provence, saffron in La Mancha, aged cheese from a region with a protected designation of origin, or olive oil from the Mediterranean. The simplest version does not even require VR: a carefully prepared tasting, a short film about the producer, and someone who knows the story well can create a similar narrative at a fraction of the cost.

Success does not depend on the technology or the menu. What matters is one clearly chosen ingredient, an honest and specific account of how it is produced, and a deliberately planned farewell — the moment when a guest leaves with more than a bottle: above all, with a memory.

Product-based tourism does not begin with a place on a map. It begins with a story worth telling — and the decision to tell it in the right place, to the right people, and in the right way.

The Rose Valley is 200 kilometres from Sofia. After this event, it felt much closer to some of its visitors.

About the Project

The event was developed in cooperation with HRC Culinary Academy (Sofia, Bulgaria) as part of Package III — "Product-Based Tourism, Storytelling and Customer Experience Management", an educational programme co-funded by the EU



Co-funded by
the European Union



under Erasmus+. The partners in Package III are Fundacja Drogowskaz and the University of Applied Sciences in Nowy Targ (Poland). The curriculum, training session plan, and accompanying materials for Package III are available to vocational education institutions and adult education practitioners across the EU.

About Rosey's Mark: roseysmark.eu · roseysmark.com



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

Co-Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Foundation for the Development of the Education System (FRSE). Neither the European Union nor FRSE can be held responsible for them.

