

ETHNIC FOODSCAPE: DISTRIBUTION OF IMMIGRANTS' TRADITIONAL CUISINES IN RIGA

ETNISKĀ ĒDIENU AINAVA: IMIGRANTU TRADICIONĀLO ĒDINĀŠANAS IESTĀŽU IZVIETOJUMS RĪGĀ

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Abstract

In the contemporary world, the gastronomic diversity observed in cities is shaped not only by local trends and migration dynamics but also by broader global processes, as reflected in the range of dishes offered by catering establishments. These processes and their spatial expressions are examined within gastro-geographical research, a field closely linked to gastronomy and the conceptual framework of the foodscape. This study aims to explore the spatial distribution of ethnic catering establishments in the neighbourhoods of Riga and identify their affiliations with specific ethnic groups, as well as classifying these establishments and analysing their correlation with the declared places of residence of residents from the countries in question. The results included in this paper show that there is no correlation between ethnic catering establishments and the location of the relevant ethnic groups in the neighbourhoods of Riga. Nonetheless, a relatively significant correlation was observed with Central Asians on the one hand, and East/South Asians on the other.

Keywords: *gastro-geography, foodscape, urban environment, ethnic cuisines, Riga*

Introduction

These days, globalisation and migration processes can be observed in many parts of the world, manifesting, for example, in trends in catering establishments and the variety of dishes they offer (Lincicome & Bagley, 2023; Pilcher, 2023). Such processes and manifestations are examined in gastro-geographical studies (Kowalczyk & Derek, 2020; Derek, 2017; Choi et al., 2011; Stalmirska & Ali, 2025), which closely consider the subjects of gastronomy and foodscapes. Gastronomic and foodscape studies in urban

environments cover an extensive range of topics, including tourism (Zvirbule & Dobele, 2018; Koufadakis & Manola, 2020; Zvirbule et al., 2023), the popularity of particular cuisines (Choi et al., 2011; Gwiazdowska & Kowalczyk, 2020; Litavniece & Silicka, 2016), the location of catering establishments (Derek, 2020; Derek et al., 2020), changes in their location (Derek et al., 2020), etc. The urban environment is a particularly important context for conducting gastro-geographical research, as this is where dynamic, rapidly changing phenomena can be most clearly observed. This environment is particularly suitable for analysing topics influenced by migration, globalisation and other socio-spatial processes, thereby providing an appropriate empirical basis for studying such phenomena.

Gastro-geography refers to the geography of food preparation and eating habits, determined by climate, soil, crops, history, traditions, psychology, trade, and national character (Gillespie, 2011). Based on this definition of gastro-geography, it can be concluded that this sub-field of geography is closely related to research into aspects of physical, human, medical, and economic geography (Weightman, 2011; Branco & Mohr, 2020; Gristai, 2001; Koufadakis & Manola, 2020). Of course, gastro-geography consists not only of the concept of geography, but also of gastronomy. Gastronomy is, in essence, the science and art of selecting, preparing, serving and enjoying food (Rogers, 2024). In gastronomy, the emphasis is on the interconnection between food, culture and traditions, a development that has often been influenced by geographical location and available resources. Gastronomy is closely linked to the culture and heritage of a particular region. What local people eat – and when, where and how they eat – are visible expressions of culture (Klosse, 2019). Historically, gastronomy has offered an opportunity to learn about a particular culture through the enjoyment of food, mainly as a result of migration. In the present day, migration is an essential driver of the emergence of restaurants offering cuisine from other cultures. Still, other processes associated with globalisation, such as the popularisation of cuisines from certain cultures, also contribute to the establishment of such restaurants (Derek, 2017).

This paper examines cuisines of the following ethnic groups - Central Asia, East Asia and South Asia including Vietnamese. Riga was chosen as the study area because it is the city in Latvia with the highest concentration and diversity of ethnic restaurants. Nine neighbourhoods were selected for the study, in which ethnic restaurants were digitised for spatial analysis. There are two research questions to examine the topic:

- 1) What are the types and locations of traditional ethnic restaurants in the neighbourhoods of Riga?
- 2) What is the relationship between the location of traditional immigrant restaurants and the declared places of residence of representatives of specific ethnic groups in the neighbourhoods of Riga?

This study aims to identify the types and locations of traditional ethnic restaurants in the neighbourhoods of Riga, as well as to investigate the correlation between the locations of traditional immigrant restaurants and the declared places of residence of representatives of specific ethnic groups in the neighbourhoods of Riga.

Data and methods

The study used both empirical data obtained during field research and secondary data and materials from existing sources, including the databases of the Central Statistical Bureau.

The boundaries of selected neighbourhoods in Riga, obtained from Riga City Council's database of the neighbourhoods of Riga, and a base map of the streets of the world, available from ArcGIS Online, were used to map catering establishments. Data on the locations and types of catering establishments were collected during field surveys, and these were recorded in the Field Maps application on a smartphone, then exported and processed in ArcGIS Pro. Information available on Google Maps and Google Street View about the locations, names and operating status of catering establishments was also used. To find more detailed information, such as menus, the websites of ethnic catering establishments were consulted; if these did not exist, the offerings available from them on the Wolt and Bolt websites were consulted.

The types of catering establishments were identified by reviewing typologies in other works and examining their main criteria for classification. These criteria were summarised, and the following new ones were created:

- whether the establishment is a restaurant
- type of service
- range of food and beverages offered
- production and marketing characteristics.

The criteria mentioned above were developed to create a typology for classifying ethnic catering establishments. Due to these specific requirements, types of catering

establishments usually classified as canteens, pubs, clubs, pizzerias, etc., were not included, as they do not serve dishes characteristic of the selected cultural cuisines. The types that were distinguished are as follows: restaurant, café, bistro, grocery store, and sushi bar.

To perform calculations and determine the correlation between the place of catering and the declared places of residence of the studied population, data on the declared places of residence of the selected population in 2021 were used, which were obtained from the unpublished georeferenced data from the 2021 population census. In addition to the calculations, data obtained from the field study of catering establishments and their locations in the suburbs of Riga were used. Using these data, the Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated and further analysed.

Results

The results section presents the mapped, digitised eateries in the neighbourhoods of Riga, their typology, and the results of the Pearson correlation coefficient calculations.

Location and types of eateries

Field surveys were conducted, and information from Google Maps and Google Street View was collected between 18 January and 5 May 2025 to create a map showing all identified ethnic eateries (104) in nine districts of Riga: Vecpilsēta, Latgale, Centrs, Brasa, Grīziņkalns, Dārziems, Purvciems, Teika and Avoti (see Figure 1). Ethnic restaurants offering Uzbek, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Indian, Nepalese and Vietnamese cuisine were examined in detail. Of the cultures of the Central Asian region, only Uzbek eateries were identified, and no establishments offering traditional Mongolian cuisine were found in Riga.

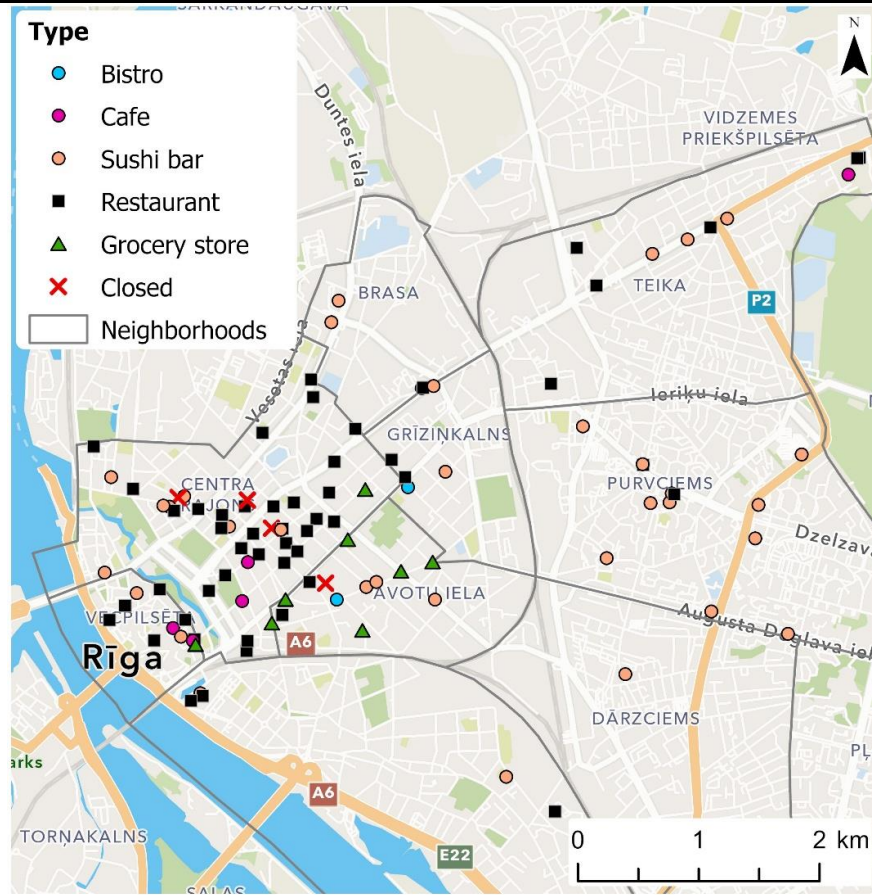


Figure 1. **Ethnic eateries in neighbourhoods of Riga** (authors' figure, based on Esri ArcGIS Online basemap and Riga City Council's neighbourhood border geospatial data)

In the central part of Riga, which includes the Vecpilsēta, Centrs, Avoti, and the north-western Latgale neighbourhood (see Figure 1), there is a high concentration of eateries. The high concentration and density of these establishments can be explained by their location in an area of importance to the city – close to major transport hubs, which encourage increased flows of residents and visitors to the city and longer stays in these areas. As one moves away from the city centre, the number and density of ethnic catering establishments decrease. Still, there is a noticeable tendency for them to be concentrated on the main streets throughout the city. This can be observed, for example, in the Avoti neighbourhood, where a large proportion of ethnic restaurants are located on Avotu Street. In the Teika neighbourhood, this can be observed on Brīvības Gatve; in Purvciems, on Gunāra Astras Street and Dzelzavas Street; in the NE part of the Centrs; and in Brasa, on Krišjāņa Valdemāra Street. Being located on a street that serves as a central transport corridor in a particular neighbourhood and in Riga as a whole offers higher potential for customer traffic than streets of secondary importance, which

users may not use as frequently to reach other essential destinations in the neighbourhood or the city.

An interesting observation relates to the location of grocery stores, which are predominantly concentrated in the Avoti neighbourhood and its surroundings. Five of the eight specialised grocery stores are located in the Avoti neighbourhood, and two others are very close to it. The only grocery store located further away is in the Vecpilsēta neighbourhood, although this is also relatively close to Avoti on the scale used. Outside the aforementioned central area and the surrounding neighbourhoods, the variety of catering establishments decreases, with restaurants and sushi bars predominating; there is also one café in Teika. Sushi bars are the only type found in all neighbourhoods, followed by restaurants, which are also found in most neighbourhoods.

During the survey, catering establishments that were not in operation were also recorded. The closed ethnic catering establishments were concentrated in specific areas, namely the central part of the city centre and the western part of Avoti. Three of the four catering establishments of this description are located on or in the immediate vicinity of the interconnected thorough Ģertrūdes Street and Baznīcas Street, forming an almost linear section. The fourth, currently closed establishment is situated nearby on Antonijas Street.

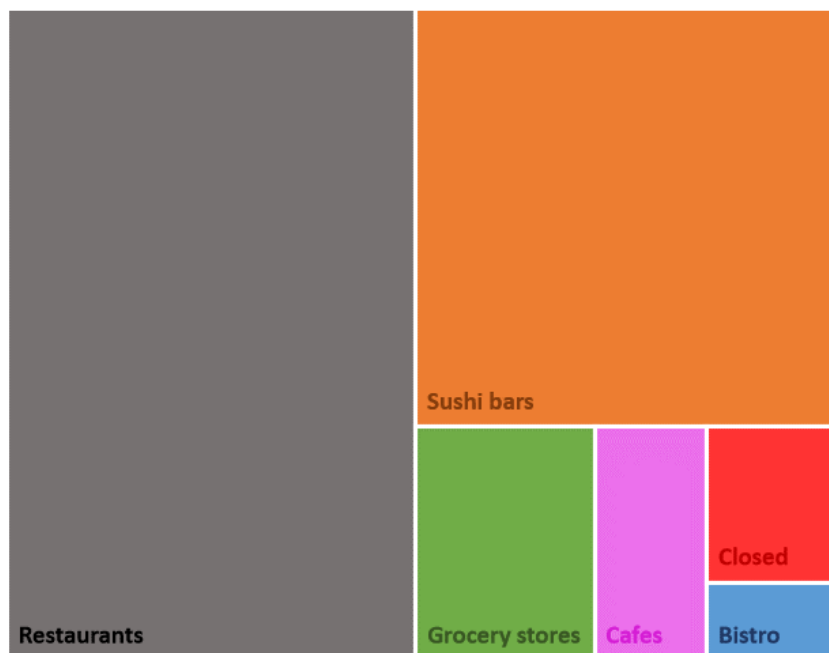


Figure 2. Ethnic eatery types and their percentage distribution (n=104) (authors' figure)

The most common type of ethnic eatery is the restaurant, with 51 establishments, or 49% of the total (see Figure 2). The second-largest category, by number, is sushi bars, with 34 establishments (33% of the total), accounting for one third of all catering establishments. The remaining categories (eight grocery stores and five cafés) do not exceed 10% of the total. The least common type is the bistro; only two establishments, or 2% of the total, were identified as such. In addition to the identified types of catering establishments, four establishments were also found that are currently closed, but where visual and digital evidence of their previous activities remains. These include the names and opening hours of the establishments visible in the windows, as well as entries on Google Maps with preserved user reviews. Two of these establishments, Tavs Banh Mi and Pendas Virtuve, were recorded during the first field survey as showing signs of activity, but when the survey was repeated, it was observed that the establishments were closed. It is possible that the location of these establishments in the area with the highest concentration of ethnic eateries limited their competitiveness, as they were probably unable to compete effectively with other similar eateries in the area.

Calculating correlation using the Pearson coefficient

The Pearson correlation coefficient was used to calculate the correlation, and the analysis was performed in OriginPro 2025 10.2. To perform the calculations in the aforementioned programme, the information available in ArcGIS Pro about eateries and declared places of residence was exported to Microsoft Excel and was then entered into OriginPro 2025 10.2.

Table 1. Correlation between people's declared places of residence and the location of ethnic eateries in neighbourhoods (authors' calculations)

Eateries	Pearson correlation coefficient			p-value
	All nationalities	Central Asia	East/South Asia	
	0.12	0.084	0.11	

The correlation between the declared places of residence of the representatives of all of the nationalities surveyed; of Central Asians and East/South Asians as separate groups; and the locations of catering establishments recorded in field work was

calculated (see Table 1). Based on the results, all calculated Pearson correlation coefficients indicate a positive, but very weak, correlation. Since all values are less than 0.3, they do not meet the threshold for a statistically significant or noteworthy correlation. The lowest correlation coefficient value is for the Central Asian ethnic group, at 0.084; it's slightly higher for the East/South Asian ethnic group, at 0.11; and the highest for all ethnic groups combined, at 0.12. The p-value was also obtained using OriginPro 2025 10.2. The p-value is <0.05, indicating a statistically significant possibility that the data did not arise by chance.

Table 2. Correlation between declared places of residence of Central Asian, East Asian, and South Asian residents in neighbourhoods (authors' calculations)

Central Asia	Pearson correlation coefficient	p-value
	East/South Asia	
	0.29	<0.05

The correlation between the declared places of residence of Central Asian and East/South Asian people was also calculated (see Table 2). After calculating Pearson's correlation coefficient, a value of 0.29 was obtained, indicating a weak positive correlation. Based on this result, it can be concluded that Central Asian and East/South Asian people choose to live in similar areas in Riga. In this calculation, as in the previous one, the p-value is <0.05, which indicates a statistically significant possibility that the data did not arise by chance.

The correlation analysis between the spatial distribution of ethnic restaurants and the settlement patterns of corresponding immigrant groups reveals generally weak-to-moderate relationships. This suggests that the location of ethnic eateries in Riga is not solely determined by the residential concentrations of immigrants, but is also influenced by broader urban dynamics, including proximity to commercial corridors, transport hubs, and areas with high pedestrian traffic. The weak correlations indicate that many ethnic restaurants cater to a diverse, cosmopolitan clientele rather than exclusively serving ethnic communities, reflecting globalised consumption patterns. Additionally, socio-economic factors such as rent costs, accessibility, and business opportunities likely shape choices of restaurant location, sometimes outweighing residential proximity. These findings align with gastro-geographical research in other European

cities, which highlights that foodscape patterns emerge from a combination of cultural, economic and urban structural factors, rather than simply from demographic clustering. Thus, while immigrant communities contribute to the diversity of the foodscape, restaurant locations reflect a complex interplay of market-driven and cultural considerations.

Conclusion

The spatial distribution of ethnic catering establishments in Riga, showing a marked concentration in the central areas – Vecpilsēta, Centrs, Avoti, and Latgales NW aligns with existing gastro-geographical research on urban centres. This phenomenon is often attributed to the high accessibility, infrastructure for pedestrians, and economic vitality of core city districts (Derek, 2020; Derek et al., 2020). The clustering of these businesses suggests an orientation toward capturing the flows of both residents and tourists, a pattern consistent with the role of gastronomy in tourism and local economic development (Zvirbule & Dobele, 2018; Koufadakis & Manola, 2020). The positioning of eateries on major transport corridors, such as Avotu Street or Brīvības Gatve, further reinforces this strategy, maximising visibility and the potential customer base within the wider urban foodscape.

The dominance of restaurants (49%) and sushi bars (33%) among the identified establishments reflects the powerful influence of globalisation processes on local culinary scenes (Lincicome & Bagley, 2023; Pilcher, 2023). Sushi bars, found across all surveyed neighbourhoods, are a prime example of a global culinary trend that transcends specific ethnic migration patterns. This trend highlights how gastronomy is shaped not only by the local presence of immigrant communities but also by the worldwide popularisation of specific cuisines, a key element of the evolving foodscape (Derek, 2017). Conversely, the lower prevalence of specialised types, such as grocery stores, suggests that these establishments, which primarily serve as cultural resources for specific ethnic groups, may follow a different location logic.

Crucially, the weak positive correlation observed between the locations of ethnic eateries and the declared places of residence of the associated ethnic groups indicates a lack of strong spatial association between ethnic residential patterns and commercial food provision. This finding contradicts the traditional model, in which ethnic businesses often cluster within residential enclaves to serve their immediate

communities. Instead, Riga's ethnic food businesses appear to function more as nodes of cultural globalisation and consumption targeted at the broader, multi-ethnic urban population and visitors, rather than as purely service-oriented businesses for specific residential groups. This separation between ethnic residence and ethnic commerce is a significant insight into the dynamic socio-spatial processes of a city's food culture.

Finally, the study provides a basis for viewing Riga's culinary diversity through the lens of gastro-geography, with the recognition that gastronomic choices are intrinsically linked to culture, history and geographical location (Gillespie, 2011; Klosse, 2019). The weak positive correlation between Central Asian and East/South Asian residential locations suggests a shared preference for specific residential characteristics, even if this preference does not strictly dictate the placement of their associated food businesses.

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Kopsavilkums

Mūsdienās gastronomiskā daudzveidība pilsētās tiek ietekmēta ne tikai no vietējām tendencēm un migrācijas ietekmes, bet arī no globālajiem procesiem, kas var izpausties, kā piedāvātā ēdienu daudzveidība ēdināšanas iestādēs. Šādus procesus un to izpausmes apskata gastroģeogrāfiskajos pētījumos (Kowalczyk, Derek 2020; Derek 2017; Choi et al. 2011; Stalmirska, Ali 2025), kuri ir cieši saistīti ar gastronomiju un ēdienu ainavas jēdzienu. Pētnieciskais darbs izstrādāts ar mērķi izpētīt etnisko ēdināšanas iestāžu telpisko izvietojumu Rīgas apkaimēs, identificēt to piederību noteiktām etniskajām grupām, klasificēt ēdināšanas vietu tipus, kā arī analizēt to korelāciju ar attiecīgo tautību iedzīvotāju deklarētajām dzīvesvietām pilsētas teritorijā. Darba ietvaros netika konstatēta korelācija starp etniskajām ēdināšanas iestādēm un etnisko grupu izvietojumu Rīgas apkaimēs, bet tika novērota salīdzinoši nozīmīga korelācija starp Vidusāzijas un Austrumāzijas-Dienvidāzijas imigrantu deklarētajām dzīvesvietām.

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