

THE NUTRITIONAL QUALITY OF HOTEL BREAKFASTS IN BALNEÁRIO CAMBORIÚ/SC: AN ANALYSIS OF THE FOODS OFFERED

A QUALIDADE NUTRICIONAL DO CAFÉ DA MANHÃ NA HOTELARIA DE BALNEÁRIO CAMBORIÚ/SC:
UMA ANÁLISE DOS ALIMENTOS OFERTADOS

LA CALIDAD NUTRICIONAL DEL DESAYUNO EN LA HOTELERÍA DE BALNEÁRIO CAMBORIÚ/SC: UN
ANÁLISIS DE LOS ALIMENTOS OFRECIDOS

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ABSTRACT:

Purpose – This study analyzes the nutritional quality of foods and beverages offered in hotel breakfast buffets in Balneário Camboriú/SC, with emphasis on the presence of ultra-processed foods and the availability of items intended for diets with dietary restrictions.

Design/methodology/approach – This case study adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach, based on systematic visual observation of the buffets and semi-structured interviews with professionals responsible for the breakfast service in the selected hotels. The hotels were selected through the TripAdvisor® platform.

Findings – The results indicate a predominance of ultra-processed foods, limited availability of fresh or minimally processed items, and very few gluten-free, lactose-free, or sugar-free options. Additional weaknesses were identified regarding food labeling and the absence of allergen information.

Practical implications – The findings reinforce the need to revise hotel breakfast menus to promote healthier and more inclusive food practices.

Originality/value – This study contributes to advancing discussions on nutritional quality in the hospitality sector and on food inclusion for guests with dietary restrictions.

Research limitations – The study was conducted in hotels located in a single Brazilian tourist destination, limiting the generalizability of the results.

Keywords: Hospitality; Tourism; Breakfast; Nutritional quality; Dietary restrictions.

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RESUMO:

Objetivo – Este estudo analisa a qualidade nutricional dos alimentos e bebidas ofertados nos buffets de café da manhã da hotelaria de Balneário Camboriú/SC, com ênfase na presença de alimentos ultraprocessados e na disponibilidade de itens destinados a dietas com restrições alimentares.

Desenho/metodologia/abordagem – Trata-se de um estudo de caso, de abordagem qualitativa e caráter descritivo, baseado em observação visual sistemática dos buffets e entrevistas semiestruturadas com profissionais envolvidos no serviço de café da manhã dos hotéis selecionados. A seleção dos hotéis foi realizada por meio da plataforma TripAdvisor®.

Resultados – Os resultados apontam predominância de alimentos ultraprocessados, baixa presença de alimentos in natura ou minimamente processados e limitada oferta de preparações sem glúten, sem lactose ou sem adição de açúcares. Também foram identificadas fragilidades relacionadas à sinalização dos alimentos e à ausência de informações sobre ingredientes alergênicos.

Implicações práticas – Os achados reforçam a necessidade de revisão nutricional dos cardápios ofertados na hotelaria, incentivando práticas alimentares mais saudáveis e inclusivas.

Originalidade/valor – O estudo contribui para ampliar as discussões sobre qualidade nutricional no contexto da hotelaria e sobre a inclusão alimentar de hóspedes com restrições alimentares.

Limitações da pesquisa – A pesquisa foi realizada em hotéis localizados em um único destino turístico brasileiro, limitando a generalização dos resultados.

Palavras-chave: Hotelaria; Turismo; Café da manhã; Qualidade nutricional; Restrições alimentares.

RESUMEN:

Objetivo: Este estudio analiza la calidad nutricional de los alimentos y bebidas ofrecidos en los bufets de desayuno de los hoteles de Balneário Camboriú, estado de Santa Catarina, con énfasis en la presencia de alimentos ultraprocessados y en la disponibilidad de productos destinados a dietas con restricciones alimentarias.

Diseño/metodología/enfoque: Se trata de un estudio de caso, de enfoque cualitativo y carácter descriptivo, basado en la observación visual sistemática de los bufets y en entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas a profesionales involucrados en el servicio de desayuno de los hoteles seleccionados. La selección de los hoteles se realizó a través de la plataforma TripAdvisor®.

Resultados: Los resultados apuntan a un predominio de alimentos ultraprocessados, una escasa presencia de alimentos frescos o mínimamente procesados y una oferta limitada de preparaciones sin gluten, sin lactosa o sin azúcares añadidos. También se identificaron deficiencias relacionadas con el etiquetado de los alimentos y la ausencia de información sobre ingredientes alergênicos.

Implicaciones prácticas: Los hallazgos refuerzan la necesidad de una revisión nutricional de los menús ofrecidos en el sector hotelero, fomentando prácticas alimentarias más saludables e inclusivas.

Originalidad/valor: El estudio contribuye a ampliar los debates sobre la calidad nutricional en el contexto de la hotelería y sobre la inclusión alimentaria de los huéspedes con restricciones alimentarias.

Limitaciones de la investigación: La investigación se llevó a cabo en hoteles ubicados en un único destino turístico brasileño, lo que limita la generalización de los resultados.

Palabras clave: Hotelería; turismo; desayuno; calidad nutricional; restricciones alimentarias.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become established as an activity of strategic importance for the economic and social development of several localities, promoting job creation, income circulation, cultural appreciation, and improvements in urban infrastructure (Sthapit, 2017a).

In this context, the hotel industry stands out as a central component of tourism, responsible not only for providing guests not only with accommodation but also for delivering experiences that enhance guest's comfort, safety, and well-being. Hospitality, therefore, extends beyond the mere act of welcoming and encompasses a set of practices aimed at receiving visitors with genuine attention and care, creating connections that foster guest loyalty (Oliveira & Sohn, 2022; Tricárico et al., 2018; Sthapit, 2018; Singh et al., 2023).

Among the services offered by lodging establishments, breakfast holds a particularly prominent role. Often regarded as a "complimentary service," its quality directly shapes guests' perceptions of the establishment and may influence their satisfaction, loyalty, and intention to return (Leite-Pereira et al., 2022). Therefore, the role of this meal is not merely nutritional; it also assumes symbolic, cultural, and emotional dimensions, introducing tourists to local ingredients, traditional recipes, and sensory experiences (Kokkranikal & Carabelli, 2021).

The growing interest in gastronomic tourism and the increasing awareness of healthy eating have led consumers to adopt a more discerning attitude toward the food options available during hotel stays. As the first meal of the day, breakfast plays an important role in providing energy and nutrients for daily activities and can contribute to promoting guests' health and well-being (Trancoso et al., 2010; Brasil, 2014).

Accordingly, it is important that lodging establishments offer breakfast with adequate nutritional quality, including both healthy preparations and options for guests with dietary restrictions, such as allergies, intolerances, chronic conditions, or specific dietary preferences (Trancoso et al., 2010).

However, although the literature recognizes the importance of breakfast in shaping the guest experience and influencing the competitiveness of lodging establishments, studies that comprehensively analyze the nutritional quality of this meal within the Brazilian hotel industry are limited, particularly when it comes to the composition of the foods offered and the availability of suitable alternatives for different dietary restrictions.

There is also a gap in the articulation between nutritional aspects and the broader dimension of hospitality, including elements such as the inclusion of foods suitable for restricted diets and the information provided to guests about food ingredients. It is therefore relevant to deepen the understanding of how breakfast services have been structured, not only as a factor of competitive advantage but also as a component of health promotion and the tourism experience.

In this context, it is argued that the composition of breakfast buffets may, in some cases, prioritize items with greater operational practicality and broad acceptance – mainly ultra-processed foods – which raises concerns about the nutritional balance of the preparations offered and their alignment with healthy eating recommendations (Cunha et al., 2022; Brasil, 2014). Likewise, the growing demand for diets involving certain restrictions, such as gluten, lactose or other components, highlights the need for services that are better prepared to accommodate guests' dietary needs, both in terms of food offerings and consumption safety (Välikangas, 2015).

Considering the importance of breakfast services in the hotel industry, the city of Balneário Camboriú, Santa Catarina, Brazil, represents a strategic setting for this study. As one of the leading tourist destinations in southern Brazil, the city maintains a robust hotel network and a high volume of visitors throughout the year (Brasil, 2022; Vieira, 2023). Evaluating the breakfast services offered by local hotels allows for an evaluation of both the quality of the foods offered and their alignment with the principles of hospitality and the recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population (Brasil, 2014).

In this context, this article aims to analyze the nutritional quality of the foods and beverages served in hotel breakfast buffets in Balneário Camboriú, with emphasis on the presence of ultra-processed foods and the availability of options for guests with dietary restrictions. From this perspective, the study seeks to reflect on the role of the hotel industry in promoting healthy and inclusive eating practices consistent with contemporary hospitality.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Hospitality and food services in the tourism context

Tourism is widely recognized as a dynamic socioeconomic activity capable of fostering regional development by integrating sectors such as accommodation, food services, and entertainment (Lickorish & Jenkins, 2000). According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2001), tourism encompasses all activities undertaken by individuals during temporary travel outside their usual place of residence and relies heavily on services that ensure comfort, hospitality, and well-being.

In this scenario, lodging establishments and food services emerge as essential components of the tourism experience. Hospitality extends beyond the mere provision of services, incorporating practices that promote guest well-being and satisfaction. Recent studies highlight the importance of attributes such as cordiality, attention to individual needs, and the creation of welcoming environments in hotel restaurants, all of which contribute to memorable gastronomic experiences aligned with the principles of social sustainability (Gama et al., 2024).

The intersection between gastronomy and tourism has gained academic prominence, highlighting the role of food as a central element of the tourism experience. Research shows that valuing local ingredients and the offering of dishes that reflect regional culture not only enriches tourists' experiences but also strengthens the identity of the destination and supports the development of local communities (Martins et al., 2024).

The quality of meals offered, particularly breakfast buffets, plays a significant role in shaping a hotel's image. The use of local ingredients and the promotion of healthy eating practices can enhance the authenticity of the tourism experience and respond to the growing demand for sustainability and well-being (Leite-Pereira et al., 2022; Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016).

Nutritional quality and dietary restrictions

The current health landscape demands increased attention to health promotion and the prevention of chronic non-communicable diseases, with the nutritional quality of food representing a key strategy in this effort. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that countries develop national dietary guidelines, and in Brazil this recommendation is implemented through the Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population (DGBP), an instrument internationally recognized for its innovative approach (Souza & Brito, 2021).

The DGBP classifies foods into five categories, according to the degree of processing: fresh foods, minimally processed foods, processed foods, ultra-processed foods, and culinary ingredients (Brasil, 2014). This framework is a central reference for evaluating nutritional quality, as it considers not only the nutrient composition of foods but also the health implications of food processing. The guidelines recommend that diets be based primarily on fresh or minimally processed foods, with limited consumption of processed foods and avoidance of ultra-processed foods. This approach is intended to ensure nutritional security and prevent diet-related diseases.

Philippi (2014a) defines healthy eating as the balanced consumption of foods from different food groups while respecting individual, emotional, social, and cultural aspects, and ensuring pleasure in eating. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO, 2019) reinforces that a balanced diet contributes to disease prevention and lifelong well-being. Thus, nutritional quality can be understood as a central element of health promotion, encompassing both the variety of foods consumed and their nutritional characteristics and degree of processing.

Simultaneously, dietary restrictions have become increasingly prevalent, whether due to clinical conditions such as allergies and intolerances, or lifestyle-related dietary choices (McGuire et al., 2001). Common examples include gluten-free diets (associated with celiac disease), lactose-free diets (associated with lactose intolerance), vegetarian and vegan diets, diets with reduced salt or sugar (associated with high blood pressure or diabetes), and diets adapted for food allergies (Dyett et al., 2013; Fasano & Catassi, 2012; Ortolani & Pastorello, 2006).

Within the context, gluten cross-contamination represents a significant challenge for food services, especially in environments that handle both gluten-containing and gluten-free ingredients. Contamination may occur through shared surfaces, utensils, and equipment, requiring strict food handling protocols. Although standardized operational procedures help mitigate this risk, ensuring safety for individuals with celiac disease requires constant vigilance and, in many cases, more restrictive control measures within the production environment (Damasceno et al., 2024; Vargas et al., 2024).

Breakfast, as one of the main meals of the day, plays a strategic role from both nutritional and psychological perspectives. As the first meal after overnight fasting, it initiates metabolic activity and provides essential energy and nutrients. The DGBP recommends that breakfast account for around 25% of the total daily energy intake, underscoring its importance in the daily diet. Besides caloric contribution, nutrient quality should also be considered, as the composition of this meal can affect physical and mental performance throughout the day (Brasil, 2014; Philippi, 2014a).

Trancoso et al. (2010), in their review of the scientific literature on the subject, report that regular breakfast consumption is associated with benefits such as reduced risk of overweight and obesity and improved cognitive performance. These effects are enhanced when the meal includes a balanced combination of food groups, ensuring adequate intake of essential nutrients. This evidence reinforces the need for lodging establishments to plan breakfast not only as an aspect of hospitality, but also with attention to nutritional criteria.

Breakfast services in the hotel industry

Given the importance of breakfast for human health, it is essential to consider the competitive and commercial implications of this meal within the hotel sector (Trancoso et al., 2010; Leite-Pereira et al., 2020). The following studies examine breakfast services offered by hotels.

Leite-Pereira et al. (2020) analyzed online comments on TripAdvisor to assess the importance attributed to breakfast when choosing a hotel, among customers of European hotels. The study confirmed that breakfast is frequently mentioned in online reviews, appearing in 66% of the comments analyzed. It also refuted the hypothesis that travel motivations influence the relevance attributed to breakfast, as there were no significant differences between business/solo travelers and families/couples in breakfast-related comments.

In a subsequent study, Leite-Pereira et al. (2022) examined the role of breakfast in hotel selection, satisfaction, and intention to return. The findings indicate breakfast influences both the choice of the establishment and the guest experience during the stay. Information about breakfast available on online platforms also affects hotel selection decisions. Furthermore, satisfaction with breakfast is associated with intention to return, highlighting its relevance in the guest experience and competitive performance.

Similarly, Sthapit (2018), in a study on antecedents of memorable hotel experiences, identified breakfast as a contributing factor to memorable hotel stays, suggesting its potential as an element of competitive advantage within the hotel industry. The quality and variety of breakfast offerings can influence guests' overall perception of hotel services, directly affecting satisfaction.

Singh et al. (2023) investigated critical factors affecting online hotel ratings by comparing religious and commercial destinations in Saudi Arabia, using reviews on Booking.com. Among the hypotheses tested, the study confirmed that breakfast positively influences guest satisfaction, alongside other variables.

Nowacki and Niezgoda (2023) analyzed all TripAdvisor reviews from hotels in Warsaw and identified that breakfast is one of the elements most strongly associated with positive and memorable hotel experiences. Their findings highlight breakfast as a component that shapes guests' overall perception of service quality, reinforcing its strategic relevance within the tourism experience. Rather than serving merely an operational function, breakfast assumes an active role in guest satisfaction and in the construction of memorable experiences.

Leite-Pereira et al. (2019) conducted a systematic literature review to investigate the criteria considered when choosing a hotel, and to determine the relevance of breakfast for guests. Among the twenty-five analyzed articles, only two referred to breakfast, indicating that although breakfast is frequently mentioned on booking platforms, the topic remains underexplored in tourism research. The authors therefore emphasize the need for further studies on the importance of breakfast in guests' diets.

Almohanna and Serrano (2014) investigated the nutritional quality of hotel breakfasts and found that, in many cases, nutritional aspects are largely overlooked in the hotel sector. This is particularly concerning considering the authors' observation that for frequent travelers, breakfast may be a significant part of their overall diet.

Cunha et al. (2022) evaluated the composition and nutritional quality of breakfast buffets in a hotel chain in southern Brazil and found that most of the items offered were ultra-processed. This finding reinforces the need for attention to the quality of foods offered, especially in a context where healthy eating has become increasingly relevant to consumer decision-making.

These findings point to the need for adjustments in breakfast services so that function not only as a tool for competitive advantage, but also as a meaningful contribution to guests' health. Improvements may include incorporating more nutritious options such as fresh fruits, low-fat dairy products, whole grains, lean protein sources, and vegetables (Almohanna & Serrano, 2014; Trancoso et al., 2010).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach, using a case study design to provide an in depth understanding of breakfast services offered by hotels in Balneário Camboriú, Santa Catarina, Brazil. This method was selected because it enables a contextualized analysis of contemporary phenomena within their real world setting, as proposed by Yin (2015), and is particularly suitable for examining food practices and nutritional aspects across different hotel profiles. The study followed the stages outlined by Yin (2015), including planning, preparation of data collection instruments, and fieldwork. Additionally, a quantitative survey was conducted solely to provide a clearer visualization of the composition of breakfast items.

To contextualize the research setting, bibliographic research, visual observation, and interviews with professionals responsible for breakfast services in the selected hotels were conducted. Data collection relied on two complementary instruments: a semi structured interview guide inspired by Leite Pereira et al. (2020, 2022), and a visual observation guide for breakfast buffets developed based on the Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population (Brasil, 2014) and relevant literature (Philippi, 2014a; Philippi, 2014b; Davies, 2001). These instruments are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

As part of the preparation stage, a pre test of the instruments was conducted in a hotel not included in the final sample to assess the clarity and applicability of both the interview and observation guides. Based on this procedure, adjustments were made to question wording and item organization to ensure greater participant comprehension and more accurate data collection.

Table 1. Interview guide

Question
1 – What is your role/position at the hotel?
2 – In your opinion, is breakfast a determining factor for a guest when choosing a hotel?
3 – In your opinion, does breakfast generate guest satisfaction?
4 – In your opinion, does breakfast generate intention to return when the guest is satisfied?
5 – Are aspects related to the nutritional quality of the foods served at breakfast taken into consideration?
6 – Does the hotel provide foods for special diets that individuals need to restrict for health reasons? If yes, for which types of diets: vegan; vegetarian; gluten-free; lactose-free; dairy-free; sugar-free; low sodium/salt. Other diets, which ones?
7 – Does the hotel provide identification of food composition? Especially for foods containing allergenic ingredients in their composition?
8 – What protocol is adopted when, during reservation or check-in, a guest informs the hotel that they have a dietary restriction due to health reasons?
9 – Would you like to add any further comments?

Source: Prepared by the author.

Table 2. Visual observation guide for breakfast buffets

Item to be observed
1 – Is food identification provided?
2 – Is allergen ingredient identification provided?
3 – Number of breakfast preparations (including foods and beverages, excluding culinary ingredients)
4 – Number of culinary ingredients available (such as sugar, salt, oils, and fats)
5 – Regarding culinary ingredients, are options for special diets available? (examples: brown sugar or demerara sugar, diet sweeteners [which type?], low-sodium salt, among other options), describe
Bakery products
6 – Number of preparations
7 – Number of whole-grain preparations
8 – Number of gluten-free preparations, describe
9 – Number of lactose-free preparations, describe
Confectionery products
10 – Number of preparations
11 – Number of frosted/filled cakes
12 – Number of simple cakes (without filling or frosting, only the cake batter)
13 – Number of cakes made with whole grains
14 – Number of cakes prepared without added sugars (including brown sugar, demerara sugar, honey, or molasses)
15 – Number of cookies/biscuits
16 – Number of cookies/biscuits made with whole grains
17 – Number of cookies/biscuits prepared without added sugars
18 – Number of gluten-free preparations, describe
19 – Number of lactose-free preparations, describe
Fruits
20 – Number of fresh fruit options
21 – Number of minimally processed options
22 – Number of preparations with added sugar
Dairy products and milk derivatives
23 – Number of preparations
24 – Number of lactose-free preparations, describe
25 – Is yogurt or a dairy beverage served? Describe
Cereals
26 – Number of preparations
27 – Number of high-sugar preparations
28 – Number of granolas
29 – Is oatmeal served? Describe
30 – Number of other grains or dried fruits, describe
31 – Number of gluten-free preparations, describe
Proteins
32 – Number of preparations
33 – Describe the options
34 – Number of options prepared with processed meats, describe
35 – Are eggs prepared with the addition of dairy products?
Beverages
36 – Number of preparations
37 – Number of milk-based preparations
38 – Number of high-sugar preparations
39 – Number of natural fruit juices without added sugars
Bread accompaniments
40 – Number of preparations
41 – Number of cheeses
42 – Number of processed meats
43 – Number of sugar-based preparations (such as jams and sweets)
44 – Number of jams without added sugars
45 – Number of fat-based preparations (such as margarine and butter)
46 – Number of lactose-free preparations, describe
Other categories
47 – Is any regional preparation served? Describe
48 – If regional preparations are available, are they identified as regional?
49 – Were items observed beyond those described above? Describe

Source: prepared by the author (2025).

At the selection of Balneário Camboriú as the study location was based on methodological criteria that considered the density and diversity of its hotel network, as well as its representativeness within national tourism. The municipality presents structural and operational characteristics that facilitate the investigation of services offered by lodging establishments, particularly food services. This configuration allows the findings to contribute to reflections applicable to other tourist destinations with similar profiles (Brasil, 2022; Vieira, 2023).

To define the sample of participating hotels, the TripAdvisor® platform was used due to its broad reach, diversity of user profiles, and open access to reviews. Unlike platforms such as Booking®, which restrict comments to users who booked through the platform, TripAdvisor aggregates experiences from multiple booking channels, offering a broader and more representative view of hotel performance. The platform also maintains an active community of travelers who provide detailed evaluations of various aspects of hotel services, from customer service to amenities (Sthapit, 2017b).

The search was conducted by selecting the region of Balneário Camboriú and applying the filters “type of accommodation: hotels and specialty hotels” and “service: breakfast included,” with ranking based on user ratings. Sponsored establishments and those not identifying as hotels (such as inns and motels) were excluded.

A total of 49 hotels met the search filters. Among them, none were classified as 1 star hotels; 2% were classified as 2 star, 66% as 3 star, 29% as 4 star, and 2% as 5 star. Additionally, seven hotels did not present any stated category. It is important to note that the star ratings on the platform are self declared, meaning each establishment assigns its own classification. There is no technical committee responsible for evaluating or validating these categories based on standardized criteria.

Initially, 11 hotels were selected according to the criteria defined on TripAdvisor. However, one establishment had ceased operations and two did not authorize participation in the study. To maintain sample representativeness, another hotel meeting the established criteria was included, resulting in a final sample of nine participating hotels. Table 3 presents the distribution of the selected hotels according to category and interviewee profile. Data collection took place between June and July 2024.

Table 3. Selection of hotels

Hotel	TripAdvisor Platform Rating	Star Category (Self-Declared)	Interviewed Professional
1	4,0	3 stars	Supervisor
2	4,5	3 stars	Operational Assistant
3	4,5	3 stars	Kitchen Supervisor
4	4,0	4 stars	Food and Beverage Manager
5	4,5	5 stars	Head Chef
6	4,5	4 stars	Head Chef
7	4,0	4 stars	Front Desk Manager
8	5,0	3 stars	General Manager
9	4,5	3 stars	Unable to provide precise information

Source: prepared by the author (2025).

Contact with the hotels was established via telephone, e mail, and WhatsApp, and visits were scheduled according to staff availability. The interviews were conducted in the breakfast dining areas, followed by the systematized visual observation of the buffets. On average, each visit lasted approximately 1 hour and 20 minutes, including both the interview and the application of the observation guide.

The qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using Bardin's (2011) content analysis method and organized into thematic categories based on the reading and interpretation of the responses. The data derived from the visual observation of the buffets were systematized in spreadsheets and analyzed descriptively, enabling the identification of patterns in food composition. The analysis was conducted in an integrated manner, triangulating information from the interviews, the visual observations, and the researcher's technical assessment, with the aim of increasing the reliability and consistency of the results.

All interviews were conducted individually, with participants providing consent through the Free and Informed Consent Form. Visual observation was carried out discreetly, without interfering with the establishments' routines. The data were organized in Excel® spreadsheets.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interview results

Interviews were conducted with nine employees, including operational staff and managers, enabling a comprehensive understanding of perceptions regarding breakfast services. All interviewees considered breakfast an essential service capable of influencing hotel selection, promoting satisfaction, and generating intention to return. Regarding menu composition, 89% stated that they considered nutritional aspects when defining the foods offered. However, most associated nutritional quality primarily with the availability of gluten free or lactose free items, which does not necessarily correspond to healthy eating from a technical and nutritional standpoint. This association suggests a limited understanding of concepts related to dietary restrictions, possibly due to the absence of specialized training.

All interviewees reported that their hotels offered items for gluten free, lactose free, and dairy free diets. However, only 67% reported offering vegan and vegetarian options. Sugar free or low sodium foods were available in even smaller proportions and were often provided only upon prior request. Some interviewees mentioned positive practices, such as personalized adaptations, although these actions were not frequent.

Regarding food identification in the buffet, only 55% of interviewees reported the use of labels with product names, and none reported the presence of allergen information. Only two hotels reported adopting specific protocols for serving guests with dietary restrictions, revealing significant gaps in this area. The absence of nutritionists was also notable, with only one of the nine hotels reporting the presence of such a professional on staff.

The data also reveal substantial discrepancies in staff knowledge about special diets. Only two respondents demonstrated a clearer understanding of cross contamination risks, reporting the use of sealed packaging or dedicated utensils for gluten free foods—practices essential for ensuring safety for individuals with celiac disease.

In contrast, the account provided by one employee illustrates limitations in staff training and weaknesses in the technical background of food service professionals. The interviewee struggled to describe their own role and incorrectly stated that a cake made without milk would automatically be gluten free. Such misunderstandings may place guests' health at risk, particularly those with specific dietary needs, and highlight the need for improved technical training among food service staff.

The final interview question invited participants to add any additional comments. One interviewee highlighted an innovative practice implemented at their hotel: the use of visual devices providing information about the functional properties of foods. This initiative demonstrates the educational potential of the buffet and reflects a concern with health promotion. Interviewees also reinforced that a well planned and well executed breakfast service can leave a positive impression on guests, influencing their likelihood of returning and recommending the hotel.

Results of the visual observation of the buffets

The visual observation of the buffets enabled the identification of relevant quantitative and qualitative aspects regarding the composition of the breakfasts offered, summarized in Table 4. Regarding communication of food related information, 66% of the buffets displayed labels identifying the foods, but none provided allergen information or descriptions of ingredient composition. This finding aligns with the interview data, in which some employees demonstrated limited technical knowledge and reported that guests with dietary restrictions should seek guidance directly from staff.

The main quantitative results obtained through the visual observation guide are presented in Table 5. For bakery products, an average of eight preparations was observed; however, whole grain options were scarce, with an average of only two items, representing just 3% of all preparations. The average number of gluten free or lactose free bakery items was zero. In the confectionery category, an average of seven preparations was identified, with a predominance of frosted or filled cakes. No cakes without added sugars were observed, and only 1.5% of the preparations (one item) consisted of gluten free and/or lactose free versions.

Table 4. Main findings related to nutritional quality

Observed Indicator	Result
Ultra-processed foods	31% of the preparations
Fresh or minimally processed foods	19% of the preparations
Preparations intended for diets with dietary restrictions	6% of the preparations
Hotels with food identification	66% of the hotels
Hotéis com identificação de ingredientes alergênicos	0% dos hotéis
Hotels with separate areas for the distribution of foods for special diets	44% of the hotels
Hotels with the presence of regional preparations	0% of the hotels

Source: prepared by the author (2025).

Table 5. Main results of the visual observation guide for the buffet

Observation Guide Question	Average Number of Items	Percentage of Representation
Number of breakfast preparations	67	100%
Bakery products: Number of whole-grain preparations	2	3%
Bakery products: Number of gluten-free preparations	0	0%
Bakery products: Number of lactose-free preparations	0	0%
Confectionery products: Number of frosted/filled cakes	4	6%
Confectionery products: Number of cakes prepared without added sugars	0	0%
Confectionery products: Number of gluten-free preparations	1	1,5%
Confectionery products: Number of lactose-free preparations	1	1,5%
Fruits: Number of fresh fruit options	3	4,5%
Fruits: Number of minimally processed options	6	9%
Dairy products and milk derivatives: Number of lactose-free preparations	2	3%
Cereals: Number of high-sugar preparations	2	3%
Proteins: Number of options prepared with processed meats	2	3%
Beverages: Number of high-sugar preparations	2	3%
Beverages: Number of natural fruit juices without added sugars	2	3%
Bread accompaniments: Number of processed meats	3	4,5%
Bread accompaniments: Number of sugar-based preparations	4	6%

Source: prepared by the author (2025).

In the fruit category, an average of three fresh fruit options (served whole or in their natural form) and six minimally processed options (peeled or sliced) were observed. No preparations with added sugars were identified. Among dairy products and milk derivatives, an average of nine preparations was recorded; however, only two lactose free options were available, representing 3% of the total. Regarding yogurt and dairy beverages, one inconsistency was noted between the label (“yogurt”) and the product actually served, which was a dairy beverage. It is also noteworthy that one hotel offered three types of milk with varying fat content—whole, semi skimmed, and skimmed—while another provided an almond based plant beverage, an appropriate alternative for individuals with lactose intolerance, cow’s milk protein allergy, or those following a vegan diet.

For cereals, an average of six preparations was identified, mainly granolas, oats, seeds, and dried fruits, although no gluten free options were observed. High sugar cereals averaged two items. Protein preparations averaged four options, half of which included processed meats. Regarding egg preparation, 67% of the hotels served eggs without added dairy products. Some hotels also offered made to order egg dishes through an à la carte service, accommodating guests’ specific requests.

Beverages constituted the group with the highest average number of preparations, totaling 16 items. These included milk based beverages (average of four), sweetened beverages (average of two), and natural fruit juices without added sugars (average of two). In some cases, each tea bag variety was counted as a distinct beverage. Among bread accompaniments, an average of 13 preparations was observed, with a predominance of jams and sweets (average of four), cheeses (average of three), processed meats (average of three), and fat based preparations (average of two). No jams without added sugars were identified, and no lactose free options were found among the accompaniments.

Regarding buffet organization, some hotels provided separate areas for special diets, although without standardization or information about cross contamination risks. In one hotel, a dedicated counter for gluten free and lactose free items was observed, with clear identification—an example of good practice. In other establishments, however, items intended for special diets were displayed alongside the general buffet, potentially compromising food safety for guests with specific dietary needs.

For classification purposes, items such as cakes, cookies, high sugar cereals, processed meats, and sweetened beverages were categorized as ultra processed foods. Other items—such as breads, dairy products, cheeses, and some beverages—were not classified due to the inability to verify their ingredient lists. Even so, an average of 21 ultra processed items was identified, corresponding to 31% of the total average number of preparations.

Fresh or minimally processed foods included fresh and sliced fruits, grains, dried fruits, and natural fruit juices without added sugars, totaling 13 options and representing approximately 19% of the preparations. According to the Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population (2014), these foods should form the basis of the diet; however, the data reveal a clear gap between recommended practices and what is offered. The predominance of ultra processed foods over fresh or minimally processed items indicates a tendency to prioritize industrialized products, compromising health promotion and reinforcing the need for nutritional revision of breakfast menus.

Regarding options intended for diets with dietary restrictions, an average of four preparations was identified. Although fruits and proteins may naturally meet the needs of some individuals, only preparations that traditionally contain gluten, lactose, or sugar and that underwent specific substitutions were counted. Thus, only 6% of the observed preparations were directly intended for individuals with dietary restrictions.

Discussion of the results

The results reveal a predominance of ultra processed items in the analyzed buffets (31% of the average number of preparations), while fresh or minimally processed foods accounted for only 19% of the total. Options for dietary restrictions remained limited (6%), and allergen labeling was inconsistent or absent. These patterns indicate misalignment with healthy eating guidelines and international recommendations for allergy risk management, representing a clear opportunity for improvement in the local hotel industry and in similar contexts (Brasil, 2014; FAO & WHO, 2024; Monteiro et al., 2019).

The significant presence of ultra processed foods reflects a dietary profile that is unfavorable to guests' health. During the visits, limited offerings of fresh fruits, whole grains, and foods intended for dietary restrictions were observed, reducing both the diversity and nutritional value of the meal (Brasil, 2014). This scenario mirrors the findings of Almohanna and Serrano (2014), who identified low nutritional quality in hotel breakfasts in the United States and recommended greater inclusion of fruits, whole grains, and lean protein sources. Similar patterns were observed in the present study.

The results also align with Cunha et al. (2022), who reported a high presence of ultra processed foods in breakfast buffets in southern Brazil. Although some hotels demonstrated interest in improving the guest experience—such as by highlighting the functional properties of certain foods—these initiatives were exceptions. Most establishments still lack structured actions to offer diversified and safe menus for individuals with allergies, intolerances, or specific dietary choices.

The high proportion of ultra processed foods, combined with the limited availability of fresh or minimally processed items, weakens the potential for a hotel experience that integrates gastronomic pleasure with nutritional value. This is particularly relevant given evidence from Lane et al. (2024), who identified associations between higher exposure to ultra processed foods and adverse health outcomes, including cardiometabolic diseases, type 2 diabetes, mental health disorders, and increased cardiovascular mortality.

Shim (2025) similarly highlights the global rise in ultra processed food consumption and its association with weight gain and obesity. In this context, the findings reinforce the need to redesign breakfast buffets by prioritizing fresh or minimally processed foods and reducing the centrality of ultra processed items.

From an operational perspective, maintaining a buffet centered on ultra processed products increases the likelihood of low nutritional density choices and distances hotels from a health promoting positioning, without necessarily adding perceived value to the service. Rebalancing breakfast composition, emphasizing fruits, whole grains, minimally processed proteins, and beverages without added sugars, would align hospitality practices with health promotion.

Lee et al. (2017) reinforce the strategic importance of breakfast in travelers' decisions, reporting that 26% of participants would choose another hotel if breakfast were not offered as a complimentary service. These findings highlight the need to consider not only the presence of breakfast but also the quality and composition of the items offered. Guests particularly valued fruit salad, scrambled eggs, waffles, and coffee—foods that combine flavor with nutritional value.

The findings suggest that menu planning has prioritized variety over nutritional density. To move toward indicator based management, one possibility is the adoption of the Breakfast Quality Score (BQS), developed based on the International Breakfast Research Initiative. The BQS ranks breakfast quality by combining nutrients that should be encouraged or limited, offering a standardized tool for internal audits and interregional comparisons (Poinsot et al., 2023).

Inefficient communication regarding food composition is another critical issue. The absence of clear ingredient and allergen information compromises the safety of guests with dietary restrictions and contradicts international guidelines emphasizing visible and consistent allergen labeling (FAO & WHO, 2024; Codex Alimentarius Commission, 2024; Turner et al., 2024). Transparent communication is essential to ensure food safety (Vesa et al., 2000).

The limited appreciation of local ingredients also represents a missed opportunity to promote regional culture and strengthen destination identity. Including at least one regional preparation per day, accompanied by simple signage indicating ingredients and origin, as well as a seasonal purchasing calendar, can enhance the guest experience and support local suppliers (Krause & Bahls, 2013; Björk & Kauppinen Räisänen, 2016).

The interviews reinforce that although breakfast is widely recognized by hotel staff as a competitive factor, few concrete actions translate this perception into nutritionally adequate practices. Satisfaction with breakfast directly influences intention to return (Leite Pereira et al., 2020; Leite Pereira et al., 2022), reinforcing the need for structured management processes. Recommended actions include establishing minimum standards for each food category (fresh/minimally processed items, whole grain products, and options for dietary restrictions) and designating a staff member per shift responsible for pre service verification. External indicators—such as satisfaction surveys and online reviews—should be monitored monthly, with adjustments made accordingly.

Another relevant aspect is the low level of staff training regarding food composition and special diets. The absence of nutritionists and the lack of specific training compromise the hotels' ability to meet guest expectations (Trancoso et al., 2010). Implementing protocols for daily verification of labels and handling special requests, along with periodic training led by a nutritionist, would strengthen operational consistency and guest safety.

Although isolated positive initiatives were observed—such as the exclusion of dairy in egg preparations and the presence of fresh fruits in all hotels—there remains considerable room for improvement to align breakfast services with principles of healthy eating and inclusive hospitality. The limited diversity of fresh or minimally processed foods may negatively affect guests' health and experience, particularly during longer stays. As noted by Leite Pereira et al. (2022), food repetition affects satisfaction and return decisions. Expanding variety and accommodating different dietary preferences are therefore essential strategies for improving service quality and strengthening competitiveness in the tourism market.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The findings of this study show that, although the hotel industry in Balneário Camboriú, Santa Catarina, Brazil, recognizes the importance of breakfast in shaping the guest experience, significant gaps remain regarding the nutritional quality of the foods offered. The predominance of ultra processed items, the limited diversity of fresh, minimally processed, and whole grain foods, the restricted availability of preparations intended for dietary restrictions, and the insufficient communication of allergenic ingredients collectively reveal a service misaligned with health promotion guidelines and weaken the perception of responsible hospitality.

The study reinforces breakfast as a dimension of hospitality that integrates well being, inclusion, and destination identity, bringing the fields of tourism and hospitality into closer dialogue with healthy eating guidelines. More than a complementary service, breakfast represents a moment in which care for the guest becomes tangible. Aligning buffets with public healthy eating recommendations and improving the clarity of food information therefore constitute not only a public health concern but also a strategic opportunity to enhance the tourism experience and strengthen the competitiveness of hospitality enterprises.

Although grounded in the context of Balneário Camboriú, the mechanisms identified in this study—such as breakfast composition patterns, allergen communication, service for dietary restrictions, and the appreciation of regional foods—may be replicated in other hotel environments, with adaptations according to guest profiles and local seasonality. In hotel chains, the standardization of these elements may also facilitate comparative analyses among units.

The results, however, refer to a sample located in a single destination and selected based on visibility and evaluation criteria on the TripAdvisor® platform, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The temporal scope and observational nature of the study restrict the capture of seasonal variations and do not allow causal inferences. Furthermore, no standardized breakfast nutritional quality index was applied, nor was the actual consumption of foods by guests measured.

Future research may expand the scope to other tourist destinations and hotel categories, include different periods of the year, and conduct comparative analyses among units of the same hotel chain. It would also be relevant to test nutritional quality indices adapted to the Brazilian hotel context and to evaluate the operational feasibility of strategies for allergen identification and service for dietary restrictions. Such initiatives may support managerial decision making and contribute to the consolidation of methodological references for future studies.

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