

## Consuming Place: Tourism's Gastronomy Connection

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In the face of fears that the world is succumbing to McDonaldization and cultural homogenization, a new hope is emerging: culinary tourism. A tourist is by definition someone who travels for pleasure, and for most of these tourists part of this pleasure is had by experiencing and enjoying the host culture's food. While this has always been peripherally accepted as a part of the larger tourism model, recent research has identified the culinary tourist as an important demographic in their own right. Despite the success and proliferation of American fast-food chains worldwide, recent trends point to a newfound appreciation of, and a desire to experience, the culinary "Other." This has important and far-reaching implications for regional economic development, as well as in the preservation of local and regional culture. By promoting local cuisines and the cultures that created them, regional tourism markets can bolster their revenues while preserving (and in some cases, reviving) local customs and heritage, catering to the increasing demands and desires of culinary tourists.

Food has always played a major role in the human experience, from procurement to preparation and consumption, and this relationship has changed over time – what was once strictly something needed for survival has become many different things (for some of the world, anyway): art, entertainment, pleasure, a hobby, a cultural artifact, an identity, a celebration, something to be experienced. If television programming is any indication, food is increasingly becoming more prominent (and profitable) in popular culture. This sounds silly to say – of course food has always been prominent in our culture, but recent trends point to the entertainment and pleasure value of food becoming more and more commodified as a response to the public demand. While some regions have long been famed for their gastronomic offerings (France, Italy), tourists in all regions must eat regardless of the region's culinary reputation. Tourists travel to new places for a variety of reasons, and generally included in these reasons is to experience new cultures; however, food is typically a peripheral experience. In recent years the "culinary tourist" has emerged with wide-ranging impacts for local cultures and economies.

Culinary tourism can have many positive impacts on the host region's culture. Tourists who travel to have unique food experiences create a demand for an experience that is authentic, and is different from their own (Van Keekan & Go, 2006, p. 59; Sims, 2009, p. 321). This type of tourist provides motivation for the culture to offer and celebrate cuisine that represents their distinct heritage. In today's globalizing world, many have spoken out to express fears of cultural homogenization and a loss of diversity. While this may be the case in

some instances, a counter-trend is definitely rising. Because food can be seen as a cultural artifact (Cook & Crang, 1996, p. 131; Everett & Aitchison, 2008, p. 151), with more exposure to different cultures comes curiosity and a desire to explore the origins of regional cuisine. In this climate, regions are able to assert their unique identity with food as a symbol. By differentiating their food culture as unique and special, globalization almost forces localization to happen, and in this way regions can remain, or become, competitive in the global food tourism market through providing "identity in terms of provision of the 'other' and in terms of self-reference" (Hjalager & Richards, 2002, p. 82).

Locals do not always appreciate tourism, and can see it as a detriment to the cultural heritage that tourists come to investigate. Everett and Aitchison (2008) interviewed locals in the Cornwall region of England regarding their thoughts on tourism in general, and some expressed resentment and fear, blaming tourism for the "environmental and social degradation of the county" (p. 156). They go on to note that these perceptions are changing, and attribute this to the rise in interest in food tourism; in response to consumer demand Cornwall has seen development in food related activities such as festivals, and attractions such as the National Lobster Hatchery, all of which promote both sustainability as well as the preservation of local traditions (p. 157-158). Local opinions are changing with the times as well; now many locals see tourism as "the lifeline and can in fact sustain some of those values they thought were being eroded" (p. 157), "keeping some of their old traditions alive... some of them have been revived" (p. 158). Hjalager & Corigliano (2000) assert that festivals and similar food-centric activities "may contribute to an increased awareness of food products and standards, which in turn might stimulate the 'reinvention' of interesting historical food traditions" (p. 291).

Culinary tourism also has positive economic impacts, especially for rural areas. As these tourists become more adventurous both in their palates and their interest areas, rural areas have an opportunity to capitalize. Promoting food tourism in rural areas helps local farmers, producers and small business owners, and helps these rural economies to diversify (Everett & Aitchison, 2008, p. 159). Tourists who venture out into these areas are in search of something authentic and different from what is common for them, and in this way help to foster these types of businesses. Their desire to do so is beneficial and can be seen as sustainable by supporting the local economy - establishments wanting to cater to the demand for local products will source their offerings from local purveyors, which in turn cuts down on food miles (Hall & Wilson, 2008, p. 3) making rural food tourism more environmentally sound. This effect can be amplified by the promotion of "slow tourism" – by staying longer less is consumed overall in terms of resources, and fewer emissions are produced (Hall, 2007, 2011). Tourists who commit to more lengthy stays

in a region are more subject to “culinary systems not one’s own” (Long, 2004, p. 131), and by encouraging rural producers to promote themselves in a way that makes them more attractive than just as “stop-off areas for passing tourists” (Alonso & Northcote, 2010, p. 705): longer stays can bolster local economies and reduce economic leakage, while at the same time promoting the area’s heritage by inspiring investigation.

Of course there are regions not renowned for their culinary heritage. Canada, Australia and New Zealand face special challenges not found in say China or Spain. Canada is a relatively new country and one with an amalgamation of cultural influences; however, they are making great strides to increase their market share of culinary tourists. Turning what could be seen as a disadvantage, Canada is discovering ways to celebrate and promote its culinary heritage by “branding itself as a nation of immigrants” (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2006, p. 35). Canada’s multiculturalism is one avenue in which they can promote culinary tourism; another is beer tourism. In south central Ontario, Canada, the Waterloo-Wellington Ale Trail is a self-guided tour launched in 1998 and includes 6 local craft breweries. The aim of this brewing group is to “increase awareness of the regional brewing industry, increase consumption of the region’s premium beers...instilling pride in regional breweries, attracting visitors to the area...developing a network of partners in the related hospitality industry” (Plummer et al., 2004, p. 451-452). This is a prime example of how a region might succeed in culinary tourism through clever marketing and creating demand, providing high quality products, and cooperation between various producers and agencies.

New Zealand and Australia face struggles similar to Canada. Without a rich, long-ranging history, culinary or otherwise, along with the handicap of their tyranny of distance, folks down under have been hard pressed to carve out a place in the culinary tourism market; they have done so by succeeding in a sub-set of food tourism – wine. Australian and New Zealand wines are well known, but their cuisine is not. Both countries aggressively market their wines and have achieved great success (Hjalager & Richards, 2002, p. 199). One strategy for success is to promote various “wine trails” whereby tourists embark on predetermined routes that link wineries, to be undertaken by car or bicycle (Hjalager & Richards, 2002, p. 198). Australia has discovered a new niche that its rare Mediterranean climate can offer – olive tourism (Alonso & Northcote, 2010, p. 696). By combining agriculture and food and tourism, Western Australian olive growers are finding ways to integrate themselves into a new market. This will undoubtedly be beneficial economically, and is only possible through the support of local tourism organizations, governments, and collaboration between the growers themselves (p. 705).

Niche marketing can help boost drooping economies by catering to food tourists’ demands, which

in most cases is an authentic local experience, though in some instances there can be miscommunication. Research has shown that when host cultures try to recreate Western food in an attempt to cater to Western palates, they fail miserably. A study done in Bali, Indonesia found that Western tourists’ desires were not being met – that local operators were catering to a perceived need by offering Westernized foods, and not only was this not what the tourists wanted (they expressed desire to experience local foods), the quality of these Western offerings were dismal (Reynolds, 1993, p. 52-53).

But what is authentic? Is “local” authentic? What is local? The definitions of these terms are sometimes blurry. C.M. Hall asserts that “...the local is regarded as better because it is somehow more ‘real’ in an increasingly commodified and standardized world of culinary production” (2006, p. 3). Allen and Hinrichs note the difficulties in asserting what the meaning of local is, stating that “the ambiguity about what local means...allows it to be about anything and, at the margin, perhaps very little at all” (cited in Sims, 2009, p. 324). If local is more real, then local, by this definition, must mean more authentic. Sims argues that “‘local food’” has the potential to enhance the visitor experience by connecting consumers to the region and its perceived culture and heritage” (2009, p. 321). This is vastly different than world-renowned chef Thomas Keller’s (of The French Laundry) claim that “...local to me is anything I can get here by jet...in a few hours...lobsters from Maine...hearts of palm from Hawaii...” (cited in Hall et al., 2003, p. 307). Clearly “local” means many different things geographically to different people. Thomas Keller’s version does not support local sustainability, at least not if he is sourcing his products via jet – clearly this business practice exemplifies economic leakage. One thread remains constant though: “local” always implies fresh and high quality in food circles.

Sometimes however, local authenticity is staged. In 1972 Scotland launched a “Taste of Scotland” campaign which constructed a food heritage by associating foods with geographical areas or historical figures which may or may not have any relation at all to the item(s); however, it is interesting to note that this approach was not “considered to be inauthentic” (Hughes, 1995, p. 785-786). Whether or not an aspect of food tourism is intentionally staged, tourist events and activities are all constructed in some way to cater to the tourist. Food tourists seem to put high value on the story food tells, and attribute that to its authenticity. Wang argues that “tourists are not merely searching for authenticity of the Other. They also search for the authenticity of, and between, themselves” (cited in Sims, 2009, p. 325); this indicates a highly subjective and wildly interpretable sense of the authentic, and one of a more existential bent.

Today, the culinary tourist can be as adventurous as they dare, sometimes without ever leaving their neighborhood - or even their living room. 24-hour food

networks and travel channels allow the culinary tourist to be voyeurs into foodways, cuisines and cultures that they may never be able to experience otherwise. The curious food tourist can embark on a journey that will take them from a noodle vendor in Thailand, to a 3-star Michelin restaurant in France, to eating bush meat with local tribes-people in Africa, to the best diners in America – all in one afternoon. Travel and food magazines also promote and exemplify food and cultures of the Other, and most Western cities feature a multitude of ethnic eateries. It is not uncommon for groceries to carry ethnic foods, sometimes devoting whole sections to various cultures, and most larger cities in the West have various markets devoted solely to specific ethnic food stuffs as well. Perhaps the fear of McDonaldization is actually resentment and anger that what Americans are offering (or at least what is being represented globally, i.e. fast food) the culinary world is garbage, while they reap major rewards in the beautiful culinary tapestry being woven across the United States.

Food tourism is an up-and-coming, blossoming niche both in the tourist market and for academic research. Clearly there is a newfound appreciation and demand for high quality food with a legacy, a history, and a story, and many are willing to travel far and wide to experience this. It is their motivations that remain unclear: whether to assert the “self” in relation to, and consuming of, the “Other,” or perhaps just to satisfy a curiosity piqued by exposure to new cultures and foods through globalization of place and media, or even still – maybe because it just tastes good. Regardless, regional markets have potential to capitalize on this new fetish commodity, and through careful marketing and planning can bolster the economies of small farmers and other purveyors as well as areas with sagging economies.

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