



10

The lure of food: food as an attraction in destination marketing in Manitoba, Canada

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Introduction

Food is one of the most important attractions sought out by tourists in their craving for new and unforgettable experiences. However, food is a very much overlooked and unsung component of the tourism literature. Typically, food is lumped together with accommodation in compilations of tourism statistics, partly perhaps because of it being almost always part of another attraction, and also because of it being a necessary element of survival no matter where a person is located. Dining out is one of the most popular activities undertaken by Canadian tourists and the practice is rapidly growing (Coopers and Lybrand Consulting, 1996; Wilton, 1997). Furthermore, the contribution of food to the tourism economy is of

very considerable importance and, because of their intensive use of labour, food preparation and services also contribute very heavily to the tourism employment sector. In Canada, nearly a million people work in the food-service industry, and according to Statistics Canada, 21 per cent of a tourist's budget is spent on food and drink (Statistics Canada, 1998: 144). Manitoba statistics show an even higher percentage of the tourist dollar being spent in this way, with more than 28 per cent being spent on food and drink by intra-provincial travellers (Statistics Canada, 1997). The promotion of regional cuisine is therefore an effective way of supporting local economies and agricultural production. This chapter provides an overview of the relevance of food to Manitoba's tourism industry.

Manitoba's food attractions command scant attention from international food guides such as the *Michelin Guide*, nor do they receive much notice from Canadian productions featuring restaurant fare. As examples, Air Canada's in-flight magazine, *En Route* typically contains only a handful of entries for Manitoba, and a feature article, 'Haute Canuck', in *Maclean's* magazine, Canada's leading weekly news magazine, barely mentioned Manitoba's contribution to Canada's haute cuisine (Chidley, 1998). However, as the statistics indicate, revenues from the sale of food are a very large component of the total amount of tourism product sold. Fine dining is important in Manitoba, and as a survey undertaken in 1995 demonstrated, more than 50 per cent of travellers to Manitoba were motivated in part by the desire to try different foods (Travel Manitoba, 1995). Manitoba restaurants boast a number of top-ranked chefs who have developed a distinctive 'Manitoba Regional Cuisine,' carrying off gold medals from the World Culinary Olympics and other international competitions (Tourism Winnipeg, 1999a: 1999b). The Manitoba Restaurant Association is more than fifty years old, has more than 500 members, and takes an active role in promoting the province's food-service industry. The association sponsors an annual trade fair, the Food and Beverage Expo, while some thirty of its more upmarket restaurants are featured at the Manitoba Food Fair, one of the more popular of Winnipeg's annual visitor attractions (Manitoba Restaurant Association, 2000). But as the statistics also show, most food expenditures are for more mundane dietary needs. As with world tourism, it is the largely unsung domestic tourist who consumes the bulk of the food and contributes most to the food tourism total. Thus, at the lower end of the hierarchy of culinary cuisine, there is a wealth of foods consumed by the local tourist and only to a lesser extent by the traveller from more distant parts, even though the latter may be critical to the success of the food outlets available.

Winnipeg festivals

Nowhere is the above relationship between domestic and international tourism more readily visible than at Folklorama, Manitoba's largest festival and most important annual tourist attraction. Begun in 1970 in celebration of Manitoba's centennial, Folklorama originally took place over a single weekend and was a totally volunteer-run operation comprising a mere handful of cultural groups. However, it became an instant success with the local population and is now a firmly established event in Winnipeg's calendar, normally spanning a two-week period in midsummer and consisting of around forty 'pavilions' scattered through the city, each representing one of Winnipeg's diverse cultural groups. The pavilions present displays, crafts, dances and, most important, a sampling of distinctive foods which, along with drinks, generate substantial revenues for the festival and its participant groups. In 1998, the festival attracted more than 425 000 visits to its pavilions, serving up 600 000 meals and 1 million beverages (Folklorama, 2000). According to Tourism Winnipeg's research, Folklorama in 1996 contributed C\$7.2 million to Manitoba's gross domestic product, more than twice as much as any other annually recurring event. With this growth, the character of the event has changed significantly.

Although volunteers and the ethno-cultural mosaic remain at the heart of the operation, there are now strong corporate and commercial interests involved. Folklorama is presently organized by the Folk Arts Council of Winnipeg, a non-profit corporation with a board of directors and a dozen permanent staff, including four marketing personnel. Their efforts are supplemented by the activities of Travel Manitoba and Tourism Winnipeg, both of which feature Folklorama in their promotional work. More than 20 000 people still volunteer their time to the festival, frequently giving up part of their holidays to the event. Others spend weeks and months in advance preparations. However, the large scale of current operations has meant that the bigger pavilions now contract out their food preparation to professional caterers and have to rent space for their activities. In 1998, only six pavilions failed to earn a profit, while twenty made over C\$6000 (Folk Arts Council of Winnipeg, 1998: 14). There are guidelines in place which seek to prevent profiteering, keep prices in line and ensure that the spirit of Folklorama is retained. However, participating organizations do use the event as a money-making venture to support their other activities and the event has now become very much a commercial operation. According to some, new volunteers are becoming more difficult to recruit and there are dark suggestions that 'money is being made on the backs of the babas', the dedicated, but ageing ladies who still spend countless hours of their time preparing foodstuffs for the occasion.