

Food experience as integrated destination marketing strategy

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Food is becoming increasingly central to the experience of tourism destinations. With the rise of the experience economy, food has become one of the central elements on which destinations can base their branding, shape destination image and promote tourism. In the process, food has shifted from being an essential support to tourism (tourists need to eat) to being an essential reason to visit many destinations (food as experience) (Richards, forthcoming).

Food is important as part of the destination marketing mix because it gives a sense of place and allows tourists to literally taste the destination and come directly into contact with local culture:

- Because tourists have to eat at least two or three times a day, gastronomy is the culture that they come into contact with most often.
- Gastronomy provokes a direct bodily confrontation with culture – we literally have to ingest the local culture
- Eating habits are differences that immediately become obvious: the time people eat, the way people eat and what they eat all become immediate points of difference on entering a new culture.
- Food provides a direct connection with landscape – you can often literally see where your food comes from.

We are probably more aware of the food production chain than for many other products, because we can see it so clearly in many places. In fact, for many urban dwellers, going on holiday brings us closer to the food chain, and the movement of what we eat ‘from farm to plate’. We can see the places where the basic ingredients are produced, we can witness these being prepared and processed, and we can appreciate the whole culture that goes into creating the finished dish set in front of us.

The important point is that food provides support for branding and marketing because it touches on so many elements of the destination experience. It also serves to link many different elements of experience together. Essentially the whole food culture of the destination can provide the basis for branding and marketing. This can be an advantage, because it provides many different branding elements:

- Products (food and beverages),
- Practices (eating and meals)
- Art and customs of preparing and eating (gastronomy)
- Sensory elements (taste, smell, touch, look)
- Origins of food (organic food, ethnic cuisines, locally produced, food and so on.),
- Food preparation (ways of cooking)

- Forms of serving (fast food, slow food, street food, snow food and so on.)
- The context in which it is served and consumed (restaurants, bars, markets, food quarters, streets and so on.).

But this also makes it challenging, because it is also easy to see these different elements as separate aspects of experience, rather than as a complex whole. This paper briefly considers some of the key aspects of destination branding and marketing through food, using examples from Scandinavia.

The northern renaissance in food

Since Noma was voted the best restaurant in the world for the first time 2012, Scandinavian or Nordic cuisine has been formally on the global gastronomy radar. This is based on a number of factors, including the intimate link between the landscape and the food, the high quality of the ingredients, the creativity of the chefs, the aesthetics of the presentation and the high degree of innovation.

This has not been an easy journey. The previously functionalist attitudes to food and eating resisted the upgrading of northern gastronomy for a long while. The resistance of culture to change was encapsulated in Axel's 1987 film *Babette's Feast*, based on a Karen Blixen story about a French housekeeper who prepares a sumptuous Parisian meal in a staunchly Protestant village in Jutland in Denmark. Worried about the sensual pleasures that might be awakened by these gastronomic pleasures, the diners agree not to talk about the food during the meal.

Similarly, Sweden was previously seen as a 'food desert' (Bonow and Rytkönen, 2012:2):

a country permeated by a productivist discourse in the agricultural and food sector, characterized by an export orientation of agricultural and food products, in which urban and rural patterns of food consumption are distinctly different and where urban consumers demand a considerable amount of fast food.

Now Denmark, together with other Scandinavian countries, have a new-found confidence in the quality and strength of their food cultures, which is reflected in the ways in which food is used for marketing and branding destinations. A range of new platforms for promoting countries and regions through food has sprung up. These include the Tasting Europe platform established by the European Travel Commission, which features food experiences, routes and festivals across Europe. The principles of these sites are very similar. They tend to link culture, landscape and food into a holistic tourism experience, a trend underlined by a recent OECD report (2012).

A recent Skift food tourism report suggests that the growth of food tourism "is seen as an outcome of a trend where people spend much less time cooking, but choose to pursue their interest in food as part of a leisure experience." Increasingly, going out for a meal with friends is as much about the social interaction as it is the food and the ambiance it is served in.

But although a growing range of destinations have the basic resources necessary to set their food tourism product in the marketplace, remarkably few destinations succeed in becoming food meccas.

In a situation where food tourism is becoming as common as sun, sea and sand products, how can destinations successfully develop and market their gastronomic riches to tourists.

Factors affecting food tourism branding

You need the basic ingredients to be able to think about developing food tourism. A recent study by the Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance (OCTA, 2014) suggests the following ten criteria for developing successful food tourism destinations and ensuring a compelling local “taste of place”:

1. Leadership
2. Market-ready or near-market-ready culinary products and resources
3. An integrated strategy
4. Partnership and community-based collaboration
5. Financial support and performance measures
6. Destinations with good access from key origin markets
7. Sufficient market intelligence
8. Food tourism resources distinctive to the region
9. A critical mass of agri- and/or food tourism experiences
10. An effective Destination Marketing Organization

However, in an increasingly experience centred consumption field, the determining factors for gastronomic success are no longer about these fairly tangible aspects of the destination. As Berg and Sevón (2014) argue, the sensory aspect of the destination is also important. They identify three basic functions of food marketing and branding initiatives:

- (i) to support food industry,
- (ii) to protect and amplify identities of places and
- (iii) to change the place

In order to achieve these aims, there are three dimensions of the city-sensescape that are affected by sensory cues related to food:

- (i) spatial configuration,
- (ii) time flow and
- (iii) sensory iconography.

So food can relate not just to the immediate sensory cues of eating, but also to the layout of the destination, the events that take place in it and the way in which food-related symbols are used in marketing and branding the destination.

This means that destinations have to be aware not just of the ways in which food plays a role in these aspects of the destination, but also of how this affects consumers and those involved in the production of food. In order to be distinctive in the contemporary crowded food marketplace, you not only have to use existing resources effectively, but you also have to constantly produce new experiences through a process of 'stylistic innovation' (Richards, 2015).

Stylistic innovation depends heavily on the role of different 'selectors' in the food system – producers, chefs, restaurateurs, critics and consumers. The selections made by these groups are also increasingly important in identifying those products and experiences that will be successful in the marketplace. The important point about this system of stylistic selection is that it requires a network of actors to function. It is not enough to have a single celebrity chef or Michelin starred restaurant. The whole system of producing, consuming and communicating about food has to be involved in the process. Even if food critics are raving about an experience this will be no use without consumers who are educated about food. In the case of food tourism a systemic approach is even more important because the consumers are distant from the food experiences they will consume. So communicating about food through the media, Internet, social media, blogs, etc., also becomes an important part of the stylistic selection process.

The other important point is that the balance of power within the selection process is also changing with the advent of new communication technologies. In the past the development of a gastronomic destination used to be a fairly top-down process. Governments would select elements of their cuisine to be promoted to tourists, and these would become emblematic features of the destination itself. This process was very clear, for example, in the development of 'Spanish' cuisine for tourists in the Franco era, when previously regional dishes such as Paella became an essential part of the tourist menu all over Spain.

Today, the consumer is much more actively involved in the selection process, thanks to the increased accessibility of information and images. Liu et al (2014) show how posting images of food online comes to influence the choice of food tourism destinations:

I like to first decide the vacation destination and then look for local food and restaurants I like to go to new places to try some new food and take pictures of them. Pictures of food motivate me to go to a new place. If I know of new places through food pictures, I will go there and try the food. I look at food pictures when planning a trip (recorded). I like to look up some information on some new food and then choose a destination where I can find the food.

In order to tap into these experiential desires, destinations need to think about the whole journey that the visitor undertakes, from the first moment of considering different potential destinations, through the different phases of the visit itself to the recollection of the memorable experience afterwards. This provides the basis for a more holistic 'sensory branding' that can link the whole food culture with tourist experience.

How can sensory branding be facilitated?

There are a range of ways that destinations can support sensory branding for food tourism. The most important first step is to ensure that the local population is enthusiastic about food. Unless

tourists can sense an excitement about food in the destination, it is unlikely that they will find the gastronomic experience particularly exciting. Essentially, as in any successful branding exercise, the important first step is to improve the reality of the food experience, without which any branding effort is likely to fail. The Nordic experience shows that investment in improving the quality of food and the eating experience eventually pays off with a more attractive image among tourists. But this is a long term process, and involves the careful crafting of food networks that bring together suppliers at all levels of the value chain in order to create engaging, holistic food experiences.

Once this basic step has been taken, then the destination can begin to think in terms of more specific food tourism development and marketing, and begin to create a solid brand. There are a number of actions that can be employed to support such branding efforts:

- Creating a buzz around food

The organisation of culinary events that link together star chefs, food suppliers, the media and consumers is a strategy being increasingly employed by gastronomic destinations. For example the Prove Portugal branding campaign organised events in key markets such as London in order to attract media attention and create excitement around contemporary Portuguese cuisine.

- Working with food affinity groups

Foodies like to talk to other people about food, and are often to be found clustered around particular locations or food-related themes on the Internet or on television. By linking in to the Slow Food movement or groups such as the Foodie Network it is possible to place the brand directly with those most likely to be interested in food experiences.

- Social media

In reaching affinity groups social media is now key. A recent research indicates that 32% of consumers have used a social network or texted while eating, and that 40% of people learn about food from websites, apps or blogs (Maxwell PR, 2014).

- Photo opportunities

If you want people to post about your food, then providing photo opportunities is crucial. This can be done via specific food-related events, but also through photographable and interesting food experiences.

- Working with bloggers

As the Maxwell PR study also shows, bloggers are having a growing influence on what and where people eat. Almost 40% of the US population reads food blogs, and people are likely to trust the reviews and ideas of the blogs they read.

In addition to clearly outlining messaging and branding around a food tourism strategy, it is equally important to establish measurable and up-to-date metrics. These include visitor arrivals in a destination, total spend categorized by activity, ticket revenues for events, and/or shares for a social media campaign.

A review of food destination branding cases is provided in the recent Skift report 'Destinations Try to Build a Brand With Culinary Tourism' (2014). More detailed cases are provided in the OECD report on Food and the Tourism Experience (2012).

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For more food tourism sources, see - <https://independent.academia.edu/gregrichards/Tourism-and-gastronomy-publications>