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Foodies and Tourism

Learning objectives

Readers are expected to learn the following from this chapter:

- How seeking and escaping theory relates to the motivations to travel and benefits sought by foodies; push and pull factors
- Destination attractiveness in the context of food tourism
- The meaning and importance of perceived authenticity
- Why foodies want tactile experiences
- Who exactly travels for food-related experiences
- Photo elicitation as a technique for exploring preferred experiences
- Willingness to pay as a measure of involvement and preference
- Preferences and styles of travel by foodies for international food-related trips

Motivation and benefits sought

In this chapter actual food tourism is examined, mostly through our research data. We present material from a number of major surveys and our own work. The first section examines motivation in theory and with regard to the specific benefits sought by foodies. The benefits obviously focus on food-related experiences, but foodies are also often looking for authentic cultural experiences, and they do combine food experiences with other activities.

Seeking-escaping theory is a theoretical way of looking at travel motivation. According to Mannell and Iso-Ahola (1987), people engage in leisure and travel in order to simultaneously escape from aspects of their personal and interpersonal environments (perhaps boredom or stress) and to seek specific benefits. These benefits could be expressed in terms of fundamental needs, namely to find rewarding social experiences and for self development. In the tourism literature escaping is often expressed as the 'push factors' while seeking is called the 'pull factors'. Anything that acts as an attraction is a pull factor in this context.

Heldke (2003) used the term 'food adventuring' to describe foodies in pursuit of new experiences. This is an example of how foodies might describe their travel, and theoretically we should ask why some people feel the need for adventure or novel experiences. Is their life boring, or do they find personal growth and identity through food adventuring? Along these lines, Kim et al. (2010) studied food-event motivations and identified three push factors (knowledge and learning, fun and new experiences, and relaxation with family) and three pull factors: area quality and value, quality of events, and food variety.

Any travel experience might satisfy generic needs, such as relaxing and social bonding with family, or specific needs related to a special interest, like food quality and variety. The more involved with food one is, the more likely it is that motivations will be very specific. This is confirmed when we examine the highly-involved foodie.

Specific pull factors, or attractions that appeal to foodies have been identified through research. Park et al. (2008) determined that one of the major factors that motivated visitors to go to wine and food festival is tasting new wine and food. Kim et al. (2009) argued that tasting local food and beverage not only satisfies visitors' appetites but also offers them local cultural experiences. Exploration of indigenous culture through food has been emphasized as an attraction by Molz (2007), while opportunities to discover new taste sensations and gain access to well-coordinated culinary experiences was identified by Kivela and Crofts (2006).

In Australia, Sparks et al. (2005 p. vi) explored wine and food tourism. "The Good Living Tourism project focused on the lifestyle aspects of food and wine tourism. The project comprised several studies including regional case studies and consumer research." Based on focus groups with experienced wine tourists, the researchers identified 'enhancement factors' that make a visit to a wine and food region more enjoyable, namely: authenticity of the experience, value for money, service interactions, the setting or surroundings, product offerings, information dissemination, personal growth and indulgence. "The food and wine tourist is rarely just interested in wine tasting; the total experience is of greatest importance." (p.vi). A survey was also conducted, with 828 completed questionnaires - approximately 87% being female respondents and mostly from one state, Queensland. "Results demonstrated that, when taking a holiday, the four most important themes were 'enjoyment and pleasure', 'being pampered', 'beautiful/undiscovered surroundings' and 'inspirational' experiences... Respondents reported that they sought a lifestyle that was characterized by comfort, health, harmony, relaxation and fun. Activities that most provided enjoyment to this group were 'getting away', 'food' and 'art'. Almost half the group indicated an intention to take a holiday revolving around food and wine within the next twelve-month period." (p. vi).

A Korean food festival study by Kim et al. (2009) examined motivational factors (exciting experience, escape from routine, health concern, learning knowledge, authentic experience, togetherness, prestige, sensory appeal, and physical environment) and food neophilia versus neophobia among tourists with regard to consuming local food and beverages. Interviews were conducted with 20 travellers. This exploratory research does not address the issue of food-tourist destination choices or desired experiences but reveals something of basic motivations and factors influencing food consumption while travelling.

Tikkanen's (2007) study in Finland linked food tourism to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Physiological needs can be the main motivation for food tourism in the case of alcohol-oriented cruises and cross-border shopping. Safety needs relate to hygiene concerns, but translate into motivation in the case of conferences on this theme. Social needs relate experiences where food is part of the social mix, including vineyard tourism and food event tourism. Esteem needs motivate travel for cultural food experiences. "Self-actualizing needs become realized in the form of trade fairs and conferences that increase the visitor's knowledge and competences related to food, and which heightens his/her self-respect." (Tikkanen, 2007: 731).

Kivela and Crofts (2005) studied gastronomic tourists in Hong Kong, finding them to be a substantial segment, more males than females, and more of a regional (Asian) market. Cultural differences were determined to be important, separating Asians from, for example, North Americans. They concluded that a major challenge is to make dining experiences more memorable – perhaps by active participation to broaden their knowledge and try different tastes.

■ Perceived authenticity (from the food tourists' perspective)

It is often said that foodies search for authentic cultural experiences, including regional and national cuisines, but what is authenticity and how do food tourists determine that their experience was indeed authentic? Exactly what is 'authentic' is almost always open to interpretation.

Kuznesof et al. (1997) said there are personal factors including the cultural awareness and knowledge of consumers that influence perceptions of authenticity. Personal factors might emerge as an individual connection between the produced and the consumed, which may be based on ethnicity for example (Johnston and Baumann, 2007) or simply the contemplative process (Beer, 2008) so the food just tastes 'right'. Perceived authenticity depends much on self-identity, personality, personal goals, lifestyle and values.

Johnston and Baumann (2007: 179) emphasized that authenticity is a social construction, with their review of the literature suggesting that "Qualities that lend themselves to the social construction of authenticity include creation by hand rather than by industrial processes; local settings and anticommercialism;

sincere expression distant from calculation or strategy; honesty, integrity, or dedication to core principles; and closeness to nature combined with distance from institutionalized power sources.” By analysing what food writers said about food authenticity they concluded that there are four qualities used to frame a food or cuisine as being authentic: geographic specificity; simplicity; personal connections and historicism. Geographic references relate to provenance and can also suggest ethnic or cultural origins. Simplicity embodies the notions of hand-made, traditional, and non-industrial, sometimes with connotations of rusticity and non-pretentious dining. Personal connections relates to “food with a face”, the opposite of impersonal. The face can be that of a celebrity chef, or a family artisanal tradition. Historicism refers to tradition and the test of time, as opposed to faddism. It should be noted that these observations themselves might reflect the fads of travel and food writing, as what is interesting to foodies changes with familiarity.

Where the food is consumed embodies authenticity, whether this be in the family home (Moisio et al., 2004), in a culturally ambient restaurant with a plethora of authenticity ‘signifiers’ (Lu and Fine, 1995) or in a commercial tourist precinct which communicates authenticity by a range of product signifiers other than food (Carroll and Torfason, 2011).

■ Activities and experiences

Activities, such as dining or picking produce, are often featured in tourism advertising and there is a general assumption that activities equal experiences. This is wrong, or at least confusing, because activities are only one of three experiential components that must be measured: cognitive (mental processes), affective (emotions or feelings), and conative (behaviour or activities). Leisure researchers have long employed experiential sampling and other methods to determine the nature of leisure, and these can be applied to food tourism. Similarly, ethnographic methods will be effective, including participant observation and netnography.

An exhaustive list cannot be compiled but Figure 4.1 provides a number of obvious examples that require examination. In the left-side column are three categories of higher-order, experiential outcomes that are believed to be sought by food tourists. They cover mental, emotional and physical domains and connect directly to social needs, esteem, and self-development or actualization (Maslow, 1954; 1962). Lower-order physiological needs are met by eating, but food tourists also know that food consumption can simultaneously be an aesthetic, intellectual, as well as a social experience.

In the right-side column are associated activities that can be packaged and sold. How activities lead to experiences, and particularly to memorable or even transforming experiences, remains a major research and theoretical challenge.