

TOURISM PLANNING AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT: INNOVATIVE PROJECTS IN FOOD AND TOURISM

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Abstract

Over the last few years, food have assumed an increasingly significant role in the dynamics of tourism development of territories, especially in minor areas (i.e. inland regions, mountain villages, etc.). In the perspective of tourism experience, there is a strong correlation between food and local development that is not limited to the satisfaction of a basic need but acts primarily as a means of spreading culture. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how territories can generate significant positive impacts in terms of local tourism development through innovative projects related to food. Case study method has been chosen to fulfil the aim of the research.

Keywords: *food tourism, local tourism development, destination management, tourism experience*

1. Introduction

Food represents today one of the essential elements of the tourist experience. Yet it is such an integral part of the experience that only in the last few years has become a subject of study in its own right (Hall and Sharples, 2003). Within the literature, today there is an increased awareness of the cultural significance of food. Hence, food has recently been recognized as an important cultural resource that, through various activities, becomes a crucial factor in promoting tourism in an area.

As visitor expectations continue to rise and competition intensifies, tourism destinations are seeking to differentiate their destinations in meaningful terms. In recent years, a growing emphasis has been placed on tourism experiences and attractions related to food (Hjalager and Richards, 2002), as the quality and authenticity of food offerings is becoming increasingly fundamental for the visitors. In response, tourism destinations are now committed to the implementation of initiatives and projects of food tourism with the intent to promote tourism development through a deeper knowledge of the territories. In order to ensure this, it is fundamental that the different stakeholders that interact at the local level have to learn how to plan and design, sharing ideas, goals and strategic vision.

In this perspective, the research will focus on the role and impacts that food related projects may have on the local tourism development of a place. The main purpose is to investigate the potential positive impacts generated by food projects in favouring local development of a tourist destination. The adopted methodology is the case study,

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as empirical evidence to examine the relevant aspects of the phenomenon under investigation.

The paper is structured in four parts. Firstly, it will be outlined an overview of the considerable changes that have characterized tourism in the recent decades. It is indeed fundamental to acknowledge what direction is the tourism industry headed and how, in light of that, the food is assuming an ever more important value within the tourist experiences of visitors. Afterwards, particular attention will be given to the role of food tourism in enhancing places and tourist experiences. The third part will present the food project Tascapan, the first and only online shop of typical products of Aosta Valley, a major alpine tourist destination in North West Italy. Finally, the paper will discuss the main findings of the research and draw conclusions.

2. The Changing Face of Tourism: Food, Experiences and Local Development

Planning for tourism means to acknowledge the significant changes that have affected the tourism industry as an economic and social phenomenon from the last few decades but especially in the most recent years. In the perspective of local tourism development, it is fundamental that territories understand the evolutionary dynamics of this complex sector, becoming active participants of such contextual changes.

The Economic Geography literature, as well as the empirical evidences and the practical experiences, have outlined several changes that have occurred both in terms of supply and of tourist demand (Poon 1994; Matos, 2004; Hall, 2006; Molz, 2009; Dickinson and Lumsdon, 2010; Conway and Timms, 2010). While mass tourism dominated the latter half of the 20th century and it was assumed that people travelled as part of a large group to inclusive resorts, the late 1980s and 1990s resulted in a shift away from this model. First, many tourists became more experienced and rejected the idea of mass travel in favour of more individualized holidays (Robinson *et al.*, 2011). Secondly, the tourist offer started to be addressed to customized proposals and to be aimed at a deeper knowledge of local contexts.

This have led to a new interpretation of the tourism phenomenon that goes beyond the idea of the tourism product as the mere sum of services and which focuses on the concept of “tourism experience”. This concept is substantiated by innovative proposals mainly addressed at informed, educated and technological tourists. Indeed, over the years, new cultural and social trends have influenced the tourists preferences and life patterns which impact on tourism. Consequently, also the travel choice of visitors and their behaviour have changed (Keller and Bieger, 2010). Nowadays, the current average tourist is a person who is used to travel and who is hardly able to be amazed. Thus, the tourism competitiveness of the territories is played around their ability to offer guests the opportunity to live unique and unrepeatabe experiences. According to Keller (2008) the greater a destination’s uniqueness the more competitive it will be. Therefore, it increasingly emerges how the territory, the local heritage and especially the local food have a central role in the ability to attract tourists. Today, visitors’ needs are moving towards genuine experience rather than a staged one (European Commission, 2006). Tourist are looking for more meaningful and authentic experiences, with a growing focus on nostalgia, roots, the identity of other cultures, as well as an increasing interest

in spiritual and intellectual activities (Nordin, 2005; European Commission, 2006; Kuoni, 2006; Pikkemaat and Muller, 2008).

Such shift has led to a proliferation of initiatives linked to the so-called *Slow Tourism*, an approach to the supply and to the fruition of tourism products that stimulates interactions with the host communities, that enhances the specificity of each place and that favours non-frenetic rhythms aimed at improving the quality of the time spent for living a tourist experience. According to Markwell *et al.* (2012) slowness works as a metaphor that brings into question the cult of speed and embraces an approach to life that values time in terms of relationships between people and place. Slow tourism foregrounds the notion of convivial hospitality as being crucial elements in the slow tourism experience and as such strengthens the relations between local and visitor (Conway and Timms, 2010). The concept of slowness has strongly influenced also the food and wine tourism, leading to the creation of the Slow Food movement. This movement has brought a revolution of the concept of food that is now based on the principles of high quality and taste, environmental sustainability, and social justice (Petrini, 2003, 2007). Slow Food seeks to catalyse a broad cultural shift away from the destructive effects of an industrial food system and fast life toward the regenerative cultural, ecological, social, and economic benefits of a sustainable food system (Parkins and Craig, 2006; Croce and Perri, 2010; Petrini, 2010; Yurtseven and Kaya, 2011).

Food has always been an essential component of the tourist experience but it is the last few years that the importance of the wine and food tourism segment has grown noticeably, in terms of tourist numbers and consequently revenues, occupancy and territorial development (Antonioli Corigliano and Mottironi, 2013). More and more tourists in the world are looking for concrete learning experiences, and in this endeavour the gastronomic experience, in highly diverse ways, is playing an increasingly prominent part (WTO, 2012). According to some authors, this industry is becoming one of the most promising segments of the tourism sector (Bruwer, 2003; Hashimoto and Telfer, 2003). Hence, food and wine tourism has turned into an actual investigation topic giving birth to a specialized literature (among others, Hall and Sharples, 2003, Quan and Wang, 2004; Croce and Perri, 2015). What has emerged in the most recent years is that combining food and tourism is having a powerful appeal (Reza, 2014). Offering local products and culinary traditions to international and national visitors adds a new component to the image of the tourist destinations and creates additional economic activity in and around the destination (Halkier, 2012). As competition between tourism destinations increases, local culture is becoming an increasingly valuable source of new products and activities to attract and amuse tourists. Food has a particularly important role to play in this (Hjalager and Richards, 2002).

3. The role of Food in Enhancing Places and Tourist Experiences

Since the last few decades, food tourism has emerged as a major area of interest for tourism studies. Food has gained recognition by government, businesses and academics as an integral part of the tourism product, and as means differentiation for destinations (Steinmetz, 2010).

There are many benefits to be had in linking food and tourism for all stakeholders concerned (Hall and Mitchell, 2006). As stated by many authors, local food could represent a vital element that can help create a sense of ‘place’ and heighten destination appeal (Haven-Tang and Jones, 2006). Consumption is an integral aspect of the tourist experience, with the tourist consuming not only the sights and sounds, but also the taste of a place (Shenoy, 2005). Local products add authenticity to the tourist experience and provides motivation for visitors to come to a location (Sims, 2009). Local food is in fact a fundamental component of a destination’s attributes, adding to the range of attractions and the overall tourist experience (Symons, 1999).

Tourists may even be tempted to stay longer in one place because of the availability of food products and related activities (Hall and Mitchell, 2006). Tourism provides an additional sales outlet for food producers and tourism-related spending on locally produced food products helps to stimulate and revitalise local economies (Boyne *et al.*, 2003). Increasingly food is used in development initiatives to strengthen tourism destinations, and to create linkages of benefit to both the food production industry and the tourism industry (Boyne *et al.*, 2002; Hall *et al.*, 2003; Hashimoto and Telfer, 2006).

Food tourism strategies are therefore a significant instrument of regional development particularly because of the potential leverage between products from the two sector (Telfer, 2001; Hall *et al.*, 2003; Hall, 2005). Increasingly, regional tourism development initiatives are utilizing locally-produced foodstuffs and beverages to: strengthen areas’ tourism products; enhance visitors’ experiences; and help maintain and enhance the viability of local food production and processing sectors (Boyne *et al.*, 2003).

But what specifically is the so-called “food tourism”? In the literature where one sees the interface between food and tourism, food tourism as a form of tourism makes its appearance as gastronomic tourism (Hjalager and Richards, 2002), culinary tourism (Long, 2004) and food tourism (Hall and Mitchell, 2001; Hall *et al.*, 2003).

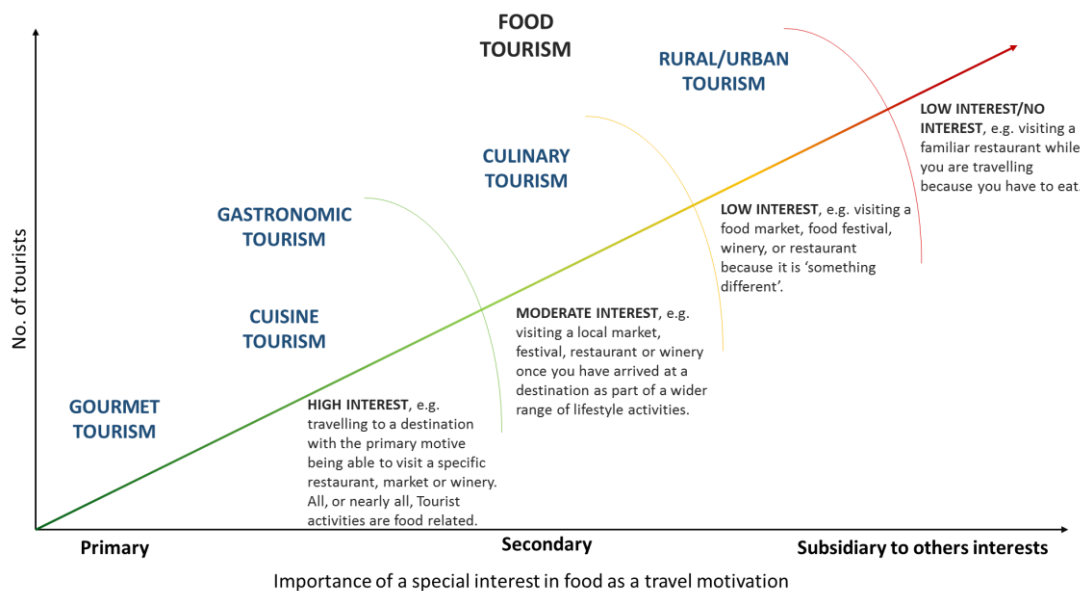


Figure 1: Food Tourism as special interest tourism (Hall and Mitchell, 2005)

These different terminologies connote almost the same notion, i.e. tourists' participation in food related activities, with food being the focus of travel behaviour rather than a by-product. In recognition of the different roles that food may play in tourism, Hall and Mitchell (2005) have categorised the food tourist in relation to the importance they place on food as a motive for travel (Figure 1).

Acknowledging that 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, 2015), local territories have designed and implemented several initiatives that address the tourist's needs highlighted so far. The initiatives undertaken by the territories were not limited to accommodation and restaurant activities (mainly related to the private sector) but they were able to transform the local heritage related to food into tourist proposals through diversified activities, as Museums, Ecomuseum; Food Events, Festivals; Food Fairs; Itineraries and Excursions; Food Tours; Workshops; Visit to markets and producers; Stores, Online Shops; etc. In this scenario,

Considering the various facets of food tourism, a focus on how food can contribute to local tourism development is becoming more urgent and apparent in current research.

4. Promoting Food Experiences and Tourism in Aosta Valley: the project *Tascapan*

The project *Tascapan* was founded as a private initiative in January 2014 from an idea by Mathieu Champretavy, a young local entrepreneur who raised the needs expressed by small local producers for selling online without affecting the authenticity and reliability of the products. Since October 2014, *Tascapan* presents itself as an e-commerce platform for both the promotion and sales of agri-food typical products of Aosta Valley and for the enhancement of the valdaostan cultural identity. *Tascapan* intends to promote a short chain that goes directly from small producers to final consumers, selecting the excellence of the territory and supporting rural and mountain communities.

This will is forthwith expressed starting with the name and the logo of the project (Figure 2). *Tascapan* represents the dialectal name used to describe the small knapsack of the mountaineers, once used to bring along food and beverage during the working day.



Figure 2: the project logo

Tascapan has met with the approval of several institutional actors of the territory, which subsequently became official partners of the project (among these, Aosta Valley

Region, Grand Paradis Mountain Community, Grand Paradis Park, Grand Paradis Foundation, Municipality of Introd).

The most important role in this project is covered by the local producers. The network created by *Tascapan* focuses indeed on small companies, often family-run, that work with traditional methods and whose products cannot be found in large distribution. Thus, the platform offers an opportunity to bring together in a single virtual place the products and the stories of the people of Aosta Valley. The project started its activities with six producers, who have tripled in just one year: 120 labels and 19 manufacturers are online today (Figure 3). Some smaller manufacturers have experienced a sudden rise of requests, which has generated a significant increase in their production.



Figure 3: the local producers

The innovative nature of *Tascapan* consists in bringing together two seemingly antithetical aspects. In fact, the entrepreneurial spirit of the project joins the cultural promotion of the territory. Bearing witness to this combination is the creation of a warehouse-shop in a local pre-existing museum, taken over by *Tascapan* since May 2015. Located in the hamlet Ville Dessus of Introd, the Ethnographic Museum *Maison Bruil - Maison de l'alimentation* (Museum of Alpine foods) represents one of the most prominent example of rural architecture that can be found in the Grand Paradis area. The current shape is the result of a complex architectural evolution that can be dated back to between 1680 and 1856, the period in which different wings of the building were joined to form a single body.

The visit unravels on three floors through the typical rooms of a traditional house, restored to their original function. *Maison Bruil* contains a special area reserved to local products (*Atelier du Goût*), a real showroom in which it is possible to discover Aosta Valley territory and its products in a tangible and conscious fashion. The visit includes the opportunity of taking part to presentations and tastings with the local producers, which underline the techniques and the cultural context where food and wine product of Aosta Valley take origin. A further space inside *Maison Bruil* is dedicated to promotion

and selling and of the typical local products, carefully selected and presented also in the *Tascapan* online shop.

The opening of the warehouse and the shop has marked the transition from virtual to real, from e-commerce to territorial marketing.

Significant results are already tangible:

- visitors can now access the museum not only during the summer season and for a few hours a day, but during the whole year;
- the Grand Paradis Mountain Community, which has entrusted *Tascapan* for the management of the museum, reported a cost savings of 60% in the face of an annual opening in 2015;
- the number of visitors has increased fourfold within a year, registering around 4,000 admissions only in July and August 2015.

The museum was in fact conceived as a physical support that favours the territorial enhancement of Introd and its surrounding areas also in terms of tourism. The innovative food project *Tascapan* has produced positive impacts on local tourism development, becoming a reference point for the initiatives and the tourist proposals that, until today, were carried out in an independent and fragmented way by various local actors. *Tascapan* relies on the collaboration among a multiplicity of public and private stakeholders. Hence, it has been able to create a network on the territory that turned the village of Introd into an emergent tourist destination (Figure 4).



Figure 4: the developing tourism scenario of Introd

Today the key target of visitors is represented by families and schools, also thanks to presence of valuable historical-cultural attractions and to the partnership with the nearby *Parc Animalier* (Animal Park) of Introd.

Among the various activities organized by *Tascapan* to disseminate the project and to attract visitors there are: participation in fairs, organization of events, exhibitions and guided farm tours with the active involvement of local producers.

Another important impact induced by this project concerns the increase in the accommodation facilities of Introd which now boasts 130 beds in a village of only 600 inhabitants. *Tascapan* is thus a young and dynamic organisation that is increasingly bringing a significant boost into the local economic and tourism development of Introd.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of the paper was to gain an understanding of food tourism and its role in contributing to processes of tourism development of a territory. As reflected in the literature, food holds a great potential in boosting the competitiveness of a tourist destination. Local food products have become an important means of selling the identity and culture of a place, motivating food producers to add value to their products by creating unique tourism experiences (Quan and Wang, 2004). As also shown, tourism and gastronomy are complex fields that involve a wide range of resources and actors in their composition (Hjalager and Richards, 2002).

The overall findings have highlighted the importance for the stakeholders to cooperate and achieve the effective implementation of integrated strategies in order to create valuable gastronomic experiences. This research has empirically demonstrated the significance of setting up projects that enable, through collaborative networks, to overcome the ever-familiar questions of polarization, fragmentation and seasonality in tourism, particularly in minor areas. The study argued that food provides an opportunity to stimulate economies through back-linkages with agriculture and other food producing sectors (Hall and Mitchell, 2006).

The case study demonstrates how an innovative project as *Tascapan* has allowed a relatively marginal village to offer an alternative tourism product to the most common skiing destinations of Aosta Valley. Thanks to this project, Introd has experienced a noticeable increase in visitor flows, motivated by a deeper understanding of the local culture, tradition and food.

This study was a preliminary attempt to gain empirically based in-depth understanding of food related projects and their impacts on tourism development. *Tascapan* is a recent project, hence the investigation has been exploratory in nature and presents the limitations concomitant to any exploratory study. The major limitations regard the availability of merely preliminary data and results, mainly of qualitative nature. However, this research leaves room for future investigations that integrate qualitative and quantitative data in order to achieve a full understanding of the impacts generated by food related projects. The analysis of quantitative data can lead to meaningful findings only over the medium term (3-5 years). Despite these limitations,

the study was able to derive some relevant findings on the issue of food related projects, demonstrating the presence of positive impacts in fostering local tourism development.

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