

The Role of Food Tourism in Supporting Vibrant Identities and Building Education among Diverse Communities and Visitors

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Toronto, located in the province of Ontario, is the largest city in Canada and has been named one of the most diverse cities in the world. The Greater Toronto Areas (GTA)'s ethnic diversity is synonymous with culinary diversity and an increasing demand for world foods. The GTA has been home to Indigenous peoples for thousands of years and three hundred years of immigration to Ontario from all corners of the globe have created an environment of exchange that continuously alters the food and drink available in the region. Toronto continues to maintain its multicultural character while growing at a pace of around 100,000 new residents per year (Galloway, 2017). As of 2017, nearly 50% of the city's population had a newcomer background. It is estimated that by 2031, 75% of the GTA's population will be either immigrants or Canadian-born children of immigrants (Nakamura and Donnelly, 2017).

The region's multicultural makeup drives disruption and innovation of food systems through a vibrant and ever-evolving food scene. The diversity of this food scene is difficult to define and package into a single tourism offering. Taking the context of growing diversity in the GTA as the starting point, the primary question explored in this paper is: What role can food tourism play in supporting vibrant identities while providing learning opportunities around local food systems and cultural heritage?

This question is explored through a discussion of foods produced in the rural areas around the GTA and the foods sought by diverse communities in urban centres of the GTA. Through analysis and comparison of land management and agricultural policy documents, community engagement initiatives, and current food tourism programs, this paper also considers the impact that the GTA's cultural diversity has in shaping the future of food education and food tourism.

Food tourism

Food tourism (also known as culinary tourism or gastronomy tourism) is direct subset of cultural tourism, drawing from ingredients of a region and from the intangible heritage and traditions of host cultures (UNWTO, 2016). Although food has long been considered a key element of the tourist experience, food tourism has become a subject of study relatively recently (Hall, 2003). The Culinary Tourism Alliance (CTA) maintains that food tourism includes any tourism experience where a person interacts with food and drink that reflects the local cuisine, heritage, or culture of a place.

For the purpose of this paper, the definition of a tourism trip draws from the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and Sport (OMTCS) definition of a touristic domestic trip as travel to a Canadian destination originating in Canada for leisure purposes. Additionally, same day trips need to be 40kms away from the traveller's home (OMTCS, 2014). As such, a 'visitor' includes both local residents and international visitors travelling in and around Ontario. Some visitors gravitate towards production-focussed food tourism experiences, such as an agritourism visit to a farm to learn and taste its product, while others are inclined to experience the food and drink of a destination primarily through consumption. The range of food tourists is increasingly being understood as 'food-connected consumers' (Carty, 2019, p.15). The archetype 'foodie' or 'gourmand', however, still exists, and this is often someone who seeks a value-added food experience, such as tasting the food of a celebrity chef or visiting a specialty food retailer.

The full spectrum of food tourism experiences can be enjoyed in and around the GTA, from farmers' markets to luxury restaurants, and everything in between. Importantly, food tourism can, and often complements other tourism experiences such as outdoor tourism, meetings & events or sports tourism, where food and drink become one part of a visitor's discovery of the destination. Food tourism can then play an important role in supporting the GTA's vibrant and diverse identities, and presenting them to locals and visitors alike.

Food Demand, Production, and tourism in Southern Ontario

The larger metropolitan area, known as the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), encompasses the City of Toronto and four regional municipalities that are comprised of 25 suburbs (Figure 1). Almost half of the GTA's 5.9 million residents (2.7 million) arrived as immigrants to Canada, and there are over 180 languages spoken in the city (Government of Canada, S.C, 2017; City of Toronto, 2018a). The GTA is also located within a broader region called the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH), which exhibits similar characteristics of multiculturalism and rapid population growth and is home to almost one quarter of Canada's 37 million people (Government of Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs, 2019).

The GGH is an area of over 10,000 square kilometres that includes the GTA's major urban centres of Toronto, Mississauga, and Brampton. Running through the GGH, is the Greenbelt, a broad band of permanently protected

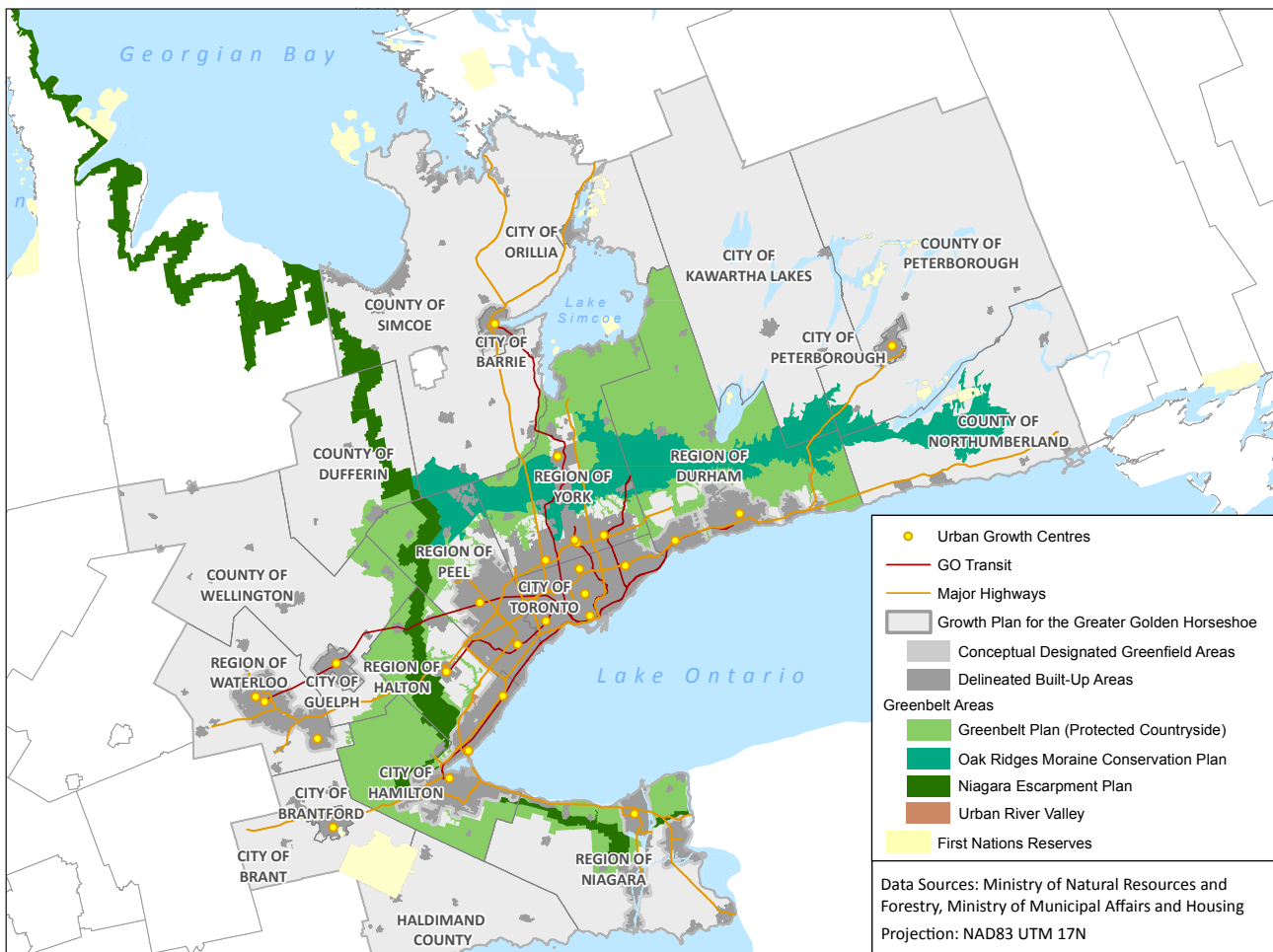


Figure 1: In this paper we will refer to 3 geographical areas in the Toronto region: the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH), the Greenbelt, and the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Source: Government of Ontario

land that stretches 325 kilometres across Southern Ontario. The Greenbelt that acts as a physical buffer to development, protects against the loss of the agricultural land base, and provides for a diverse range of economic and social activities associated with rural communities, agriculture, tourism, recreation, and resource uses (Government of Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs, 2017). Of particular importance is the protection of ‘prime agricultural land’, designated based on fertile soil composition and climate conditions, which makes up less than 5% of Ontario’s land base. This valuable, finite, non-renewable resource is essential to feeding populations in the GGH and must be protected for long term agricultural use (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2014, p.46). Once these invaluable lands are taken out of agricultural production, they are rarely reverted.

To protect food production there are strict rules around the use of prime agricultural land. These rules, which inform food tourism development, are set through a number of keystone policy documents and a range of municipal planning tools. For example, a key intent of the 2014 Provincial Policy Statement (PPS), which sets minimum standards for planning and development in the

province, is to focus development in settlement areas, away from prime agricultural land. The PPS also provides insights to the policy context around food tourism development in Ontario, especially agritourism. For instance, in the PPS agritourism is categorized as an on-farm diversified use that cannot hinder surrounding agricultural operations, and agritourism uses are defined as ‘farm-related tourism uses, including limited accommodation such as a bed and breakfast, that promote the enjoyment, education or activities related to the farm operation.’ (Government of Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs, 2014, p.39).

Similarly, The Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe ‘provides clarity about where and how future growth should be accommodated and what must be protected for current and future generations’ (Government of Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs, 2017, p.1). It works in partnership with the Greenbelt Plan, Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, and the Niagara Escarpment Plan. Together, these plans ‘establish a unique land use planning framework for the GGH that supports the achievement of complete communities, a thriving economy, a clean and healthy environment, and social equity’

(Government of Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs, p.1). The importance of supporting tourism in rural areas is mentioned in the Greenbelt Plan and a new tourism strategy for the Greenbelt is currently being developed with a focus on food tourism and nature-based tourism. In addition, municipalities in Ontario also use official plans and zoning by-laws to guide local land use planning and outline permitted land uses. Consequently, they determine whether or not tourism and food businesses are deemed acceptable in a given area.

Although the GGH is home to some of the most fertile land in the country, Ontario still imports over 20 billion dollars of food each year and over 50% of this imported food could be produced in Ontario (Cummings and MacRae, 2015, p.9). The agri-food industry contributes over \$37 billion to Ontario's gross domestic product and employs more than 800,000 people across the province (Government of Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, 2018, p.4). With a population that has roots in over 200 countries and as a region that produces more than 200 types of foods, including foods that are traditionally imported from around the world such as okra and shrimp, the GGH foodscape is rich and evolving (Government of Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, 2018). The combination of diverse foods being produced locally with high rates of food imports points to an urban-rural disconnect. Awareness building and knowledge sharing of local food systems and diverse heritages is an important role that food tourism can play.

Crops in the Greenbelt

Food production in the Greenbelt benefits from several distinct advantages, including unique soil compositions, microclimates, and proximity to strong GTA markets. In 2011, almost half of the total land area in the Greenbelt (43%) was used for agricultural production (JRG Consulting Group, 2014, p.9). Although field crops such as grains, oilseeds, and corn dominate its agricultural landscape, the Greenbelt accounts for 55% of the fruit producing land and 13% of the vegetable producing land in Ontario (JRG Consulting Group, 2014, p.57). Considering that the total area farmed was 856,424 acres in 2011 (7% of total area farmed in the province) the large percentages of fruits and vegetables being produced is significant (JRG Consulting Group, 2014, p.64).

In 2008, a University of Toronto study explored the potential for new crops to be produced in the Greenbelt that meet the demands of diverse communities in the GGH (Kelleher et al., 2009). As part of the process the study investigated the current production, supply and policy context for world crops. Findings showed that many policies constrained the growth of specific crops in the Greenbelt, including limits on seed imports (Kelleher et al., 2009). Capacity to produce diverse crops is key for both meeting the demand for multicultural food with a local

supply of ingredients, and showcasing the diversity of Ontario's cultures through food that is connected to the land.

Okra, yard long beans, and Chinese long purple eggplant are a few examples of high-demand 'world crops' featured in the multi-language *Locally-grown Food Guides* developed by The Toronto Environmental Alliance. The food guides (South Asian, Middle Eastern, African-Caribbean, and Chinese) identify where farms, farmers' markets, and retailers are selling world crops grown in the Greenbelt and surrounding area (Toronto Environmental Alliance, 2008). This initiative is one example of how connections between diverse GTA communities and local food production are being supported. It is important to consider however, how connections between world crop production, diverse food offerings, and consumption are informing food tourism in the region. Although food and drink are inextricably linked to the cultures and heritage of a place, there is a growing disconnect between food production and consumption, and this can only be overcome by bringing people closer to where their food comes from.

Food Tourism in and around the GTA

Notably, of Canada's 22 tourism regions, the GTA is one of the highest earning regions in the country for international visitor spend, with the largest share of foreign travel expenditures going to accommodation (36.8%) and food and beverages (24.1%) (Government of Canada, S.C, 2019a). In 2018, out of the 117.5 million visits to Ontario 93.4% were Ontarians visiting their home province (Government of Canada, S.C, 2019b). With the large number of domestic travellers, participation in food tourism activities could be leveraged for learning purposes, especially in rural areas where food is usually grown.

Within the GTA, visitors from near and far have access to a bounty of food tourism experiences—from dining at high-end restaurants and participating in cooking classes or seeing how maple syrup is produced at a sugar bush. Taste experiences in and around the GTA span across the food tourism value chain, which includes accommodations, attractions, beverage producers, cooking schools, farmers' markets, festivals and events, growers, producers, and harvesters, restaurants, retailers, and tour operators. Importantly, the GTA has been home to diverse and changing cultures since time immemorial. The region is considered the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat, Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee Indigenous groups. Today the region is home to an even greater diversity of Indigenous peoples, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis – many of which live within the urban centres. Currently, Indigenous cultures and traditions, including food and beverage, are undergoing a process of resurgence and increased public attention (Indigenous Tourism Ontario, 2019). As such, there is great opportunity to continue developing genuine Indigenous food tourism

experiences in the GTA as a way of promoting local economic development for Indigenous businesses and communities, and deeper cross-cultural understanding. The Canadian federal government recognizes this opportunity through their priorities for tourism development in the coming years, focussing on Indigenous, culinary, and rural tourism, which make up three of five priority areas (Government of Canada, 2019).

The potential for rural tourism growth is recognized in the *2019 Federal Tourism Growth Strategy* where the need to disperse tourism across Canada is acknowledged and building up rural and remote tourism destinations is presented as part of the solution (Government of Canada, 2019). Additionally, many rural areas in the province recognize the potential of food tourism as an economic development opportunity. For example, Destination Northern Ontario supported food tourism strategy development for several regions including Algoma, Greater Sudbury, and North Bay. The Regional Tourism Organization Kawartha Northumberland has invested in food tourism in all three of its sub-regions, from strategy development to stakeholder mobilization to research on agritourism. All of these projects were facilitated by our organization, the Culinary Tourism Alliance. There is then a growing interest and commitment to food tourism development for economic and rural development in a sustainable way that positively impacts communities.

Although Ontarians are by far the province's largest visitor group, there is a gap between demand for, and access to tourism experiences in Ontario among newcomer populations. Ontario residents who were born in other countries are more likely to travel abroad than pursue overnight travel within the province (Tourism Research Unit, 2007). In anticipation for the growing immigrant numbers in the GGH and the fact that Ontarians are the province's main visitor market, Destination Ontario recognizes the importance of engaging the ethnically-diverse residents of the province's fastest growing potential market (Tourism Research Unit, 2007). Food tourism provides an opportunity to connect diverse domestic populations with experiences familiar to them, such as visiting restaurants specializing in foods from their home countries, as well as to experiences associated with other cultural groups in the region. One example of a program seeking to support education on food systems and agricultural production is the 'Into the Greenbelt' program. It 'directly connect[s] over 1,000 children, youth, newcomers, and other underserved groups, living in urban centres, to the Greenbelt to learn about the benefits and beauty of our natural systems and protected spaces' (Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, 2020). As such, food tourism activities such as agritourism present an exciting answer to strengthening the connection between urban populations, among these newcomers, and local foods.

At the same time, both domestic and international visitors are increasingly looking for immersive travel

experiences. This is seen in the continued growth of purpose-driven and experiential travel, shaped by the tourists' desire to learn (McCaul, 2020), and the growing demand for hands-on experiences such as cooking classes and food tours on platforms such as TripAdvisor (Carty, 2019). When urbanites visit rural areas, they often seek relaxing, revitalizing escapes from the city—a connection to nature, family histories, alternative ways of living, and personal and authentic connections to the people of the place (Ainley and Smale, 2010). Rural tourism 'presents an exciting opportunity to showcase local culture, history and landscape, flora and fauna, and food and drink' (Baldacchino et al., 2015, p.1). Food tourism in the Greenbelt and other agricultural areas near the GTA has a potential role to play in showcasing rural culture to locals and visitors alike by providing them with the meaningful and multisensory tourism experiences that reflect the changing food identities of the region.

A number of initiatives seek to connect businesses across the food tourism value chain. For instance, the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation and partners have also collaborated around multi-stop tourism products that feature food and drink, including the *Brewery Discovery Routes*. This series of nine routes that showcase Ontario craft brewers, cideries, and distillers alongside restaurants and retailers that champion local food responds to the growing demand for tourism experiences with a clear connection to place. There is also the Greenbelt Farmers' Market Network, through which vendors generate between \$45-50 million per season via 142 markets in and around the Greenbelt that see 100,000 weekly users. The network supports the local food system to promote 'vibrant, connected cities and towns' and 'growing communities around food' (Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, 2016, p.16). Farmers' markets and casual food and drink experiences are some of the most sought out food tourism experiences among food-connected consumers (Carty, 2019). The existence of a large base of agricultural spaces, farmers' markets, and related food tourism experiences in close proximity to the GTA shows how food tourism is connecting city dwellers and visitors to the GTA's food sources. Within this context, the Greenbelt offers a unique tourism destination. It boasts rural landscapes, farms, historic main streets, Indigenous foodways, and natural heritage areas. With 9.8 million people living within 20 kilometres of the Greenbelt the potential for food tourism development, especially agritourism development, is huge.

Multiculturalism and food tourism

The multicultural makeup of the GTA is a double-edged sword when it comes to food tourism development. The quantity and diversity of food heritages that weave throughout communities within the GTA and broader GGH contributes to vibrant and ever-evolving food scenes. However, this dynamic makes it difficult to define, develop,

and/or package a clear food tourism offers. On the one hand, there is a risk of oversimplifying the diverse food heritage of the region, both tangible and intangible, to facilitate its commodification as a tourism product. On the other hand, there is a tremendous opportunity to celebrate this diversity along with what's becoming an increasingly creole cuisine that is unique to the GTA.

Toronto for instance, has an estimated 7,500 food service establishments (City of Toronto, 2018b). Currently, the city's tourism offering focuses heavily on multiculturalism, and its 'tasty and diverse food options' (Tourism Toronto, 2020). Signature experiences include *Taste of the Danforth* or *Kensington Market* which are renowned for their international foods. Visitors can explore a multitude of neighbourhoods known for their ethnic and diverse foods – little Korea, at least three Chinatowns, Corso Italia, the list goes on and restaurants are by no means cordoned to specific neighbourhoods. A key question is, how many of the ingredients used in this international food offering come from the nearby agricultural lands like the Greenbelt?

A program working to connect more people, both residents and visitors, to Ontario food and drink through food tourism experiences is the Feast On program. Feast On works to connect chefs directly to Ontario producers, with the aim of increasing awareness about local food products, sourcing systems and sustainable practices. It is a certification program that works with restaurants, who must verify that at least 25% of their annual food procurement purchases are Ontario foods and beverage (Culinary Tourism Alliance, 2019, p.9). As of August 2019 the program had 144 certified restaurants across the province. The program also works with 'preferred purveyors,' the growers, producers, suppliers, and distributors working to provide more Ontario food to restaurants. From cheese producers to shrimp farmers, breweries to wineries the preferred purveyors work on the sourcing side of the food tourism equation. Although annual impact reports of chefs sourcing Ontario foods are produced for the program, a question regarding the diversity of food products, or more specifically world crops produced in Ontario, is not yet measured by the program. Connecting food producers to chefs and restaurants, and communicating these relationships to the public is a key way to support the interaction of residents and visitors with food and drink from the region through food tourism.

Developing food tourism destinations involves identifying the products and experiences that make a destination unique. In the GGH, the diversity of food and drink experiences is unparalleled. Cultural diasporas produce foods from their homelands and multicultural food fusions abound. As such, food tourism businesses from restaurants to food tours to cooking classes need more access to world crops if they are to present genuine dishes and experiences tied to cultural groups represented in Toronto with ingredients grown in the area. Currently,

the market for imported world crops in Ontario is estimated to be \$62 million dollars per month (Keung, 2013). As such, this represents a large market opportunity to displace the import of world crops through crop diversification to allow for locally grown versions of these products. Although there are inherent challenges to crop diversification such as experimenting with how world crops will adjust to the soil and temperature of Ontario, an increasing number of commercial farms in Ontario are already experimenting with producing world crops to meet the demands of the GTA's diverse population and visitors.

In Toronto alone, consumers from South Asian, Chinese, African and Caribbean communities spend approximately \$396 million a year on world crops (Keung, 2013). Importantly then, around half of the total spend on world crops in Ontario (\$62 million) comes from the Toronto area alone. Consequently, there is a clear disconnect between the current focus of agricultural production and the types of products that some local populations seek (Government of Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, 2018). Currently, new immigrants are settling further away from the downtown core, opting for suburban areas with cheaper rent and more space (Warren, 2018). The food options in the region are influenced by waves of immigrants that have made the region their home. Settlement patterns of cultural groups across the region have the potential to impact the demand for, and in turn, the production of world foods. These settlement choices will no doubt influence the food landscape of the region as much now as in the future.

Conclusion

The lack of a definable cuisine may seem like a challenge to food tourism development in the GTA, wider GGH, or surrounding Greenbelt, but it is also an opportunity to celebrate and share the rich cultural and culinary diversity of these regions in genuine ways. Food is intrinsically tied to land and place, and so when thinking about food tourism development, it is key to use local ingredients so that dishes are reflections of the place and the cultures within it. Through this approach, even if the recipes are connected to places far away through knowledge of cooking techniques or traditional ingredients, they are also connected to the place where they are now prepared, in this case being grown and prepared in Ontario.

Food culture and identities are dynamic and evolving concepts, and this is incredibly obvious in a place like the GTA, where traditions and neighbourhood institutions are cherished but not frozen in time. As discussed through the examples of initiatives, food tourism experiences, and community engagement programs, food tourism can connect diverse domestic populations to experiences that may be familiar to them like visiting a restaurant but also connect them to experiences linked to other cultures in the region and to the places of food production in the area. For

food tourism to have an impact in supporting vibrant identities, building education about local foods systems, and connecting urban and rural cultures and residents the policy context determining crop-production and land use needs to facilitate crop diversification and on-farm diversification (e.g. agritourism). By doing so food tourism can have a bigger impact in facilitating connections between food producers and the diverse cultures represented in food offerings across the GTA. Food tourism, when developed responsibly and with integrity, has the potential to showcase the vibrant identities, support their connections to place by connecting their foods to the agricultural products from the region, and in doing so teach residents and visitors alike about the diverse cultures and local food systems of the area.

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