



Local food and authenticity in Greek restaurants

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to understand the role of local food and authenticity for restaurateurs in Athens and Patras, Greece. Nine restaurant owners were interviewed about their current dishes, menu and ingredients. The results of this qualitative research indicate that, for the majority of the respondents, all the ingredients that are produced inside the country are considered local. They also indicated that sourcing local food is problematic, because, although transport distances are small, the total cost of local food items makes it difficult to compete with imported food. However, to customers, both foreign and indigenous, the local origin of ingredients is crucial for the perception of food as authentic.

Keywords: authenticity, current dishes, gastronomy, Greece, ingredients, local food, menu, restaurants

Introduction

Over time, food has acquired a social and cultural meaning. Refined methods of preparation have been developed, and people used the ingredients that they could cultivate or find in their region. Through them, they expressed their style, from the taste to the presentation of their plates. Many customs were and are still linked with local food traditions. These links confer authenticity on food. Authentic food, in its turn, attracts tourists (Perales, 2016). Contemporary tourists are interested in authentic experiences in general and in particular in relation to food (Otieno Obonyo et al., 2014). Therefore, for an ethnic restaurant to work successfully, it is necessary to understand which factors are important to deliver experiences that are perceived by the guest as being authentic. Those factors are preparation, presentation and consumption (Youn & Kim, 2017).

The aim of this article is to understand the role of local food and authenticity in restaurants in Athens and Patras, in Greece. It investigates whether an ethnic restaurant can provide truly authentic tastes only when it sources its raw materials locally. The research also addresses the importance of the menu not only in presenting the range of food and beverage offered, but also as a means to communicate locality to the customers (Ozdemir & Caliskan, 2015). The results of the current research will provide a better idea of the important features of a menu in the decision-making process.

The article is divided into four sections. Firstly, local food and menu presentation are discussed. Secondly, the research method is described. Thirdly, results are presented and discussed. The fourth and final section brings the study to a close, identifies its limitations and offers suggestions for future research.

Literature review

An important feature of food's authenticity is the origin of the ingredients that are used in its preparation. Alongside its natural scenery and cultural monuments, a country could promote its local products to strengthen the economy of fragile areas (Bennett et al., 1999, as cited in Thomas-Francois et al., 2017). According to Telfer and Wall (2000), tourists spend one third of their holiday budget on food (Sengel et al., 2015). In addition, tourists' choice for local food supports local farming and small-scale companies (Henderson, 2009, as cited in Mynttinen et al., 2015). Local food shortens the supply chains, making it possible for the producer to keep a higher share of the economic benefit that otherwise would have fallen to the middlemen (Roy et al., 2017). To appreciate this benefit, it should be considered that in globalised markets only 7.5% of the final retail price goes to the farmer (Ilbery et al. 2005, as cited by Sims, 2009). However, for a system to be sustainable, it has to respect not only the social and the economical values, but the environment as well.

One of the results of producing locally is the reduction of food miles. The food mile theory assumes that the environmental impact is connected to the distance that food needs to travel in order to reach the consumers (Hiroki et al., 2016). However, this theory is a topic of great controversy among researchers. Schmitt et al. (2017) support that food miles are an important matter, but claim also that the procedures, the identity and the management in domestic production are probably more important factors than transport. This critique notwithstanding, it is generally accepted that local food products offer social benefit to tourist destinations.

Locality though is not coherently defined by consumers, professionals and governments. Lim and Hu (2015) refer to the definition by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) that allowed producers to label their products as local only if they were produced in the province or territory where they were sold, or across its borders within a 50 km radius (CFIA, 2013). However, the results of their research showed that most consumers would accept a product as local even if it originated from a 160 km radius from the selling point. An extreme case is presented by Autio et al. (2013) where Finnish residents perceive anything that is produced in Finland as local.

In his research, Allan (2016) indicates that a traveller might choose, primarily or secondarily, his destination because of its food. In support of his thesis, he referred to Hegarty and O'Mahoney's (2001) statement that a way for individuals to deeply understand the cultural difference between themselves and their destination is to taste local food. Indeed, an important factor of a destination's attractiveness and its ability to satisfy visitors lies in its culinary traditions, as well as in the variety of dishes that it provides (Sajna, 2009, as cited in Otieno Obonyo et al., 2014). Food and wine tourism preserves and develops local areas, products and dishes, which explains their establishment as a form of cultural tourism (Bencivenga et al., 2016). Authentic local tastes, though, are not just a touristic destination's attribute. According to research in Finland, many local residents felt reconnected with their roots through the consumption of local food (Autio et al., 2013). Some of the respondents were interested in the health benefits of local food, but most respondents were concerned about history, traditional production methods and traditional taste. This implies that consumers place a great value both on the symbolic and the physical value of a local product (Hopkinson & Pujari, 1999, as cited in Otieno Obonyo et al., 2014). However, according to Liou and Jang (2009, in Youn & Kim, 2017), many food providers do not spend the time that is needed to prepare authentic tastes. On the contrary, they concentrate on making tasty food and providing value for money (Schulp & Tirali, 2008).

Chiciudean et al. (2013) claimed that it is necessary to study the consumer's motivations and perceptions in relation to local products. When a consumer decides to acquire a local product, he may (as stated above) think about traditional taste, authenticity, health and similar attributes. Interestingly, consumers generally suppose that local products are organically grown, even if it is not certain whether this is the case (Hiroki et al., 2016). Organic products are produced without synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, genetic engineering, growth hormones, irradiation or antibiotics (Lee et al., 2018). An interesting question that Roininen et al. (2006) ask is whether local goods are preferred by consumers for similar reasons as organic products. Hasselbach and Roosen (2015) offer a partial answer in noticing that German consumer are equally ready to pay a premium price for organic and for local food. They suggest the use of a label that combines both of these attributes (Hasselbach & Roosen, 2015). However, in order to engage the customer, local or organic products should be properly presented. In a restaurant setting, menu presentation could play an important role.

A very common routine among restaurant guests is asking for the menu, even when they know what they want to order. A menu has two purposes: to present the range of food and beverage offered by the restaurant, and to communicate its offerings to the customers (Ozdemir & Caliskan, 2015). Research

over a menu's potential is well established. For example, Magnini and Kim (2016) evaluated how various cues (fancy font, gold paper, heavy physical menu, etc.) drive guests' perceptions. Food naming is also very important as a study (Irmak et al., 2011). Different product names have different imagery impact and can stimulate the imagination to a certain degree (Lutz & Lutz, 1977). The name of the dish not only aims at informing the guest about the food offering, but also creates feelings, images and expectations. Adding photographs next to the name of food, a common practice in ethnic restaurants, is a way to help guests form the right expectations (Hou et al., 2017). In conclusion, consumers do not seek food just for sustenance, and this is particularly true for local food because it is connected to the cultural and social identity of the destination (Sengel et al., 2015). Therefore, food ought to be connected with the region where it is served. Local ingredients and traditional recipes are the means to achieve this connection. As Greece is a country with a strong traditional food culture, this research aims at better understanding the role of local food and authenticity in Greek restaurants. Through the analysis of the answers, we hope to shed light on whether the offer of authentic food is not only good for the local society and the environment, but also for the economic success of an ethnic restaurant.

Research method

In this qualitative study the units of analysis were restaurants situated in the centre of Athens (seven units) and in Patras (two units). Units were purposively chosen on the basis of their high ratings on TripAdvisor, an open platform whose scores are updated by the customers that visit the restaurants. Arguably, these rates reflect guests' satisfaction.

Data were collected through interviews with the restaurant managers. They received a letter of introduction one week prior to the meeting, which contained an overview of the proposed research and a request for an appointment for the interview. The letter also informed respondents that interviews would be recorded to minimise information loss. Only Restaurant 1 (R1) and Restaurant 7 (R7) disagreed with recording, therefore notes were taken in these interviews. After the email, a follow-up phone call was made to arrange the meeting. The interviews were held at the restaurants' location to be able to observe the space, and lasted between 15 and 35 minutes. All interviewees agreed that restaurants' names could be used in publications. However, as a matter of precaution all the restaurants are presented in this paper anonymously (R1, R2, R3, and so on). To respondents who asked for it, a copy of the final draft version of this article was sent.

An interview outline was developed with questions focussing on the interviewees' opinions on local and organic food, authenticity, menu presentation and ingredients, as can be seen below. Examples of questions asked included: "What made the restaurants choose the dishes that they currently serve?; According to you the restaurateur, does authentic and local food stimulate sales?; How do you, the restaurateur, encourage foreign customers to order something local?; How do the restaurants feel that customers react on local or organic raw materials? What is a restaurant's greatest issue in acquiring local ingredients? In what way is the presentation of a menu important? How does using local ingredients contribute to a more sustainable restaurant operation?"

To facilitate the conversation, interviews were held in Greek. Then, interviews were transcribed in Greek and translated into English. Handwritten notes about the interviews and observations (tone of voice, speed, body language, and so on) were used when needed for the interpretation of the interviews.

The following steps were used in the analysis: (1) familiarisation with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes among codes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After reading the interviews and the notes a few times (step 1 above), the answers that were connected with the themes of the study were highlighted by the first author using colour coding (step 2). Then the same researcher circled emerging themes (step 3) and discussed them with the second author, also in the light of some separate notes from the transcripts and from the observations held during the interview (step 4). Finally, themes were clustered and named (step 5) as follows: current dishes; menu; and properties of the ingredients.

In the next section, results are presented starting with general information about the restaurants. Then, the three themes emerging from the data analysis are addressed: the dishes that they currently serve; the menu of the restaurant; and the properties of the ingredients. In this last section, the sourcing of local ingredients in the Greek market is addressed alongside the importance of local ingredients for the authenticity of the offered services.

Results

Information about the restaurants

The interviews created a rich body of information. Considering the nine restaurants that participated in this research, data suggest that they are very different in character and philosophy, even though they all serve Greek cuisine. To highlight these differences, Figure 1 plots the nine restaurants according to their perceived level of traditionalism and their perceived level of adaptation to the (foreign) guests' taste. Even though R3 and R4 are not the same business, they share the same ideology in the way that they function since one of the owners is a partner in both of the restaurants.

Current dishes

Plotting restaurants as above is informative, but fails to capture some of their special traits. For that reason, this section focuses on specific differences in the offered dishes. R8 provides Greek traditional recipes, however, the ingredients and the cooking procedures follow the Jewish tradition to cope with the demands of the Jewish guests (kosher). The tastes that are provided by this restaurant are similar to those from other traditional restaurants; the difference between them is their target group. R4 is a restaurant that specialises in breakfast and afternoon snacks. R2 and R9 have a rather different perspective on their guests' wishes. More specifically, the owner of R2 detailed:

This restaurant is a family business with Greek character. The dishes that it serves must be family food, like that a mother serves at home. This is our concept.

On the other hand, the owner of R9 stated:

A customer usually looks for a dish that reminds him of something. He does not come to find a dish that resembles the ones that were made by his mother.

The owner of R9 mentioned the importance of familiar tastes. Trying something that has similarities with what you have already tried in the past in conjunction with something new, he furthermore states, has a greater chance to be appreciated by the guest. Consequently R9 also offered foreign guests tastes that they could find in their countries of origin. The reason for this approach was to impress the customers, showing the difference in quality and taste in order to win their trust and make them try other dishes. R8 and R2 aim to bring back memories as a way to make the guests enjoy its offerings even more.

When someone reads an online review before entering a restaurant, he is aware of the type of food it provides. As R3 and R4 owners insisted,

The products that I bring for both of the restaurants are from Mani [Greek region] as well as the recipes. Having Russian recipes, for example, in [R3] would not make any sense.

A similar response was given by the owner of R2, who stated, *"the building is Greek, totally Greek. The music that plays in the store is also Greek, so everything must have a Greek character"*.

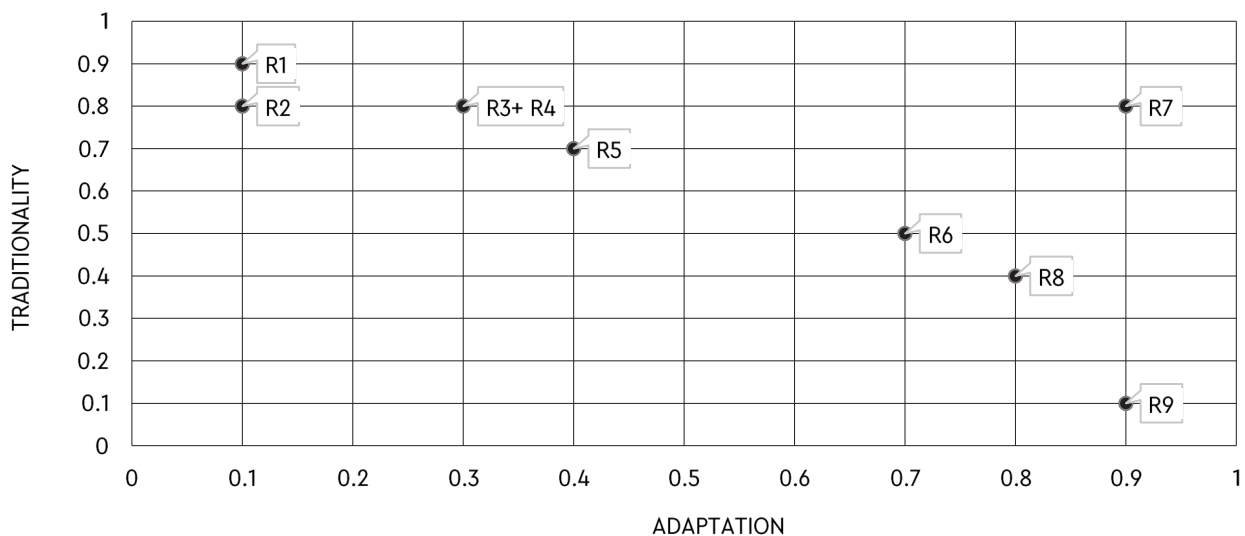


FIGURE 1: Perceived level of traditionalism and taste adaptation of the respondents

R1 is the restaurant with the richest historical background. The restaurant was Fokion Rok's old atelier, the sculptor of the Unknown Soldier's monument in Athens. It was established in 1931, and it has stayed the same since then. Its character is totally Greek and for that reason the food that is served has to be authentic. According to the owner, when he tried to make some changes to the menu, the loyal customers were not happy with his choice. The customers that are interested in places like these want to try original tastes of the country. For that reason, having things that would act as a safe choice are not needed; R9 and R5 also supported this statement. The owner of Restaurant 9 even stated that foreigners are less afraid of unknown Greek tastes than the locals.

Most of the restaurants that participated in the research, owe their success to their loyal customers. R9 supported that loyal customers are getting less over time, which could prove to be a big issue in the future. Owners think that some guests are loyal to the diverse background of the restaurant's offerings, while others are loyal because of its good location or because they have a professional connection with it. Unsurprisingly, the reason most often alleged by the restaurateurs as a reason of their clientele's loyalty was the local and traditional character of the food. The more modern restaurants like R7 and R5 adopted a healthier type of cuisine. According to these establishments, this is a very successful approach. Older restaurants though, disclaimed this statement because as stated above, the loyal customers were against it.

The results suggest that the restaurants that are family-run like R2, old like R1, or profoundly connected to a region such as R3 and R4, tend to be more traditional. Despite this, though, the managers of R3 tried to modernise their recipes in order to make them healthier. It is evident that the owners' personal taste is the driving force behind the type of cuisine that is provided. Another important aspect though are the loyal customers; these guests are a viable income for most of these businesses and for that reason their opinion of the dishes that are currently served is of great importance.

Menu of the restaurant

The importance of the menu as a tool differs for each restaurant. For R1, the menu is a tool that informs possible guests what the restaurant offers before they sit down. The respondents from R8, R7 and R9 supported that a menu is important because it gives information about the price of the dishes. R6, R2 and R5 added to this that alongside a menu, waiters are important in shaping guests' expectations. In their opinion, a menu is a tool that provides information, but that will also create questions. Waiters should be able to answer these questions. A waiter should also make the guest comfortable in case he or she feels uneasy about anything. More specifically, the owner of R5 stated:

With regard to Greek cuisine, if someone has not eaten Greek food, obviously, it will seem like something special. The importance lies on how we promote it, that is, we usually tell them to which dish it is similar.

On the other hand, R3 stated that the menu is not what is important, but the waiter is. According to the respondents, the waiter could be the saviour, but also the demise of the restaurant. R7 arranges a tasting of the dishes every time there is a change in the menu, so that the waiters are properly prepared to promote the dishes. Ultimately, R6 and R2 mentioned the

importance of a small and clear menu. According to them, many guests are afraid of big menus because it makes them feel that the restaurant is too expensive.

Most of the restaurants care about the menu, but all of them agree on the importance of the waiter. The waiter is the person that will make suggestions to the guests and answer the questions that cannot always be covered by the menu. Almost all of the restaurants adopted a seasonal menu in order to use the fresh ingredients of the season and to cook the recipes that are common at that time.

Properties of the ingredients

According to the interviewees, finding local products is not an easy task. For example, the owner of R6 sourced a type of ham called "apaki", which is produced only in Crete, from Herakleion. Another example is the wild boar cheeks, sourced by R5 from Katerini. The owner of R6 mentioned that it is a great joy to try to find these hidden tastes. On the other hand, the other interviewees were not that excited. According to them, the difficulties in getting these materials were vast and the limited availability is one of the main difficulties. The small size of the market in conjunction with the number of restaurants creates a big gap between supply and demand. In one of the interviews, it was mentioned that the establishment of guilds is of great importance, since it would be very expensive for "Cash and Carry" chains to provide these products. The volume of many of these ingredients on the market is very limited. Many of the respondents were obliged to acquire the products they needed by driving to the producer. On the other hand, this gave them the opportunity to bypass the middle person and establish good relations with the producers. As a result, many respondents managed to get their ingredients at lower prices. Unfortunately, even by sourcing ingredients directly from the local producer, this was more expensive than the imported ingredients. R9, for example, stated that a good bottle of Greek wine from Santorini is a lot more expensive than a wine of similar quality from elsewhere.

Subsequently, it is clear that acquiring local products is not an easy task. On the contrary, their price, availability, seasonality and transportation are rather challenging. R2 stated that it is hard or even impossible to refund your initial investment in these products. Interestingly enough, all of the respondents insisted that having a Greek restaurant with Greek products is of utmost importance. The owners of R2 and R3 mentioned that they even turned down offers to open the same business, in the middle of the local economic crisis, in another country because they were not able or allowed to use Greek ingredients. One of the reasons that local raw materials are so important to respondents is their high quality. Due to the economic crisis, the locals do not have the ability to dine in restaurants very often. Consequently, they want a restaurant with consistent, high quality, and the way to achieve that is by using fresh ingredients. Travellers seek different experiences and one of the ways to achieve that is through original tastes. The respondents supported that for the recipes to provide original tastes it is important to use ingredients from the country. Many of them stated that they do not even have to convince the travellers to try something purely local. On the contrary, they seek the most authentic tastes they could get. For that reason, the restaurateurs aim to inform them about the originality of these products through the menu.

Discussion

The present research reveals the importance of local ingredients for Greek restaurants, but also the problems connected to obtaining them. Most of the respondents addressed these issues by shortening the supply chains, as suggested by Roy et al. (2017). According to Henderson (2009, as cited in Mynttinen et al., 2015), this situation works in favour of the small local farms. Unfortunately, many of the respondents support that it is really hard to acquire the needed ingredients from the local farms. Some of them insisted that the solution would be the formation of guilds or small-scale companies that will provide these raw materials to the restaurants in line with Henderson (2009, as cited in Mynttinen et al., 2015).

Another interesting result of the research is that almost all of the respondents referred to all Greek ingredients as local, notwithstanding the distance from their restaurant. The only other country with a similar approach to the origin of raw materials is Finland (Autio et al., 2013).

Ultimately, a traveller seeks to find authentic experiences through the consumption of dishes from the visited area. Several respondents stated that many of their guests ask for the most traditional dishes that they could get. This is in line with the development of food tourism as a new type of cultural tourism (Bencivenga et al., 2016). On the other hand, the importance of local products and recipes is paramount for the locals as well. Local residents favour, among others, the freshness and the taste of Greek products (Autio et al., 2013). It is clear that authentic tastes are appreciated by both the locals and the tourists. While the owner of R3 recognises that using cheaper ingredients would probably mean better profits at the cost of a drop in authenticity and quality, the other interviewees believe that food prepared with authentic ingredients brings better profits than food prepared with cheaper ingredients. This is supported by Schulp and Tirali (2008), who insist that a drop in authenticity would probably result in lower profits in the future.

Conclusions, limitations and future research

This study aimed to understand the role of local food and authenticity for restaurateurs in Athens and Patras, in Greece. On the one hand, the restaurants that participated have accomplished a rather high level of sustainability. On the other hand, the obstacles that they encountered were hard to cope with. According to the respondents, the greatest problems were the high prices of the local ingredients and the difficulty in obtaining them. In order to solve these issues, they had to search for the producers themselves, and as a result shortened the supply chain.

Results also suggest that in the eyes of the restaurateurs both the locals and the travellers perceive local ingredients as special and a necessary part of authentic Greek recipes. Interestingly, though, the vast majority of the respondents treated everything that was produced in the country as local. While this is at odds with a strict definition of local, it also has a positive spinoff because products that are produced all over the country are promoted to the travellers who may then wish to taste them back home as well.

The present research builds upon interviews taken from a small number of restaurants in only two cities in Greece. As a result, the sample is not diverse. For that reason, the researcher that is

interested in conducting similar research or to build upon this project, it is highly recommended to do so on a bigger scale. The interviews were conducted with restaurant owners and reflect their subjective evaluation. Further research, for example with guests as respondents, is needed to probe this study's result.

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