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Examining farm-to-table during the COVID-19 pandemic: Sustainability and the chef-farmer relationship in times of stress

Introduction

Food is foundational to our culture. It is simultaneously fundamental to our survival and an expression of individual identity. The procurement of food is also the activity we engage in as humans with the largest environmental impact (Smil, 2000) and concerns over agricultural practices are growing (Auld, Thilmany, and Jones 2009). The practice of ‘eating out’ has increased substantially in the last several decades (Julier, 2016), further complicating the food supply chain and threatening food sustainability. While we are experiencing a technological food revolution (e.g., plant-based protein alternatives, genetically modified organisms), consumers are also on a quest for food authenticity (Askegaard, Kristensen, & Ulver, 2016). They are seeking out systems of production and consumption that produce better quality food (Julier, 2016) and match their values. Subsequently, food sustainability has emerged as a major area of concern over the past several decades.

Travel and tourism are also responsible for a number of negative environmental impacts, contributing to approximately 8% of annual global greenhouse gas emissions (Lenzen, et. Al, 2018). Meanwhile, tourism is important to the economic sustainability of many communities, with culinary tourism emerging as a significant motivator in attracting tourists (Backe, 2012; Smith & Costello, 2009). With the onset of the Covid-19 outbreak in the spring of 2020, culinary tourism came to a halt, seemingly overnight. Individuals ceased traveling and restaurants were shuttered. Yet, farmers still had crops planted, many with plans to sell to restaurant partners. The global pandemic fundamentally changed the way food was consumed around the world and tested longstanding relationships in the farm-to-table system. Therefore, this study explored the role of shared sustainability values on the durability of bonds between chefs and farmers during a time of crisis. It also explored the resilience of these small scale, or micro-entrepreneurs, in response to these challenges.

Literature Review

Culinary tourism

Culinary tourism, defined as the “appreciation of regionally produced foods and beverages” (Smith, 2001, p. 3), is especially popular in the southern United States, which is experiencing a type of “culinary renaissance” (Passidomo, 2017). North Carolina (NC) is home to distinct food regions, ranging from Eastern NC style BBQ to Appalachian cuisine. Likewise, agritourism has grown at a rapid pace in North Carolina, increasing 89% in the past decade (Ivey, 2018). Yet, the connection between culinary tourism and agritourism is understudied.

Recent research suggests that prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, Americans spent more per year eating out at full-service or limited-service restaurants than on groceries to eat at home (Goetz et al., 2020). While schools, hotels and recreational facilities have also served less food since early 2020, mail order and home delivery, as well as direct sales by farmers, have actually increased. Therefore, the way in which farmers sell their food and the way that restaurants prepare food has changed dramatically.

North Carolina is an ideal location to explore the relationships between chefs, farmers, and tourists within the context of sustainable culinary tourism because it is characterized by urban centers, surrounded by nearby rural agricultural areas. It is also fortunate to be home to a wide variety of agricultural products and a long growing season (Bradley, et al., 2016). Some researchers have described NC restaurants as a profit-based at the cost of environmental and social justice issues that concern farmers (Long, 2010). Others suggest that chefs are motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically to incorporate sustainability values (Batat, 2020), but few have looked at sustainability and the resilience of very small or micro culinary tourism enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic (Millwood & Crick, 2021; Ntounis et al., 2021).

Local food systems & sustainability

Local food networks have been identified as a way for rural areas to establish a sustainable culinary profile (Backe, 2012), particularly through shortened supply chains. This can also help construct unique relationships between consumers and producers (Mardsen, Banks, & Bristow, 2000). Shortened supply chains include products purchased face-to-face from the producer, those purchased within the local region of production, or those which are consumed outside the region but convey a particular meaning of the place in which it was produced (Mardsen, Banks, & Bristow, 2000). Agritourism can be used as a vehicle to educate consumers, establish relationships, and develop an emotional connection with farms (Nickerson et al. 2001). Face-to-face interaction, particularly in terms of visiting a working agricultural operation has also been shown to increase the bond with farmers and customer loyalty (Kline, Barbieri, & LaPan, 2016). Consequently, these shortened supply chains are acutely relevant to the sustainability of culinary and agricultural tourism. This is especially true during times when human mobility is limited, or larger supply chains are threatened, as was the case during the early part of Covid-19 outbreak.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative approach to elicit chefs' and farmers' insights on sustainable culinary tourism and to explore their perceptions of the chef-farmer relationship. The researchers used semi-structured in-depth interviews to 1) examine relationships between farmers and restaurants that source local products and 2) explore whether collaborating farmers and restaurants share sustainability beliefs and values. In-depth interviews were conducted with both chefs and farmers. As of February 2021, 12 interviews had been conducted (2

farmers/agricultural producers; 10 chefs), with a goal of at least 20 interviews (10 farmers; 10 chefs) to be completed by the end of Spring 2021. A purposive sampling method (i.e., based on identified eligibility criteria) was used (Patton, 2002). Restaurants were selected from urban areas in Central, NC (e.g., Charlotte, Greensboro, Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, Winston-Salem) based on their decision to offer locally sourced food on their menu. Farmers were selected based on their decision to sell their agricultural products to local restaurants. Introductions were initially made through a partner at the North Carolina Department of Agriculture. Subsequent participants were recruited using a snowball (i.e., referral) method. This was particularly useful in identifying farmers, and every effort was made to interview chef-farmer pairs (i.e., individuals who have an established working relationship).

In-depth interviews took place virtually from October 2020 through March 2021. Topics discussed were generally related to the current status of the business, the impact of the covid-19 outbreak, the individual's sustainability values as well as their relationship with others in the farm-to-table system. The interviews were video and/or audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then analyzed following Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006).

Results

Twelve interviews were completed with 13 participants. Two of respondents were female, with the remaining 11 chefs and farmers being male. Participant ages ranged from 30 to 74, with an average age of 40. Nearly all participants had some post-secondary education. Interviews ranged from 23 to 93 minutes, and averaged 60 minutes in length.

Preliminary results reveal a number of themes related to the ongoing importance of sustainability as well as the resilience of the micro-entrepreneurs in the face of COVID-19. Several core themes related to perseverance, flexibility, and creativity emerged. Most chefs and restaurant owners felt lucky to simply still be in business. The idea of survival (rather than growth) as a measure of success was expressed by several participants. One female chef and restaurant owner explained, *“Well, we're still here. So that's a victory. Yeah, it's - you know - it's been obviously it's been really hard here, but we're doing outdoor dining and takeout and it's January...”* A male brewery owner added,

“So it's going okay. It's not going awesome. But we're making it work. Our business is down for the year about 35%. And most critically, on premise we're doing better now, but the spring and summer, obviously, were very rough for us.”

Despite significant losses, most participants were grateful things had not been worse. One male executive chef articulated,

“Now? They're up and down. To say they're good would be a lie. To say things are bad would be a lie as well. It's a weird... I want to almost say like purgatory. We're surviving. We're not - you know - everyone's getting paid - you know - we're paying our purveyors, the lights are still on. It's not the projections we usually do though. So we're very fortunate to have what we have and what - in comparison to like other restaurants I've talked to...”

In order to survive these difficult times, participants described new levels of creativity they had yet to explore. One female bakery owner explained,

“We had to get creative pretty quickly. And we went from having two locations and a staff of seven. And now we only have this now. We got rid of the little store we had in Hampstead and have no staff. So that's been... we've completely changed the way we do it. And it's still only curbside. So, but the challenge has been making everything for one day's pickup, and keeping that concept fresh and new, because it's a much smaller crowd than it had been before. So, in a way we've gotten them to buy a lot more vegetables. In the past, we would have to fix the vegetables to get them to buy them. Now, if it's got a story and a recipe, we've gotten them - they're better about buying it and doing it themselves. But I think it's because they have more time. So we've seen a pickup in that. But it's been... We're here. It's just been... exciting.”

In certain ways, chefs, in particular, found that the pandemic both created new spaces for creativity and forced them to stay true to their core values. One male executive chef for a large hotel chain explained,

“And more importantly than that mitigating waste is more necessary now than it's ever been in this industry... I'm just trying to find ways to utilize parts of produce, animals, any product that we get in here, in ways that traditionally you might scrap or throw away or not use. I'm just trying to think of new ingenious ways, maybe bringing back some old world technique for preservation to just give some longevity and keep your inventory stock where it needs to be to make the boss people that sign the checks happy.”

Farmers, on the other hand, had rather different experiences depending on the type of operation. One heritage beef farmer answered,

“Prior to the current COVID experience, about 80% of our business was restaurants. So that may help answer the question about where we are today. Second, there's been a major disruption in processing capacity. So, we were a producer of product... So, you put all that together, and not knowing what tomorrow is gonna bring, not seeing a strengthening in the - in the restaurant side makes that challenging because some of

those will eventually get on the other side of this, but when and how is a challenge ... But so the answer is, there's enough unknown, but there's enough opportunity too that makes the days long but we enjoy the challenge I guess.”

A heritage grain farmer added,

“For us has been wide open. You know, we got lucky, due to some partnerships, you know... When COVID hit for us, it was really rough, because we were 95% restaurant based. And so suddenly, overnight, every restaurant in America being shut, that was kind of traumatic ... But what we decided to do, instead of just kind of sitting around and waiting was we actually pivoted our packaging size and started tailoring it towards the harvest box kind of craze... And at that time, the whole world was so afraid to go out that it was convenient to not have to do it from a safety standpoint that those goods found you from a risk exposure time standpoint, I think it was a perfect storm for that industry. And we pivoted very hardly in that direction. And I'm proud to say that we were able to- we were actually sold out of our rice. We sold out during COVID.”

For several chefs, the pandemic has given them the opportunity to reassess their core sustainability values, broadly defined. In some instances, it has resulted in a deeper conviction to these values, whether related to economic, social, or environmental sustainability. One male chef and bakery owner explained,

“We wanted to make sure that we're not only supporting local agriculture, but we're supporting local manufacturers. And, you know, we want to buy local food and shorten supply chains, because it's good from an ecological standpoint, but we also want to make sure that we're supporting jobs and different areas around the state ... And so I think that when we talk about running a business in a way that not a lot of folks do, we are flying by the seat of our pants. But, we've got really lucky that it's also working. So, you know, we're not just looking at what the bottom line is. By avoiding that question and talking with my investors - they said, 'Don't worry about profit margins right now. Worry about breaking even.' And we did some things where we loosened some restrictions on staff hours and labor and those sorts of things and we're actually making money now because we have loosened those restrictions. Rather than, you know, thinking about the minutiae of what a profit-loss statement is. And so, we're getting away from penny wise and dollar dumb and trying to think about dollar smart things ... And it directly reflects on the ability for us to pay our staff more if we expand. And that's the ultimate goal... what can we do to employ 100 people, and those 100 people only have one job. And that's not necessarily the norm in the restaurant business. And out of 15 people, we only have two folks that have two jobs. So, I guess my main motivation in the way in which I manage and run that business is, you know, social and political first.”

Another female chef and restaurant owner added,

“And I think when, when the pandemic hit, we obviously all panicked and all of that. But now that we're so far into it, there's a certain amount of like, whatever it takes to figure this part out - that's important. It's sort of like how I feel, and not kind of willing to go back on some of the ways that, you know, restaurants, quote, operated, or things had to be a certain way. And I guess when you're kind of constantly straddling that line of perhaps losing it all, you become a little like, fearless in a way. So I'm excited about the future. I feel like this has been a really important time of reset. And just kind of, since there hasn't been any leadership, throughout this whole thing, pretty much you just kind of go from your gut in a way. And, you know, we've been able to hire back a few people. And some people, we never - we never laid off. Just some folks that, you know, been with us for a long time and can't qualify for unemployment, because of where they come from. And, you know, all those kind of things that make you realize what your priorities are, what your values are, and then kind of evaluate from top down how all of your systems reflect that. And this has been an important time for us to be able to do that.”

Conclusion and Discussion

While the COVID-19 pandemic has been a major disruption in the farm-to-table system, it has also provided new opportunities for chefs and farmers as well as a re-examining of sustainability values. In some ways, the pandemic has stripped away previous concepts of how things “should” be done and allowed new priorities to emerge. Small-scale farmers have been able to pivot artisan crops directly to the consumer, while often maintaining key restaurant relationships. Chefs have found ways to use products more efficiently and creatively. Many remained loyal to the farmers they worked with, even with shrinking profit margins.

However, despite the ability for many chefs and restaurant owners to pivot creatively during the pandemic, few had formal strategies in place to deal with this type of shock. In some ways, the concept of sustainability has been limited because it generally involves the ability for something to be continued indefinitely (Joohnston et al., 2007). While this definition is reminiscent of the survival mode many of the study participants entered, it fails to capture the array of creative responses they have implemented during this time. Conversely, the concept of resilience has emerged as an alternative to sustainability. Resilience describes the ability of a system to absorb external disturbances before the structure is fundamentally changed (Derissen, et al., 2011). Nonetheless, as research participants suggested, perhaps a restructuring of the system is necessary.

It is certain that the travel and tourism industry will look fundamentally different on the other side of this pandemic. It is too early to determine whether or not a business has fully weathered the storm, as the pandemic is ongoing and many places still have restrictions in place. Even as restrictions are loosened, it is unlikely we will “get back to normal” in the foreseeable future. Yet, chef/owners and farmers that have shown a great degree of resilience during the pandemic remain hopeful that culinary tourism and the farm-to-table experience will evolve into a better version of itself.

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