The cultures of Restaurant Australia: epicurean food experiences for tourists in south east Queensland

By Susan Carson and Mark Pennings

Australia’s launch of the ‘Restaurant Australia’ campaign in 2014 is aimed at changing market perceptions of the ‘prawn on the BBQ’ image of Australian culinary culture. According to Tourism Australia, the campaign is being developed in response to global research that reveals how tourists want ‘good’ food and wine experiences in this country. ‘Restaurant Australia’ indicates that Australian tourism should provide epicurean food experiences associated with high quality and ‘authentic cultural’ tourism, rather than contrived versions of 'national identity' articulated via stereotypical notions of national cuisine.

Evidently, Australia has a thriving culinary culture. According to Tourism Australia, as reported in the International Business Times on September 17, 2013, ‘food, wine and local cuisine were the top consideration of 38 per cent of travellers, while beauty and natural environment were the second most important factors cited by 37 per cent. Another 26 per cent believe Australia has good food and wine to offer, but these tourists have never set foot in the country.’ Those who have visited rank Australia second for food and wine after France, and before Italy. The close association between food, wine and local cuisine on one hand; and on beauty and natural environment on the other, is an interesting finding given that historically Australian tourism campaigns have focussed on eco and adventure tourism at the expense of cultural tourism.
There is no doubt that some regions have developed a solid reputation in providing fine food and wine that attracts domestic tourists. These include the Margaret River wine country in Western Australia, the Yarra Valley in Victoria, and the Barossa Valley in South Australia. Other regional operators have developed substantial programs that cater to a range of niche cultural markets. Recently, in Queensland, on the north-east coast of Australia, the ‘Southern Queensland Country Regional Food and Wine Development Plan’ proposed a program to boost cultural tourism by attracting visitors to partake in regional food systems. We believe that these initiatives have the potential to represent a major transition in food tourism in Australia. However, we have also identified a series of unique challenges that Australian tourist policy developers confront in their pursuit of authentic activities that characterise cultural tourism in national and international contexts.

Tourism – cultural and otherwise – in all countries is being informed by a number of major developments. These include the impacts of globalisation, and the experience economy’s influence on cultural tourism. The relationships between local, regional, national and global tourism, which have been altered by the revolutionary impact of globalisation. Globalisation has offered great value for those who dedicate their disposable income on leisure and tourism, and there has been an incredible expansion in travel that has led to an estimated 1.87 billion tourists per annum (or 1 in 7 of the global population) [Rifai, UNWTO]. Global cultures are more accessible than ever due to the reduction in transport costs and a broad improvement in travellers’ amenities and food standards, and more economic resources are being directed to tourism as it takes an increasing share of national employment and GDP outputs.
Food is a critical component in the tourist experience and accounts for 25 per cent of total tourist expenditure [Quan/Wang, 2004: 299] Food satiates an essential human need, but also plays a crucial role in social and cultural practices [Mak, 2008]. Indeed, gastronomy is an intrinsic marker of national, regional and ethnic customs and expresses a broad range of symbolic meanings, as consumption of food ingredients can also tell us about social distinctions, class and educational affiliations. [Bourdieu, Distinction, 1984]. This process will only intensify in future as more people (supported by digital forms like social media) will come into contact with foreign cultures via immersive travel experiences. Globalisation has been accused of homogenising local cultures, but it is a complex process, and the term ‘glocalisation’ has been used to describe ways in which local cultures can both adapt to and differentiate themselves from globalised tendencies. Indeed, globalisation can make people more aware of their unique culture and how this might be defined, maintained and fostered.

In recent times, the post-tourist and the cultural tourist have been identified as negotiating the expectations and aspirations of travellers in a globalised experience-centric tourist industry. The post-tourist has been described as a dedicated consumer in the 18-45 year age bracket with high disposable income, a desire to be entertained above all else, treats the commodification of tourist adventures in a playful manner, and is not particularly concerned with locating ‘authentic’ cultures. [Rojek, 1993; Melanie Smith] The cultural tourist in contrast is putatively someone from an older demographic who seeks to discriminate authentic from inauthentic cultures, seeks a kind of integrity, and wants to derive considerable learning benefits from their travel.
In relation to alimentary matters, the post-tourist is likely to attend a tourist-oriented restaurant in a foreign land that serves ‘tourist cuisine’ (local dishes adapted to foreign taste), but the cultural tourist is more likely to be attracted to the idea of using their engagement with local cuisine as amateur gourmands, or ‘foodies’. This can be a form of ‘status’ food consumption, and some cultural tourists have been described as middle and upper-middle and high class denizens ‘who possess the cultural capital to appreciate and enjoy foreign food, and are sophisticated enough to be able to order it’ [Cohen & Avieli, 765]. Epicureans aspiring to this level see the consumption of new cuisine in new environments as part of a learning process where they can savour the food, imbibe the atmosphere, and develop an aesthetic appreciation of their experience [the ‘voyeuring gourmand’ Lacy & Douglas – 2002: 8 in Cohen & Avieli].

Many cultural tourists are informed aspirationalists and ‘competitive consumers’ who are more likely to seek establishments others would avoid (often due to language difficulties; i.e. Japan). In so doing, they hope to connect with, and vicariously ‘share’ in, the identity of the new culture through the consumption of its cuisine. This process has also been described as expressing the desire to find ‘existential authenticity’ [Wang, 1999] and using food to find ‘special meanings and pleasure’ [Quan/Wang, 2004: 299]. By immersing themselves in memorable and authentic ‘food contexts’ [Gustafsson, 2006] and cultural ‘settings’ [Mak 2008] they believe they are getting ‘value for money’.

The cultural tourist has been described as an ‘experience-collector’, someone who embraces the exciting novelty of eating in ethnic restaurants that offer
authentic décor, design, cuisine, local staff and new modes of hospitality. Such environments provide a stage where tourists can relax, be spontaneous, immerse themselves in the pleasures of the gustatory and satisfy their vicarious aspirations towards certain lifestyles. Such experiences might just as easily be obtained at a cheap restaurant as an expensive one, and in the former case, such tourists may congratulate themselves on securing good quality food for a cheap price (just like the locals). Any tourist – whether ‘post’ or ‘cultural’ – wants to create their own ‘story’ during such experiences [Jensen, 1999]. This story may reinforce or satisfy an ‘ideal self-concept’ (of the sophisticated traveller as mentioned), as well as other processes related to self-realisation and meaning [Cohen, “Searching for Escape”]. It is here that the tangible consumption of food facilitates enriched intangible pleasures, and these experiences can be simultaneously entertaining, aesthetic, escapist, educational and transformational (value for money again).

Authenticity is a part of a ‘unique’ tourist experience. The cultural tourist looks for authenticity according to criteria such as the ‘ethnic origins of the producer, the production techniques, the materials used, the designs or colors of the object, or even the locality in which it is purchased [my italics]’ [Cohen & A, 769] How the food is served is also important, as is the décor and ambience of the eatery as signs of authenticity. The cultural tourist also seeks ‘to vicariously experience the authentic life of others [and] in the culinary domain, they will show a marked interest in local dishes and food habits.’ [Cohen & A, 774] This is form of escapism (from the routines of everyday life) bolstered by the learning of other cultures acquired from such experiences.
Australia’s food and wine tours can offer an enriched experience for those cultural tourists seeking high quality food in an authentic ambience, which in turn can offer lucrative rewards to Australian tourism. Australia’s experience products however are not integrated and guided by a clear direction from government. Government needs develop a cohesive plan for encouraging a wide range of food producers to promote their wares in a cohesive manner. This is linked to the need to pay more attention to the role of ‘setting’ on visitor experience; can Australia offer unique ‘settings’ in epicurean parlance? And, do local regions live up to the marketing language of the Restaurant Australia campaign, launched early this year, which promises to make Australian food and wine a recognizable aspect of ‘remarkable locations’? Or, is Tourism Australia attempting to link an earlier tourism focus on landscape and the outdoors with sophisticated food and wine?

The following brief case studies, one in South Australia and one in South East Queensland, alert us to the challenges of this situation. [map showing regions needed here]

**South Australia:**

In a recent visit to two famous wine growing areas of South Australia, the McLaren Valley and the Barossa Valley, both within a 1.5 hour drive from Adelaide, we observed a continuing problem with attempts to link different aspects of culture—whether it was food, wine, art, or heritage—to bring tourists into the space of engagement and authenticity desired by Restaurant Australia. Beginning in the town of Hahndorf, in the Adelaide Hills, we followed a ‘wine trail’ to the McLaren Valley via the town of Hahndorf, known for a centre of food and wine in the Adelaide Hills. On the day of our visit the
township was preoccupied with Sir Tony Robinson and the crew of the BBC Living History channel who were filming a documentary on the town’s German history (specifically war history). [two pics of Hahndorf and Robinson] Robinson’s visit was an occasion for all manner of local heritage and tourism groups to publicize their special interests. Yet, despite boasting an attractive main street with many heritage stone buildings and shopfront references to the fine wine and food heritage of the location, a local tourism operator, Nathan Doble, who was handing out brochures for a guided tour to a nearby art collective, lamented the fact that visitors walk up and down the main street, buy an ice-cream or lunch, and leave without engaging with local creative producers. So, there appeared to be no centralized ‘point of departure’ in the town. The Hahndorf Historical Museum, which is at the centre of the main street, has no associated online delivery of information either about the Museum itself or suggested links to nearby vineyards or cultural locations. [pic of Nathan Doble]

If one searches for food and wine trails online via South Australian tourism sites prior to visiting Hahndorf, the Udder Delights food and wine trail is prominent. This company, a cheese producer, offers two self-drive trails that begin at the Udder Delights Cheese Cellar, 50 metres down the road from the Museum. The trails suggest vineyard locations and offer a hamper of specialist cheeses, purchased from the Cheese Cellar that can be matched with local wines at selective vineyards. Yet this integrated touring option was not well publicized from the Cheese Cellar retail outlet, although the production of local fresh food was highlighted [pic of sign at Cheese Cellar]
The lack of integration between food and wine information, from the point of view of the self-drive visitor, continued in the McLaren Valley. Despite a multitude of well-sign posted vineyards, [pic of the wineries road signage] food was in limited supply or was unavailable at cellar doors—for example one could only purchase an extensive cheese platter at the Coriole vineyard despite the scenic location [pic], and there was no easily accessible online information about the offerings at each location. It also appeared that coach parties had advance booked out the well-known vineyard restaurants. This experience contrasts with other famous wine growing areas of Australia: for example, in the Margaret River region of Western Australia most of the well-known vineyards have full restaurant facilities, and are often co-located with art galleries.

A far more successful approach has been implemented in the Barossa Valley, north-west of Adelaide. Here we began at the Adelaide Hills and headed for Nuriootpa to the Maggie Beer Farmshop (pic) Maggie Beer is a famous Australian chef who has built an impressive business around fresh produce and local game and television cooking demonstrations. Her ‘Farmshop’ sits beside a lagoon and between her fruit orchard, a small vineyard, and her family’s geese (farm). Despite Beer’s national success the shop is inclusive and accessible: there is no set lunchtime meal, rather food is available all day. The ‘shop’ has free tastings of her produce, and free cooking demonstrations are held every day (pic). Visitors are encouraged to taste the produce and then take a short stroll around the lagoon, where information plaques provide a narrative of the history of growing that produce at the farm. Visitors linger over the food and stay for the demonstrations. There is a strong sense of the project that Maggie Beer and her family are pursuing in relation to local produce. This site engages to a far greater degree that the winery cellar doors with the concept that
Lugosi Morgan describes as the evolution of experience management which needs to ‘move from a focus on staging performances to one on creating the space in which customers can stage, or co-create, their own experiences.’ [Morgan, Lugosi, 2010: 225] Indeed, Maggie herself has been a focus on national television programs, arguing for the importance of the Restaurant Australia campaign.

However, although this enterprise is in the heart of the Barossa wine making region, there is, again, little online connection to other wine or food producers. South Australian Tourism websites have references to ‘guides’ such as the ‘Seppeltsfield Road Touring Guide’ that includes Maggie Beer’s shop in a listing of local vineyards and accommodation venues, but once the visitor is ‘on the road’ it is difficult to find information on an iphone or ipad as to ‘the nearest vineyard (with restaurant option)’. This disjuncture between geographic positioning and data on proximity points further to a concerning lack of online integration between marketing authorities and producer.

South East Queensland

Whereas the South Australian wineries have an established, if fractured/uneven/inconsistent, presence, the south-east corner of the state of Queensland is a relative newcomer to establishing a regional food and wine presence. This inland region is generally acknowledged to produce high quality food, and has a relatively youthful, but promising, wine industry. In 2012 a ‘Food and Wine Development Plan’ was produced to highlight the need for ‘systematic change’ to improve the distribution, access and knowledge of the region’s produce. This plan sought to rectify the food service sector’s difficulty with obtaining a consistent and convenient supply of product that clearly
affected its capacity to satisfy tourists. The plan states that while the tourism industry works hard to promote the region’s offerings, ‘research suggests the on-the-ground experience if falling short of visitors expectations’ (SQCR Food and Wine Development Plan, p.5). The research states: ‘visitors to the region report difficulty in locating these offerings and often the consistency, authenticity and quality of experience is less than desirable’ (p.5). The regional authority identifies consistency and efficiency of access to food and wine experiences as the fundamental issue.

The plan includes a ‘Strategic Intervention Approach’ to address barriers such as planning regulations; identification of ‘regions’; and simple ordering and supply systems (p.6). This effort required in the short term involves a series of key actions focussed around establishing, coordinating and networking regional partnerships and funding. In the context of this plan, regional consumers and visitors are viewed as ‘wanting to buy authentically local food’ (p. 21). Another key action is to develop a network brand that includes a ‘brand story’ (p.25). The document focuses on the collective voice of the member of this network, but the approach seems to be governmental and top-down perhaps because of the regulatory and land management issues at stake. The 10-point Strategy is focussed on networking, planning, branding and marketing, with Strategy 8 identifying key drivers for farmers markets. One key action (Strategy 5) spoke of the need to counter a ‘what’s in it for me’ response from producers.

One of the difficulties of course is the perennial problem of distance. This region covers some XXX square kilometres and there is no history of regional gastronomy. However, it does include key towns such as Stanthorpe and Kingaroy that have developed niche market.
Conclusion

Despite the national ‘Restaurant Australia’ promotional initiative, much more needs be done to attract international visitors. Challenges include the higher costs of travelling over vast distances in Australia; a lack of critical mass and complementary products; a lack of integration of mobile technologies that can efficiently bring tourists to a point of interest. Moreover, ‘authenticity’ is an essential phenomenon in high quality cultural tourist experiences, yet in the promotional material of the Southern Queensland Country Regional Food and Wine Development Plan (2012) the term is used to describe food and wine that is locally produced, and states: “An opportunity exists now to create closer connections between producers and consumers and create authentic regional food experiences that will attract visitation to regional destinations.” Yet the plan also acknowledges that despite the attractions of a ‘paddock to plate’ experience of local cuisine, “‘one lone farmer out on a range does not create a food trail or regional food experience.”

Moreover, how does one create a ‘regional food experience’ in sparsely populated regions? And what exactly is the ‘Australian’ food experience, what and where is its ‘points of difference’, and what could it be? There appears to be little attention paid in regional or national planning to develop new understandings of cultural tourism. If the 21st century tourist increasingly looks for a diversified, flexible, increasingly independent and mobile experience - as suggested by Melanie Smith (2009) - and tourist demands can no longer be so clearly separated from those of residents and other users of
cities and regions - as Robert Maitland argues (2010) - then Australia faces particular and unique challenges in delivering quality gustatory experiences to the new (cultural? Post- and cultural?) touristen.

Australian tourism does not have an adequate ‘story’ about “Australia’s authenticity” as an epicurean destination. Australia is recognised for its ‘wide plethora of gastronomic offerings. Its cuisine represents a creative merging of international styles which is largely influenced by migration from Europe and more recently Asia.’ [Mak, 2008: 17] Yet this may be part of the problem. The epicurean niche experience needs to be able to stand on its own if it wishes to build a sustainable presence in cultural tourism, and shouldn’t be necessarily be reliant on attachments to pre-existing narratives about natural beauty, beaches, etc. As Quan/Wang argue: ‘foods either constitute an event attraction or act as the gastronomic part of the attractions in destinations, no less significant than other attractions, such as landscape or amusement park’ [Quan/Wang, 2004: 302]

Bio:

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