



## Food and tourism synergies: perspectives on consumption, production and destination development

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To cite this article: Tommy D. Andersson, Lena Mossberg & Anette Therkelsen (2017) Food and tourism synergies: perspectives on consumption, production and destination development, *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 17:1, 1-8, DOI: [10.1080/15022250.2016.1275290](https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2016.1275290)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15022250.2016.1275290>



Published online: 20 Jan 2017.



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## EDITORIAL

# Food and tourism synergies: perspectives on consumption, production and destination development

## Introduction

Food and tourism are, and have always been, closely integrated. However, the experiential potential that food entails has stimulated a growing interest in food tourism among producers of tourism services and destination management organisations within recent years. In terms of scholarly research, food tourism is also an expanding field, though critical studies are still needed concerning the conceptual and practice-oriented aspects of food tourism.

To facilitate an overview of the field, it is instructive to divide existing research into a consumer, a producer and a destination development perspective, and characteristic of all three perspectives is the multitude of interests, and possible conflicts between them, which they deal with. Multifarious demand patterns increasingly characterise tourists also in relation to food, and compromises towards other members of the travelling party, not least children, make food consumption on holidays highly complex. Food can be a motive for travelling, a search for an extraordinary experience and a factor, in combination with other factors, influencing visits to destinations. A food tourist may be defined as a person who selects travel destinations mainly due to anticipated food experiences and who therefore seeks out food, meals and food-related activities offered at the destination. The types of experiences gained from consuming food on holidays seem to vary and may for instance cover sensory, cultural and social experiences. Furthermore, tourists are food tourists once in a while and few, if any, are food tourists all the time (Getz, Robinson, Andersson, & Vujcic, 2014). Taken together, this adds further to the complexity of food tourism demands.

In terms of production, a large variety of producers cater for the experiential needs of food tourists, including food producers, retailers, hotels, restaurants, attractions, farmers' markets and gastronomic festivals (Hall & Sharples, 2003). It has been estimated that the average tourist in Sweden spends 20–30% of the total travel expenditure on restaurants (Paulsson, 2014) and the online travel agency Expedia has demonstrated that around 20% of Danish tourists have been on at least one holiday where food was the "reason to go" (Expedia, 2016). Though caution is needed when considering such consumer surveys, there is no doubt that food tourism is increasingly becoming big business, also in the Nordic countries. Food and meal offers are seldom the act of one producer alone and hence cooperation is necessary, often across sectors, which likewise is fraught with interests and modes of operation that may not easily go hand in hand.

Moreover, destination development centred on food tourism depends on cooperation across interests and between public and private parties (Henriksen & Halkier, 2015). And cooperation has to be mutually beneficial as well as tuned into market demands. Due to its close connection to the natural conditions and cultural traditions of a place, local food and meals are frequently used place symbols that link up with a sense of authentic place. This leaves food and meal experiences with a substantial destination branding potential that reaches beyond a food tourism context.

The ambition of the present special issue: *Food and Tourism Synergies* is to contribute to a critical knowledge base on food tourism by zooming in on the multitude of interests at stake among consumers, producers and destination developers. This is done by bringing together six papers that contribute to our practice-oriented and conceptual insight and help fill out existing knowledge gaps on food tourism. Before the six papers are introduced, we will, however, set the stage by critically reflecting on some of the potentials and pitfalls of food tourism consumption, production and destination development already debated in the existing literature.

## Consuming food on holidays

Food and meals on holidays may be experienced in a multitude of ways influenced by the personal, social and cultural background of the tourist, his or her travelling company and the specific context in terms of people and facilities in which the offer is set. Some food and meal experiences are memorable because they constitute something out of the ordinary, either good or bad, others are quite mundane and serve mainly the functional purpose of filling the tourist's stomach. Along these lines, it is possible to differentiate between peak and supporting food experiences (Quan & Wang, 2004) – the former being “reasons to go”, the latter being the food experiences that are part of the overall holiday experience but not decisive for the success or failure of the holiday. For special interest “foodies”, scrumptious food and meal experiences naturally constitute a peak of the holiday, whereas for more general-interest tourists a food experience may be one among a number of experiences that taken together constitutes the “good holiday”. And even enthusiastic “foodies” may engage more in food experiences on some holidays than on others, both because the demand patterns of the individual tourist is increasingly complex and because compromises have to be made in view of travel companions. Hence tourists' food relations are dynamic and may vary across holidays, which concurs with the understanding of consumers as increasingly volatile and fickle (Firat & Dholakai, 2006; Uriely, 2005). In view of this, set categories in terms of food tourist typologies (e.g. Cohen, & Avieli, 2004; Hjalager, 2004; Tse & Crofts, 2005) are therefore questionable. This discussion shows that tourists' level of engagement in food and meal offers vary across time and space due to potentially volatile personal interests and social contexts that necessitate compromises. To some tourists, food is even a non-experience (Blichfeldt & Mikkelsen, 2013) in that it has no supporting qualities in relation to the overall holiday experience and serves only the function of providing necessary fuel for the tourist's personal engine.

To understand the complexity of tourists' food relations, *level of engagement* has to be supplemented by a discussion of *kind of engagement*. In other words, what types of experiences do tourists gain from consuming food and meals on holidays. As argued elsewhere (Therkelsen, 2015), pleasure, health, social bonding and sense of place are four significant types of experiences that food and meal offers generate among tourists. *Firstly*, pleasurable experiences signify sense stimulations in terms of taste, smell, texture and visual impression that food, drinks and meals result in. Apart from the intake of the product, sense stimulation also occurs in the meeting with service staff and other guests as well as the décor of the restaurant, farm shop or physical set-up of the food event (Gustafsson, Jonsäll, Mossberg, Swahn, & Öström, 2014). Indulgence is central to this type of food experience and tallies well with the classical understanding of tourism as extraordinary, where everyday norms of healthy eating are broken or at least bended. *Secondly*, and in contrast to norm-breaking hedonism, healthy eating and with that engagement in the nutritious qualities of food may also define tourists' food relations. The increasingly de-differentiated nature of tourism in general (Larsen, 2008; Uriely, 2005) means that people's everyday practices and norms do not change completely with a new place context. Particularly among families with children, the

socio-cultural norm of healthy eating also influences holiday food consumption, though a greater willingness to accommodate children's wishes of unhealthy treats exists on holidays than at home (Therkelsen, 2015). *Thirdly*, strengthening the interpersonal relations of the travelling party may also be the outcome of preparing and eating a meal together. Company and conversation have been identified as central to eating out both at restaurants and as guests in someone else's home (Warde & Martens, 1998), and as "thick sociability" is a defining characteristic of particularly family tourism (Obrador, 2012), food as a means of social bonding clearly extends into a holiday context. *Fourth and finally*, food and meals as a means of providing a sense of place is found in several studies on food tourism (Bardhi, Ostberg, & Bengtsson, 2010; Cohen, & Avieli, 2004; Hjalager, 2004; Mak, Lumbers, & Eves, 2012), which stresses the learning experiences in terms of insight into historical and contemporary food practices and on that basis a broader cultural understanding.

It is important to stress that this understanding of food experiences is not an attempt at providing yet another typology of food tourists. The core of the argument is that food and meals do not result in one type of experience but that tourists may gain a number of experiences from food even within the same holiday. Hence preparing and eating a meal together with friends may at the same time be a sensory experience focused on the qualities of the products used and a social experience that draws the travelling group closer together. Just as a meal made from local produce may result in a consumer experience that signifies nutritious eating as well as a sense of the local terroir. On this basis, the intersection of experiences becomes highly interesting to scrutinise (Therkelsen, 2015).

The discussion above, furthermore, indicates that food experiences on holidays touch upon the more fundamental issues of identity construction. The qualities we hold in esteem in relation to "the good food experience", be that indulgence, healthy nutrition, social bonding, cultural sense-making and complex combinations of these, all point towards who we are and who we want to appear to be. "You are what you eat" and "one man's meat is another man's poison" are more than just *bon mots* but point to the potential of food for thinking about identity, both that of Self and Others (James, 1996). This is not an area that has received much attention in tourism research and therefore an important future research avenue to pursue.

## Producing food tourism activities

The ingenious efforts of a multitude of producers are needed to meet the complex food demands of tourists outlined above. And the complexity of the market even expands when including business tourist segments who are frequent consumers of local meals during business meeting, conferences and exhibitions. Research on the production of food experiences has a long history from hospitality research on hotel and restaurant management, which is an area that has developed an academic school of study parallel to tourism research. Tourism research has, however, more recently started to delve into production issues related to food tourism. Moreover, few academic journals draw on the synergies between tourism research and hospitality research, with *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* being a notable exception to this.

In the research literature, local food producers and restaurants with a local cuisine focus are often identified as lifestyle entrepreneurs who take pride in what they produce and are dedicated to the local area where they are based (Henriksen & Halkier, 2015). These characteristics are central contributing factors to an authentic food experience. On the other hand, these local actors are typically small scale in terms of manpower and turnover and may not have the capacity to acquire the market knowledge necessary for meeting consumer demands.

Another stumbling block for food producers may be difficulties in establishing sustainable retail relations in that disagreement on price, scale and frequency of delivery may exist (Holloway et al., 2006; Renting, Marsden, & Banks, 2003). Finally, for a lifestyle entrepreneur, growth may not be the end goal, and this may result in the actual supply of local products and meals being too limited to meet consumer demands (Halkier, 2012; Hall, Mitchell, & Sharples, 2003).

The production of food experiences are often the collective effort of a number of actors, as in the case of food festivals, farmers markets and food fairs. More or less all regions have some kind of food event centring on food and/or drink. There are food events focusing on local produce either of a particular kind, such as fish or apples, or local produce in general. Competitions are frequently included in food events, such as the chef/waiter/sommelier of the year or competitions centred on a specific product, such as oyster opening championships or growing the largest pumpkin. The events can be large or small, be held either regularly or on a single occasion, be directed at both tourists and locals or only locals, and some are open for invited guests only. Food events are seldom private actors acting on their own, the local DMO or business association often acts as a coordinating force in bringing the interests of a multitude of actors, including local volunteers, together. Getting to agree on a common concept and acting accordingly can be nothing less than a cumbersome process.

Food trails and gourmet tours are likewise dependent on the cooperation of a number of actors such as local producers, restaurants, hotels, wine producers and breweries and may be centred on a particular kind of product, such as beer, or on a broad range of local produce/dishes. Together the actors can offer an inclusive tour or a route with recommended stops where the visitors can gain insight into the story behind the food/meal as well as taste and purchase it. Again issues of cooperation appear in relation to such experience offers. For instance, food trails necessitate a certain level of shared cross-actor knowledge for the trail to come across as a coherent experience to the tourist, and this may, indeed, be a challenge to achieve (Larsen & Therkelsen, 2009). Collaborative efforts among food and meal producers and public authorities are increasingly an integral part of destination marketing and development across the world, including the Nordic countries, which will be reflected on below.

## Developing tourist destinations via food

One of the reasons why food and meal offers have become central in destination marketing and development is their broad appeal. Not only can local food and meals attract food-interested visitors (Du Rand, Heath, & Alberts, 2003; Sims, 2009), also when food-related activities are not the main travel motive, they have the potential of communicating broader experiential benefits of a destination for instance in terms of cultural impressions and insights. Moreover, food tourism has a number of positive characteristics related to sustainable tourism, which is increasingly valued in destination development: Economic impacts from food tourism remain to a large degree within the local economy; local food tourism has the environmental advantage of reducing food miles; and in terms of cultural benefits, the rediscovery and development of crops and livestock, food products and dishes may have positive effects on local residents' sense of cultural belonging, just as it may enhance tourists' understanding of the visited place.

Food and meals are linked to places of different geographical scale ranging from continents (e.g. Asian cuisine), over supra-national regions (e.g. Mediterranean food), to countries (e.g. Taste Sweden) and smaller national regions (e.g. Gourmet Bornholm) and are used for branding these places to tourists. For instance at a supra-national level, a concerted effort has been made to refine and subsequently market a New Nordic Cuisine concept building on elements such as

seasonal produce from the Nordic terroir (i.e. formed by the Nordic climate, soil and water), insight into the cultural heritage of Nordic produce, products and meals and innovative ways of using traditional Nordic food (Therkelsen, 2016). However, it is a hard struggle to establish a given destination of any size as a food destination on international markets, as the competition is fierce from high-profile food places such as Italy, France and Spain.

A salient step towards becoming a food destination is collaboration and coordination among private and public actors, not just within one sector but across the tourism and food sector (Everett & Slocum, 2013; Hall et al., 2003). Public and private actors may share the overall goal of providing tourists with more and better local food experiences; however, how to get to that goal may differ significantly. Whereas the local DMO may need to use time on mapping out interests and finding compromises that accommodate a wide variety of stakeholders, private actors will typically be focused on immediate results for their own businesses. And whereas public actors will have an agenda of cooperation, private actors will also consider organisations within the same line of business as themselves as competitors leaving broad cooperation fraught with problems.

In sum, bringing together consumer, producer and destination development perspectives contributes to a comprehensive understanding of food tourism, which considers the multitude of interests at stake, but also the multitude of resources that producers across sectors and public-private divides as well as consumers can contribute with. Such a cross-stakeholder perspective is highly beneficial both to food tourism development in practice and to the conceptual expansion of the field.

## Outline of food and tourism synergies

The six papers of this special issue contribute each in their way to our understanding of consumption, production and destination development issues of food tourism. Most of the studies are undertaken in a Nordic setting, but irrespective of their empirical context, they contribute to our general understanding of food tourism.

In their paper, *Interested in eating and drinking? How food affects travel satisfaction and the overall holiday experience*, Björk and Kauppine-Raisanen (2017) study how food interest affects food experiences at a destination and influences the overall travel satisfaction. In this quantitative study set in a Finnish context, concepts are described and operationalised with the help of factor analysis. Thus five types of food experiences at the destination are identified and analysed in terms of their influence on overall travel satisfaction. Travellers' food interests condition the influence from food experiences on travel satisfaction. This study demonstrates the importance of food experiences not only for food tourists but also for general-interest tourists' total experience and satisfaction.

Food tourism is to a large extent experienced through the senses and understanding how experiences are shaped is an ongoing endeavour among researchers. In *Exploring the concept of extraordinary related to food tourists' nature-based experience*, Goolaup and Mossberg (2017) contribute to the field by a study of tourists travelling exclusively for food experiences. A specific food activity, a visit to an Oyster Bar, is a priori defined as an extraordinary nature-based food experience and is studied on the basis of observations and personal interviews. The concept of extraordinary nature-based food experience is further developed by a number of sub-concepts: non-ordinary, togetherness; insightful, hospitality, luxurious, genuine and peripheral. By integrating these sub-concepts into a conceptual framework, the study adds new dimensions to the discussion on extraordinary food experiences.

In the next paper, *Travel for the sake of food*, Andersson and Mossberg (2017) present the result of a survey carried out in Sweden and describe the effects of enduring food involvement

on consumers' behaviour in terms of food consumption, food-related activities and travel. The core theoretical concepts are consumer involvement, identity and travel motives. They compare food enthusiasts with general-interest tourists and show how consumers within these two groups differ in terms of identity formation, attitudes towards ecological consumption, use of local produce as well as the interest in travelling for the sake of food. The study, among other things, shows that a quarter of the Swedish urban population is highly involved in food – a finding that has practical implications for DMOs, restaurants and local producers.

Food trails provide tourists with a package of activities put together by several stakeholders along a designated route. The "Taste of National Tourist Routes" in Norway exemplifies an effort to forge collaboration among a number of business actors. In her paper, *Networking and collaboration between tourism and agriculture: Food tourism experiences along the National Tourist Routes of Norway*, Mei (2017) discusses negative attitudes and dissatisfaction among business actors, which demonstrate that building relationships and sharing knowledge as part of a network are difficult. Mei suggests several factors that explain the difficulties such as a lack of willingness, involvement and trust as well as internal conflicts between public authorities. However, the fact that initial contacts have been established may eventually lead to future collaborative food tourism developments.

Whereas Mei studies horizontal collaboration between actors that provide activities for food tourists, vertical collaboration between food tourism actors and providers of local food is studied by Boesen, Sundbo, and Sundbo (2017) in their paper: *Local food and tourism: An entrepreneurial network approach*. The paper builds on a qualitative analysis of the logics of entrepreneurial local food networks and tourism actors, respectively. The research question: "Why do local food networks succeed or fail in collaborating with local tourism actors to create more tourism based on local food?" is answered by comparing various forms of actions and attitude logics. Boesen, Sundbo and Sundbo suggest that successful collaboration is characterised by the food networks and tourism actors having at least one logic in common. Logics emphasising the community aspect, that is, that both parties want to support the local community and brand it, seem to be successful, whereas a market and industry logic, emphasising egoistic economic gain, mostly hinders collaboration.

Finally, in *Destination image and loyalty development: The impact of tourists' food experiences at gastronomic events*, Folgado, Hernandez, and Duarte (2017) study the influence that two food event brands have on the destination images of Jerte Valley and Trujillo in Spain. A quantitative method is used to model the major concepts and assess the relations between these. The results show that event visitors' food experiences have positive effects on their destination image as well as destination loyalty. Folgado, Hernandez and Duarte further demonstrate a reciprocal relation between food events and destination brands showing that there are reciprocal positive benefits between the brand of a food event and a destination food brand. To brand destinations on food events thus creates a win-win situation where the brand of a destination benefits from a food event and *vice versa*.

All in all, the contributions of this special issue show that research on food tourism is becoming increasingly multifaceted and nuanced, providing valuable insights to scholars and practitioners alike. In terms of future avenues for Nordic food tourism scholars, it would be expedient to place sustainability more firmly on the research agenda. Economic sustainability in terms of paying increased attention to both geographically distant markets and to the highly local markets (i.e. the local population of a given destination) – the former being important for future growth and the latter being indispensable for local food producers and restaurants to sustain an all-year business. Moreover, cultural sustainability, in terms of building on and developing the culinary heritage of places, can contribute to a more distinct local culture that is interesting both to visit for tourists and to be part of for locals. Finally, with climate change being

one of the grand challenges of the future, environmental sustainability holds research potential for tourism scholars in that environmental forces increasingly influence demand, supply and local cultures alike. Hence by viewing food tourism through the three-dimensional lens of sustainability, many important problems are revealed, which need further attention in future food tourism research.

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