

## FOOD TOURISM IN OCEANIA: TELLING THE STORIES

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All travelers eat and drink when they travel but not all travelers are food lovers or travel for food. This research explores food tourism and food tourists in two case studies of New Zealand and the Cook Islands. The research focuses on the information about food that food lovers seek, and the critical components required at a destination for food tourism to flourish. Thirty-one interviews were conducted in both New Zealand and Rarotonga using a purposive sample. The findings show that people want information about the food stories that they can trust. In both places, many of the stories are hidden and this leads to lost opportunity and potential disappointment for the food tourist. There is a lack of voice about the food culture. New Zealand promotes its primary produce to the world but it does not actively promote the opportunity to experience it at home. The Cook Island situation reflects the complexities of small island states with lack of consistency and complacency in the food on offer. A digital food resource is advocated in both places that is curated, articulated, and disseminated to focus the lens on the food culture and all its experiences.

**Key words: Food tourism; Oceania destinations; Information sources; food culture**

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### Introduction

Food experiences can be exciting, stimulating, provocative, and challenging. There is a plethora of information that exists in the world today about food and travel; cooking has become educational as well as entertaining. Lifestyle channels on television, movies, podcasts, cooking programs, magazines dedicated to food such as *Cuisine* and Australian *Gourmet Traveller* profile food. On top of that there is the internet and all the ways that it is used to tell travelers' stories. Information is a critical link between tourists and what they choose

to do, but with all this information it can be hard to know what to believe and who or what to trust. Not only do suppliers of food experiences have their own websites but the Web 2.0 environment is the place where everyone can share their views, their images, and their dialogue, in real time if necessary (E. Latham, Good Food Awards, Food Judge and Assessor, *Cuisine* magazine, 2011–2019).

In the context of Oceania, there is little in-depth research about food lovers and what credible information sources they are seeking and specifically what New Zealand and the Cook Islands offer as food destinations. At the end of 2019 New Zealand

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welcomed 3,867,756 international visitors to the country. Tourism contributes 6.1% to total GDP with \$4.5 billion spent on food and beverages by international and domestic tourists combined (Statistics New Zealand, 2019). In addition, there are many millions of domestic visitor trips per year. The Aotearoa New Zealand Government Tourism Strategy (Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment, 2019) highlights the lack of consistent development across the regions of New Zealand, a lack of a coherent visitor proposition that links all of New Zealand's regions, and a lack of understanding of the unique visitor proposition of each region. The strategy does not mention food or food tourists as a segment of value to sustainable tourism development in New Zealand.

Visitors to the Cook Islands reached 168,760 in 2018, with 61% coming from New Zealand. Overall expenditure from tourism was \$23 million. Up to 70% of GDP is a result of tourism (Ministry of Finance and Economic Management, 2019). It is a vital component of the economy of the Cook Islands. Tourism is thriving on Rarotonga with a myriad of accommodation options from high-end resorts and villas to modest backpacker lodges as well as lots of holiday houses to rent. There are increasing numbers of budget travelers capitalizing on cheaper airfares. Some of these visitors arrive with chilly bins full of food to take to their self-contained holiday accommodation. Conversely, there are travelers paying significant nightly tariffs in resorts where expensive restaurants serve new global cuisine (E. Latham, Cook Islands Tourism and Hospitality Accreditation Assessor, Business Awards Project Manager, 2013–2017).

Both New Zealand and the Cook Islands, more particularly Rarotonga, the capital and center of Cook Island commerce, have well-established restaurants and food experiences, albeit many more in New Zealand. There is a vibrant food scene in many parts of the country although one could argue not of consistent quality or evenly spread. The lack of consistency is a point of similarity for both New Zealand and the Cook Islands. New Zealand has not demonstrated a commitment to food tourism at a national level but has a well-developed set of resources that should ensure vibrant food tourism. The Cook Islands have also not demonstrated intent on food tourism and must manage a range of social

and economic issues with the limited use of local food and high levels of imports being a key part of the tourism environment. It is important to note that there are very close ties between the two countries. Cook Island and New Zealand Māori share many cultural features. New Zealand provides substantial aid to the Cooks and there is a shared currency. The general theme used to promote both countries is linked to scenery, natural attractions, and indigenous culture (Berno et al., 2016; <https://cookislands.travel/home>; <https://www.tourismnewzealand.com>).

Information about the food scene in the Cook Islands is disseminated by local media print publications when visitors arrive on the island, via online review sites such as TripAdvisor, Facebook pages, advertorial publications, National Tourism Organization (NTO) website, and tourism and restaurant websites and media food writers such as Robert Oliver, who has done much to promote the food of the Pacific Islands. Information about the New Zealand food scene is disseminated in a much more complex manner with evaluative publications such as the Cuisine Good Food Guide profiling the best of the best as well as a myriad of other publications devoted to food and cuisine.

Within the context of New Zealand and the Cook Islands, the purpose of this study is to gain deeper insights into how food tourists access information about a destination, and the focus of tourism development that will attract or conversely needs attention to ensure food tourism will reach its potential. There are clearly real differences between the two countries: one developed country and the other a developing small island state; however, the dominant visitor group to the Cooks comes from New Zealand plus a significant number of tourism workers and business owners as well (E. Latham, Cook Islands Tourism and Hospitality Accreditation Assessor, Business Awards Project Manager, 2013–2017). Their environment is imbued with much that has resonance of New Zealand. It is proposed in this study that the New Zealand visitor demographic to the Cooks is in fact impacting on their development of food tourism.

The questions this research addresses are: What type and quality of information is the food tourist seeking about a destination's food stories? What are the factors in the destinations of New Zealand

and the Cook Islands that meet food tourists' needs or disappoint them, and what action is required?

### Literature Review

This section provides an overview of food tourism, food tourists, food tourist segmentation, and information sources used by food tourists and the trustworthiness of the information. Authors have been actively discussing and researching the concept of traveling for food experiences for several decades. Wolf (2002) described culinary tourism as experiential and interactive. Hjalager (2002) referred to it as gastronomy tourism and Hall and Mitchell (2001) as food tourism. These distinct terms are still used in the literature, sometimes interchangeably. Smith and Xiao (2008) said:

culinary tourism is an intentional and reflective encounter with any culture including ones own through culinary resources. Culinary tourism encompasses travel specifically motivated by culinary interests as well as travel in which culinary experiences occur but are not the primary motivation for the trip. (p. 289)

One of the most recent definitions provided by The World Food Travel Association (2018) is simple and evocative: "Food tourism is the act of traveling for a taste of the place to get a sense of the place."

An increasing number of tourist destinations throughout the world are sought after because of their unique gastronomy (Hjalager, 2002). Food tourism can stimulate local, regional, and national economies and contribute positively to various levels of the tourism value chain, such as agriculture and local food manufacturing (Hall & Gössling, 2016). Linking food and tourism also provides a platform to promote culture through cuisine (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2017; World Food Travel Association, 2019). It is even argued that food is culture: the word rooted in food growing, in agriculture (Bell & Neill, 2014).

All travelers eat and drink when they travel but not all travelers are food lovers or feel that they would travel for cuisine experiences (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014; Sánchez-Cañizares & Lopez-Guzman, 2012). There is a market segment of highly involved food tourists who are motivated

to seek out food experiences locally, regionally, or internationally. These are the people who travel for food and are the most dedicated to having authentic experiences in a variety of contexts. There are a range of other food tourists whose motivations and attributes mean that they do seek out food experiences but they are not as dedicated as the highly involved food lover. Beyond that there are those who can be convinced to participate with peripheral interest (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Getz et al., 2014; Hall & Mitchell, 2001; Hjalager, 2002; Robinson & Getz, 2014).

The food tourist has been found to spend more than average, be more demanding and seek new experiences and trends, and is interested to discover the authenticity of destinations through their food. Progressively, tourists are more educated, exercise criticism, and share experiences online (UNWTO, 2017). Various resources are required for food tourism to flourish. Restaurants, food and wine routes, food and wine events and festivals, artisan food producers, organizations dedicated to food, and the recommendations and advice given by reputable guides such as the *Michelin Guide* or the *Good Food Guide* in New Zealand and Australia, which endorses the quality of the local cuisine (Ignatov & Smith, 2006; Smith & Xiao, 2008).

Media, in its myriad of forms, play a powerful role between the tourist and what they do. Sharpley (2003) stated, "the media undoubtedly form a pervasive and invasive aspect of culture which has enormous influence on destination and place image, as well as on taste" (p. 113). The media also act as cultural and culinary brokers (De Marco, 2015). Social media now offer a platform for travelers to share their experiences and opinions online using text, photographs, and videos through consumer review sites, social networking sites, blogs, and media sharing sites. It is increasingly becoming a major source of travel information for many travelers and is a growing influence on travel decision making (Ayeh et al., 2013). Hernández-Méndez et al. (2015) asserted that information from family and friends, which is shared through social media, is more reliable and effective than the contents generated by other online users. This finding is consistent with that of Murphy et al. (2007), who compared the effects of word of mouth from family and friend with that from other travelers.

As digital media sources often lack traditional authority indicators such as author identity, this can diminish trustworthiness, and the absence of identity verification is particularly common in the Web 2.0 environment. Travelers appear to evaluate the trustworthiness of sources more favorably if they perceive congruence between themselves and those who generate the content and therefore some level of author identity is known (Ayeh et al., 2013). In multicountry research by Getz et al. (2014), trust in sources was ranked as follows: friends and family, destination webpages, guide books, Tripadvisor. Social media was mostly not trusted. The authors concluded that this could be attributable to the impersonal nature of the sources.

Trust and reliability of information is highly valued whether from word of mouth or from reputable sources such as guide books. “While this is the era of digital journalism and social media influence, legacy media still offers a founded and reliable voice” (Fusté-Forné, 2020, p. 82). There are examples from around the world that demonstrate the effectiveness of easily accessible, high-quality, comprehensive information to tell the stories of a place. The creation of guidebooks about a locale is one such example; these can be either digital or paper based and can be highly effective as they mediate between the destination and the visitor (De Marco, 2015). The guidebook of the Isle of Arran Taste Trail in Scotland where growers and producers and their produce were highlighted is an example. Visitors to the area who had purchased a local trail guidebook spent more money on meals made from local produce, ate out more often, and purchased locally produced food. Businesses reported increased turnover and profit, increased volume, and increased spending per customer (Boyne et al., 2002).

Fusté-Forné (2020), in discussing New Zealand, pointed out that we don’t know the extent to which media news content contributes to food tourism development and tourists’ ability to taste local food but there is a need to compare the building of tourism narratives from print media and the current marketing and promotion contents of the country. Tourism New Zealand (TNZ) is responsible for the marketing and promotion of New Zealand as a destination. In previous research, Steinmetz (2010) and Thomas (2016) painted a positive picture about the direction and intent of TNZ relating to food tourism; however,

that intent is not evident in current practice. Steinmetz did conclude that there was greater emphasis on food and tourism on the TNZ website at the time and less across the country in regional tourism websites, with significant variability from region to region. The variability of the situation has not changed greatly from the primary research conducted in 2007 by Steinmetz. The latest New Zealand government tourism strategy (Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment, 2019) does not recognize food as a key pillar of the strategy. Nor is there mention of food tourism in the latest strategic plan of TNZ (TNZ, 2017).

Fusté-Forné (2020) stated:

Both food production and tourism industries are deeply arrayed in New Zealand identity, culture and economy, and much more work is needed with regard to the influence of media coverage of food tourism on people . . . there is a huge potential to narrate the country as an outstanding food destination, with a large offer of produce and events, where to build a robust community of food lovers that includes farmers, chefs, journalists, writers, academics or food bloggers. (p. 90)

### Methodology

For this study the approach of choice is case studies. They are useful in enhancing and understanding complex issues (Burton, 2000). They provide detailed contextual analysis and investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 1994). A comparative approach is used to examine two cases that have both similarities and differences to enrich the research.

For this project, each case includes a purposive sample to access experiences and views on food tourism. The sample universe was determined to include specific categories of individuals—food professionals, destination managers, and food lovers—to provide a range of perspectives on the topic. Food professionals’ occupations are diverse (refer to Tables 1 and 2 for details) to add range to the study; however, food was the primary focus of the job. Food lovers self-identified as such. Destination managers were selected geographically for their roles in shaping the narratives around food. The sample was sourced largely through personal contacts, work colleagues, or people whose public profile indicated a fit with the topic.

Table 1  
New Zealand Interviews

Role	Location	Food Lover Segment Characteristic <sup>a</sup>	Level of Food Involvement: 0–7 <sup>b</sup>
1. Foodie	Auckland	Deliberate	6.1
2. Food Professional/writer	Wellington	Deliberate/Opportunistic	6.3
3. Destination Manager	Wellington	Opportunistic	3.8
4. Food Professional/chef	Nelson	Deliberate/opportunistic	6.6
5. Foodie	Auckland	Opportunistic	5.8
6. Destination Manager	Nelson	Opportunistic	3.5
7. Foodie	Nelson	Deliberate/Opportunistic	5.9
8. Food Professional/chef	Nelson	Deliberate	5.45
9. Foodie	Nelson	Deliberate/Opportunistic	5.9
10. Destination Manager	Wellington	Opportunistic	5.45
11. Food Professional/chef	Wellington	Deliberate/Opportunistic	6.0
12. Food Professional/writer	Auckland	Deliberate/Opportunistic	6.6
13. Foodie	Auckland	Deliberate/Opportunistic	5.9
14. Food Professional/chef	Auckland	Deliberate/Opportunistic	5.5
15. Food Professional/chef	Auckland	Deliberate	6.0
16. Food Professional/writer	Auckland	Deliberate	6.1
17. Food Professional/educator	Nelson	Deliberate	5.0
18. Food Professional/restaurant manager	Nelson	Opportunistic	5.1
19. Food Professional/National organization	Christchurch	Deliberate/Opportunistic/Accidental	6.1
20. Destination Manager	Oamaru	Opportunistic	5.75
21. Food Professional/restauranteur	Moeraki	Deliberate	7.0
22. Food Professional/educator	Dunedin	Deliberate/Opportunistic	6.1
23. Food Professional/writer	Wellington	Deliberate/Opportunistic	6.25
Overall score			<b>5.7</b>

Note. Interviewee NZ 5 and CI 3 are the same individual. Interviewee NZ 14 and CI 9 are the same individual. <sup>a</sup>Following the Travel Industry Association (2007). <sup>b</sup>Following Getz et al. (2014).

Face to face interviews were set up across both destinations. All potential interviewees were informed of the study's aims and how anonymity is protected, prior to any agreement to participate (Mason, 2002).

Thirty-one interviews were conducted in both New Zealand and Rarotonga between September

and November 2019. Two of the interviewees answered questions relating to both destinations as they have lived and worked in the Cook Islands and New Zealand. A range of views were sought from experienced informants (see Tables 1 and 2).

Each interview took 60–90 min and during the interviews comprehensive notes were taken,

Table 2  
Cook Island Interviews

Role	Food Lover Segment Characteristic	Level of Food Involvement: 0–7
1. Food professional: hospitality manager	Deliberate	5.75
2. Food professional: food retailer	Opportunistic	6.1
3. Foodie	Opportunistic	5.8
4. Food professional: chef	Deliberate/Opportunistic	6.25
5. Foodie	Opportunistic	5.6
6. Food professional: chef	Accidental	5.75
7. Destination manager	Opportunistic	4.4
8. Destination manager	Opportunistic	5.25
9. Food professional: chef	Deliberate	5.5
10. Food professional: chef	Opportunistic	6.3
Overall CI score		<b>5.67</b>

Note. Interviewee NZ 5 and CI 3 are the same individual. Interviewee NZ 14 and CI 9 are the same individual.

supported by digital audio recordings. The transcripts were analyzed following Stroh (2000). The participants' views provide the experiential and social data that bring validity to the outcomes and responses to the key research questions to inform our understanding of the social world in which food tourism resides.

The questions in the semistructured interviews related to three different areas of discussion. First, each interviewee answered questions relating to their degree of involvement with food, then questions relating to the information sources they used and their views about trustworthiness of the information, and finally they answered questions relating to the destination. To establish the profile of the people interviewed in this research, a food involvement scale was used. In an Australian study, people were analyzed based on their food involvement and whether this translated to becoming a food tourist. Each item on the scale required a response from 1 to 7, with 7 points equating total agreement with the statements, all of which related to involvement with food (Getz et al., 2014). Most of the interviewees demonstrated a moderate to high level of involvement with food. The results are tabulated in Tables 1 and 2.

The Travel Industry Association (2007) segmented travelers as Deliberate Culinary Travelers where food is a key reason for choice of a place, Opportunistic Culinary Travelers who seek out food-related activities but not the main reason to go to a place, and Accidental Culinary Travelers who participate in food experiences because they are available. Interviewees were asked to identify which of these three categories most represented them.

Most of the interviewees had traveled either domestically or internationally primarily for a food experience.

### Findings

The findings are organized as follows with direct quotes from interviewees to provide rich contextual evidence to support the themes.

#### *New Zealand and the Cook Islands Food Information Sources and Content*

There is a huge variety of information sources used. Most interviewees referred to the fact that

the internet is pervasive. Most people use multiple sources, wanting to hear the same message from more than one source to validate the information.

People's opinions, word of mouth, I read widely about travel experiences, magazines, food writers, Instagram, newspapers. (NZ 5)

I follow people and then go down rabbit holes—even Facebook ads. (CI 5)

I try to triangulate if I can—I won't ride on one piece of information. (NZ 22)

Across all the interviews word of mouth was key to obtaining the best information particularly among food professionals. Trust in information is often about knowing the person personally or a least by reputation and respecting their voice and sharing similar tastes and values particularly as they relate to food.

Talk to locals, talk to my chef friends to get local knowledge, I don't want to waste a mealtime with a bad meal. Taxi drivers and ladies of the night are great, they know the best food, most authentic food. (NZ 8)

Word of mouth from those who have been there before but not from a single source. If they have similar tastes and experiences and opinions of places as we do. (CI 5)

Hopefully the information I am reading is moderately current, reading about places that still exist, that the author has credibility, has some knowledge with no hidden agendas that I cannot see. (NZ 9)

User-generated content (UGC) and social media are valued most by those who wish to gauge people's views. The issue of trust is raised, particularly Tripadvisor, a place that interviewees stated they do not access to source reliable information. Advertorials and incentivized reviews where the writer may have been paid to write a positive review is information that cannot be trusted.

I'm a great believer in UGC. You pick up things. The best way to find stories is to test them online on social media. The way people react provides a hook. (NZ 16)

Web 2.0 does not have enough value beyond my network. I never use Tripadvisor. I don't even go

there. My network is people who travel for food and wine. A lifetime of glasses of wine and plates of food. (NZ 19)

Advertorials you can take with a grain of salt. With public reviews you get the good the bad and the ugly. If you read between the lines you get a feel for a place. (CI 7)

The impact of social media for food establishments was seen as significant whether the reviews are good or bad. If reviews are consistently saying one thing then it is important for establishments to take heed.

Tripadvisor is black mail, it is dreadful, it stops restaurants from being spontaneous. (NZ 21)

Restaurants should ignore Tripadvisor at their peril. The fact of the matter is that if people have taken the time to record their feelings—if there is a trend and you ignore it you may be missing a pointer about the restaurant's future. (NZ 12)

#### *New Zealand Food Information Sources and Content*

*The Need for a Comprehensive Story About New Zealand Food.* Interviewees felt that there is a need to learn and explain much more about the New Zealand food story. Information needs to be easily accessible, preferably online, that tells the whole story. Information needs to include a wide range of diverse food experiences to appeal to all markets: high end, middle of the road, and budget food experience consumers. The need to curate the information is important.

We need to be able to provide in digital format, region by region, artisan winners, delve more into the casual dining sector, wine food, beer. It could be an APP, it needs to be told by a trusted source. There are different levels of food tourism, we have something for everyone. Everyone in the business has a story to tell- the story of the people, families, those are the stories to be told. (NZ 16)

*New Zealand Food Culture Has Yet to Find its Voice.* There is a belief among the interviewees that there are a significant number of New Zealanders to whom food is fuel; they don't particularly value

food and this impacts on the ability to tell our food stories and identify our food culture.

For NZ a large percentage of the population don't place value on amazing food or quality food or taste. NZ is pretty fixated on sport and scenery, people are not widening their tastes. (NZ 7)

Food in NZ is by in large still just food for fuel for people. Most New Zealanders will be looking for value for money and quantity over quality and innovation. (NZ 17)

Although we haven't yet developed the language to freely describe our food culture and to celebrate it, the interviewees were able to articulate the essential elements of our food culture.

NZ food culture is a consequence of the people and place in context—the original stories of tangata whenua make us unique and then it is the landscape and all of its parameters and immigrant cultures. We are a South Pacific nation—so fish—we are a colony—so Britain's little farm. Auckland has the largest Pacific food culture and we are part of Asia as well. All of these things overlapping each other. (NZ 19)

In NZ we do have stock standards like paua and whitebait but it is always evolving and constantly changing here. When people ask me to describe NZ cuisine it is hard to explain. Pacific flair, innovative, open ended. We are a melting pot of cultures. A Vietnamese restaurant called Apache won the hamburger award in Wellington on a Plate. (NZ 11)

#### *Cook Islands Food Information Sources and Content*

*The Value of More Comprehensive Information About Food and Food Culture.* Interviewees felt that documenting the food story and food experiences, as well as the range of food establishments as a positive step forward.

To be more comprehensive is good, to see the bigger picture, not just the top restaurants. Someone who makes different things. There is so much to be discovered that is not even necessarily seen on Google. (CI 9)

Food culture is locally made, made in the homes of people, food prepared with love, the best food

to eat made with traditional recipes from years of experience. (CI 2)

### *New Zealand as a Food Destination*

*Food Is Not at the Top of the Tourism Agenda.* People do not come to New Zealand for the food is a view expressed by some. There is also a view that those in tourism marketing decision-making positions are not food lovers and they drive the narrative. It is all about adventure and scenery.

There is huge emphasis on adventure tourism not food—we are not known as a food destination. It could be easily changed if the tourism authorities and local government got behind food. (NZ 2)

There is no one organization that is telling the story—there should be a Ministry of Food, you need people in positions who understand food and can drive the conversations. There is the Ministry of Primary Industries and regional tourism offices but they are not driving the story. (NZ 16)

*We Celebrate the Food we Export But Not the Food Experiences at Home.* We promote our primary products but do not put the same energy into promoting what is happening here and the food experiences on offer is a view of interviewees.

Part of it is our production driven mentality to food—milk solids, frozen carcasses. The country is so dominated by the production driven, commodity export, bulk attitude. The actual final treatment of the food gets pushed to the background. (NZ 10)

*The Realities of the Food Scene Leads to Inconsistency of Experiences.* Interviewees concluded that there are plenty of food options in the urban centers and some in regional New Zealand; however, much of the country has limited options in terms of eating establishments that can lead to disappointment. This does not mean that the country is short on food experiences.

The food of the Waitaki: Whitestone cheese, Palmerston asparagus, the closest commercial asparagus to the Antarctic, jersey benny potatoes, Kakanui tomatoes, pine nuts, organic dairy. It keeps growing. The special flavors and characteristics of the limestone soils. (NZ 20)

Levin is voted one of NZ's most boring places but in Levin there is RT's liquorish, Genoa pesto and the asparagus farm—all sorts of food industry there but unless you have a guide you wouldn't know. (NZ 2)

The standard is really low in a lot of places—not just the food but the food premise—the whole thing. If authentic kiwi is vinyl seats, dirty toilets and stale sausage rolls then we are not putting our best food forward. (NZ 9)

*Actions to Take to Lift the Game.* A consistent theme expressed is that New Zealanders need to find their voice about food culture. The history of being a supplier for others has prevented New Zealanders from having pride in themselves. People stated that better communication and education is vital. Advocacy about food also requires the right people in the right jobs to tell the New Zealand food story to New Zealanders and the world.

We gave up responsibility for local ingredients because we were the paddock in the ocean for the mother country. We have never got over seeing ourselves as suppliers of ingredients. (NZ 19)

Development boards for local tourism need to talk to the industry and work out how to promote something that is manageable. It needs to be well managed to be positive, right people, right experience, right knowledge. They must have interest. It is hard to promote something that you are not a part of or at least interested in. The guy who thinks food is fuel is not the person we want heading our development. (NZ 8)

### *The Cook Islands as a Food Destination*

*The Reality of the Food Scene Leads to Inconsistency of Experiences.* The food scene and food establishments lack consistency. There are a variety of reasons given for this such as complacency and staffing problems, impacting on the quality of the delivery.

The food scene is as strong as it has ever been in Raro however it is consistently inconsistent, both the food and service. You can go twice in a week and have a completely different experience, poor service, badly educated staff. It is hard to teach people who have never been off island, increasingly staff are coming from overseas, Filipino, Fiji, Indonesia, NZ. (CI 3)

Some of the places here have had the same menu for ever because there is such a high staff turnover, they don't change their menus. Then there are the menus with tinkered out items—it is a sign to “get out of here.” (CI 1)

*Individuals Dominate and Influence How Things Get Done.* In a small island environment, interviewees felt there is the issue of the dominance of some individuals and the consequence of this for others.

A true food guide would have to have the good, the bad and the indifferent. People's egos have to be taken into consideration. (CI 7)

In Raro the mentality is everyone should get a prize, everyone gets a consolation prize. (CI 2)

The problem is the size of the pool; people have thin skins. (CI 5)

*The Type and Style of Visitors Influences the Food on Offer.* With an increasing number of visitors coming to the Cook Islands and many on budget carriers there is a feeling that this is influencing the food scene in Rarotonga. They do support the local economy however. The lack of high-end tourists is seen to relate to the fact that the Cook Islands cannot deliver food or service to meet their needs.

The Cooks is closely linked with New Zealand—75% of the people coming are kiwis and 75% of them are not food tourists. (CI 2)

Any tourist is the best one for Raro. There are the Jetstar people. We do have a lot of low-end traveler, they eat at the market, burgers, sandwiches. Some people say we should attract the high-end tourists, but we do not have the supply to meet their needs. (CI 2)

Low end tourists support the local Cook Islanders more; local families do Air BNB and the money stays in the country. At the resorts the money goes offshore. Unless food and service can be increased, we can't promote ourselves as a high-end destination. Locals are not prepared to make changes; at the moment it is big Polynesian food and sell it on. (CI 2)

*The Stage in Destination Life Cycle and the Sophistication of the Food Scene.* Interviewees

commented that the Cook Islands is still heavily dependent on imports of food and beverages, anecdotally estimated as high as 70%. Naivety about quality was expressed. The general feeling is that the Cook Islands is not ready to talk about the food experiences.

Like tourism there are stages in the life cycle—got to start somewhere to get to maturity—depending on where the destination is in terms of maturity, the role of food will change. We are at the beginning of the food journey to create food experiences. (CI 8)

Cook Islands is on the third rung of a 10 rung ladder. Still 70–75% of food is imported, there is not enough supply and variety of vegetables, meat is imported and even some fish. Farmers are still doing things in their traditional ways. Tomatoes and pineapples all come at the same time and then there is none. It needs some coordination to do different things, it is a real catch 22. (CI 7)

There is no degree of sophistication with the food here compared with New Zealand and Australia. There is a lack of maturity as a tourism destination, we are still very naive about what quality is about. (CI 7)

*The State of Strategic Thinking and Action About Food.* The tourism scene was described as busy and active. Effective decision making and leadership is advocated and more emphasis on achieving quality.

We still have an industry that is self-driven and insulated. They like to self-govern and self-critique. A number of owner operators need to get out and see the world. You should be making great cocktails from scratch and not using cheap pre mix. Some think they are doing a wonderful job, some need to retire but they are hanging on for dear life and new ones come in and make mistakes—buying prepackaged prawn twisters and salt and pepper squid—the same old things. (CI 1)

There is a lot of chugging along organically but not enough effort to plan, coordinate and work together to manage the sector. The success of tourism is also our let down. Business is good at the moment and people are focused on their day to day delivery, not thinking about our strategic future. The appetite for planning and development goes on the back burner. (CI 8)

A lack of voice about food culture and food experiences is described. Food tourism and capturing the food tourist is not at the top of vision for marketing the Cooks Islands to the world.

Maybe the CI doesn't have the product as such or are not proud enough to talk about. They may not have the offerings right. (CI 9)

It is really hard to say come to the Cooks and have an amazing food experience, we aren't ready, the food is not universally excellent. We aren't ready to go "wow come on down" better to be an under-achiever and people go away and say that was good—under promote and over deliver. (CI 7)

## Discussion

### *Information Sources and Their Content*

In both New Zealand and the Cook Islands there are real similarities in the type and quality of information that people are seeking. In order to be able to delve into food culture, food stories must be accessible, diverse, and trustworthy. The need to learn more and describe more is common to both destinations.

There is a huge variety of information sources used, with some interviewees involved in deep research and the creation of spreadsheets on travel and food to those preferring spontaneous experiences with no research at all. The diversity of sources of information reflects the plethora of information available.

Communities of like-minded people belonging to respected food groups were referenced as go-to places. Interviewees felt that they needed to be cautious about Web 2.0 and apply filters to validate the information. There is lack of trust in advertorials and incentivized reviews where the writer may have been paid to write a positive review.

Word of mouth is the most valued source of information especially from likeminded people and is the key to obtaining the best information, particularly among food professionals. Most people use multiple sources, wanting to hear the same message from more than one source to validate the information. Trust in information is often about knowing the person personally or a least by reputation and respecting their voice and sharing similar tastes and values, particularly as they relate to food.

Information must be current and authoritative; old news will not suffice. These findings reflect those of Hernández-Méndez et al. (2015), Munar et al. (2013), Murphy et al. (2007), and Surlemont and Johnson (2005), all of whom asserted that information from word of mouth is most trusted and is the key influencer from all information sources.

Interviewees felt that there is a need to learn and explain much more about the food story of both destinations. Currently these vivid descriptions of the food stories are missing and finding out about them is difficult. This leads to lost opportunity and potential disappointment for the food tourist.

The food stories need to be curated, articulated, and disseminated potentially via a publication that spreads the word and comprehensively catalogues the food stories to meet the needs of every type of traveler. Food specialties should be highlighted and diverse food experiences to appeal to all markets: high end, middle of the road, and budget. The information should focus on the provenance of food and a celebration of ingredients, providing the signposts for local and visitors about what is potentially available to experience. Information needs to be easily accessible, preferably online, that tells the whole story.

### *Current State of Food Tourism in New Zealand and the Cook Islands*

The factors in each destination that meet food tourists needs or disappoints them, and what action is required varies between New Zealand and the Cook Islands. Both places have the challenge of telling their food stories eloquently enough to be recognized as food destinations. So far it is piecemeal. The real differences between the two countries in terms of economic development—one developed country and the other a developing small island state—result in different constraints and variables for both that are described in the following discussion. Of note is that the makeup of New Zealand budget visitors to the Cook Islands and the lack of value they place on food impacts food tourism development there.

In the New Zealand context, there is a belief among the interviewees that there are a significant number of people to whom food is fuel, and that

these people do not particularly value food and this impacts on the ability to tell the food stories. Having food experiences rather than satisfying hunger is a cornerstone of culinary tourism (Long, 2004). New Zealand has a lack of clarity about food culture resulting in it not being articulated well with a sense of apology rather than celebration. Despite the findings of Bell and Neill (2014), who assert a far more knowledgeable and adventurous food consumer culture in New Zealand, particularly since the 1950s, there are still many people whose sense of culinary adventure is limited. Even for the food adventurers, articulating the food culture in so many words is not easy. There is no doubt that there has been a fundamental improvement in the food scene with a vastly different and dynamic food environment in recent years, in part a result of the increasingly multicultural population and the availability of diverse foods from around the world. The huge increase in production of a wide variety of new foods has also impacted significantly. New Zealand has multiethnic cuisine, creative chefs, and significant agricultural and marine products: all key factors for effective food tourism (Kivela & Crotts, 2006).

New Zealand promotes its primary produce to the world with gusto but does not significantly promote the opportunity to experience those ingredients in their own setting. There are lost opportunities to promote local food and beverage experiences to the world by stakeholders in tourism or primary industries. The interviewees lamented that those in positions to create the narrative are not food lovers and that is important to have the right people in positions of authority to bring the food story to life. New Zealanders appear not to be able to get over the tradition of being the supplier of ingredients yet those same ingredients are the cornerstone of New Zealand cuisine, particularly as the country lacks local or regional dishes that define the food culture (Steinmetz, 2010).

It could be argued that TNZ have gone backwards in their focus on food; their current website largely focuses on sporting opportunities. There are pages dedicated to food and wine and information is available, but it is not comprehensive. The previous marketing strategy of TNZ focused on the interactive traveler, a niche market whose profile has a match with those who may well seek out food

experiences when they travel. This focus on special interest tourism segments is no longer active.

The seasonality of tourism, a small population base, and some regions not focused on food and tourism means that what is supplied may be patchy and visitors and locals may well be disappointed by the food establishments and the level of service on offer. The 2018 report by Ministry of Primary Industries and the ANZ Bank highlighted that there is a perceived lack of variety and quality of food across the country. This is likely because visitors both domestic and international don't know where to go as food experiences outside of food establishments are not well communicated. It is also essential to have interaction and coordination between a range of stakeholders within regions and across the country for food tourism to flourish (Hall, 2009) as is the need to enhance local landscapes and their food culture so visitors can experience them (Fusté-Forné, 2020).

Interviewees concluded that we are spoiled for choice in our major urban centers and some pockets of regional New Zealand; however, much of the country has limited options in terms of eating establishments. Not every region should necessarily become a food tourism destination per se. Some regions fare better than others and although what is on offer is inconsistent across the country, there are patches of brilliance and opportunities exist almost everywhere for food experiences, if they can be found. Many already have a profile: crayfish on the beach at Kaikoura, mussels in Havelock, smoked fish in Mapua, but there are also tomatoes in Kakanui with a wedge of Whitestone cheese, asparagus in Levin, and blue cod in Invercargill. All the stories need to be told even in those regions that are not necessarily thought of for food. An interesting example is the Waitaki region in the South Island. Their plan for a geo park and an associated geo-gastronomic plan centers on the elements of landscape, geology, and terroir and these are the very elements that have the capacity to create regions that can become destination icons (Fusté-Forné, 2016).

The Cook Island situation reflects the complexities of small island states with lack of consistency and complacency about what is on offer: making do in many ways and not necessarily striving for excellence. It is not helped by the "food for fuelers," the dominant visitors who want bulk and

quantity rather than quality. The view expressed is that many of them are not food tourists and not too concerned about the quality of what they eat. Interviewees therefore support the notion that the type of visitor from New Zealand is impacting on the development of food tourism. Potentially these visitors are also those who have not found a food voice within their home setting. They do support the local economy however and stay in houses owned by Cook Islanders. The lack of high-end tourists is seen to relate to the fact that the Cook Islands cannot deliver food or service to meet their needs.

Food tourism and capturing the food tourist is not top of the vision for marketing the Cook Islands to the world. Berno et al. (2016) showed that food does not rank highly in destination promotion compared with sun, sea, and sand and there are missed opportunities. Although Berno (2017) reported that there have been plans to invigorate the food stories it was clear from the interviewees in this study that this has not gained significant traction.

Documenting the current food scene and food establishments in any evaluative manner is seen as difficult largely because of the inconsistency of what is on offer. There are a variety of reasons given for this such as complacency, staffing problems, churn, and the need to import staff to fill jobs who have little understanding of local cuisine, all which contribute to impacting on the quality of the delivery (Catherwood & Twining Ward, 2006; South Pacific Tourism Organization [SPTO], 2013).

Interviewees commented that the Cook Islands is still on its journey to sophistication and maturity. It is still heavily dependent on imports of food and beverages, estimated anecdotally as high as 70%. Island states typically have limited resources and increased visitors and temporary workers strain resources even more (Hall, 2010). A lack of commitment to using local food resources or celebrating the local food culture adds to the situation. On top of this mix lies the colonization of the Pacific, the last wave of that colonization being tourism. Instead of celebrating the cuisine of the islands, the menus of most places reflect those of the tourist-generating countries: in this case New Zealand (Berno, 2017). Food imports create leakages and lead to lost opportunities for linkages between food and agriculture sectors (Belisle, 1983; Conlin & Baum, 1994; Torres, 2003).

Naivety about quality was expressed; however, the Cook Islands has managed to develop a successful tourism industry without being overtaken by international investors. There is considerable local ownership of the tourism product (Scheyvens & Momsen, 2008). The general feeling is that the Cook Islands is not ready to talk about the food experiences. They too could benefit from an information source that provides the food narrative, starts the word of mouth, and develops the pride in their delicious ingredients: local fruits such as coconuts, mango, papaya, passionfruit, pineapple; vegetables such as maniotia, taro, snake beans, rukau (spinach) renga (turmeric) and fish such as tuna, broadbill, parrot fish, mahi mahi, marlin and eke (octopus).

In the words of Eric Wolf (2020), founder of the World Food Travel Association:

Food and drink are the cornerstone of tourism. All travellers eat and drink. They can return home with memories of chain burgers and chain coffee or a savvy destination, tour operator or other suppliers can make sure that travellers have the information to make solid choices and to create impactful memories. In many ways food and drink should be the cornerstone of any tourism strategy, even in areas not known for great food and drink. Food and drink affect all five human senses making them one of the most influential experiences.

## Conclusions

This study considered the information about food experiences that travelers seek, and the critical components required at a destination for food tourism to flourish. It is apparent in both case studies that comprehensive and trustworthy information is highly valued and that for culinary travelers access to the food stories of a destination is vital. For both New Zealand and the Cook Islands there is a lack of comprehensive, quality information and this has a critical impact on the ability to flourish as sites of successful food tourism.

A comprehensive food resource or guide is advocated, most likely digital, curated by expert voices and funded effectively to ensure its longevity and currency. This could also potentially go some way to overcoming the lack of voice about food culture.

This research contributes to the existing literature in three main areas. It adds to the work of Getz et al. (2014), within the context of New Zealand and the Cook Islands, in terms of the level of food involvement and how it contributes to participation in food tourism activities. Getz et al. defined a highly involved foodie as one that scored over 5 in the various components of the scale. Only three interviewees scored less than 5 and they were destination managers who may well not have any particular interest or affiliation with food. All other interviewees had an affiliation with food either through their profession or their personal interests.

The research also adds to the work of Fusté-Forné (2020) in suggesting that the marketing and promotion of food tourism in both destinations is lagging behind the media narrative. Media narrative, however, needs to be comprehensive and accessible enough to have real value and at this point it is piecemeal.

This study also highlights the impact of the stage of development of a country and how that may impact on what is on offer as a food tourism destination. The issues that confront small island states in providing tourism experiences, particularly in the areas of human resources, have been documented extensively in the literature. This study supports previous research within the Cook Islands (Berno, 2017; Catherwood & Twining Ward, 2006; SPTO, 2013) and provides further insight into the ongoing issues faced by this island nation. New knowledge is provided around the barriers to expression of food culture.

In both destinations the conundrum rests with those who have the ability to make changes, and it seems that too often it depends on individuals with the passion and drive to make change and to continue the momentum long term. Both destinations have the challenge of putting food culture on the map and finding the voice to tell the food stories.

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