

Culinary experiences as a key tourism attraction. Case Study: Braşov County

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Abstract: *Providing authentic travel services is a prerequisite of increasing the attractiveness of a holiday destination. The development of the culinary tourism by integrating the traditional menus in the offer of food services or the organization of festivals based on culinary traditions of the visited area are components that highlight local specificities and which ensure the differentiation of the tourism offer on the national and international market. This article analyses the potential which favours the development of culinary tourism in Brasov county and which can represent a key element for improving the image of this tourism destination.*

Key-words: *culinary experiences, food tourism, food festivals, destination image*

1. Introduction

The development of food tourism to a destination enhances the visitors' experience. Nowadays issues like how we eat, what we eat and where we eat are subjects which generate extensive debate, reflection and important actions in our everyday life. During trips there are no exceptions to these rules, explaining why obtaining relevant answers to these questions influences the holiday program. Elements such as the culinary curiosity, the desire to diversify the daily menus, the desire to taste new or famous dishes are real topics which can facilitate and strengthen knowledge about the visited destinations, local customs, completing thus the travel experience.

2. Theoretical background

The tourism literature has highlighted that local food and cuisine significantly affect holiday destination choice (Long, 2004 cited in Alderighi, Bianchi and Lorenzini, 2016; Quan & Wang, 2004), and greatly influence the enjoyment of the stay (Fox, 2007). In such a context, food tourism is quickly becoming one of the most interesting and popular areas of the tourism industry (Kim, Kim, and Goh, 2011).

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Food tourism may be considered a subset of culture tourism (Horng and Tsai, 2010), in which tourists can observe, participate in, and gain an understanding of other peoples and places through food and eating experiences (Okumus, Okumus and McKercher, 2007; Lin, Pearson and Cai, 2011). Food is a fundamental aspect of culture for a place (Mak, Lumbers and Eves, 2012) and food tourism can enhance the identity of destinations because it is strongly related to ways of life, local production, cultural celebration, and heritage (Everett and Aitchison, 2008). Food tourism refers to the participation of tourists in food-related activities during a trip, such as purchasing local foods and consuming local cuisine (Hall and Mitchell, 2001 cited in Tsai and Wang, 2016). Hall and Sharples (2003 cited in Tsai and Wang, 2016) established levels of interest in food when traveling: (1) high interest, such as gourmet tourism, gastronomic tourism, and cuisine tourism, each of which consider food to be the primary motivation for traveling; (2) moderate interest, such as culinary tourism, where tourists view food-related activities as essential to understanding a destination's local lifestyle; (3) low interest, such as rural/urban tourism, through which tourists participate in food-related activities because they want different experiences; and (4) low interest/ no interest, where tourists consider food and eating as simply satisfying needs. Tsai and Wang (2016) analyzed the differences between full-service restaurants' activities and street food. The full-service restaurants highlight elements such as service excellence, sophisticated food presentations or aesthetics superlatives, while lively vendors delivering street food and having joyful interactions with customers offer a significant and strong experiential value, as well. Delicious and affordable food is an attractive food experience for people with limited budgets, and street food is a major type of food sites in a city, being a moderator between experiential value and the city's food brand image (Choi, Lee and Ok, 2013).

Culinary experiences have become a major tourism attraction for many destinations (Cohen and Avieli, 2004), and food tourism is now a key element in destination marketing strategies (du Rand and Heath, 2006). Food-related tourism initiatives could contribute to regional development, and, as a consequence, the role of food in tourism can be extended from a tourist's attraction to a destination into the tourist's major attraction to a destination (Boyne, Halland and Williams, 2003). Moreover, compared with other travel activities, food often can be consumed outside the limitations of seasons (Kivela and Crofts, 2006). Analytical results show that food can create a strong and unique image, motivating a tourist's intention to visit and revisit. Food - including the type of ingredients, cooking styles, or culinary fusions - has the advantage of being distinctive to that place (Nelson, 2016). New trends arise in food consumption which encourage natural products (Neacşu, 2015, p.64). Tsai and Wang (2016) emphasized that: (1) in the competitive tourism market, the uniqueness food image can be promoted to distinguish a city from its competitors; (2) traditionally, DMOs rely on elements such as museums and natural environment while food is only a supporting character; (3) with a strong place of

food image, DMOs can remarket their cities by defining them as food destinations that are supported by other tourism resources. The creation of business alliances and marketing associations will help SME to better approach the foreign markets and to reduce costs of promoting products overseas (Boşcor, 2015, p.229). As Lee, Chao and Lin (2016) concluded, interesting food provides not only a basic need but also a cultural experience for tourists and the special dishes tell the histories and cultures of the people. Recent studies confirmed the existence of a strong and statistically significant link between local food products and the intention to (re)visit a mountain destination and indicated that experience of local products plays a significant role in promoting both the places of origin and other similar tourist destinations, typical food products having a market-expanding role (Alderighi, Bianchi and Lorenzini, 2016).

Food and wine festivals can also promote the authenticity of destinations (Park, Reisinger, and Kang, 2008). While foodservice offer at special events can serve as the *raison d'être* or as a peripheral service to the tourist experience (Fields & Stansbie, 2004 cited in Robinson and Clifford, 2012), previous studies have suggested that foodservices can augment overall event authenticity through differentiation, association and as a quality control mechanism (Robinson and Clifford, 2007). With more intense competition in the global market without quality and without special skills in its obtaining, assessment and continuous improvement, companies will not be able to meet the increasing demands of consumers (Madar, 2014, p.71).

3. Braşov County as a culinary tourist destination

Romania has many important culinary traditions. The official tourism site of Romania, i.e. www.romania.travel, informs visitors that Romanian tourism specificity is based on the following three pillars: natural beauty, the hospitality of local people and the flavours of regional cuisine.

The central characteristic of the Romanian cuisine is its great variety being a cuisine influenced by repeated waves of different cultures: the ancient Greeks, with whom Romanians traded; the Romans, who gave the country its name; the Saxons, who settled in southern Transylvania; the Turks, who for centuries dominated Romania; as well as Slavic and Magyar neighbors. All of these influences gradually blended into the varied and delicious Romanian culinary tradition (Klepper, 1999).

As for Brasov County, the established tourist valences of the local gastronomy are, to a high extent, ignored by the authorities in the field. For example, APDT Brasov (the Association for the Promotion and Development of Tourism in Brasov County), founded in the year 2006 by the Brasov County council, aims integrating the promotion of all representative tourism attractions in Brasov county. By its specific organization and activity, the association is a genuine Destination

Management Organization (DMO) aiming to encourage initiatives, projects and practices for the tourism development of Brasov County. Yet, among different and numerous tourism activities promoted by this association, such as: wood and leather manufacture, pottery, traditional painting, milling, traditional costumes and music, etc., the attractions represented by local gastronomy are neglected.

Important local events, as the festival organized in Bran, known by the name "Răvăşitul oilor" followed by the "International pastramy and cheese festival", numerous slow food festivals, the festival of Pancakes held every year in Prejmer, the celebration of bread in Sâmbăta or Women's Scrambled Eggs custom (a custom held by older women who gather three days after Easter and make a huge cabbage scrambled eggs) are a few examples that highlight the existing potential for the development of this type of tourism in Brasov County.

On the other hand, in Brasov County there are some famous restaurants for the traditional menus served and their specific ambiance which represent a tourism symbol of the region. In this respect could be mentioned the traditional restaurants from Ardeal area which belong to Sergiana group. The Carpathian Stag Restaurant is one of the most durable and most famous Romanian cuisine restaurants from Brasov; in Poiana Brasov are well known the traditional ethnic restaurants such as Coliba Haiducilor, Cabana Vanatorilor, Sura Dacilor or Stana turiistica. In Bran area, a famous restaurant is the Mountain Princess Restaurant from Moieciu de Sus.

Another significant gastronomy element from Brasov County is represented by the famous pancakes. Served as main course (stuffed with meat) or served at dessert when they are stuffed with cheese, these pancakes are a Romanian and Saxon mix, a very special and tasty meal (Roman). The potential that exists in the area is significant and encouraging. Few weeks ago, Sibiu has been awarded European Region of Gastronomy 2019. The history, the coexistence of different cultures and civilizations influenced the local gastronomy, thus Sibiu differentiating itself as a genuine gastronomic destination.

4. Conclusions

The promotion, development, and finally, the knowledge of tourist destinations by visitors are possible after identifying genuine elements, capable to differentiate a place from others. The development of culinary tourism has these valences, the more, in the contemporary society, the choice of the menus and the satisfaction of food needs has an important place in daily activities. The restaurants, as small firms, could understand that innovation is the tool that can help them survive on the market and can offer the advantage in a highly competitive environment (Epuran, 2015, p.61) and adapt accordingly. Romania, Transylvania region and Brasov County in particular, are distinguished on the national and international tourism map through specific and unique gastronomic features. Including the culinary tourism specific to

this area as motivations of visiting are ways to diversify and complement the tourism offer or to reinvent established holiday destinations. Finding the most appropriate ways to promote the local gastronomy festivals, keeping unaltered recipes or including culinary tourism programs in the offer of incoming tourism agencies will ensure a positive trend in the evolution of tourism sector.

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