

INSIGHT FROM INSIDERS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY FOR EXPLORING FOOD TOURISM POLICY IN IRELAND 2009-2019

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on how the phenomenon of food tourism developed in Ireland between 2009 and 2019. Employing a phenomenological epistemology, a qualitative methodology was adopted to explore key stakeholder's lived experience of the Irish government's approach to food tourism, identifying the primary drivers and key moments during the ten-year period. Extant literature was reviewed and critically evaluated. Using purposive sampling, and employing an emic posture, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior governmental and tourism industry figures until saturation occurred. The findings highlight the influence that key policy makers, the formation of networks, clusters, and the role social entrepreneurs had on developing food tourism in Ireland. The influence of the economic downturn in 2008 was a force for change and creativity

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among both government agencies and the broader tourism and hospitality industry. Food tourism policy was aligned with broader government policy, the creation of regional tourism brands (Wild Atlantic Way etc.), linking gastronomy with cultural and other tourism initiatives and marketing strategies. Whereas food in tourism in Ireland is well established, only ten per cent of overseas visitors are travelling specifically for food experiences.

INTRODUCTION

The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) defines tourism as being the 'activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes' (De Esteban et al., 2015, p. 9). Globalisation has brought about cultural changes which have impacted tourism activities, leading to the appearance of many niche markets within the tourism offering (Everett, 2016). Food tourism, defined by Hall and Sharples (2003, p. 10) as 'visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of specialist food production region are the primary motivating factor for travel', has now emerged as one of those key tourism activities, offering as it does the opportunity for food lovers to seek out culturally authentic food experiences (Getz et al., 2014). Ellis et al. (2018) suggest that food not only defines the cuisine of a country but also represents the traditions, stories and symbols of a nation. Therefore, interacting with the food of a place provides tourists with an opportunity to co-create a unique and memorable tourism experience (Kivela & Crofts, 2006).

The academic literature suggests some blurring of the lines between the concepts of 'Food Tourism' and that of 'Food in Tourism' (Mulcahy, 2019a), however, there is widespread acceptance of the pivotal role (about 33% of tourist spend) that food now plays in the tourism product of any country (Fáilte Ireland, 2018). With food so deeply connected to its origin, many destinations are focussing their marketing efforts and product development strategies on their own unique food offerings (UNWTO, 2012). Ireland is no exception in this regard. Mac Con Iomaire (2018a) concedes that Ireland has a greater historical connection in the public imagination with drink rather than food, yet he argues for food to be recognized as part of Ireland's intangible cultural heritage. There is growing international recognition of the quality of food produced in

Ireland and increased priority given to the promotion of food and food related activities within government agencies (Allen & Mac Con Iomaire, 2017; Healy & Mac Con Iomaire, 2019). Since 2009, Fáilte Ireland, the National Tourism Development Agency, has begun to develop policies and strategies for food tourism in Ireland (Mulcahy, 2019a). Both tourism and food tourism have become incorporated into rural policy making in Ireland, acknowledging not only the greater economic role of non-agricultural actors in rural economies but also the growing importance of environmental and sustainability imperatives (Hall & Gossling, 2016).

This paper will briefly outline the history of food tourism globally before discussing the growth and development of food tourism/food in tourism in Ireland from 2009 to 2019. The main aim is to examine the Irish government's approach to food tourism by exploring the major developments and identifying the primary drivers of Irish food tourism during this ten-year period. The objective of this paper is to explore the development of food tourism policy in Ireland from 2009-2019. This research attempts to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the historical origins of food tourism phenomenon in Ireland?

RQ2. How did food tourism policy develop in Ireland from 2009-2019?

RQ3. What was the lived experience of various stakeholders of the development of food tourism policy in Ireland?

The first section explores the current literature relevant to food tourism, its growth and development and reviews international cases as well as significant developments in Ireland. An outline of the methodology used to gather the primary data is then offered. This is followed by the presentation of the key results derived from the data analysis, and the development of a contextual framework. A discussion of the results obtained in the context of addressing the overall research aim follows, together with conclusions incorporating both the practical and theoretical contributions of the findings relating to the relevant stakeholders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The increasing interest in food tourism as a field of study has generated the emergence of several definitions of the term 'food tourism'

(Henderson, 2009; Mulcahy, 2017). These definitions aim at distinguishing those who eat by necessity during their travels, from people deliberately looking for food and drink experiences or traveling for food-related motives. There have been a number of different terms used to describe the combination of food activities and tourism such as 'food tourism' (Getz et al., 2014), 'culinary tourism' (Long, 2004), 'gastronomic tourism' (UNWTO, 2012) and 'tasting tourism' (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014). Everett (2016) suggests that the complex and ever-evolving nature of food tourism justifies the use of several terms to designate it. In fact, she advances that using one definition would undermine and simplify food tourism: in many cases food and drink activities overlap with other wider forms of tourism, hence the need for different definitions (Everett, 2016).

Historical Origins

Historical evidence has shown that food has played a key role in the experience of travellers for many centuries. However, it is suggested that perhaps food tourism as we know it dates back to the 18th century, when people first started exploring other cuisines during their travels, be they based on war, commerce or leisure (Mulcahy, 2019b). Tannahill (1991) notes that there was culinary engagement on the part of people who travelled around different countries, tasting foreign food and drinks. Professional tour guiding can be traced back to the tutors who accompanied the young aristocrats on the 'Grand Tours' in that their roles of mentor and pathfinder were antecedents of Cohen's (1985) theories of contemporary tour guide roles. In the 18th century, nations such as France and Italy were becoming famous for their culinary identities and the theme of food emerged in travel writing, suggesting that food was part of the overall tourist experience (Everett, 2016; Mac Con Iomaire, 2018b).

New Tourism - the Experience Economy

From the 1990s there was a shift from mass tourism and package holidays characteristic of 'old tourism' to more flexible, segmented and more authentic tourism experiences which led to a form of 'new tourism' (Boyd, 2015, p. 13). This coincided with a general recognition of the experiential elements of the tourism offering within the wider context of the new 'experience economy' (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 98). In this new era, if a business intentionally used its 'services as the stage, and goods as props,

to engage individual customers in a way that created a memorable event', they were no longer selling mere products but were in fact selling experiences.

The culturally symbolic role of food thus gained greater significance for tourists seeking out new travel experiences. Indeed, Scarpato (2002, cited in Kivela & Crofts, 2006) suggests that because gastronomy is considered a cultural element, it can also be seen as a cultural tourism product. Tourism therefore can be seen as an unusual context in which food consumption gains special meaning and pleasure (Hjalager & Richards, 2003), while others such as Quan and Wang (2004, p. 302) suggest that within food tourism activities, the consumption of food can be considered a 'peak touristic experience' by many individuals. It is not surprising therefore that the literature on the development of food tourism internationally shows the importance of local food and drink and its ability to contribute to a destination's 'sense of place' (Yeoman et al., 2015).

Fox (2007, cited in Henderson, 2009) suggests that a distinct gastronomic identity and culinary heritage can be used by regions and nations for both differentiation and revival. While some destinations have traditionally benefited from the positive image of their food, other destinations such as Canada, Australia and South Africa have actively sought to promote and highlight their food and wine as part of their destination image (Henderson, 2009). Mulcahy (2014) notes that Norway, Singapore, New Zealand and Scotland each use food as a marker of identity to promote tourism and exports. Similarly, Hjalager and Richards (2003) highlight how destinations like Scotland and Portugal, not necessarily known for their food, began to use their gastronomy as part of the tourism experience and destination marketing. The Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance included Ireland as a case study in its special *The Rise of Food Tourism* report, where it noted that Ireland was a 'great example of an emerging culinary destination because it is not necessarily top of mind for culinary tourists' (Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance, 2015, p. 13).

Food Tourism and Ireland

Ireland is the most westerly country in Europe. The island of Ireland has thirty-two counties, six of which form Northern Ireland which is part of the United Kingdom. The other twenty-six counties gained independence from Great Britain in 1921 and was known as the Irish Free State until

1947, when the Republic of Ireland was declared. Although there are only five million people currently living on the island of Ireland, there are over eighty million people around the world who claim Irish lineage, thanks in part to the mass emigration of the mid-19th century (Mac Con Iomaire, 2011).

Both commercial food provision and tourism were well established in Ireland long before the country gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1921 (Mac Con Iomaire, 2013). It will surprise some to find that neutral Ireland, and especially Dublin, experienced an influx of 'gastro-tourists' during the years of World War II (1939-1945) and that in the 1950s, two Dublin restaurants, Hotel Russell and Jammet's were among the most outstanding restaurants in Europe (Mac Con Iomaire, 2015). These 'haute cuisine' restaurants, with their French head chefs and managers, were not the norm in 1950s Ireland.

Bord Fáilte (The Irish Tourism Board) was created in the 1950s, and indeed, for the decades that followed, Ireland's food was not perceived positively (Deleuze, 2014). Bord Fáilte began to put in place initiatives to promote Irish food and change the quality standards. This new-found emphasis on food is illustrated with the publication in 1972 of its first Guide to Good Eating. Conflict between nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland between 1969 and 1994, known as 'The Troubles', severely curtailed tourism development in Ireland for decades. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Bord Fáilte took more interest in the food sector and invested in training and education projects to improve the quality of food standards up to 2003, when it merged with Tourism Ireland into Fáilte Ireland, the National Tourism Development Authority (Deleuze, 2014).

Mac Con Iomaire (2018b) highlighted that dramatic changes in the Irish foodscape arose during the 'Celtic Tiger' (1994-2007) boom years and later during the economic recession (2008-2014) that followed, noting that in 2011, the editor of *Le Guide du Routard*, Pierre Josse, wrote 'the Irish food experience is now as good if not better than anywhere in the world' (Mac Con Iomaire, 2018b, p. 59). This economic downturn generated a boost in creativity along with a focus on local quality produce within the restaurant industry. It appears that during this time state bodies such as Bord Bia (The Irish Food Board) also started considering food as a driver of economic development (Mac Con Iomaire, 2018a, 2018b). Fáilte Ireland (2018) accepts that the perception of Irish food has improved, however the government agency admitted that there remains a considerable amount of

work to be done. A signal moment for Irish gastronomy was when Mark Moriarty won the San Pellegrino Young Chef of the Year 2015, beating nineteen other regional finalists from all over the world (Mac Con Iomaire, 2018b).

Visitors' Perceptions of Irish Food

In 2016, the World Food Travel Association (WFTA) conducted a survey on food expectations regarding Irish food and drinks of respondents who had not visited Ireland (Fáilte Ireland, 2018). Findings showed that beer was the first thing that came to mind (32%), followed by potatoes (15%), whiskey (14%), Guinness (10%) and corned beef and cabbage (10%). Generally, respondents associated Ireland with its alcoholic beverages more than its food. Fáilte Ireland (2018) stated that prior to visiting Ireland, tourists did not see Ireland as a food destination and had low expectations regarding the food offering. However, a 2016 survey showed that 76 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the food offering they experienced when visiting the country, which identified a gap in perception (Fáilte Ireland, 2018). Fáilte Ireland (2018) recognised that an adequate marketing approach is required for the Irish food and drink offering to gain a positive global reputation.

Tourism Policy and Policy Makers in Ireland

The strategic development of tourism in Ireland started with the creation of the Irish Tourism Association at the start of the 20th century (Fáilte Ireland, n.d.). Bord Fáilte Éireann was then formed in 1955 to facilitate the development and promotion of Irish tourism in the Irish Republic at both domestic and international levels (Fáilte Ireland, n.d.). This was followed by the establishment of CERT (the Council for Education, Recruitment and Training) in 1963, which aimed at providing training for the tourism sector (Fáilte Ireland, n.d.). In 1998, as part of the Good Friday Agreement, tourism was identified as an area of cooperation. A new entity, Tourism Ireland Ltd. was established in 2002 to manage the promotion of tourism for the island of Ireland. This function was previously managed by Bórd Fáilte Éireann in the Republic of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in Northern Ireland (Fáilte Ireland, n.d.). In 2003, Fáilte Ireland was formed as the 'National Tourism Development Authority', a new agency which replaced Bord Fáilte Éireann and CERT (Fáilte Ireland, n.d.).

The dramatic rise in Irish tourism during the 'Celtic Tiger' years is charted by O'Brien (2012) who points out that between 1996 and 2006, the number of hotel rooms doubled from 26,000 to 52,000. She noted that a dramatic collapse occurred in the second half of 2008, and in just 18 months, tourism numbers fell by one million. Applying Wilson's (2000) policy regime model, O'Brien (2012) maps the state and private sector interactions that led to developmental failure. In September 2009, the Tourism Renewal Group published a mid-term report *Survival, Recovery, and Growth – a Strategy for Renewing Irish Tourism 2009-2013*. The Tourism Recovery Taskforce was established in 2010 and *The Gathering Ireland 2013* was a government led grassroots tourism initiative run by Fáilte Ireland to mobilize the Irish diaspora to return to Ireland during the year. Mottiar (2016) examines *The Gathering* in the context of social entrepreneurship. Prior to 2010, the lack of a national food tourism policy was criticised by Mulcahy (2009) who highlighted the potential of food tourism as a driver of Ireland's economy and the impact it could have on the tourism sector generally.

Developments in Food Tourism in Ireland

John Mulcahy can undoubtedly be viewed as the architect and instigator of food's role in Irish tourism development, originally stemming from a Masters' thesis (Mulcahy, 2009). In his position as senior manager for the Irish state agency, Fáilte Ireland, Mulcahy played a central role in the shaping and implementing of a food tourism / food in tourism policy and strategy in Ireland from 2008-2018. The trajectory of this evolution can be seen in his academic publications (Mulcahy, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019a, 2019b) and many of the individual developments are outlined in the state agency's policy documents (Fáilte Ireland, 2011, 2014, 2018).

It was during the recession (2008-2014) that Fáilte Ireland came up with a new approach in terms of food tourism. In 2010, Fáilte Ireland created a working group comprised of stakeholders and government agencies (Mulcahy, 2019a). This led to the development of the National Food Tourism Implementation Framework 2011- 2013. The aim was to develop a vision and plan for food tourism as part of the overall tourism destination marketing strategy (Fáilte Ireland, 2011). The framework aimed at highlighting Ireland's ability to offer unique food experiences: 'Ireland will be recognised by visitors for the availability, quality and value of our local and regional food experiences which evokes a unique sense of place, culture and hospitality' (Fáilte Ireland, 2011, p. 17).

Mulcahy (2019a) presents a case study of Ireland's Food Champions network, and outlines how the model of lifestyle entrepreneurship first applied in the Auckland and Hawkes Bay area of New Zealand inspired him to set up the network. In 2012, Fáilte Ireland created a 'Food Tourism Team' within its organisation and launched their Food Champion programme (Mulcahy, 2019a). An initial group of 14 Food Champions were chosen by Fáilte Ireland in 2012. This was followed in 2013 by the addition of eight individuals to the list of Fáilte Ireland's Food Ambassadors to support the Wild Atlantic Way brand. Consequently, the Food Tourism Activity Plan 2014-2016 was created, seeking to 'shift the perception that Ireland is a producer of great ingredients to that of a nation with an authentic cuisine (Mac Con Iomaire, 2018a, p. 1). In 2016, Fáilte Ireland selected 16 new individuals from the Irish food scene and kept six existing Food Champions from the previous group (Mulcahy, 2019a). In a case study, Mulcahy (2019a) showed that the tourism agency adopted a creative collaboration approach between 2012 and 2017 to develop food tourism in Ireland. Sustainability has been core to the approach, and Carruthers et al. (2015), using the County of Cork as a case study, proposed gastronomic tourism as a viable option for sustainability on the island of Ireland in terms of economy, environment and society. Mulcahy (2019a) concludes that the critical success factors for gastronomic tourism experiences are:

- Start with the basics (quality, authenticity, and locality)
- Build coalitions (public private partnerships)
- Spread the message (build a brand, communicate clearly)
- Develop and promote a holistic approach (gastronomic tourism should be seen as one aspect of the entire food value network)
- Ensure a solid base of local food culture
- Develop a network abroad that helps to profile national and/or regional cuisine

More recently, Fáilte Ireland's Food and Drink Development Strategy 2018-2023 was launched, which demonstrated a clear interest in making Irish food and drink a more important component of the overall tourism experience in Ireland. The strategy was based on Fáilte Ireland's Food Tourism Activity Plan 2014-2016, which generated successful food initiatives such as the Boyne Valley Food Series and the Burren Food Trail (Fáilte Ireland, 2018). The aim of the current food and drink strategy is to 'enhance the visitor experience through food and drink and make a strong contribution to overall tourism revenue growth' (Fáilte Ireland, 2018, p. 33). The food and drink strategy relies on four main pillars 'insights and

innovation', 'strengthening Ireland's appeal', 'driving industry capacity' and 'building great visitor experiences' (Fáilte Ireland, 2018, p. 35). According to Fáilte Ireland (2018) the strategy will enable it to measure the impact of food in tourism and demonstrate how it contributes to Ireland's economic growth. Finally, the strategy will be reviewed by Fáilte Ireland in 2020 in order to identify its strengths and weaknesses.

The latest food tourism initiative is an all-island project entitled Taste the Island (Fáilte Ireland, 2019). The report outlines how far food tourism has progressed in the decade since it was first proposed by Mulcahy (2009). Fáilte Ireland (2019, p. 14) estimates Ireland's food and drink tourism landscape to include 8000+ pubs, 3000 restaurants (including 16 Michelin stars and 31 Bib Gourmands), 966 hotels, 170 farmers markets, 60+ food festivals, 60+ food producer experiences, 40 food and drink tours, 31 cookery schools, 27+ brewery experiences, 17 whiskey distillery experiences, 9 gin distillery experiences, and 4 cider distillery experiences. Food tourism in Ireland appears to be firmly part of the 'experience economy' (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). In October 2019, the Michelin Guide 2020 awarded stars to five new Irish restaurants, resulting in 21 Michelin starred restaurants including three two-starred establishments.

METHODOLOGY

Phenomenology as an established philosophical movement gained credence with the writings of Edmond Husserl, Martin Heidegger and later Maurice Merleau-Ponty among others (Gill, 2014). Ontological and epistemological views of leading phenomenologists differ from its two orientations (descriptive or hermeneutic) or its three associated methods (descriptive phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, and interpretative phenomenological analysis) (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010; Jackson et al., 2018). Pernecky and Jamal (2010, p. 1056) note 'significant variations within the phenomenological tradition', pointing out that Heidegger's 'hermeneutic phenomenology', which is the approach adopted in this article, 'addresses experience from the perspective of meanings, understandings and interpretations'. Jonathan Smith's interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is within the Heideggerian orientation and since its emergence (Smith, 1996), has become increasingly popular in psychology. IPA employs flexible guidelines and its idiographic nature distinguishes it from other phenomenological methodologies (Gill, 2014), making it apposite for this research.

The first step of the research project was to conduct a comprehensive review of the extant literature on the topic of food tourism globally and then in Ireland. A desk-based, online review was undertaken on the grey literature, various strategy documents, frameworks, policies and initiatives that have been published or launched by the Irish government or its agencies. Peer reviewed journal articles and book chapters were examined on the broader field of gastronomy and tourism, covering the various terms adapted within the canon (food tourism, culinary tourism, gastronomic tourism etc.). Academic literature on gastronomic tourism in Ireland is dominated by one key researcher (Mulcahy, 2009, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019a, 2019b) and the grey literature stems principally from a single state tourism agency (Fáilte Ireland, 2011, 2014, 2018, 2019). Therefore, a phenomenological epistemology was adopted to uncover the 'lived experiences' of key governmental and industry figures to see how their perceptions of the development of food tourism in Ireland 2009-2019 triangulated with the published literature.

To achieve the objectives of this exploratory study, constructivist ontology, an interpretivist phenomenological epistemology and a qualitative methodology was adopted. This can help to get close to the professional life and 'lived experience' of the participating food tourism professionals to explore how they conceive and experience the phenomenon of food tourism (Gill, 2014; Hillman & Radel, 2018).

Data was collected by the use of face-to-face semi-structured interviews with nine food tourism professionals and, due to logistical and time limitations, one telephone interview, between February 2018 and May 2019 until saturation was achieved (Denscombe, 2003; Gill, 2014). Potential interviewees were contacted, the research background and goals were outlined, and following which each interviewee was invited to participate. Purposive sampling (Smith, 1996) was used and the majority of interviewees held senior positions with many years of experience in various sectors of the tourism hospitality industry. They included social entrepreneurs, food champions, tour guides, culinary educators, and managers in state agencies and beverage attractions.

The researchers constructed a flexible interview schedule in a way which aimed at answering the research objectives but allowed room for issues to emerge (see Appendix 1). Notes and memos were taken during each interview; these were appended to the typewritten transcripts for use at the data analysis stage. The longest interview took 54 minutes while the shortest interview lasted for 26 minutes. Interviews were transcribed

verbatim. The transcripts were then checked against the recordings for accuracy. Participants were asked to sign a consent form. Each was assured of complete anonymity— of both identity and operation— and data confidentiality. Names used within this paper are pseudonyms (Table 1).

Table 1. *Demographic of Interviewees*

Code Alias	Gender	Age	Position	Years in Tourism/ Hospitality	Other Role / Details	Location
George	Male	51-65	Senior Manager	40 years	State Tourism Agency	Urban
David	Male	51-65	Entrepreneur	35 years	Food Champion	Urban
James	Male	41-50	Educator / Tour Guide	28 years	Social Entrepreneur	Rural
Deirdre	Female	31-40	Tour Guide	13 years	Food Champion	Urban
Martina	Female	51-65	Artisan Producer	17 years	Food Champion	Rural
Linda	Female	31-40	Manager	20 years	Beverage Attraction	Urban
Patricia	Female	41-50	Beverage / Tour operator	25 years	Social Entrepreneur	Rural
Kate	Female	31-40	Beverages / Education	20 years	Food Champion	Rural
Joy	Female	31-40	Tour Guide	20 years	Food Champion	Urban
Mary	Female	41-50	Tour Guide	10 years	Social Entrepreneur	Rural
Amy	Female	31-40	Manager	13 years	Beverage Attraction	Urban

Data analysis

The data were subjected to qualitative inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involved a process of data familiarisation, coding and gradual data reduction as coded comments were brought together under higher order themes. Codes were subjected to a process of continual comparison, and the data were refined through several stages using procedures outlined in the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gill, 2014). Analysis in qualitative research does not stop by summarizing data; it digs deeper to recognize patterns and themes envisaging the relationships among these reaching to an elucidation of the phenomenon. It should be noted, however, that this process was an iterative one (Gill, 2014). The final outcome of the analytical process is a narrative account where the researchers' analytic interpretation is presented with verbatim extracts from the interviewees (Gill, 2014).

As the four researchers held occupational experience within the tourism / hospitality industry, an 'emic' or 'insider's' rapport (Robinson et al., 2014) was developed with the interviewees. An emic perspective is fundamental to understanding how people perceive the world around them and is one of the principal concepts guiding qualitative research (Given, 2008). This facilitated a greater level of insights and a reflective hermeneutic cycle (Heidegger, 1962) which continued into the analysis and beyond, thus strengthening the rigor of the project. Interviews are clearly reflexive, but reflexivity comes into its own in the interpretation and reinterpretation of data – Heidegger's (1962) 'double hermeneutic' manifest. May (1999) describes knowledge derived from the shared understanding of a community (tourism professionals in this case) based on the emic posture of the researchers as 'endogenous reflexivity'.

RESULTS

Participant's profiles

The demographics of the interviewees are discussed in this section and an outline of participants is shown in Table 1. Male interviewees constituted 30% of the sample while female interviewees accounted for 70%. The majority of the participants were aged between 31 and 40 years, three participants were in the 41-50 bracket, and three participants were over 50. Most of the participants had a long history of working in tourism and/or hospitality - 241 years in total; the mean was 24.1 years. Half of the interviewees were self-employed entrepreneurs, with three employed by the State, and two employed in the private sphere. All were highly-socially networked in their local communities, with five individuals having been chosen by their peers as Food Champions or ambassadors at some stage of their career (see Table 1).

The interviews provided insight into the development of food tourism not available in the literature, including how food tourism strategy was influenced by other overarching developments in tourism policy in Ireland and how politics and a change in either government or minister can affect policy and direction. The 'lived experiences' of various individuals who were affected, or not, by changing policies or strategies depending on which parts of the industry or country in which they worked proved illuminating. Also of note was the power of volunteerism and social entrepreneurship within the tourism / hospitality industry where networks, clusters, and concepts of supporting local businesses and

producers helped to build a more sustainable future through the multiplier effect. Quantifying the social value of this in financial terms proved difficult for food tourism policy advocates, who battled with finance directors in justifying spending on projects whose return seemed intangible or required long term vision. Additionally, thought-provoking was hearing from those at the coalface on how policy initiatives such as the 'Food Story Toolkit' and the promotion of local seasonal food, through initiatives such as 'Place on a Plate', actually transformed businesses. The findings can be divided into three main themes: The Economy, Government Policies and Strategies, and finally, Food and Drink Initiatives and Experiences. The key themes and sub-themes are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Identified Themes and Sub-Themes*

Main themes	Sub-themes
The economy	The creative economy The experience economy
Government policies and strategies	Major developments in Irish food tourism 2009 and 2019 (Networks, Events, Food Trails) Food champions Networking Social value of volunteerism
Food and drink initiatives and experiences	Social entrepreneurs Bureaucracy Education Clusters

The Economy

Some of the initial codes emerging from the data can be grouped under the theme of the economy. Naturally, recession featured strongly in the analysis, as the dramatic collapse of tourism from 2008 through 2009 took hold and, as O'Brien (2012) noted by September 2009, unemployment had reached 429,400, a rise of 75% in the course of a single year. However, some interviewees such as Amy stated *'I think the recession was the best thing that happened to Irish food'*.

The creative economy

Creativity often stems from crisis, and Mary expanded on this sentiment noting *'the crash came and a lot of people went back to their roots, working on their parents' farms and started looking at things differently, looking for it to be more sustainable in the future.'* Entrepreneurs such as David suddenly found that they had to *'reign in [their] spending and cut [their] cloth to measure'* thereby transforming their businesses into much leaner operations. For others, such as Patricia, recession allowed them to change career and explore new opportunities.

Creativity and the opportunity to try new directions also influenced government departments. Initiatives such as 'The Gathering' based on a previous concept, *'An Tóstal'* which started in the 1950s recession encouraged each parish in Ireland to organise events, such as clan reunions, to entice some of the large Irish diaspora to return home. This boosted the local economy and also reinforced the traditional Irish concept of the *'meitheal'* or volunteerism for the greater social good. It also reinforced the role of social entrepreneurs who emerged as leaders within each parish or community.

George noted that around 2009 there was *'no appreciation of the fact that we could offer food tourism as a product here'*; but as it did develop in very small ways, *'it became more about food in tourism than food tourism.'* The Gathering was followed by the formation of regional tourism brands such as *'Wild Atlantic Way'*, *'Dublin, a Breath of Fresh Air'* and *'Ireland's Ancient East'* as strategies to entice tourists and business out of city centres and around the country.

The experience economy

Linda could have been quoting Pine and Gilmore (1998) when she posited that *'food is not just a functional piece anymore, it's experiential.'* Both she and Amy, who both work in one of Ireland's most visited tourist attractions, noted that the role of food moved from sustenance to an important part of the tourist experience. Linda noted that although theirs is a beverage experience, the number of people who eat onsite now represents about 30% of visitors. This contrasts with 2009, when food was functional as a *'comfort stop'*, in more recent years *'food has become central to what the visitor is expecting, also what the brand has to communicate. The role of food is totally unrecognizable.'* Amy elaborated that if visitors have food onsite; their

experience is clearly enhanced, stating '*If you get people to come in and eat here they're having a much deeper experience than they would have otherwise had, so it's a huge opportunity*'.

Government Policies and Strategies

The creation of regional tourism brands has been one of the most prominent tourism developments in Ireland of the last ten years. This research reveals that food was not a formal part of the tourism strategy until a 'food tourism team' was created within Fáilte Ireland in 2012. This implies that rather than promoting food tourism, Fáilte Ireland has progressively integrated food as a part of the overall Irish tourism experience. This gradual incorporation as a minor element of the overall strategy has taken place against the backdrop of the development of regional brands. It is evident, however, that during the ten-year period between 2009 and 2019, a concerted effort has been made to promote food tourism as well as food within Irish tourism, through a range of strategy commitments and policy initiatives. This marks an increased focus on food tourism from a policy perspective.

Major developments in Irish food tourism 2009 and 2019 (networks, events, food trails)

The three main policy developments in Irish food tourism during the period studied were the *National Food Tourism Implementation Framework 2011-2013* which was followed by the *Food Tourism Activity Plan 2014-2016* and the *Food and Drink Development Strategy 2018-2023*. The research showed that the creation of the Fáilte Ireland Food Champions was one of the first food tourism initiatives developed. Generally, the agency looked at developing collaborations with the private sector as well as providing business support to food and tourism industry professionals. Fáilte Ireland also increased the availability of food tourism tools in order to facilitate the development of food tourism products. The major developments in Irish food tourism were identified as the creation of networks (e.g. Fáilte Ireland Food Champions, Boyne Valley Food Series), food events (Food on the Edge, Dingle Food Festival, Ballymaloe LitFest, Dublin Gastronomy Symposium) and food trails (The Burren Food Trail, Taste the Atlantic).

Food champions

The creation of the Fáilte Ireland Food Champions was mentioned by nearly all of the participants. Although Mulcahy (2019a) provides a case study of the Champions, it was revealing to hear some of them tell of their own 'lived experiences' and to see how they were perceived by others within the industry. George highlighted that the traditional route to engage with industry professionals was through the representative organisations (Irish Hotel's Federation, Restaurant Association of Ireland, Tourist Guide Association) who would disseminate information downwards. He noted that many of these organisations '*act as trade unions for employers and therefore might not be the best way to get your message out to an industry constituted of large number of microbusinesses.*' The idea of the Food Champions, according to George, was to form a network of individuals to facilitate exchanges between the government agency and the private sector: '*People who are on the ground doing stuff, who are seen by their peers as somebody that knew what they were doing or they had a very strong interest in and through that to create a community who are all the more or less saying the same thing.*'

With this network, Fáilte Ireland created an opportunity to use the social and professional capital of this group of individuals in a comparable way to the local champions in New Zealand. While the role of the Food Champions was not clearly defined at first, their individual experiences have still been useful. George pointed out that these individuals provided useful insights to the government agency from a business perspective, noting '*the earlier Food Champions were all commercial people, if they thought something was nonsense, they would blow it down straight away.*' George noted that the second group of Food Champions was strategically chosen along the Wild Atlantic Way. Indeed, eight individuals were added to the list of Fáilte Ireland's Food Ambassadors in 2013 to support the Wild Atlantic Way brand. The third group of Food Champions comprised of three groups of 22 individuals based in the three different branded areas. Again, this was a strategic move to align with overall national tourism strategy.

Networking

The Food Champion programme involved several benchmarking trips and George stated that a trip to Canada inspired Michelin-starred chef J. P. Mac Mahon, who was one of the first Food Champions to be selected, to create his food symposium 'Food on the Edge' in October 2015. Mac Con

Iomaire (2016) analysed the inaugural event, which comprised 350 symposiasts and 40 speakers, 'three-quarters of whom either have or had been awarded Michelin stars at some time, and one quarter of whom currently feature in the 2015 world's top 100 restaurants' (2016, p. 107). Food on the Edge has been running annually each October in Galway and was one of the key events of Galway's European Region of Gastronomy program in 2018. Some of the Champions interviewed mentioned that the value of the benchmarking trips was as much about networking with fellow Champions as it was about observing international best practice. Joy discussed how this network grew and commented that '*a message to the Champions' WhatsApp group would get a quick answer to nearly any question you posed*', so diverse was the expertise within the group. Kate noted that these trips gave them confidence in Ireland's food offering, as quite often what was available at home was far superior to what was benchmarked internationally as 'cutting edge'. George suggested that '*it was more about raising the confidence to say "Actually, we don't have to go overseas, we actually have the things ourselves", and the three benchmarking trips showed that.*' With events such as Food on the Edge, many of the Champions got the opportunity to network at home, not just amongst themselves but with a host of international culinary stars. This worked both ways, as Mac Con Iomaire (2018a) noted that chefs Albert Adria and Nathan Outlaw both put local Galway oysters on their respective menus on their return to Barcelona and London.

Social value of volunteerism

One factor that was brought up by more than one Champion was that the benchmarking trips were not 'junkets' but that the champions contributed to the trips financially as well as giving their time and energy. This was an unpaid volunteer role which they were happy to perform, and from which they benefited in the social and cultural capital derived from the network and new friendships. Another insight gleaned from the interviews was the surprise and shock some champions felt when they were brought together in late 2018 and informed that their contracts would expire in June 2019. Some, such as Kate, had realized that it was a limited time contract when signing. A new CEO was appointed to Fáilte Ireland in 2016. The head of food tourism retired in 2017, but was not replaced until 2019 with appointment of a Food and Drink Tourism manager.

Food and Drinks Initiatives and Experiences

The *Taste the Island* report (Failte Ireland, 2019) documents the dramatic growth in food and drink experiences (festivals, markets, tours, cookery schools, beverage experiences etc.) which have mushroomed since 2012. Interviewees identified some of the early regions to organize networks and clusters, such as Cork, The Burren, Boyne Valley and Kilkenny.

Social entrepreneurs

A common theme among these regions was the presence of one or two dynamic social entrepreneurs who had strong leadership capabilities. James identified individuals such as Olivia Duff, *'who nearly singlehandedly transformed the Boyne Valley into a thriving food destination by her ability to energise the local producers and bring people with her.'* Joy also noted how, as a tour guide, she would *'recommend my fellow Champions' businesses and others that I knew were special to foreign visitors on my tours.'*

Bureaucracy

Things were not always smooth and more than one of the interviewees had issues with other industry professionals being unaware of some of the Fáilte Ireland initiatives. Bureaucracy was also mentioned as an issue in some interviews. Mary recalled attempts to convince a regional tourist office of her idea to bring French tourists on food tours falling on deaf ears until a new manager was appointed and finally listened to her idea. Mary noted her pride in changing tourists' perception of Irish food. *'When I have my French customers on a tour, getting them to try air-dried lamb for example, it's something that you don't necessarily see everywhere and it's a beautiful product,... showing them the reality of what we're actually making now. I suppose it's innovative.'* The role of other agencies such as the rural development agency, LEADER, and Local Enterprise Office (LEO) was mentioned by some. James noted that *'over time I learned how the system worked and became good at drawing down available grants for artisan producers in my area to develop websites, fund training workshops, or scale up for a food visit to their farm.'*

Education

Continuous professional development and education featured, with David noting how *'going back to college and studying gastronomy and the history of food helped me return to the business and transform it.'* David funded bursaries for Irish students to research Irish food history. George also recognized the importance of having solid research on Ireland's gastronomic history and heritage *'to shape authentic storytelling, folklore not fakelore'*, and noted that Fáilte Ireland over this period funded a number of PhD projects and initiatives such as the Dublin Gastronomy Symposium and Food on the Edge.

Clusters

Kachniewska (2013, p. 38) extends her definition of clusters to include educational establishments and research institutes which provide a large part of their human and technological capital. The networking of the Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT) with Food on the Edge and with the Galway European Region of Gastronomy 2018 is a great example of this. Mac Con Iomaire (2018a) has argued that the new paradigm of liberal / vocational education, with gastronomy at its core, offered by the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT, now Technological University Dublin) since 1999, was a factor in the Irish food renaissance. Finally, nearly all interviewees would agree with Mary who when asked if Ireland was a food tourism destination, said: *'Not yet. I think it will in the next ten years.'*

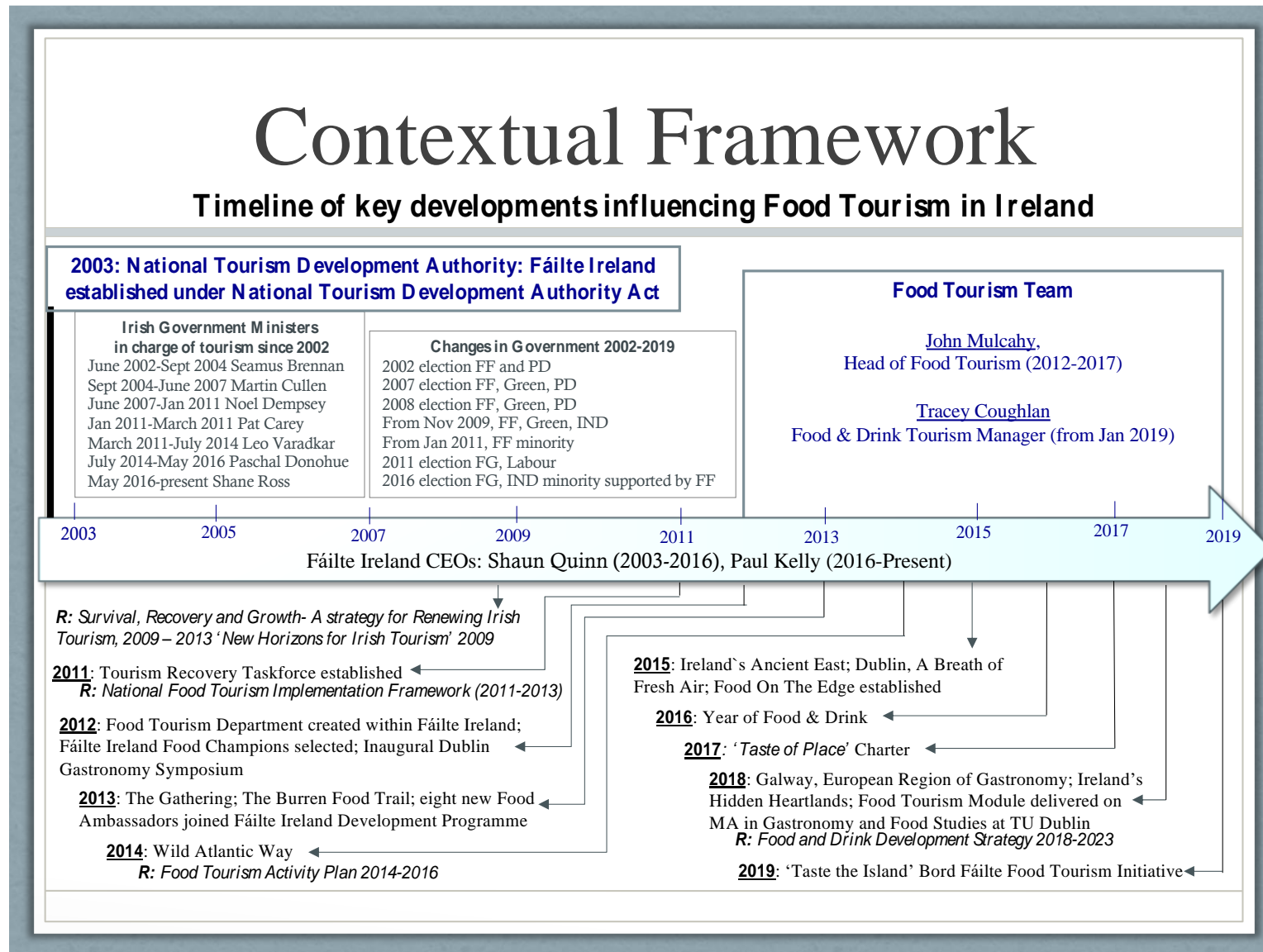


Figure 1. Contextual Framework

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The development of food tourism in Ireland 2009-2019 can broadly be conceptualized into four factors: economic, political, societal and environmental, as can be seen in Figure 1. It is clear from reviewing the academic and grey literature, and analysing the interview transcripts and notes, that the recession was a major factor in driving change and creativity in both Fáilte Ireland and in the broader food tourism/hospitality industry. Some of this creativity was fiscal, with the lowering of the VAT rate from 13.5% to 9% in July 2011, a change that was reversed in January 2019. As the 2009 Tourism Renewal Group report proclaimed, what was required first was survival, then recovery, and growth would flow from recovery.

From a political perspective, a major revelation from the interviews was the influence a change in government or minister could have on policy makers. Since the establishment of Fáilte Ireland in 2003, up until today, there have been only two CEOs, Shaun Quinn (2003-2016) and Paul Kelly (2016 onwards), yet there have been eight changes in government, seven changes in minister, and the government department responsible for tourism has been re-named and re-structured twice. Long-term planning is difficult during periods of political instability. Restructuring in state agencies based on incentivized early retirements at the beginning of the recession helped reduce the wages bill, but also meant a significant loss in expertise and institutional memory. There were three changes in ministers of tourism over a six-month period from late 2010 to early 2011, a fact which must have delayed recovery somewhat (O'Brien, 2012). This is clearly identified in Figure 1 which outlines the contextual framework of this study.

From a societal perspective, initiatives such as The Gathering (Mottiar, 2016) helped draw citizens and communities throughout the length and breadth of the country together in a collective and volunteering mind-set, which differed hugely with some of the neo-liberal individualism and greed that had been prevalent during the worst excesses of the Celtic Tiger boom in Ireland. The creation of regional tourism brands aimed to spread the recovery around the country and out of the large urban areas that were not as hard hit by the recession. Initiatives such as the Food Champions (Mulcahy, 2019a) drew on social entrepreneurs and leaders from communities around the country and networked them. Fáilte Ireland (2019, p. 23) grouped foreign visitors into the 'Culturally curious', 'Social energizers', and 'Great escapers', and

communicated the different food and beverage demands of each group to the industry. Story toolkits and most recently Taste the Island toolkits and workshops enabled communities to improve their own food and drinks experiences and, with initiatives such as 'Taste of Place', to promote local food and boost the local economy through the multiplier effect (Yeoman et al., 2015).

The creation of networks and clusters carried with them not only economic but important societal rewards through interaction, social capital, volunteerism and friendship. A recent publication of calculating social value (Whitebarn Consulting, 2019) might provide a model for illustrating the monetary value of volunteerism. CLG Na Fianna, a Dublin sports and cultural organisation with 3000 members, was shown to have created €50 million of social value in the local community in the years 2017-2018. For every €1 equivalent invested into CLG Na Fianna, in the region of €15 of social value was created, resulting in a 15:1 return on investment ratio. This is a model which social entrepreneurs in tourism might explore in order to justify investment in programs such as The Food Champions.

The environmental factors are diverse and many. They include the impact that using local food has on building sustainable tourism and on sustainable societies, allowing rural dwellers, farmers and food producers to remain in their environment and safeguard that environment for the next generation. A large number of the food and beverage experiences listed in the Taste the Island report (Fáilte Ireland, 2019) are members of 'Origin Green' and are committed to sustainable food production. In Ireland, the landscape and the wild beauty of the countryside are also a large part of our tourist offering along with the warm hospitality and great food.

To conclude, this paper has explored the development of food tourism policy in Ireland from 2009-2019. The research questions were answered by exploring the historical origins of food tourism. Figure 1 contextualizes the primary drivers and key moments in food tourism policy development in Ireland. The 'lived experiences' of ten key tourism stakeholders from across the industry have been analysed and compared with the academic and grey literature to form a narrative account of the phenomenon of the development of food tourism in Ireland from 2009-2019.

Practical Implications

The practical implications of this journal article for the future of the food tourism policy of Ireland are fourfold. First, government agencies must endeavour to ensure cross-political party backing for medium to long term strategies so that changes in government or minister do not side track or jeopardise tourism policy. Secondly the role of social entrepreneurs and volunteerism in developing tourism needs to be valued. The social value of these initiatives can provide returns in multiples of the initial financial outlay. Thirdly, the environmental implications of sustainable tourism can ensure the next generation of rural farmers and communities can remain on the land and as custodians of the rural communities and landscape, which forms such a part of Ireland's unique tourism attraction. Finally, the value of networking both nationally and internationally needs to be embraced so that all stakeholders can learn from each other and realise the quality of the product they are selling and be proud of the work that they do.

Limitations of the research

One of the limitations of this research is the difficulty in getting current policymakers to go on record. Another limitation is that as an under-researched area, most of the published research is dominated by a small number of researchers which limits the perspective and research outlook.

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Appendix 1. *Interview Schedule*

Questions for Policy Makers	Questions for Industry Professionals
<p>Could you describe the role of the food tourism department at Fáilte Ireland? What has been the Irish government's approach to food tourism over the last 10 years? Has this approach changed over time? How? Why? What do you think have been the major developments in Irish food tourism in the last ten years? What have been the drivers of the development of food tourism in Ireland? What have been the main food tourism strategies and initiatives in Ireland? How would you evaluate the success of these food tourism strategies and initiatives? Could you tell me about successful food tourism initiatives? Do you consider Ireland to be a food tourism destination? Do you think the food tourism strategies and initiatives have had an impact on the perception of Irish food? What do you think are the main challenges in food tourism in Ireland? How do you think tourists perceive Irish food?</p>	<p>What do you think is the perception of Irish food for tourists prior to travelling to Ireland? How do tourists react to your food experience? Have you identified common characteristics amongst your customers? Why do you think tourists partake in food tours? Do people who partake in your food experience have common characteristics? What do you think is the approach of the Irish government towards food tourism? Has this approach changed over time? How? Why? Do you feel as a food tourism provider you receive support from policymakers? Do you consider Ireland to be a food destination? What are the challenges of running a food tourism business? How do you describe the food experience you provide? Do you think Ireland has a national cuisine?</p>