



Research Article

FLAVORS OF LJUBLJANA CULINARY SCENE

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ABSTRACT

Food as a tourist attraction is gathering a growing international acknowledgement. Food and gastronomy can be experienced in different ways. Here, restaurants emerge as one of the most significant food tourism venues. Foods and dishes incorporate the sense of the place, and they convey a mixture of cultural, natural and historical meanings. This research note presents an exploratory approach to this authenticity transmission by using the case of Ljubljana downtown restaurant landscape.

Keywords: Culinary Landscape, Food Tourism, Restaurant Industry, Slovenia, Urban Environment

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Why tourists are paying a growing attention to food practices? Food is a significant cultural and natural identity marker (Berno and Fusté-Forné, 2019; Bessièrè and Tibère, 2013) and thus tourists seek to discover landscapes through food (Fusté-Forné and Berno, 2016; Hillel, Belhassen and Shani, 2013; Kim and Eves, 2012; Sidali, Kastenholz and Bianchi, 2015). Also, tourism organisations and businesses are increasingly using food and gastronomy as promotional and marketing tools (Cohen and Avieli, 2004; Du Rand and Heath, 2006; Okumus, Okumus and McKercher, 2007; Stanley and Stanley, 2015). Food, culinary and gastronomy tourism practices include a wide range of experiences, where eateries take a leading role (Levitt *et al.*, 2019). While it is obvious that eating out is a compulsory consumption arena for travellers, there are other examples of food venues such as farms, markets or festivals, which also help in the boosting of food tourism at destinations (see, for example, Hall and Sharples, 2003; Timothy, 2016). Here, urban environments agglutinate the main tourist flows. This short article advocates that eateries in cities are a vital hook for tourists' attraction and also a significant portion of their travel budgets. Furthermore, these food spaces are expected to convey a sense of authenticity of the place they are visiting (Goolaup and Mossberg, 2017; Jalis, Che and Markwell, 2014; Sims, 2009; Smith, 2015), providing a genuine experience.

2. AIM AND METHODOLOGY

An exploratory and descriptive non-participant observation case (Somekh and Lewin, 2005) was conducted in Ljubljana city centre in order to draw a picture of the iconic Slovenian ingredients and dishes

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delivered at local eateries. Restaurants and food places were selected, departing from the Triple Bridge as a central landmark in the city and walking up to one kilometre to each direction. Ljubljana downtown is featured by a wide variety of food venues which offer both local and international cuisines. While this diversity helps in meeting the heterogeneous tourist demands – those asking for “global”, there are many references to regional identities – to travellers asking for “local”.

3. STUDY CASE

Slovenia is gathering international attention due to a set of reasons. First of all, thanks to the role of food in its communication actions with brands such as Taste Slovenia (SPIRIT Slovenija, 2013). Also, the overall importance of Slovenian food culture will be further materialised in 2021, with the country being the European Region of Gastronomy (Slovenian Tourist Board, 2018). Secondly, the visibility of star chefs such as Ana Ros, who was acknowledged the world’s best female chef in 2017 (Price, 2017). Celebrity chefs largely contribute to the promotion of Slovenian identity through food and gastronomy (Slovenian Tourist Board, 2018), which is also observed in previous research in countries like Spain (Fusté-Forné, 2017). Thirdly, its cultural and natural idiosyncrasies compound a unique food landscape made of regional culinary heritages – from the Alps to the Mediterranean shores. In total, Slovenia is divided into 24 gastronomic regions, including 3 wine regions and featuring, as part of the Slovenia’s candidature to become European Region of Gastronomy, up to 365 typical local and regional dishes and drinks (Slovenian Tourist Board, 2018).

Slovenian culinary heritages are historically influenced from Mediterranean, Alpine, and Pannonian cuisines, which provides a rich mixture of ingredients. In particular, Ljubljana, its capital city, which is part of the region of Central Slovenia, is gastronomically famous due to dishes such as beef tongue, frog’s legs, Carniolan sausage, potica, and dairy and honey products (Ljubljana Tourism, 2016). Also, there are plenty of locally grown vegetables sold at Ljubljana marketplace, or a range of products available in the wild, from forests like mushrooms, from rivers like trouts or from the sea like squids. As a modern cosmopolitan city, the culinary Ljubljana scenario features a mix of local products and dishes, and an offer of international and fashionable food. Within this context, initiatives like the Taste Ljubljana project (Ljubljana Tourism, 2019) aims at recovering and promoting the traditional Ljubljana dishes by using local ingredients.

4. RESULTS

This exploratory study shows that the offer of local identity foods and dishes reflect the overall food landscapes of Slovenia. Which of these ingredients are representative of the Slovenian culinary identity? First of all, examples of wild foods such as trouts (Figure 1) or frogs are observed, and also the use of vegetables grown as a result of local agricultural activities, such as lettuce. Thus, the taste of these products and dishes means the taste of nature, wild foods being a primary example of the sense of place. Furthermore, meat dishes which are also traditional in Slovenian cuisine are present in restaurant menus, with a significant presence of chicken and duck (Figure 2).

Added to this, dairy products are also abundant, exemplified with the opening of specialist restaurants. These animal-based products show the authenticity chain, where cheese itself is made from the milk obtained from the animals grazing and feeding in the landscape. This provides an ephemeral acquisition of the taste of the place – for example, translated into prosciutto and cheese tables at restaurants (Figure 3) –, which is meaningful both in terms of where happens (Slovenian landscapes are unique) and when happens (the landscape changes with the seasons as foods do).

Finally, food places such as ice cream shops also deliver Slovenian historical flavors. This is the case of tarragon, an herb which, in the Slovenian food culture, is traditionally used in sweet dishes, for example, ice-creams.



Figure 1 (own source)



Figure 2 (own source)



Figure 3 (own source)

5. CONCLUSION

Foods and dishes transmit the identities of a place. In analysing the culinary scene of a place we can get a taste of how a land and its people are. Firstly, we know what they grow or harvest. Through cuisine, they communicate the diversity of their landscapes, from the mountain to the plains, from the plains to the sea shores. Secondly, we can trace the evolution of the way they understand food from a leisure perspective. Due to the importance of customers' demands and expectations in the structure of goods' offer, the analysis of food venues allows to know the degree of locality they deliver. Thirdly, the discovery of the nature and culture of a place through its food serve in a threefold way: to recover the historical roots of its people, to engage the local communities within the communication of their lifestyles, and to promote gastronomy and tourism to national and international travellers.

This study is limited since is exploratory and relies on a descriptive non-participant observation qualitative approach. However, it defines a new avenue for food tourism-based research. In this sense, further research needs to explore the authenticity transmission of restaurants and local eateries by questioning both the offer and the demand. From the offer perspective, it is crucial to further explore how restaurants are incorporating local products, and how they negotiate the conflict local-global in their menus. In terms of customers, the discovery of the meanings that visitors and tourists attach to food tourism experiences in restaurants is convenient for private and public tourism managers: do travellers understand 'eating' as an extraordinary experience or as an ordinary activity to fill up their stomachs? Do they search for local food instead of global? Do they appreciate the intangible heritages related to the dishes they eat? Motivations, perceptions, and post-experiences' opinions of travellers are significant to further understand the food tourism phenomenon and, specially, the sense of place derived from *restaurantscapes* in urban environments.

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