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GASTRONOMICAL EXPERIENCES IN THE WESTERN TOURISTIC POLE OF PORTUGAL

Abstract

The tourism concept associated to an experience is getting more prominent every day. Food Tourism is one of those expansions of tourism that focuses on the individual as opposed to the world around him. The tourist is the protagonist of an experience, apparently individual, but in reality it involves a whole range of factors, physical and psychological, that do not allow isolating him but identifying him as the one who surrenders to the sensations.

According to Fields (2005), gastronomy is run by four pillars that allow tourists to move in certain areas in order to meet their needs.

It is the destinations onus to attract tourists with its attributes and its capacity to distinguish itself from other destinations, aiming to provide different experiences.

The Western Region through its attributes, either by food associated with the region or some events, allowed us to develop this study, individualizing its characteristics but particularizing the region in a global context.

This article results from a research project in the Western Region of Portugal, which had the duration of one year (May 2010 to May 2011), with the objective to understand the role that food tourism plays for the differentiation of a destination, assess the local tourist agents' perception on food tourism and their sensibility of the same and to profile the food tourist that travels to the Western Touristic Pole and identify key practices of those who travel, motivated by food. Regarding the method of the study, the case study approach was used, with field work that resulted in 863 questionnaire surveys on the demand side and 92 questionnaire surveys on the supply side.

To conclude, we sought out to understand if gastronomy has a primary or secondary role in this coastal region, determined by particular gastronomical aspects, in order to evaluate its recognition from both views, supply and demand.

Keywords: Food Tourism, Gastronomy, Tourist Destination, Experiences, Western Touristic Pole.

Introduction

The tourism sector, contributes towards the economic growth on a global scale as well as for the regional and local development, it is characterized by significant transformations involving an adjustment to actual demand. As a result of these changes, we are seeing new tourist practices that emphasize experience as differentiator and competitive, leading to the development of different niches such as the food tourism.

According to Poon (1993), this segmentation seeks to meet the needs of specific groups of tourists who do not identify themselves with undifferentiated mass phenomena. Today's tourist not only choose a destination in function of what he can see or do, but also what he can feel or experience as an individual

To understand the link between tourism and each of its components becomes crucial in understanding the tourism phenomenon. When related to food, we realized that there is so much more than just choosing any destination, factors such as identity and customs, combined with endogenous technical and production resources, that may be consolidated and spread, becoming a tourist attraction for the destination visited.

In Portugal, a country with great tradition and diversity in relation to its food, it has conditions for full development of food tourism and as a result, it was therefore defined as one of the ten strategic products to implement in a number of regions, identified as priority, highlighting the Western Touristic Pole. (Turismo de Portugal, 2007).

The present study results from a research project in the Western Region of Portugal, which had the duration of one year (May 2010 to May 2011) with a team of five investigators and two full-time apprentices. The project was supported with internal funding by the Polytechnic Institute of Leiria and through an application of the Institute of Research, Development and Advanced Studies (INDEA).

This paper first begins with literature review on food tourism and food tourist, followed by gastronomical experience. The second part of this paper will describe the methodology and discuss the results and the final conclusions of the findings.

Literature Review

Food Tourism

To understand the concept of food tourism it is necessary to comprehend the behavior of those who practice it, in other words, it is the behavior of those in which their choices are directly influenced by food, being the food the primary motive to travel.

Bernier (2003), refers that there are tourists who "feed themselves" and those that "seek food". The tourists that "seek food" travel, at times, in a cultural perspective, but always physiological, seeking the pleasure of eating; however the tourists that simply "feed themselves", face a destinations' food just as something physiological. In the authors' opinion, the food tourists are, without a doubt, those that "seek food" being in this case, food a principal attraction or, following Baptista (1990), the primary resource of the visited destination.

Being food tourism, a type of niche tourism (Sidali, et.al., 2014; Thompson & Ruwhiu, 2014), it is obvious that most tourists falls under the category of "tourists who feed themselves". But the group "tourists who seeks

food", as the primary reason for travelling, is a reality and has been increasing; the expansion of food tourism is supported by the gastronome Saramago (2002, p. 17), stating that in the late 90's we observed the "beginning of a tourism that searched for restaurants and public places, where you could eat well, with the same enthusiasm with which the Romanesque churches were sought." According to the author, you can find a bit everywhere, people traveling to "try, taste, and savour new flavors," whether in restaurants, food fairs, medieval banquets and other events.

In academic terms, the most referenced definition of food tourism belongs to Hall and Mitchell (2001, p. 308), defining food tourism as "the 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".

Following this definition, academic terminology has varied, aside from appearing the term food tourism in articles and books, other designations have surged such as culinary tourism (Horng & Tsai, 2010; Long, L.M. 2014; Montanari & Staniscia, 2009) and gastronomic tourism (Astorga-España & Mansilla, 2014; Chaney & Ryan, 2012; Schlüter & Ellul, 2008; Williams, Williams Jr, & Omar, 2014).

Although the term culinary tourism appear sometimes associated to a visitor with very specific interest in the form of food preparation (Long, L. 2004; Smith & Xiao, 2008), and the term gastronomic tourism refers to, in some cases, to a better appreciation of food quality, in distinguished restaurants, gourmet spaces not accessible to all (Kivela & Crofts, 2006; Santich & Bilson, 2009), the fact is that the terms food tourism, culinary tourism and gastronomic tourism are often used as synonyms. As referred by Ab Karim & Chi (2010, p. 532), "Tourism activity related to food has been labeled such as food tourism, culinary tourism, or gastronomy tourism. These terms have the same meaning: people travel to a specific destination for the purpose of finding foods".

Concerning the above mentioned, for purposes of this article and the study associated, the terminology food tourism was adopted to classify the typology of the tourism studied, using the definition of Hall and Mitchell (2001) as a main reference.

However, in Portugal, food and gastronomy are commonly used as synonyms, being more common the word gastronomy.

The Food Tourist

Although in recent years the studies regarding the profile of food tourists have been increasing, in 2003, Mitchel & Hall reported the scant research in the area, leading to limited data on the demographic characteristics of the food tourist.

However, between 2003 and 2005, there are three studies that can be considered pioneers on the profile and behavior of the food tourist (Lankford & Çela, 2005; Ontario Tourism Ministry, 2005; Research Department Tourism Queensland, 2003). Crossing the data and conclusions of the three studies, we can infer that the food tourist has between 18 to 45 years; can be either male or female; falls mostly in couples with or without children; have higher educational qualifications; and belongs to the upper middle class or higher.

Another interesting approach concerning food tourists, this one as motivational point of view, is presented by Fields (2002), which presents a "model" based on the popular model by McIntosh, Goeldner and Ritchie (1995).

Fields (2002), referring to food tourists, assumes that food is the main reason for traveling, there is however other motivations involved, such as physical, cultural, interpersonal and status and prestige associated with the trip.

For the author, the physical food motivations are associated with the fact that the act of eating is something natural to man and the food awakens our senses and causes various sensations. Thus, these motivations are identified, for example, as needs that are not met in full form in everyday life, such as the need to relax and desire to try new flavors.

Regarding the cultural food motivations, we must take into account the importance of food in the civilization's culture. Therefore, some tourists look at food as a possibility to learn more about the culture of a place. It is not only the act of tasting the food that attracts tourists culturally motivated, but the possibility of knowing the habits associated with the cuisine of the local people, the chance to visit food museums or learn to cook delicacies.

About the interpersonal food motivations, we must consider that although there are tourists traveling alone, mostly travel in groups and the act of the meal is of great importance for personal interaction. The majority of people associate a good meal with friends as a moment of pleasure, relaxation and joy, while socializing. Consequently, many tourists can take great pleasure in group meals in restaurants, food fairs, festivals and other food venues. Also, the act of eating out has an important social function, to strengthen relations, as well as create relationships and interactions with strangers.

The status and prestige food motivations are not unaware of the direct association of restaurants to the elite and high social classes. In general, the restaurants that are recommended by reference guides certify its quality and, moreover, are associated with individuals of high economic level; a meal in a recommended restaurant offers status to those who attend. Fields (2002) argues that the interest in referenced restaurants has become an important part of the lifestyle of the new middle class, for many, the fact that they can tell others that they had a meal at a prestigious place, or even at a little known place, mentioning all details and prices, is the possibility to achieve a higher social status and recognition.

This approach to food motivations was explored by Oliveira (2011) in Portugal and Schluter and Ellul (2008) in Argentina and these studies can contribute, for example, in marketing of promotional campaigns targeted to a particular type of motivation.

Gastronomical Experience

The development of local and tourist aspects have been increasingly approaching the concept of marketing and promotion, investing in its identity and uniqueness. A successful tourism destination is, among other things, evaluated by the positive disclosures of visitors and tourists to the area, the money spent and prospects of repeat visits to the destination. Consequently, Murphy, Pritchard and Smith (2000) argue that visitors consume the products of a destination; therefore, the products must be something the visitor wants and needs. Tourists want to experience the region they are visiting underlying reason being that culture is playing an increasingly important role in tourism and food is one of the key elements of culture.

The concept of tourism based on visits to museums and other monuments, as well as sun and beach, has been changing. The combination of attractions, cultural events and activities are tools for economic growth and the promotion of a place. According to Richards and Wilson (2007a) culture is increasingly explored as a unifying element of physical resources and living traditions. A strong bet on creativity brings vitality to culture and releases the potential of people and places (Richards and Wilson, 2007b), originating the experiences of the tourists (Binkhorst, 2007). An experience in tourism allows to develop activities such as "learning to cook, to fish, to horseback ride, among other experiences (Filipe, 2008), taking advantage of the space provided. Leisure becomes an increasingly important consumer product and this willingness to experience is stimulating tourism.

With this new concept a priority value is attributed to the senses, associated with physical or sensory pleasure. What we are referring to is a dichotomy between food as a physiological need or as a pleasurable experience. For Carneiro (2003, p.1) food, "after breathing and water intake, is the most basic of human needs" leading to a personal, unique satisfaction.

This concern with the gastronomical experience does not only come from the consumer, but also from the ability to generate customer satisfaction by the businesses. The appropriation of typical, regional products can contribute to the practice of unique and memorable experiences. The aim is through a product, you can associate it with a place, just by the tasting itself. Therefore, there is an appreciation of the product that is reflected in the visitor's/tourists pleasure in consuming. The experience is seen "as individual events that occur in response to some stimulus (...) they are the result of direct observation and / or participation in actions. (Schmitt, 2002, p.85). Gastronomical "Experiences are more than just the product (...) it includes the location in which it takes place, the décor" (Sundbo and Darmer, 2008, p.1), and its ambience. The layout and the hospitality of the place can be retentive elements of customer acceptance, associated with tasting, and the reason that motivates going to the location. We are referring to aromas, tastes and visual aspect of an experience that can become memorable. According to Pine and Gilmore (2011) "one of the easiest ways to engage the senses with the services is to serve food and drink."

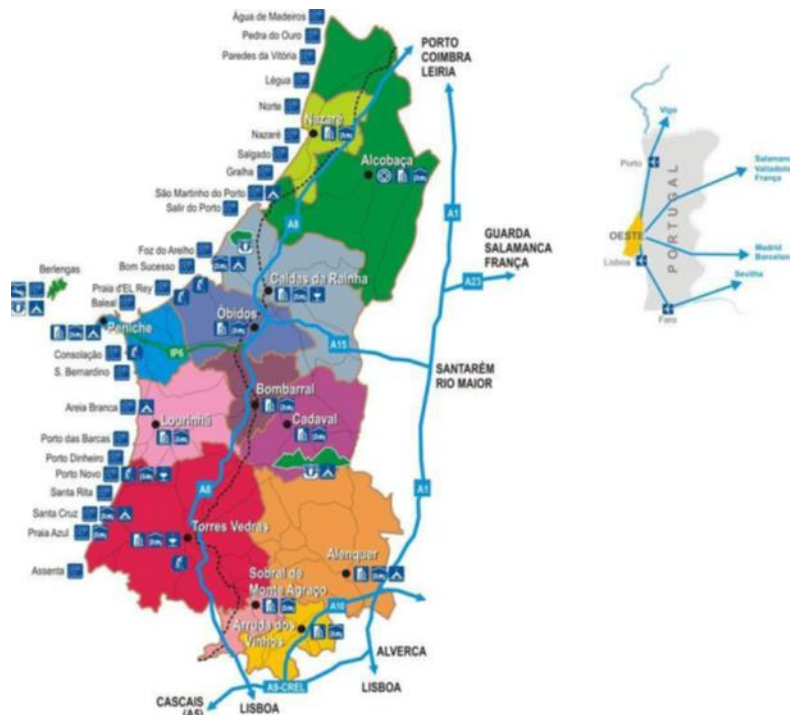
The gastronomical experience on the one hand, is a way to make the tourist participate actively and sensory in product consumption and, on the other hand creates customer opinion and their loyalty. Consequently, the advantage of using the product consumption in accordance with restaurants regarding its attractiveness, uniqueness and typicality allows to create new recipes, but also to create a new destination and a new concept of it.

Methodology

Framework

The Western (or West) region intervention territory by the Touristic Development Pole of the Western Region, is situated in the center-coast of Portugal (figure 1) and consists of 12 counties: Alcobça, Alenquer, Arruda dos Vinhos, Bombarral, Cadaval, Caldas da Rainha, Lourinhã, Nazaré, Óbidos, Peniche, Sobral de Monte Agraço and Torres Vedras.

Figure 1: Western Region



Source: Touristic Development Pole of the Western Region

The main distinguishing factors of the region, according to the National Strategic Plan for Tourism (Turismo de Portugal, 2007) are: castles, churches, monasteries, golf, food and wine, beaches and cross-selling with Lisbon. The twelve counties comprising the West have characteristics very different from each other, allowing visitors the opportunity to enjoy different environments in a short time and distance. (Gaspar, 1993). Regarding food, the region has natural resources that allows the growth of excellent quality products and displays recipes and "ways of doing" with unique characteristics, which allows differentiation from other regions. Also relevant is the heterogeneity, from sea products, meats, pastries, fruits and vegetables, wines, etc. This variety is related to the geographical and cultural diversity.

Data Collection

To develop the study, initially a literature review was conducted on food tourism, following with the characterization of the region studied, emphasizing on the supply side of food and its relationship with tourism. The following step was the development of the theoretical model as well as the delineation of the surveys to apply to the supply and demand.

After validation by conducting a pre-test in Peniche, the questionnaires were applied. Data was collected by the means of two questionnaires structured in different sections. The demand's questionnaire resulted in a total of 23 questions related to respondent's profile, tourist practices and food motivation. The supply's survey consists of 27 questions about respondent's profile, operation of the establishment, tourism in the region and concrete aspects of food. A total of 863 surveys were responded on the demand side, administered indirectly, non-probabilistic sample of convenience, occasional and not random. The sample on the supply side was based on a

restaurant list presented in the portal Online "Escape" organized by the newspaper "Expresso". A total of 92 surveys were responded, administered indirectly, in restaurant establishments of the region.

The surveys were administered between late July and mid-October of 2010, to benefit from the high season of summer, when most visitors are in this region. Two databases were constructed, obtained from valid surveys. These were analyzed using the SPSS statistical software.

Results and Discussion

Demand

- Residents of 28 countries were surveyed: most respondents were from Portugal (65%), then from Spain (10.55%), France (6.38%) and lastly from the UK (3.36%). To understand the importance that visitors ascribe to region's attractions, 47.62% of respondents considered the monuments and museums, the most important attractions of the region; 36.38% found beach/sea more prominently attractive; 10.20% rated food as the main attraction and 5.33% valued events as the most important.
- The respondents were asked to highlight the region's gastronomic products. Concerning this aspect, 47% highlight the fish; 19% the seafood; 10% meat; 18% the pastry; 5.8% other products like fruit and wines. Thus, to understand food visitors' motivation and their satisfaction during their journey a 5-point Likert scale was applied.
- Although food is not the main reason for traveling (region's food is cited as the main reason only by 8.9% of the visitors while 57.7% considered an important reason but not the main), there are other motivations (related to cultural, physical, interpersonal or status items) relevant to their local experience.
- As a result, aspects as tasting new flavors (46.3%), to know traditions and costumes (46.2%), telling friends their experience (50.8%) and even the decoration (45.4%) suggest good levels of satisfaction when provided.

Supply

- The majority of the analyzed establishments that supply food are, restaurants (76.09%) and hotels (11.96%). The food establishments are concerned in supplying regional food (76.1%), although this concern is concentrated primarily in main dishes and wines, since in terms of desserts, only 32.61% of the food establishments claim to have typical regional pastries. Consequently, in reference to the most ordered dishes, according to the food establishments surveyed, the preference is for fish delicacies which are related to the vast coastline of the region and the main concentration of population and visitors along the coast.
- Almost all establishments (95.65%) consider food as an asset for tourism development in the West region. Other important inputs mentioned are quality (30.3%), typical/traditional dishes (30.3%) and service/care (16.9%). In terms of the importance of the development of food tourism to West region, 78.26% are aware of its importance and support this type of tourism referring some main suggestions as further promotion, events, and creating a food tourism circuit.

- To conclude this part, regarding the promotional aspects, 23.9% stated that "word-of-mouth" is still very important and entrepreneurs are aware that customers tend to comment their experiences (positive and negative).

Conclusions

This paper has presented that local food could be used as a tourist attraction and is one of the ways to develop a tourist destination. For many tourists, the food is not the main reason for choosing a destination, but it is taken into account when making a decision. According to the Touristic Development Pole of the Western Region's results (analyzed during one year) the destination clearly has conditions to offer quality food tourism.

The idea of experience is given not only through the consumption of local dishes but includes increasing cultural knowledge and satisfaction, which leads to understand that food visitors of this region are sensitive to the cultural dimension of food.

A variety of similar approaches were employed to local suppliers whom perceive the existence of food tourism and are also sensitive to the same, suggesting ways to streamline the product. In regards to achieving a successful experience for their customers, quality was revealed as one of the most important element both in the context of quality products as well as service quality, considered in each restaurant.

This study has demonstrated that gastronomical experiences are not homogeneous. Overall, destinations need to ensure that food tourism development takes into account that there are many different visitor's motivations and behaviors. Local players need to be sensitive to this question to develop policies and actions according to the differential needs of the visitors.

As further research indications, given the importance of food tourism development, it would be interesting to replicate similar studies in other regions. Additionally, develop a reliable and valid scale to measure food tourism and include additional variables that are likely to influence tourists' behavior.

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