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Making Sense of Self and Other through Holiday Food

A qualitative study of tourists' consumption of food

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Making Sense of Self and Other through Holiday Food.

A qualitative study of tourists' consumption of food

Abstract

Food as a means of cultural insight is widely acknowledged in the tourism literature, however, the present study argues that tourists' relations to food are more multi-faceted than that. Food as a means to social togetherness and personal insight as well as food enjoyment as an end in itself are different types of food relations identified in the qualitative data studied. Moreover, it is demonstrated that links exist between these different ways of enacting food and the identity construction processes of tourists.

Keywords: Food, tourists, authenticity, cultural insight, identity construction, hybrid consumer patterns

Food as a central component of tourists' experiences is debated widely among scholars (Hall et al, 2003; Henderson, 2009; Hjalager, 2002; Kim et al., 2009; Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Reynolds, 1993; Westering, 1999), and a salient argument is that local food provides tourists with insight into the daily life and cultural heritage of places. Authenticity is hence a concept that is utilized repeatedly to explain tourists' relations to food and place, however, discussions on authenticity, food and tourism seem in want of more nuances. For instance it needs to be considered whether local food products and dishes by some tourists are sought out both as a means to cultural insight and an end in itself i.e. a gastronomic experience, or primarily as means to taking in the local culture with no explicated interest in gastronomy. Moreover, tourist may be motivated mainly, or only, by the gastronomic experience not caring about potential place attachments of the food consumed but focusing on the quality of the food, the ingenuity of the dish composition and the sense stimulation that it provides. Fully in line with the classic discussions on authenticity (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1976; Wang, 1999), food as mediator of cultural insight, be that scientifically correct or socially constructed, point to an object-oriented understanding of authenticity (Wang, 1999). But also food as gastronomic experience can be termed authentic in the object-oriented sense of the word in that authenticity in this case rests with quality produce and the craftsmanship of the chefs. Interestingly, the subject-oriented approach to authenticity (Wang, 1999), including the search for the authentic Self (Brown, 1996), seems quite neglected in a food tourism context, both in terms of the personal insight which culture-specific or personally challenging food experiences may provide, and in terms of social ties to travelling companions, other tourists, tourism providers or locals that food experiences may render. Hence placing discussions of authenticity and food tourism in the context of consumption related identity construction (e.g. Belk, 1988; Holt, 1995; Warde, 1994) appears to be salient when wanting to understand the deeper meaning of tourists' relations to food.

On the basis of a qualitative study, the present study seeks to expand our insight into the meaning that tourists ascribe to their food consumption by centering on the questions like: Is food a vehicle of cultural insight into the place visited and if so, is cultural insight linked to or separate from personal insight which food may also provide? Conversely, is food better to be understood as a self-contained,

sensory experience in its own right? Or perhaps food predominantly represents a functional necessity and with that a non-experience?

The data of the study consists of 25 in-depth interviews with Danish informants. 17 of these interviews are carried out with 1 informant and 8 are undertaken as family interviews with 3-5 informants (parents and children), which results in a total number of informants of 48. The age span of the adult informants is 24 to 62 years (although people in their late twenties to early forties are over-represented), the age span of the children informants is 3 to 17 years. In the family interviews it is clearly the adults that contribute with most input. The interview data set consists of 4 singles without children; 7 persons with partners and no children; 12 families with dependent children; and 2 empty nesters. Being qualitative by nature, the findings of the study can not be generalized beyond the 25 interviews, and, furthermore, analytical generalization may be restricted by the fact that interviews draw on one national (i.e. Danish) context. All interviews lasted one to three hours, were undertaken in the mother tongue of the informants, recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Preliminary findings suggest that tourists' food relations vary both across holidays and within the same holiday suggesting that tourists have hybrid food consumption patterns and ascribe different kinds of meaning to food in different holiday contexts. By some tourists in some situations, food is used as a means towards cultural insight or social togetherness, in which case the sensory stimulation and pleasure that food may provide is of minor importance. By other tourists and/or in other situations, food functions as a peak experience in its own right excluding any sense-making qualities in relation to the place visited. In both examples, food on holidays may play a role in the identity formation process of the individual, either directly as way of providing understanding of oneself as a food connoisseur or indirectly as way of providing insight into the Other and through this relational lens possibly insight into the Self. Object- and subject-oriented types of authenticity seem to be useful concepts to apply in the context of food consumption on holidays, however, not as separate units as suggested in the existing literature but rather as closely intertwined in that understanding the Other and the Self is a relational process.

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