

# Gastronomy in the periphery

## Food and cuisine as tourism attractions on the top of Europe

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### **Abstract**

Food is frequently seen as an emblem or a symbol of local distinctiveness, and when tourists choose local food and beverage they literally taste elements of the visited area's local character. In numerous tourism regions the local gastronomy is thus seen as a crucial part of the local heritage. The paper explores the possible contribution of local food and culinary traditions in a peripheral region's attraction to tourists, and, in turn, the meaning and significance that this social construction may have. Consequently, food is considered as a vital part of the tourist experiences in numerous contexts. Moreover, the paper investigates various food interests of foreign motor tourists in Northern Norway, employing data from the Norwegian foreign visitor survey.

*Keywords: Local food, cuisine, attraction, choice*

### **Introduction**

Typical food and beverages are often the first associations that come to peoples' minds when they think about tourism destinations. The appearance, smell and flavour of raw materials and local cooking are appealing to a variety of human senses, and their varying manifestations in different geographical areas contribute to a perception of local distinctiveness. Food products regularly include key elements of the local heritage where great amounts of traditional knowledge and specialized skills, often acquired through generations, are embedded. Within a wide range of natural settings, local people in their interaction and treatment of the land and harvesting of the sea have developed distinct techniques and skills in the ways of producing and processing their food. Expertise and traditions have also been modified and enriched through influences from other cultures and technical improvements, and regions and local areas have throughout history

therefore developed their own characters. Local food produce is thus a result of an inherited utilisation of a mixture of the natural, social, and cultural resources of a location. Generally speaking, no pure local forms exist, as “crossover” and “fusion” have been the norms in most instances of food development. But there still exists food that is perceived as distinctly local. Food may thus be regarded as cultural symbols and distinctive hallmarks of various tourism destinations.

Game suggests that an essential point of travel, when anything visible can be seen on television, is to eat the food of another culture (1991:180). In many countries there is a growing awareness of the possible contribution of food in the development of character and cultural identity of a region or a place. However, the significance of food and gastronomy in tourism is not yet mirrored in a proportional research on these topics. There are various reasons for this situation of aromatic neglect in tourism research. For instance, Rindisbacher maintains that the accidental nature of smell is reflected in the absence of public education and learning about olfaction, and smell has no art form associated with it (1992). But there are some exceptions. In the culinary, smell has long held a status approaching that of art, Rindisbacher asserts (1992:vii; quoted in Dann and Jacobsen 2002).

The growing appeal of gastronomy and locally-based cuisine in tourism is partly resulting from processes in society at large, where peoples’ interests in food quality, ecological concerns about the impacts of farming upon the natural environment, health aspects, more sophisticated knowledge of food and beverages, and acquired information about different types of cuisine are becoming ever more significant. Dining out has also become increasingly popular in most of Europe, both when people are at home and during holidays abroad. In numerous European cities, augmented attention towards food is reflected in a greater variety of restaurants and cafés offering an assortment of specialized food, grocery stores with abundant food supplies from various geographical origins, and the pervasive interest in regional recipes in cookery books, magazines, television, and other media. Modern-day urban life in Europe is characterised by the anonymity of consumption of standardised food without specific traditions or identities (Bessière 1998), fewer structured meals, and increased random snacking. The feeling of loss of traditional cooking skills in many modern-day households may create a craving for culinary roots. In a period of rapid globalisation and Europeanisation, with a ubiquitous feeling of the risk of loss of local character and distinctiveness, an escalating interest in local cooking may be seen as a counter-tendency and as an endeavour to prevail and strengthen the experiences of the local. Among European consumers, there is also a growing demand for food produce that is certified in terms of origin, raw materials used, and methods of processing, partly as a reaction to supermarket standardisation. Under such circumstances, numerous people also search for traditional food and eating habits in the course of their tourist excursions. Tourists yearning for peripheral rural landscapes and the past may be seen as complementary to the contemporary way

of urban and suburban living, and their demeanour may also be comprehended as a reaction to a technical and industrial society and its mass production.

Increased tourist concern with local food and food produce may affect tourism development in certain direct ways. Naturally, holidaymakers need food and beverages in the course of their journeys. Additionally, numerous tourists search for the identity or the spirit of regions and places they visit, and food and beverages have always been crucial elements of place-related tourism products. Given a local flavour, such products may literally represent a taste of a locality. This second denotation may add to the tourists' experiences of an area, and may also facilitate tourism producers to sharpen the profile of a destination. In this way, local cuisine may contribute significantly to the diversity and richness of cultures and identities across different tourism regions, and additionally represent a general enhancement of cultural heritage. A third notable aspect is that the tourist consumption of food, which is produced and processed in a destination area may underpin the local economy and "add value" to the local farm or seafood producers. Moreover, locally produced and processed food may be a crucial instrument for the diversification and added value of the local economy, an aspect that is especially addressed in the development of rural tourism (ECOVAST 2001). The position of local gastronomy may thus be examined from diverse perspectives.

The main objective of this paper is to examine certain potentials of local food as contribution to cultural identity and image of tourism destinations, and the meaning and significance of this social construction to the visitors. Although this discourse may have relevance to both urban and rural areas, the principal focus here is on the significance of local cuisine in peripheral tourism regions. It is recognised that local food is a core resource in rural tourism in several regions in Southern Europe. One of the questions raised here is whether the consumption of local food has an equally strong meaning to the tourists visiting the Northern Scandinavian periphery. Utilising data from the Norwegian Foreign Visitor Survey, the paper presents some empirical results of individual motor tourists' interest in and perceptions of food and foodservices (cf. Jacobsen and Haukeland 1998).

### **Gastronomy as an element of local cultural identity**

In the pre-modern economic structure, before the establishment of rapid long-distance transport systems and universal trade of food across national boundaries and climatic zones, farming and other food producing industries were mainly serving local markets. The often-great diversity in the resource base and the acquired local skills resulted in the making of assorted local food produce. Also other cultural elements like architecture, local materials in buildings, local crafts and folklore, regional languages, visual arts, literary references, ways of living, and so on, developed in various ways and contributed to the characters of dissimilar regions. Ray (1998; quoted in Kneafsey 2001) labels the utilisation of

these ranges of cultural markers as “cultural economy”, where such resources are transformed and made available for economical utilisation within a certain territory, which tourists may take an interest in.

A geographical area may have an explicit cultural and historical identity, resulting from various influences such as the character of the natural resource base, the skills and the know-how that is shared in an area through a common history, and a shared memory by the people living there. Bessièrè (1998) points out that the local gastronomy and its traditions may be seen as an integrated part of this local identity. The bond between a local population and the land is often expressed through the culinary heritage, rooted in history and memories. Moreover, numerous people seem to think that the cooking traditions of an area may reveal some of the character of a society and, to some extent, the mentality of its members. However, in this context it is imperative to underline the meaning of cookery and eating habits as an emblem, a kind of banner beneath which the inhabitants of a given area or community recognise themselves, and are also recognised by actual and potential tourists (Bessièrè 1998).

The awareness of the significance of food as a heritage component in tourism has been steadily growing over the past decades. The tourist quest for authentic experiences has been a principal driving force, and practically every tourism destination, may that be a country, a region or a local community, is striving to develop its own distinctiveness that could make it more outstanding and appealing in the eyes of visitors. Especially peripheral areas may offer particular opportunities in terms of imagery and perceptions of traditional and authentic characteristics of products, Ilbery and Kneafsey argues (1999). The conservation of cultural aspects like landscapes, buildings, food, customs, skills, values and knowledge generates meaning and identity, and these are elements which also visitors are welcome to explore, experience and remember. Heritage interests are thus often underpinned and stimulated by tourism development in an area. However, sensations of authenticity within this context may also be regarded as reactions to effects of globalisation and similar forces, invading local communities (Hughes 1995).

Time and again, there are strong linkages between tourism and local food production, and in many places, these two sectors have potential for collaboration in a symbiotic relationship. Among various effects, tourism may stimulate agricultural services such as landscaping, tours on farms and processing sites, as well as farm holidays (Telfer and Wall 1996). Moreover, Socher and Tsurtschentaler (1994) points out that agriculture may have two main supply values for the tourism industry: The first is the direct support provided by the sales of agricultural products to tourists and/or the tourism industry. The second is indirect supply, which involves preservation and cultivation of landscapes acting as backdrops or tourism resources (Socher and Tsurtschentaler 1994).

The concept of sustainable tourism has contributed to the increased interest in the employment of local resources in tourism development. Also with respect to food and beverages, the prevalent attitude is that as much as possible should be obtained locally, it is argued. In the eco-tourism movement there is a strong ethic prescribing that host communities should benefit as much as possible from tourism in terms of income and job opportunities for local people. This understanding is also widely approved in discourses of the development of small-scale rural tourism (Lane 1994). Organic or semi-organic foodstuff is ever more preferred over factory-produced fare. Furthermore, traditional local recipes are regularly used in restaurants, and fruits and vegetables in season are preferred to preserved provisions (Telfer and Wall 1996). Both agricultural and fishing communities may benefit from local food resource bases, the traditional ways of food processing, and the skills, knowledge and myths associated with local culinary traditions. Across numerous countries, food and beverage festivals and trails of different foodstuffs like fruits, herbs, seafood, cheese, wines, and spirits are developed into imperative tourism attractions for certain tourist segments. Events and attractions regularly exhibit local specialities and traditions, entertain the visitors, and contribute to learning experiences and better understanding of the destination. Smell and taste are literally adding to a sense of place that tourists often search for (cf. Dann and Jacobsen 2002). Time after time, nostalgic ingredients reinforce tourist impressions of authentic and fairly timeless places (Kneafsey 2001).

It has been mentioned that gastronomy has become a focal source of identity formation in late-modern societies. The advance of locally based gastronomy related to tourism may also act as a badge of quality for food producing regions and localities. Roberts and Hall (2001) emphasise that tourism in small rural communities needs to be rooted in strong back-lines with the local economy if it is to be sustainable. This is particularly relevant to the rapidly growing food and drink sector of tourism enterprises in rural peripheries. To become an appropriate and successful peripheral development tool, cuisine for tourism must be integrated with other aspects of rural advancements through complementary activities, it is argued. On the basis of previous research (Boyne *et al.* 2001; Bowen *et al.* 1991; Henderson 2000; Sylvander 1993; Gilg and Battershill 1998; Ilbery and Kneafsey 1999; Bessièrè 1998), Roberts and Hall maintain (2001) that attention should be addressed to the following elements:

- Encouraging innovative back-linkages with the local economy, and thereby stimulating niche specialist food production and promotion – including non-standardised and organic food produce
- Stimulating locally rooted food-related growth and co-operation of small and medium-sized enterprises
- Generating locally retained value-added benefits from production, processing and retailing

- Raising food quality and generating awareness of the requirement to improve and maintain quality, at both the production and consumption ends of the gastronomic tourism chain
- Strengthening the local image and regional identity through the development and promotion of place-specific food brands, thereby helping to promote – though also lead to possible over-commercialisation – of local culture and heritage

In numerous places in contemporary Europe, there are local initiatives to construct territorial identities by means of culinary heritage, such as the Arctic Cuisine of Northern Norway. Linkages between tourism and gastronomy are especially strong and ingrained in countries like Spain, Italy and France. Bessièrè (2001) also argues that in France, the culinary elements have, since the end of the nineteenth century, become an essential affirmation of local identity (Csego 1996, quoted in Bessièrè 2001). Gastronomic tours of France were offered already in the first part of the twentieth century, and the well-known Michelin Guide was launched in 1901. From the 1920s onwards, also the Guides Bleus provided information about the culinary richness and the specialities of different parts of France (Bessièrè 2001). In France, the canonisation of certain tourism sites, often referred to as “shrines”, may often be gastronomic in nature, and there are recently labelled 100 *Sites Remarquables du Gout* – Sites of Special Culinary Interests – by the *Conseils Nationaux des Arts Culinaires*. Apart from this, there are a variety of labels certifying different kinds of foodstuffs. Another evidence of food being a principal tourism attraction is the various rural tourism products offering culinary experiences: Fresh farm products sold by farmers, farmstead inns (*fermes-auberges*), family inns (labelled by *Gites de France*), stay on the farm (*fermes de séjours*), snacks at the farm (*goûters à la ferme*), all of which local food is a crucial component. In addition, local culinary heritage events and traditional restaurants contribute to the importance of rural food as a weighty aspect of the French tourism product (Bessièrè 1998).

### **Tourists as consumers of local food and beverage**

In numerous instances, gastronomy is vital to tourist experiences and tasting local food has become a fashion among certain tourists (Roberts and Hall 2001). The “culinary tourist” is, as mentioned above, well established, even if it may not be typical to foreign holidaymakers in a Scandinavian context. In France, on the other hand, “eating well” is a sort of cultural code. Among French holidaymakers, it seems more or less self-evident that eating well is essential to the quality of the vacation.

Food has a variety of meanings (Bessièrè 1998) in addition to the basic nutrition that all human beings need. It is representing symbolic virtues (that is, bread and wine in Christianity) and may act as a sign of communion; food shared with other is a fundamental social link. Food is also a social marker, creating distinctions

between people (Douglas and Isherwood 1980). As mentioned above, local cuisine may represent the identity of a community or a region. Moreover, Bessièrè (1998) points out that meal and table customs also may lead to the integration of tourists into local cultures by making the visitors absorb cultural codes. Consuming the food of other people and borrowing from their culinary practices may provide a sense of the place visited, and may be seen as a symbolic consumption of a region or a place, and facets of its climate, history, customs, and scenery. Furthermore, tourists also buy food and beverages as souvenirs. Such flavoursome reminders embody the link between the destination and elsewhere, and prolong and reinforce the journeys as travel sensations may be reactivated after return (Bessièrè 2001).

### **Food interests among foreign motorists in Northern Norway**

To further explore tourist food interests, this paper employs data from statistically representative surveys of foreign motor tourists in Northern Norway in the summer seasons of 1997, 1998, and 1999. The surveys, conducted by the Institute of Transport Economics, involved the registration of and interviews with motor tourists as they exited Norway. Visitor statistics were gathered in various categories. One part involved statistics for holiday visitors staying overnight in Norway. A questionnaire completed by the respondents included some questions about food and foodservices. This questionnaire was distributed and collected at selected national highway border crossings to Finland and Sweden and ferry connections to Sweden, Germany, Denmark, and the United Kingdom (cf. Rideng and Haukeland 1998). The questionnaire was available in eight languages: Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Italian, and Swedish. This study only comprises motorists who visited Northern Norway. The effective sample sizes in the materials utilised here are 816 in 1997, 1037 in 1998, and 671 in 1999. The response rate is approximately 80 percent, which is considered fully satisfactory. As with all sample surveys the results are tinged with uncertainty (cf. Jacobsen and Haukeland 1998; Jacobsen 1999).

#### **General interest in local food**

In the summer seasons of 1998 and 1999, the foreign motor tourists were asked whether they like to try new local dishes when they are travelling. In both years, more than half of the respondents (56 percent) confirmed this interest whereas only a small minority took the opposite attitude (13 percent in 1998 and 17 percent in 1999). These figures indicate a relatively strong general interest in local food among the individual tourists visiting Scandinavia's northern periphery. The interest in previously untried food increases with educational length, and it is also related to an interest in learning about nature. Moreover, the 1999 data reveal an interest in other local cultural attractions like churches and museums, and also a learning interest, among the motorists oriented towards local food.

The interest in local food is most frequently found among first-time visitors to Norway. Moreover, the appeal of food is most strongly articulated among those

who mainly use hotel accommodation (In 1998, 79 percent of these motor tourists reported an interest in local dishes), and it is also linked with a desire for a comfortable holiday. Conversely, about one third of the motorists practice only self-catering, and no more than 39 percent of them are interested in trying local food.

Moreover, the search for local food is highly correlated with the tourists' interests in visiting what they perceive as genuine local communities (Table 1). This finding underscores the denotation of local food as an expression of local distinctiveness.

*Table 1: Interest in trying new local dishes when travelling, by interest in experiencing a genuine local environment. Foreign motor tourists in Northern Norway, summer season 1998 (percentage)*

Importance of experiencing an authentic local environment	No interest in trying out local dishes	Neither interest nor disinterest	Interest in trying out local dishes	Total
Unimportant.....	16	57	27	100
Somewhat important.....	23	36	42	100
Fairly important.....	8	28	64	100
Very important.....	12	23	65	100
Total.....	13	31	56	100

Data source: Institute of Transport Economics, Foreign Visitor Survey

It should also be noted that the interest in local food is correlated with an aesthetic interest in nature and other visual impressions, like gazing at landscape panoramas along the roads. Additionally, motor tourists with an interest in local food think that tourism development in general may cause numerous places to lose their distinctive character.

Even if there is a fervent general interest in local food, most of the motor tourists in this region predominantly draw on self-catering and only infrequently fall back on the services of the hospitality industry (Jacobsen and Haukeland 1998). There may be a variety of reasons for this gap between potential and actual food demand. Some principal explanations may be that the menus are not well adapted to foreign motorists, that the locations of the foodservice premises are not optimal, and that the price level is an obstacle (cf. Jacobsen and Haukeland 2001).

### **Interest in specific local food**

In the 1997 survey, the visitors from abroad were asked to give their opinion on what kind of typical Norwegian food they considered to be most appealing. Table 2 indicates that fish is by far the most wanted type of food among the foreign motorists.

*Table 2: Interest in Norwegian food, foreign motorists in Northern Norway in the summer of 1997, percentage finding the type of food interesting and mean score (scale 0–3)*

Type of food	No interest (0)	Some interest (1)	Rather high interest (2)	Very high interest (3)	Total	Mean score
Fish dishes.....	14	22	33	32	100	1.8
Local specialities .....	26	27	29	18	100	1.4
Traditonal dishes based on						
Norwegian agricultural produce .....	26	31	31	12	100	1.3
Game (reindeer, elk, deer, hare, etc.)	35	30	23	12	100	1.1

Data source: Institute of Transport Economics, Foreign Visitor Survey

This indicates that the rich fisheries of Northern Norway may be seen as an icon of the region. Moreover, fish is generally a high-grade food in this part of the country, while the produce of the agricultural industry is regarded as more uneven, as it is mainly sold as bulk goods, with no declarations of origin. Two thirds of the motor tourists are decidedly interested in fish dishes, and a reasonable number are also attracted by local specialities and traditional dishes based on Norwegian agriculture. However, there is considerably less interest in food based on various kinds of game. The interest in fish and also some other types of local food are most clearly expressed among German and Swedish visitors, whereas motorists from the Netherlands and Finland pay less attention to local food. Especially Dutch holidaymakers articulate a diminutive interest in game. Those tourists who stay mainly in hotels during their tour in Norway are the most enthusiastic to familiarise themselves with local dishes.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined various potentials of local food as contribution to cultural identity and image of peripheral tourism destinations. In several instances, local gastronomy and its traditions are often seen as integrated parts of local identity. Numerous tourists seem to think that the cooking traditions of an area may reveal some of its character, and, to some extent, also the mentality of its population. Smell and taste are literally adding to a sense of place that tourists often search for, and in numerous instances, tasting local food has become a fashion. Local food shared with visitors may act as a fundamental social link. Some visitors also buy food and beverages as flavoursome souvenirs, which embody a connection between the holiday destination and the tourists' home. However, food in tourism is also a social marker, creating distinctions between various holidaymakers.

The paper has pointed out that awareness of food as a heritage ingredient in peripheral tourism has been steadily growing over the past decades. In many

places, cookery and eating habits may be seen as a kind of banner beneath which the inhabitants recognise themselves, and also become recognised by actual and potential tourists. Moreover, the concept of sustainable tourism has led to an increased interest in utilisation of local resources in tourism development. In numerous regions, the tourism industry and local food production have potential for a symbiotic relationship. Especially peripheral areas may offer opportunities in terms of imagery based on what is perceived as traditional and authentic food and beverage products.

The paper has shown that there is a relatively strong general interest in local food among foreign motorists visiting Northern Norway. In this area, the appeal of local food is linked with a fascination of what the visitors perceive as genuine local communities and an aesthetic interest in landscapes and other visual place impressions. Moreover, motorists with an interest in local food think that tourism development may cause numerous places to lose their distinctive character, indicating that one should be aware of the problems related to possible over-commercialisation of local culture and heritage. Not surprisingly, the Foreign Visitor Survey revealed that fish is by far the most wanted type of food among motorists from abroad. In this part of Norway, fish is generally considered to be a high-grade food while the produce of the agricultural industry is regarded as more uneven, as it is mainly sold as bulk goods, with no declarations of origin. A reasonable proportion of visitors are also attracted by other local specialities and traditional dishes based on Norwegian agricultural produce, while there is considerably less interest in game. However, the actual tourist consumption of local food in this region is more moderate, and this indicates that certain measures should be taken, for instance, to upgrade foodservices and add more local flavour to the menus.

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