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Developing a Rural Culinary Tourism Product: Considerations and Resources for Success

This paper focuses on tourism in rural areas, and examines the prerequisites for optimizing the chances of developing a successful rural tourism product. Specifically, reference is made to rural-based wine tourism and culinary tourism. Considerations for success are cited and useful resources are presented. This paper will be of particular interest to regions that are considering developing a rural-based tourism product.

Introduction

New tourism products are launched regularly. Some are new venues for existing interests (eg. new locations for taking in the arts or white-water rafting), while others are new products that fill a void (eg. storm chasing (Arpe, 2003)). Others, like culinary tourism, are not so much a new product as they are a recognition of an existing pastime that can be focussed on, refined, and improved. Many governments throughout the world are looking to tourism initiatives not only to breathe new economic life into stagnating economies (Edgell and Staiger, 1992; Turnock, 1999; Briedenhann and Wickens, 2003), but also to address a very serious problem with rural depopulation. Culinary tourism in a rural setting holds promise as one potential rural economic engine.

The depopulation of rural areas has been recognised as a problem in many countries throughout the world, including Canada, USA, Iceland, and most countries in Western Europe (Edgell and Staiger, 1992; Turnock, 1999; Briedenhann and Wickens, 2003). Edgell and Cartwright (1990) noted that until the 1980s, unemployment rates in the US were always higher in urban than rural areas, but that this changed during the 1981-82 recession and that, as a result, “about 400,000 rural residents packed their bags and left rural America each year to seek employment in the cities”. The Republic of Iceland, for example, continues to experience disturbing depopulation of its rural areas. The northern third of the Westfjords region of Iceland, an area comprising close to 10% of the inhabitable area of this nation has become almost completely depopulated in the last decade due primarily to a lack of employment opportunities. (Insight Guides, 2003). This region is now designated as a protected area, in the hope that this designation may spawn adventure tourism.

Rural tourism, including year-round resorts, has been recognised as one of the main ways to help provide gainful employment that will allow and encourage people to continue to live and

work in rural areas (Edgell and Cartwright, 1990; Edgell and Steiger, 1992; Turnock, 1999; Reid, Taylor and Mair, 2000; Briedenhann and Wickens, 2003). While many rural areas can and do offer tourism activities ranging from wildlife viewing and bird watching to hiking and horseback riding, the potential to cross-market and package these products with culinary tourism is almost completely unexplored. Providing leadership in this potential however is the Canadian Tourism Commission (CTC 2003a; Wolfe 2003).

Wine tourism, which is predominantly a rural product, yet attracts aficionados of both food and wine, can offer significant guidance in developing a rural-based culinary tourism product in a region that is blessed with a richness of farming activity, but not so fortunate to be able to produce wine. The tourism board of Queensland, Australia described wine tourism as “a wide range of experiences built around visitation to wineries and wine regions” including the tasting of wine and food, and the enjoyment of regional environs (Queensland Government Department of State Development, 2004). Wolfe (2003) defined the culinary tourist as one who travels in order to find and enjoy prepared food and drink. To suggest that the successful examples of “wine tourism” in several regions of Australia, plus the Napa Valley in California, and the Niagara Region in Canada, could not be extrapolated to non-wine-producing farming regions would be to overlook a significant potential area for growth in rural-based tourism. The argument is that while travellers’ interest in wine-growing is indisputable, the potential number of travellers who may be interested in gastronomy and wine is even more substantial than the number interested in wine alone. Wolf (2003) noted that “Eating and drinking are universal activities to which we can all relate”. Boniface (2003) not only stated that “food is a global language”, but also emphasized the same belief as the Queensland State Government when she wrote that food eaten in interesting places is more appealing than food eaten at home.

This paper draws on the literature that explores wine and culinary tourism products, and offers several considerations for developing a new culinary tourism initiative in a rural region.

Rural Tourism / Culinary Tourism

“Rural tourism” is not a positive term for many travellers. As Davidson (1992) stated, “rural tourism came to be synonymous with ‘cheap tourism’, an economical alternative for those who could not afford to follow the annual mass migrations to the beaches”. Additionally, Davidson noted: “perhaps the greatest fear of city dwellers, regarding the countryside, is that of being bored”. The Ontario Rural Tourism Council (2001) expressed similar unease with the label “rural tourism”, and suggested that a different adjective needed to be found (under consideration was the word “countryside”). While the term “rural” may be inconsequential to tourism businesses, academics and researchers communicating among themselves, it may be wise to avoid the term in any communication such as marketing or advertising with consumers.

Although travellers have, for millennia, criss-crossed the planet looking for foodstuffs to trade, the term “culinary tourism” is relatively new, and is attributed to Lucy Long from an article she authored in 1998 (Wolfe 2003). Clearly, as a tourism product, it is relatively new, and by extension, reliable data is scarce.

Despite the concern over the adjective “rural”, it is well-known that city-dwellers want to get out into the country and onto farms (Edgell and Cartwright, 1990; Edgell and Steiger, 1992; Turnock, 1999), and although culinary tourism is often thought of as an urban experience in five-star restaurants, this is far from being an accurate depiction of its potential. True food aficionados seek out memorable gastronomic experiences at venues ranging from five-star restaurants to

unpretentious, and relatively unknown, small-town cafés, and even farmers' markets. The only real 'non-starter' tends to be chain restaurants (Wolfe 2003).

Although there is a tendency to think of culinary tourism in terms of fine dining and wineries, as noted previously, such a narrow approach would clearly limit thinking about rural culinary tourism products. A recent comprehensive study of culinary tourism in Canada (CTC 2003a), which is cited as "one of the most comprehensive profiles yet available of culinary tourists" (Wolf 2003), found that 1.8 million Canadian adults (8% of the adult population) are "wine and culinary enthusiasts". This study also identified that these enthusiasts are more affluent (almost 20% higher household income) and have more education, than the average Canadian tourist. Wolf (2003) suggested that culinary tourists, in addition to seeking out venues for prepared food and drink, tend to be the type of people who like to 'explore' and will even make a point of seeking out the location where a favourite product is made. Examples such as the Hershey chocolate factory and visitor centre in the somewhat rural area of Smiths Falls Ontario, suggests that Wolfe's observation is correct.

Interest in 'things culinary' that may apply to tourists is certainly evident and gaining momentum. There are Web sites for the Slow Food Movement, a mapped out self-drive route for gastronomic experiences in the Charlevoix region of Quebec Canada ("Route des Saveurs de Charlevoix"), and the "Taste of Scotland" Web site that is aimed at enticing tourists to come and enjoy the restaurants of Scotland, to name just a few (www.slowfood.com, www.bonjourquebec.com , www.taste-of-scotland.com). In addition, there are Web sites aimed primarily at academics and businesses that are interested in culinary tourism, examples of which include the International Culinary Tourism Association, and the European Network of Regional Culinary Heritage (www.culinarytourism.com , www.culinaryheritage.com).

Hall and colleagues have conducted extensive investigation into wine and food tourism in Australia (Hall, Cambourne, Marcionis, and Johnson 1997; Hall 2002; Hall 2004), and identified numerous issues such as government involvement, organizational networks and clusters (see also Briedenhann and Wickens, 2003), the need for "champions" (leadership), linkages and collaborative behaviour amongst organizations, entrepreneurial culture, and, specifically, the need for wineries to see themselves as part of the larger tourism industry. Reid et al (2000) conducted extensive research into rural tourism in southwestern Ontario, Canada, and found, among other issues, that community-based planning was sorely lacking, and proving to be a critical issue to successful rural tourism development. Boniface (2003) also identified many issues related to wine and culinary tourism in her book "Tasting Tourism: Travelling for Food and Drink". She noted that the potential capacity for what she refers to as "food and drink tourism" to regenerate rural areas is so significant that it brings it into the political domain. This is a key observation.

Boniface (2003) clearly is of the view that culinary tourism is by no means limited to urban regions and five-star restaurants. She lists farms, farm shops, fruit-picking sites, cheese manufacturers, honey producers, processors of foods such as jams and chocolate, cafés, tea rooms, and bars among potential sites in the domain of food and drink tourism, and suggests that "local" and "artisan production" are key words in the product. "The modest local establishment appeals [to the food tourist] due to ...authenticity...". As an example, she points to the popularity of afternoon tea with tourists in England, despite the fact that locals now prefer coffee. Boniface, as did Hall, noted that critical mass is important, especially in a rural setting, as the traveller is expecting an adequately time-filling, as well as satisfying, proposition.

Six Considerations for Launching a New Rural Culinary Tourism Product

It is clear that there are certain criteria that can help to ensure the success of a rural culinary tourism product. These criteria are drawn from a review of the literature, and, although primarily mentioned in relation to wine tourism initiatives, should serve well for a rural-based culinary initiative.

Multiple Players

The notion of “critical mass”, as previously mentioned, cuts at least two ways. First, as Boniface (2003) suggested, there must be enough for the tourist to do to fill his or her time in a meaningful way. Secondly, if a rural region wants to develop a product that will attract repeat visitors, and not become a “been there done that” location that quickly enters the decline stage of the product life cycle, then there will be a need for not only multiple food and drink venues, but complimentary products such as lodging, outdoor activities, and, ideally, an educational component as well (Boniface 2003; Ontario Travel, 2004). Clearly, it would be extremely difficult for a single business or organization to create a meaningful and sustainable culinary tourism product. Even to get started, a rural initiative of any sort would have to be enticing enough to get travellers to leave the city and make the trek to the non-urban location.

Briedenhann and Wickens (2003) noted the success of the European Cultural Routes with over 2000 partners working in cooperation on a chain of projects with shared information. Telfer (2000) suggested that the development of cluster relationships in the Niagara Region of Ontario, Canada has been significant in promotion of the “Tastes of Niagara” alliance of food producers, winemakers, chefs, restaurateurs, and retailers (Tastes of Niagara Quality Food Alliance, 2004). (The reader will find an excellent discussion of network and cluster development in Hall 2002 and Hall 2004.) Reid, Mair, George, and Taylor (2001) present a comprehensive plan based on a cooperative community-based approach, for developing a rural tourism destination.

Government Involvement

There is agreement that government involvement in rural tourism initiatives is essential (Boniface 2003; Briedenhann and Wickens 2003; Wolfe 2003; Hall, 2004). Hall (2004) noted the creation and funding of the Victoria Wineries Tourism Council (in the State of Victoria, Australia) in 1993, the establishment of the South Australia Wine Tourism Council in 1996, and the development of a Food and Wine Tourism Plan in the State of New South Wales, each by their respective State governments. Conversely, he noted that New Zealand is much less well-developed in wine tourism than Australia, and that where innovation and the creation of networks in wine and food tourism have occurred in New Zealand, it has been due to individual champions working at the local level (Hall 2004). Wolfe (2003) cited the Canadian Tourism Commission (CTC - a jointly government- and industry-funded partnership) as one of the “movers and shakers” in the business of culinary tourism. In fact, the CTC has written “How-to guide: Develop a Culinary Tourism Product” (CTC 2003b).

As noted previously, the potential for food and drink tourism to regenerate rural areas is so great that governments simply cannot afford to overlook it (Boniface, 2003). Given the taxation rates in many jurisdictions, plus the well-documented multiplier effects of tourism and its potential to generate foreign currency, it is not difficult to show a good return on investment for government support of tourism initiatives (Gedge, 2004).

Based on his research findings, Hall (2004) suggested that too many public administrative agencies within a region may actually hamper success, while the existence of a champion, and the hosting of meetings to develop relationships could figure significantly into successes of creating cooperative networks and clusters. In the same paper, Hall noted that the Australian Bureau of Industry Economics suggested that governments could potentially play the following roles in network development:

- information dissemination
- encouraging cooperation within industries
- improve existing networks between public sector agencies and private companies
- examine the effects of existing legislation on the formation, maintenance, and break-up of networks.

Cooperation and Trust

The literature clearly emphasizes the need for cooperation among participating businesses, governments, and individuals. Unfortunately, there is also very clear indication that cooperation is difficult to achieve in practice (Reid et al 2000; Briedenhann and Wickens, 2003; Hall 2004). If a rural tourism initiative is to succeed however, then the need for, and the benefits of, cooperation must be clearly and indisputably presented to all potential participants. Rosenfeld (1997) noted that in order for groups of operators to work successfully together, there must be "...reciprocity and sufficient levels of trust to encourage professional interaction and collaborative behaviour".

In his research, unfortunately, Hall (2004) noted that while tourism operators tend to be quite positive towards the wine and food industries, the same is not true of the wine and food industries towards the tourism industry. Wineries and food producers, such as cheese-makers, did not see themselves as being part of, nor having any reason to be interested in, the tourism industry or tourists.

The message for rural tourism initiatives, therefore, is that farmers, producers, restaurateurs, artisans and others must come to see themselves as part of, and benefiting from, the broader tourism industry. Clearly, this is no small task, and champions (see below) have a responsibility to promote both the economic and social benefits of the formation of cooperative relationships between a wide variety of businesses.

Champion (Leadership)

A major potential stumbling block to rural tourism initiatives is the absence of a champion, and continuity in this leadership (Hall, 2002, 2004). Major long-term initiatives tend to fail when leadership is either lacking or inconsistent. Such initiatives need to have one person take the leadership role and stick with it for the long term. In order to help ensure that this happens, the 'players' and the champion both need to commit to the project for several years and provide the support necessary to give the initiative a reasonable chance at being successful.

While the presence of a champion may be somewhat less important to the establishment of a culinary centre in an urban area, it is an "essential" for the establishment of a culinary centre in a rural area. As mentioned above under *cooperation and trust*, if a rural culinary tourism initiative is to be successful, then 'players' who would not normally consider tourism as having anything to do with them, much less any benefit to them, must be clearly shown the economic connection. Just as wineries do not see themselves as being a part of the tourism industry (Hall

2004), undoubtedly the same will be true for most farmers and food producers and processors. There are, however, exceptions that can provide excellent examples for others. In Australia, numerous wineries have developed extensive tourism facilities (Hall 2002). In Iceland, the Icelandic Farm Holiday Association has grown from 5 members and 330 guest-nights in 1970 (the original “farm-stay” concept) to 124 members in 2003 with over 3200 beds (Viktorsdóttir, 2003).

In the successful creation of food and wine tourism networks and associated new products in New Zealand, the roles of a champion and local government were identified as being singularly especially important (Hall 2004). The creation of the Hawkes Bay (New Zealand) Wine and Food Group was the result of several local leaders recognizing that the creation of a critical and connected mass was needed in order to generate sufficient visitors to make their respective businesses successful. In contrast, Briedenhann and Wickens (2003) noted that tourism promotion in South Africa has been significantly frustrated by unilateral action, uncoordinated programs, duplication of effort and squandering of resources.

Related to both *trust* and the need for a *champion*, was Hall’s observation regarding credibility:

“Critical to the development of the [Hawkes Bay] Food and Wine Group was the involvement of ‘experts’ or ‘knowledge brokers’ at the initial meeting who could provide what was perceived as ‘independent’ advice which created a climate of trust between potential members of the cluster, and, just as importantly, allowed the work of champions to be perceived as wider than self interest in the creation of the group.” (Hall 2004).

Long-Term Approach and Funding

Any major initiative will not come to fruition in a short period of time. As the experiences in Australia and New Zealand have shown (Hall 2004), it will take several years to develop the product and the market, and the ‘players’ must buy into this notion (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2003). Not surprisingly, this is related to the lack of continued long-term leadership (a champion).

This initiative will require some funding for at least two things: a “champion” (leader) to develop and promote the initiative, and an advertising budget. Briedenhann and Wickens (2003) noted that in the highly ambitious “African Dream” project to create rural tourism routes in South Africa, funding was cited as “the only acute problem thus far”.

Essential Resources for a Rural Culinary Tourism Initiative

It has been noted that even the term “culinary tourism” is relatively new and that research, information, data, and resources are relatively scarce on the topic. However, as a result of this exploratory research paper, several resources that may prove very valuable to any group looking into actually establishing a rural tourism initiative have been assembled. While all of these are included in the list of references, not all references would be particularly useful in the process of starting such an initiative. It is also likely that some useful resources, regrettably and inadvertently, may have been overlooked to date.

Books and Articles

Among the 'must-read' books are "Tasting Tourism: Travelling for Food and drink by Priscilla Boniface. While not an easy-to-read book, it has a wealth of excellent ideas and information that is useful and thought-provoking. A second book, although not reviewed for this paper due to lack of availability at the time, is "Food Tourism Around the World: Development, Management and Markets" (Hall, C.M., Sharples, E., Mitchell, R., Cambourne, B., and Macionis, N (eds) (2003); published by Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford; ISBN 0750 65466 X) This is likely to be an excellent resource due in part, to the involvement of C. Michael Hall.

Manuals and Reports

The manual published by the Canadian Tourism Commission, "How-to guide: Develop a Culinary Tourism Product" (see reference list; ISBN 0-662-35076-6; quote #C50300E when ordering by email) should be obtained and reviewed by anyone working in this area. This publication, which is also available in French, can be ordered on-line through email to distribution@ctc-cct.ca. Available through the same channel, is the CTC's "Canadian Wine and Culinary Enthusiasts: A Special Analysis of the Travel Activities and Motivation Survey (TAMS)" (see reference list; ISBN 0-662-33867-7; quote #C50174E when ordering by email). This publication provides useful statistics about the profile of Canadian wine and culinary enthusiasts, and these statistics will be of interest to others who may want to investigate the profile of such enthusiasts in a different country. Both of these publications are new in 2003.

Two publications from the University of Guelph in Ontario Canada will be very useful. The first is "Rural Tourism Development: Research Report", by Reid, Taylor, and Mair (see reference list). The second is "Visiting your Future: A Community's Guide to Planning Rural Tourism, by Reid, Mair, George, and Taylor (see reference list).

Erik Wolf, director of the International Culinary Tourism Association has written "Culinary Tourism: A Tasty Economic Proposition". This paper is available through email from info@culinarytourism.org. In 37 pages, it provides background, economic potential, and issues to establishing a culinary tourism venue.

Conclusions

This paper is the result of preliminary research into how to go about actually establishing a rural culinary tourism product in northern Iceland. The information presented here has been very useful in getting the Iceland project underway and, hopefully, will be of value to others working in the area of rural tourism, especially with a culinary emphasis.

The Iceland project is on-going at the time of writing, and the authors see a follow-up article detailing specific issues related to the project. The goal is to have a recognized, viable and sustainable culinary tourism product in northern Iceland within a few years. The first steps will be operating in summer 2004.

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