Traditional food and tourism.

Tourist experience and food heritage in rural spaces: contribution to the definition of the “tourist-eater”

Jacinthe BESSIÈRE et Laurence TIBÈRE

*Lecturer in sociology at the University Toulouse II, France, CERTOP laboratory, UMR CNRS 5044, Toulouse School of Tourism, Hospitality Management and Food Studies*
Examining the role of food and eating in the tourist experience.

- We shall first attempt to assess its importance in visitors’ representations, notably as a motive for travel, or in the images deployed regarding eating and drinking during their stay, as they relate to perceptions of the place visited.

Our hypothesis: tourists act in accordance with their “environmental bubble” (Cohen E., Avielli N., 2004). This is the set of more or less conscious social, cultural but also individual determinants that affect food tastes, preferences and representations, together with attitudes of “neophobia” or “neophilia” amongst tourists.

- We shall also examine tourist behaviour as regards food purchasing and consumption, together with behaviour relating to food souvenirs.
Méthodology:

4 rural areas in South-West France:

- the Haut Rouergue country (Nord Aveyron),
- the PNR (National Regional Park) des Grands Causses (Sud Aveyron),
- the PNR des Causses du Quercy (Lot)
- the Armagnac country (Gers).

These 4 highly attractive rural areas were chosen for their gastronomic and tourist potential.
Data collection: two main approaches

- **A quantitative approach**: a survey questionnaire was carried out on 480 tourists, covering the 4 areas under study.

  *Objective:* Revealing the representations and practices of “tourist-eaters” with regard to the local food heritage.

- **A qualitative approach**: observing the main points of “tourist/food heritage” contact (markets, shops, restaurants...) and 30 semi-directive interviews with professionals involved in supplying tourist food.

  *Objective:* Bringing to light actors’ perceptions and representations as to the influence and role of the tourist phenomenon in their enhancement activities; complementing the analysis of the tourist-eaters’ profile, their individual features, food behaviour on holiday and “environmental bubble”.
Plan

1. Representations and practices of tourists for whom local cuisine remains a motive for travelling

We were led to qualify our position on the relative importance and attractiveness of food and eating in tourists’ eyes. We shall see that although discovering local food heritages may be a strong motivation generally for tourist travel, it sometimes plays a secondary role, coming after environmental and architectural attractions. By addressing the question of “eating good food on vacation”, we will deal with the eating norms associated with the holiday setting and the situations of change and continuity it gives rise to.

2. Food during holiday experience

We have tried to follow the tourist step by step throughout his/her stay, attempting to identify the ways in which food and eating are integrated, and fit into the holiday experience, going from preparations for the trip to food souvenirs brought home afterwards.
The survey indicates that the discovery of local specialities comes third in the purposes underlying the trip (19%) following the appeal for landscapes (55%), and the cultural heritage, other than the gastronomic one (26%).
Two main stances emerge concerning the interest of tourists for local food cultures and their status during the trip. They differ depending on whether they are breaking with (breakage) or in continuity (extension) with their daily life, especially at the level of food.

1. *Extension situation*: the consumption of food during holidays becomes an extension of our everyday food diet: one sticks to basic food or routine meal structures, while adapting them more or less to the tourism universe (addition of peripheral ingredients, etc.).

2. *Breakage situation*: food is an integral part of the discovery and is considered a new "memorable" experience, which has an influence on the quality and success of the trip.
1.1 Food: a touristic component amongst others

- Food as a component amongst others, and sometimes even, as a secondary dimension of the holidays’ universe.
- Food takes on a purely functional role and remains a mere peripheral nutrient compared to the main purpose of the trip. (Ex: pilgrims)
- Food products are perceived as a strong element of the image and reputation of the territory, but only after cultural or technological sites, considered more attractive.
- Tendency to neophobia, through the rejection of some products perceived as too remote from the edible sphere.
- For the professionals involved in the promotion of food heritage, this category of tourists represents a true challenge in terms of marketing target and quasi pedagogical accompaniment in the area of taste initiation and product discovery.

“People come here for the country. That's all. They come for the landscapes. Once here, they learn about the country...its codes...its gastronomy, but only in a second phase”
Restaurateur, Haut Rouergue country
1.2 Food: a driving force in the organisation of a stay in a rural area

- Important **driving force** for the touristic experience, in the same way as interest showed for natural sites or for architecture and key monuments.

- Food discovery punctuates the tourist's itinerary and participates in his **quest for identity** and cultural enrichment.

- From a merchant point of view, food heritages are full components of touristic products: gastronomic breaks, farm or cooperative visits, appear as almost incontrovertible tourist step today just like the visit of monuments or the discovery of craft production sites.

- Predominance of the **terroir**

> “Gastronomy is a unified whole, a know-how to live: products, way of life, landscapes. The tourist comes for a unified whole...a terroir ” Director Pays du Haut Rouergue.
Three profiles of “tourist-eaters”

Profile 1: food as a vehicle for self-discovery
- Initiation, apprenticeship conversion, reconversion of the soul, of the taste.
- Initiatory route, pilgrimage organized around a quest for one's self.
- Food incorporation enriches the tourist-eater, it symbolically nourishes him (Fischler C., 1990)

Profile 2: food as a vehicle for discovering the other
- Incorporation principle (Fischler C., 1990): appropriation of the other one's culture.
- Exchange, discussion, dialogue, creation of social links with producers.
- Interactional dimension, intercultural exchange.

Profile 3: food as a vehicle for location discovery
- Link to the region, to the territory, to the terroir.
- Conditions the purchase of products.
  "Local" provenance
- Label guarantees to itself the territorial anchorage.
- Product "traceability"
Food thus intervenes in various degrees in the tourist experience. Most of the time, it constitutes an important component, even sometimes a central driving force.

The holiday period inscribes eating and drinking in a specific experiential process, articulated around the quest for one's self and the other, as well as around the contact with the territory in its physical but also social dimensions.
II – THE JOURNEY OF THE TOURIST-EATER IN A RURAL AREA

- **Question of “eating-well”:** to understand normative systems and the forms of rationalities mobilized by the eaters (Corbeau J-P., Poulain J-P., 2002) and to reveal the values associated to the touristic time (breakage with everyday life).

- **Question of the status of food** during the time before the journey, then through the journey and finally, through the purchase of food souvenirs.
2.1. "Eating-well" on holidays

For many tourists, the relation to food on holiday is characterised by a reversal of everyday life habits in relation to temporality and conviviality.

“The tourist is looking for a link with the soil, a return to basics, in a fast-growing world, extremely rambling (...) he looks for landmarks” Director Haut Rouergue country

“They enjoy themselves, they relax themselves” Farmer offering a touristic activity, P.N.R. Causses du Quercy
Through food, the tourist-eater reinvests time and space of holidays in parallel to the rhythms and ways of life which organise his everyday life. The meal crystallizes the desires of social recomposition, hedonistic experience and time re-supplying.

Local food becomes a focus of interest around which food practices are organised: we eat more products from the terroir (96.5% of answers), we spend more time at the table (86.7%), the restaurant is more crowded (72.6%).
2.2. Food during the 3 phases of the journey in a rural area

- Food heritages are perceived by the tourist, as identity markers just like cultural codes enabling access to the territory or to the region visited. As a place of reading and understanding of the Other and of elsewhere, food heritages reveal an inextricable link between the "tourist-eater" and the country visited, by offering, beyond the organoleptical qualities of food (smell, flavour, nutritional qualities...), a symbolic value on the signification and the meaning of the place (knowledge, know-how, table manners...).

- Food imagination during the trip can be broken down in three important moments: before, during and after the journey; moments that accentuate and punctuate the tourist's journey.
Prior to departure

- The tourist’s imagination is built up prior to departure.
- The destination is imagined, dreamed (role of literature, cinema, travels agents, friends and relatives).

During the trip

- Different opportunities to come into contact with local food cultures, through material elements (dishes, ingredients, plant and animal ingredients, utensils, table ornaments) but also other components part of the intangible (the symbolism of food, social values, hierarchy and codes, culinary, cultural and artisanal know-how..).
- Food helps tourists to see the limits of their own food culture

After the journey

- Food souvenir: Buying and taking local products back home (wines, farm products), prolongs and reinforces the vacation.
- Purchase of souvenirs: souvenirs to choose, to buy and to take home, and souvenirs for others. This ritual aspect of the journey helps to prolong the vacation in day-to-day life;
- In food souvenirs there is an interpenetration of the foreign world and the day-to-day world
Prior the departure

Tourists prepare their trip based on various media (literature, cinema, travel guides, stories...) that more or less frame the relationship with local foods:

Tourist guides (24%) and websites (23%) have a significant informative function. This explains why, quite often, there is very little discovery in travel but rather 'recognition, and verification of the words and images buried in our memories' (Urbain J-D., 1991). Word-of-mouth and the advice given by local inhabitants are a non-negligible source of information (29%).
During the trip:

Across the regions studied, we observed four preferred places for discovering food products on holiday: farms and production sites (25%), restaurants (22%) and local markets and home-cooked meals (17%).

“There are people who say “oh yes, that reminds me of when I used to ride my bike to the farm nearby to get the milk...many childhood memories” (producer, Armagnac country, Gers).
During the trip: places of distribution and purchasing

- When organising a trip, several activities are planned around food: visits to farms, markets, restaurants, wineries, museums, importance of markets.

When it comes to local products, tourists seek contact with producers and go to places that allow them a certain level of proximity with production: **open-air markets (36%), farms (21%) and cooperatives (12%)** are in the lead in terms of production sites for local products.

Here we observe the compensatory function of the consumption of local products compared to modern food, establishing the eater in a region and bringing them closer to the producer.
Apart from restaurants, in some regions, **local stakeholders carry out initiatives** that involve discovering the local gastronomy.

**Markets** are an example of this:

“We organise night markets during the summer that are very successful. I think that what people are looking for is hospitality. You have to know how to combine hospitality and gastronomy, allow for time to sit down around a table, share and eat a few Rocamadours with a glass of wine, a plate of confit... So there is this time for tasting which is important and it is popular”.

(Director of the Tourism Office, P.N.R. des Causses de Quercy).

In the comments, hospitality seems to really be an element that is essential to the organisation of these markets with the ‘**authenticity**’ of meetings and discussions around food associated with the region :

“And so, when tourists come here during the summer, they are very fond of local products and tasting local produce. We do 3 night markets in Sainte-Affrique during the summer and there are more than 1200 people each time. There are locals but not just locals, they come to one or two markets because it is friendly; they eat next to people that we don’t know and they make friends. The tables are big but there is a friendly, local feel. I think that today people are looking for sincerity, those who come from the cities are looking for genuine people who talk about things with conviction, who teach them things...” (Farmer, PNR des Grands Causses).
After the journey

Food souvenirs are purchased in places with increased contact with food heritage:

-Farms are still special places that encourage purchasing (42%) almost as if they crystallised a link beyond the vacation, during the reintegration into day-to-day life, into routine (Urbain J-D., 1991).
-Specialised shops and markets also rank well (33% and 30% of cases).

Eating at restaurants that serve the cuisine of the country visited after the journey is also part of a similar process of immersion into the memory.
Conclusion

- For tourists and local stakeholders, food imagination and tourist imagination are often inextricably linked.

- In the tourist’s mind, the link is established between food cultures and the place: the consumption of local specialities is a symbolic consumption of a land, region, province, of its soil.

- The sacralisation, as defined by Rachid Amirou (Amirou R., 1995) and Dean MacCannell (MacCannell D., 1986), of certain tourist destinations is supported by the food sector (Bérard L., Marchenay P., 2004). Some institutional labelling schemes, basing themselves on both tourist and gastronomical appeal, have a statute of common rules for stakeholders of the regions and places of pilgrim for a ‘tourist-eater’ in search of alimentary reconciliation.

- Gastronomic places, which mark out the tourist’s journey, are part of the rituals of the journey. The imagination and actions carried out in relation to food are both integrated into the route organised, before, during and after the journey.
Thank you for your attention