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Research Report

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Food as a Tourism Resource: A View from Singapore

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The relationship between food and tourism seems comparatively under-researched given its importance, but greater attention is now being devoted to the subject by academics and practitioners. New terms have emerged to describe the demand for and supply of travel experiences in which a significant component is the enjoyment of food; these include culinary tourism (Wolf 2004), gastronomy tourism (Hjalanger and Richards 2002) and tasting tourism (Boniface 2003). A degree of exclusivity is sometimes implied by such phrases, with connotations of *haute* cuisine, and food tourism (Hall *et al.* 2003) is perhaps a more inclusive label which is used hereafter. Definitions often incorporate appreciation of alcoholic and other beverages and many wine-producing areas have evolved into centres of culinary interest and excellence, although wine tourism is recognized as a discrete type of special interest tourism (Hall *et al.* 2000, Telfer 2001).

Food alone, or in combination with drink, is an element of many tourism marketing and development strategies. Certain destinations continue to exploit an established reputation for quality food while others attempt to define a food culture and heritage which can be utilized as a marketable tourist commodity. Linkages between food and tourism are thus being forged in areas lacking a strong culinary identity, encouraged by authorities in pursuit of the economic rewards of food tourism, which is often viewed as a catalyst for rural development with a capacity to boost local agricultural production. However, it is also a marketing and positioning tool which allows differentiation in an extremely competitive environment and can be oriented towards urban economies as demonstrated by the Asian city state of Singapore. This report identifies some of the critical connections between food and tourism with specific reference to Singapore where food and eating out is a tourism promotion theme of growing prominence, and policies are shaped within the framework of the country's distinctive features.

Food and Tourism

Eating is obviously a human necessity, but food can be a tourist attraction and reason for travel. Food service has been shown to affect vacation choice (Sheldon and Fox 1988) and gastronomy to be a powerful travel motivator (Polaceck 1986), Quan and Wang (2004: 297) distinguishing between food consumption as the primary or 'peak' and secondary or 'supporting' tourist purpose. Hall and Sharples (2003) present a spectrum of food tourism types related to the intensity of food as a motivating factor and it seems likely that those who travel for reasons of food alone are comparatively few in number. They may, nevertheless, be a vital market for certain suppliers such as cookery school operators. Even when food is not the principal driver of tourist behaviour, sampling native dishes and browsing in markets are popular leisure pastimes (WTO 2003) and Williams (1997: 168) writes of an 'ethic of release and relaxation on holidays in relation to food'. However, it should be remembered that an unaccustomed diet may be a cause of anxiety for some and food-related illnesses and safety scares can mar a visit and damage tourist arrivals (MacLaurin 2001). Food is thus a matter of concern to both tourists and the industry at every destination and a core ingredient in the overall tourist product and experience.

As well as satisfying biological and hedonistic needs, food has a social and psychological function and holiday meals permit interaction and bonding with family members, friends, and strangers. In addition, demonstrating a familiarity with exotic foods on returning home may be deemed to enhance the traveller's self-esteem and prestige. Eating is also an activity through which cultures can be

understood (Hegarty and O'Mahony 2001) and food is 'packed with social, cultural and symbolic meanings' (Bell and Valentine 1997: 4), even affording insights into a country's geography and history. National, regional, local and ethnic cuisine is an expression of identity and a vehicle for its preservation and affirmation (Reynolds 1993), famous dishes assuming iconic status (Riley 2000). The authenticity and uniqueness of traditional foods have an appeal for many tourists and partaking of these or attending cookery classes could be regarded as a manifestation of cultural tourism in which meaningful contact with host societies is sought.

At the same time, there are dangers of commodification and possible invention, which all representations of cultural heritage fashioned by the tourism industry are vulnerable to (Graham *et al.* 2000). Other forces are also at work in the post-modern era which further complicate conceptions of authentic and indigenous dishes. Foods from around the globe now can be quickly transported to retailers and restaurants where they are accessible to those with sufficient income, this ease of purchase and consumption confounding conventional notions of what constitutes a local product and helping to construct a 'new global cuisine' (Scarpato and Daniele 2003: 298). Globalization may thus act as a champion of diversity, but more negative aspects are apparent in international dietary trends symbolized by the worldwide presence of fast food chains which is part of the 'McDonaldization' of culture in general (Alfino *et al.* 1998) whereby differences are eroded or obscured.

Irrespective of the debate about origin and authenticity, food consumption by tourists is an economic exchange and generates substantial revenues. Au and Law (2002) record that dining in Hong Kong makes up 10% of total tourism receipts and is increasing its share, a situation echoed around the world (Du Rand *et al.* 2003). Customers for local foodstuffs are caterers and tourists, the latter buying goods as souvenirs and for immediate use. Tourism is an avenue for showcasing products and fosters good relations among suppliers, their partners and customers (Plummer *et al.* forthcoming), with the chance of extending markets overseas. The protection and strengthening of local food supply chains is often the major imperative determining official support for food tourism schemes, as explained by several commentators (Hall 2003). Opportunities are not always realized, however, especially in developing countries where linkages between agriculture and tourism are weak and food processing capabilities are restricted (Belisle 1983; Telfer and Wall 1996). A similar dilemma may occur in more advanced nations where local chains have been broken and food manufacture and distribution is dominated by large centralized corporations.

Nevertheless, official appreciation of popular enthusiasm about food and its possible commercial returns have led to it being allocated a heightened priority in tourism marketing and development. This is marked by the inclusion of the topic in broader strategies and the formulation of specific plans such as those prepared by Canada (Canadian Tourism Commission 2002), several Australian states (Tourism New South Wales 2000; Tourism Tasmania 2002) and the countries of the United Kingdom (Boyne *et al.* 2003). The foundation for many of these schemes is rural development objectives involving diversification and the consolidation of economic ties between countryside industrial sectors. A destination's food history and renown may be exploited in its branding, but there are general challenges to confront related to service quality, government regulations, education, public awareness and the backing of appropriate businesses which might not see themselves as part of the tourism industry (Wolf 2004). Hjalager (2002: 33) classifies formal gastronomy tourism initiatives and organizational structures into four stages, as depicted in Figure 1, and proposes that tourists too progress from a straightforward enjoyment of food to educational attainment and the sharing of knowledge. While the model has still to be thoroughly tested and implies a conformity that might

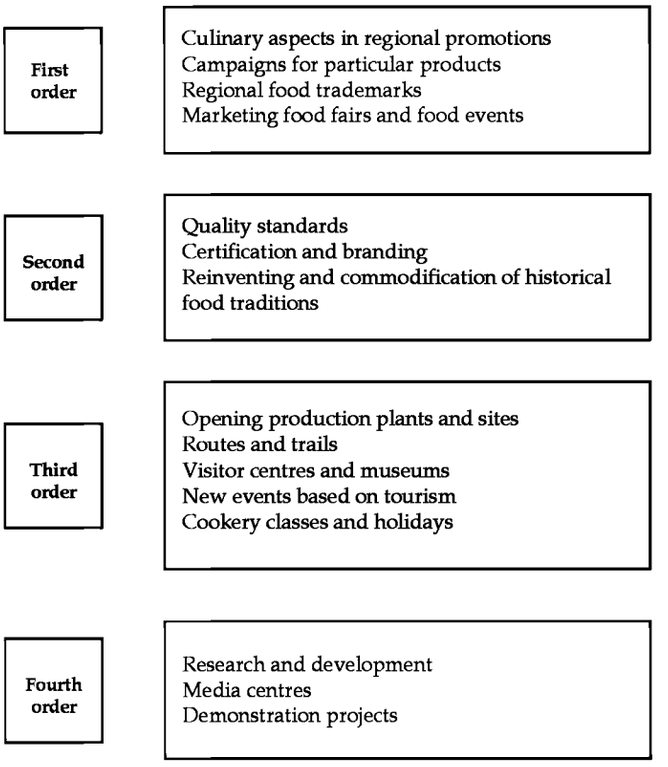

Figure 1. Gastronomy Tourism Initiatives

not exist in practice, it does illustrate the diversity of measures employed by food tourism providers and promoters.

Food, Tourism and Singapore

As already indicated, Singapore is not a typical food tourism destination if this is perceived as a rural site of agricultural activity. The small size of the republic (682 sq km) and extent of urbanization and industrialization leave very little space for farming and most basic foodstuffs are imported. The operation of food trails and the opening of production and processing plants are thereby constrained, and the scenic rustic landscapes commonly associated with many sorts of culinary tourism are absent. It is also a comparatively new country, its population of just over four million comprising an assortment of races, where there is a preoccupation with questions of identity and security. Emphasis is, therefore, placed on the great selection of foods available and the manner in which these represent the country's socio-cultural composition and dynamics. The rationale accompanying food tourism promotion remains principally economic, although other influences operate to create a policy making environment which is uniquely Singaporean.

Food tourism is one constituent of a tourism strategy dedicated to making the best use of scarce resources in an approach commended by Teo and Chang (2000) for its creativity and adaptability, made necessary by the lack of conventional natural and cultural tourism assets. The expansion of tourism is one dimension of a wider economic programme to secure Singapore's future which acknowledges the existing and potential contribution of the service industries (ERC 2002). Economic goals are underpinned by political considerations as the government of the People's Action Party, in power since the 1960s, seeks to retain and assert its position as the architect and guardian of Singapore's successes. Tourism is a vehicle for the communication of official visions which reflect favourably on the regime and can be harnessed to a hegemonic agenda (Hall and Oehlers 2000), conveying images such as those of racial harmony and outstanding economic progress. Food is frequently used as a marker of ethnicity and metaphor for a polyglot society whose members retain and respect ethnic loyalties while also united by a shared destiny; for example, a salad of fruit and vegetables known as rojak (wild mix in Malay) to which other ingredients and spices can be added is often quoted as an embodiment of Singapore's racial medley. Prevailing political, economic and social circumstances therefore infuse the meanings and significance attached to food and decisions about food tourism.

According to the Minister for Trade and Industry, Singaporeans 'spend a lot of time eating and thinking about food. Even while we are eating, we are already thinking of the next meal. It is an inseparable part of our culture' (STB 2004a) and such statements are commonly made in public and private. Food is also perhaps one domain in which passions can be expressed and indulged without offending authorities noted for their exercise of control over many aspects of life (George 2000), although there are constant pronouncements about the health benefits of a balanced diet. There is little empirical evidence to quantify these sentiments and the proportion of the average household budget spent on food declined from 39% in 1988 to 27% in 1998, but the figures do reveal a preference for eating out compared to home-cooked food which accounted for 14.7% and 12.2% of expenditure respectively (Statistics Singapore 2000). There has been a corresponding increase in food outlets which numbered almost 3,500 at the end of the 20th century, in addition to 139 government administered hawker centres (Goi *et al.* 2002), and the food and beverage sector earned 8% of Singapore's GDP in 2002 (STB 2004a).

The choice of food on offer reflects Singapore's history as a British colony which drew immigrants from China, India, the Malay Archipelago, the Middle East and beyond. Many practices derived from ancestral cultures have disappeared and cooking methods have been modified over time, yet an appetite for customary dishes persists and some specifically Singaporean foods have resulted from a coalescence of racial influences. There has been a degree of hybridization as ethnic cuisines have borrowed from each other, one interesting trend being the Islamization of Chinese food to accommodate Muslim sensitivities (Chua and Rajah 2001). Although rooted in the civilisations of Asia, Singapore is a modern metropolis and home-grown and international enterprises supply food from outside the region. Cooks experiment with recipes which profess to synthesise styles and tastes and well known Western chains have a strong presence, spending on the fast food sector rising by 51% between 1993 and 1998 (Goi *et al.* 2002). The tropical climate also has consequences for diet, the propensity for open-air eating, and the design of some dining establishments.

Singapore's geography, history and contemporary traits of multiculturalism and modernity are thus evident in the array of food which has been recognized as a selling point by the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), which asserts that it tells a 'tasty tale' of an 'unique cultural tapestry' (STB 2004b). The country's food is heavily advertised in print and electronic promotion material and initial emphasis was given to 'New Asian' cuisine (Scarpato and Daniele 2003: 310), coinciding with a general advertising campaign of the same

name which commenced in 1997. An annual programme of events organized by the Board includes the month-long Singapore Food Festival 'demonstrating how food is interwoven into the Singaporean lifestyle' and the World Gourmet Summit in which the talents of international chefs are displayed (STB 2002). Festival advertising is directed at the domestic and tourist markets and everyone is reassured about standards due to the strict rules governing public hygiene and food preparation. There is also a system of *halal* food regulation and a list of outlets certified by the Islamic Religious Council is published in a guide to Muslim dining (STB 2003a).

Visitors already spend 13% of their budget on food (STB 2004a) and the government is intent on taking advantage of its linkages with other branches of tourism and food manufacturing. As a result, food tourism marketing and development efforts have intensified in recent years and the STB set up a dedicated unit in 2003. The Food and Beverage Division is responsible for market, product and industry development, channel management and investment with a mission to establish Singapore as a destination with a 'compelling mix of local and international cuisine, dining experiences and nightlife entertainment' (STB 2004c).

The Board launched a food drive entitled 'Let's Makan! Delight in Singapore's Unique Flavours' in 2004 to celebrate the country's cuisine at home and abroad, *makan* meaning to eat in the Malay language. Ten 'must try' dishes are advertised which it is hoped will become symbolic of Singapore and measures are being implemented to improve the tourist experience of food. In cooperation with the National Environment Agency, storyboards have been installed at food centres to convey information about their history and Singapore's food culture. Residents are urged to act as 'food ambassadors' and recommend Singaporean delicacies to visitors (STB 2004d), a survey disclosing that more than 50% of the former believe food to be Singapore's main attraction (STB 2004e).

The campaign complements that of 'Tasty Singapore' organized by officials of the International Enterprise agency to stimulate foreign sales and investment in domestic food manufacturing. The Singapore Premium Food Gift Programme is another joint effort by the Tourism Board, the Productivity and Standards Board and sixteen leading manufacturers. Almost 40 items produced in Singapore were selected to be packaged and marketed as food gifts which are distributed through eight selected retail chains, many with branches at the airport. The programme is seen as meeting the previously unsatisfied demand for food souvenirs and facilitating the cultivation of new markets overseas by Singaporean food companies (STB 2003b).

As well as food suppliers, the rest of the tourism industry has a part to play in these projects and the STB is collaborating with other groups to devise specialized tours promising a 'gastronomic adventure'. Food is a theme of 'Uniquely Singapore Shop and Eat Tours' which take visitors off the beaten track and introduce them to the Singaporean way of life through local shopping and food (STB 2004e). The 'Ethnic Trail' covers the ethnic enclaves of Chinatown, Little India and Arab Street, while 'Heartland Trail' highlights typical suburbs of public Housing Development Board estates where most of the population live. Culinary instruction is on offer, some classes conducted by individuals in their own homes which allow closer observation of everyday life. Specialist guides also combine visits to wet and dry markets, traditional shops and ethnic eateries in their tours (The Straits Times 2004).

It thus seems that Singapore is moving towards becoming a higher order food destination (Hjalanger 2002) and developing a distinctive form of food tourism adapted to the conditions which prevail there. However, the success of the initiatives summarized above is not yet clear. Preliminary studies (Bauer 2000; Lee *et al.* 1999) indicate an awareness of and willingness to experiment with local food amongst tourists, but a more comprehensive review is currently underway which should allow firmer conclusions to be derived about actual attitudes and actions.

Conclusion

The study of food and tourism in Singapore serves to illuminate the complex relationship between the two phenomena which finds expression in psychological, socio-cultural, and economic arenas. Enjoyment of and experimentation with food is seen to be a motive underlying much tourist decision making and its marketing and development is considered a route towards attaining a commercial competitive advantage while stimulating rural and urban economies. Specialist and non-specialist tourist products and experiences are enhanced and financial gains accrue to both the tourism and food industries, although critics might claim that dining practices are in danger of becoming a commodity. Nevertheless, in the case of Singapore, the population's zeal for eating is striking to the outside observer and food habits are one key to uncovering interesting facets of society, if the topic is appropriately presented and interpreted.

However, further conceptual and empirical studies of the role of food in tourism should be conducted in Singapore and elsewhere. There is a need to better understand this sensory dimension of tourist motivation and behaviour and appreciate differences in demand and expectations in order

to satisfy visitors. There are also relevant questions to explore about the socio-cultural messages communicated to tourists by food, the extent to which food tourism encourages cultural understanding, the ties between cuisine and senses of place and identity, and conceptions of authenticity and the commodification of culinary heritage by the tourism industry. While anthropological and cultural critiques of food are perhaps more wide ranging in their geographical scope, tourism scholars have tended to focus on illustrations from North America, Europe and Australia and New Zealand. Food's significance in South-east Asian tourism, especially the place of the ubiquitous street hawker, merits more detailed analysis. There is thus a rich research agenda for the future on the subject of food and tourism, with many worthwhile issues to discuss across a number of disciplines.

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