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Food, place and authenticity: local food and the sustainable tourism experience

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In recent years, attempts to improve the economic and environmental sustainability of both tourism and agriculture have been linked to the development of “alternative” food networks and a renewed enthusiasm for food products that are perceived to be traditional and local. This paper draws on research from two UK regions, the Lake District and Exmoor, to argue that local food can play an important role in the sustainable tourism experience because it appeals to the visitor’s desire for authenticity within the holiday experience. Using evidence from qualitative interviews with tourists and food producers, the paper records ways in which local foods are conceptualised as “authentic” products that symbolise the place and culture of the destination. By engaging with debates surrounding the meaning of locality and authenticity, the paper challenges existing understandings of these concepts and offers a new way forward for tourism research by arguing that “local food” has the potential to enhance the visitor experience by connecting consumers to the region and its perceived culture and heritage.

Keywords: local food; authenticity; sustainable tourism; rural tourism; culture; place

Introduction

Tourism researchers now acknowledge that there is more to tourism than the visual aspects of the visitor experience epitomised by Urry’s “tourist gaze” (1990). A growing body of work is beginning to pay testament to the role that sensations of taste, touch, sound and smell can play within the holiday (Boniface, 2003; Davidson, Bondi, & Smith, 2005; Eastham, 2003; Mitchell & Hall, 2003; Urry, 1995), with holiday food becoming of particular importance to researchers (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Germann Molz, 2004; Long, 2004b; Torres, 2002). More specifically, it is recognised that the kind of foods and drinks on offer for tourists can have major implications for the economic, cultural and environmental sustainability of tourism destinations, with researchers arguing that a focus on locally sourced products can result in benefits for both hosts and guests (Boniface, 2003; Clark & Chabrel, 2007; Enteleca Research and Consultancy, 2001; Ilbery, Kneafsey, Bowler, & Clark, 2003; Torres, 2002; Woodland & Acott, 2007). Similar debates are also taking place in agriculture, where a focus upon “local” food and drink products sold through “alternative” outlets such as farmers’ markets and organic box schemes are being championed as a way to boost the sustainability of “traditional” farming, and the landscapes and communities sustained by that farming (Boniface, 2003; Ilbery & Kneafsey, 2000; Marsden, 2004; National Farmers’ Retail and Markets Association, 2007; Parrot, Wilson, & Murdoch, 2002; Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, 2002; Tregear, Arfini, Belletti, & Marescotti, 2007).

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Despite such developments, the precise nature of the links between food and tourism remains unexplored (Bessière, 1998; Germann Molz, 2004; Long, 2004a). There is therefore a need to investigate whether the growth of the “alternative” food sector and the renewed interest in “local” food can provide a boost to rural destinations looking to develop a sustainable domestic tourism industry within the United Kingdom.

The results presented in this paper are taken from a qualitative study of the local food and tourism industries of two national parks – the Lake District and Exmoor. Located in the North West and South West of England, respectively, both are popular tourist destinations where the attraction is the beauty of the upland landscape and the chance to take part in outdoor activities such as walking and cycling, with Cumbria receiving 5 million overnight visitors in 2007 (Cumbria Tourism, 2007), while equivalent figures for Exmoor show that 1.1 million visitor nights were spent in the park in 2003 (Exmoor National Park Authority, 2003). Both destinations also have a thriving local food industry that is based around a number of iconic food products, with the Lake District being famous for specialities such as Cumberland sausage, Kendal Mint Cake and Grasmere Gingerbread, while Exmoor is part of a region well known for cream teas, cider and Cheddar cheese.

This paper argues that “local” food and drink products can improve the economic and environmental sustainability of both tourism and the rural host community through encouraging sustainable agricultural practices, supporting local businesses and building a “brand” that can benefit the region by attracting more visitors and investment. In this way, developing a thriving “local” food industry can generate the kind of all-round benefits for hosts and guests that are sought as part of the drive to promote Integrated Rural Tourism in peripheral areas of Europe (Clark & Chabrel, 2007; Ilbery, Saxena, & Kneafsey, 2007). The research presented here shows that local food initiatives are able to achieve these benefits because they offer an enhanced visitor experience that can connect the consumer with the people and places involved in food production. By telling the “story” of food production in this way, it is possible to use the tourist’s desire for authenticity to encourage the development of products and services that will boost sustainability and benefit rural regions for visitors and residents alike.

Sustainable tourism and food

Research has shown that food is important to sustainable tourism on a number of levels. Firstly, it is argued that increasing tourist consumption of local foods can generate a multiplier effect that will benefit the local economy (Enteleca Research and Consultancy, 2001; Torres, 2002). Secondly, concerns about the environmental consequences of transporting food across the globe have led researchers to argue that “buying local” is vital if the tourism industry is to reduce its carbon footprint (Boniface, 2003; Mitchell & Hall, 2003). Thirdly, there is a growing recognition that tourism destinations throughout the world are competing with each other in a bid to attract visitors. Successful tourist destinations must, therefore, exhibit what Urry (1995) terms “tourism reflexivity” whereby every destination must develop a range of goods and services that will distinguish it from other destinations and attract a steady stream of visitors. Promoting high-quality cuisine or distinctive local food products is one way of achieving this (Hage, 1997; Hashimoto & Telfer, 2006; Ilbery et al., 2003; Woodland & Acott, 2007). Indeed, local foods may be particularly popular with tourists because they are considered “iconic” products that capture the “typical” nature of a particular place (Bessière, 1998; Urry, 1990).

The link between food and drink and sustainability can also be understood in terms of the recent research agenda which explores the concept of “Integrated Rural Tourism” (IRT).

Often described as “all-round sustainable tourism” (Clark & Chabrel, 2007; Ilbery et al., 2007), IRT is focused upon achieving all-round social, economic and environmental benefits on the understanding that “the best form of tourism would be one which achieves gains on all dimensions and for all groups. It would not, for example, protect the environment by disadvantaging businesses, or benefit businesses at the expense of the host communities” (Clark & Chabrel, 2007, p. 372). Therefore, IRT is not just concerned with the sustainability of the tourist industry; it is about creating thriving rural communities and enhancing the local environment, economy and culture in ways that can be enjoyed by hosts as well as guests. Local food and drink projects can play an important role in the IRT agenda because they can embrace all these concerns simultaneously. This idea of “all-round sustainability” is also integral to the aims of the Slow Food movement – a worldwide initiative which is concerned about the environmental and social consequences of a fast-paced, heavily industrialised food system. In its place, the Slow Food campaign “envision[s] a future food system that is based on the principles of high quality and taste, environmental sustainability, and social justice—in essence, a food system that is good, clean and fair” (Slow Food USA, 2008).

“Local food”

Similar approaches to sustainability are evident in the rural research agenda where concerns have centred upon falling farm incomes (Ilbery, Morris, Buller, Maye, & Kneafsey, 2005; Morris & Buller, 2003) with Pretty (2001, cited in Ilbery et al., 2005) claiming that, in the United Kingdom, only around 7.5% of the final retail price of food returns to farmers, as opposed to a figure of 50% more than 60 years ago. Such developments have been accompanied by a loss of consumer confidence in what Morgan, Marsden, and Murdoch (2006) have termed the “conventional” food sector as a result of food scares such as BSE and the Foot and Mouth Crisis (Blay-Palmer & Donald, 2007; Boniface, 2003; Kneafsey et al., 2004). Ilbery et al. (2005) have also claimed that the expansion of industrial agriculture has led to consumers becoming alienated from contemporary food production. In response to these problems, it has been argued that we are seeing the development of an “alternative” food sector (Morgan et al., 2006), which is associated with a more ecological approach to production, and where smaller companies are involved in producing food for localised markets. It is claimed that participation in these networks can enable food producers to escape the spiral of declining prices and add value to their sales (Boniface, 2003; Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, 2002; Tregear et al., 2007).

However, recent work has criticised the notion that a discrete and coherent “alternative” food sector exists in opposition to a discrete and coherent “conventional” food sector (Holloway et al., 2007a, 2007b; Morris & Kirwan, 2007; Watts, Ilbery, & Maye, 2005; Watts, Ilbery, & Jones, 2007) with Ilbery and Maye (2005) arguing that most producers show a more hybridised approach to production, which is characterised by a tendency to “dip in and out” of conventional and alternative modes at different times. Similar arguments have been made by Watts et al. (2005) who suggest that a spectrum exists from weaker to stronger versions of “alternativeness”. At the weaker end of the spectrum are projects that emphasise particular “quality” aspects of the food products themselves – for example, better taste or freshness – but which do not necessarily say anything about the networks through which such products circulate. By contrast, projects with a stronger understanding of “alternative” will be more explicit about the avenues via which products are produced and sold – for example, they may emphasise that products have reduced food miles and provided more jobs for local people.

Other arguments have focused upon the ambiguity which surrounds the concept of “local” food, with Morris and Buller (2003) explaining that “local” can be understood either in terms of a bounded region within which products are produced and sold, or in terms of “speciality” or “locality” foods which are intended as value-added products for export to other countries or regions. Following Watts et al. (2005), the latter approach could be interpreted as a weaker version of localism on the basis that such speciality products may be sold beyond the region through more “conventional” networks. Allen and Hinrichs (2007) also argue that the many benefits attributed to “local” products – for example, a better environment, healthier food, greater social justice – can contradict each other. They highlight the conflicts that surround the meaning of “local” before concluding that: “the ambiguity about what local means . . . allows it to be about anything and, at the margin, perhaps very little at all” (Allen & Hinrichs, 2007, p. 269).

As Holloway et al. (2007a) have argued, such critiques are not intended to dispute the potential benefits that “alternative” food systems can yield, as many researchers support the rationale that exists for improving the sustainability of food systems. However, in view of the problems associated with an alternative/conventional dualism, Holloway et al. recommend abandoning such distinctions in favour of an approach where we can ‘recognise the relational contingency of what is regarded as alternative at any one time and in any one place. . .’ (Holloway et al., 2007b, p. 5). This “relational” approach is echoed by Maxey (2007) who suggests that a sustainability framework could provide a solution to the problems inherent in the alternative/conventional discourse. In contrast to those who want the certainty of a defined and measurable concept, Maxey argues that sustainability is socially constructed and that this is one of its greatest strengths as an analytical concept because “sustainability encourages us all to consider what we want to sustain and to assess the ways we wish to go about this” (Maxey, 2007, p. 59).

Authenticity

Consumer demands for foods perceived to be “traditional” and “local” can also be viewed as linked to a quest for authenticity. Debates about the meaning and validity of authenticity have played a central role in the tourism literature with Taylor claiming that “there are at least as many definitions of authenticity as there are those who write about it” (Taylor, 2001, p. 8). Today, accounts such as those presented by Boorstin (1964) are criticised for theorising authenticity as an “objective” concept that is based upon a static understanding of place and culture. By contrast, contemporary researchers argue that all cultures change and there are therefore no examples of “pure” societies upon which concepts of authenticity can be based (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Germann Molz, 2004; Jackson, 1999; Meethan, 2001). Consequently, it is argued that authenticity should be viewed as a social construct (Hughes, 1995). Jackson’s (1999) work on the commodification of cultural artefacts also suggests that, instead of talking about “authenticity”, we should focus upon “authentication”, which is the process whereby people make claims for authenticity and the interests that those claims serve.

Recent developments have extended such discussions by arguing for a third kind of authenticity. According to Wang (1999), objective and constructivist accounts of authenticity are limited by the fact that both relate to the nature of the attractions being visited by the tourists. Objective understandings thus depend upon whether something can be “proved” authentic with reference to external criteria, while constructivist understandings focus on the ways in which particular attractions are “staged” by tourism operators (MacCannell,

1989). By contrast, Wang argues that we need to develop an “existential” understanding of authenticity that relates – not to the objects or attractions themselves – but to the response that a particular tourism experience generates in the tourist. Existential authenticity thus describes the way in which tourists, by participating in holiday activities, can construct their identity to experience a more authentic sense of self. Therefore, “tourists are not merely searching for authenticity of the Other. They also search for the authenticity of, and between, themselves” (Wang, 1999, p. 364).

The concept of existential authenticity as linked to identity formation is important in relation to the provision of tourist products and services – including food and drink – because tourists may look to develop an authentic sense of self through the purchase of particular products. For example, Yeoman, Brass, and McMahon-Beattie (2006) talk about the importance of “authenti-seeking” – a process which describes “consumers searching for authenticity from a range of products, services and experiences, and looking for it within themselves” (Yeoman et al., 2006, p. 1128). Just as explanations for the emergence of alternative food networks have revolved around increasing consumer resistance to the industrialisation of agriculture, so discussions of authenticity have focused upon society’s need for meaning in the face of the increasing commodification of culture. For example, Taylor (2001) sees the tourist’s desire for authenticity as a result of a world where people feel they have become alienated from nature, and where everyday life is viewed as increasingly inauthentic.

Authenticity is valuable only where there is perceived inauthenticity. Such is the “plastic” world of the consumer. Enamoured by the distance of authenticity, the modern consciousness is instilled with a simultaneous feeling of lack and desire erupting from a sense of loss felt within “our” world of mass culture and industrialisation and giving rise to possibilities of redemption through contact with the naturally, spiritually and culturally “unspoilt” (Taylor, 2001, p.10).

Kate Soper’s work on “alternative hedonism” also reflects consumer concerns with the “inauthentic” nature of modern life (Soper, 2007). Soper argues that many people are changing their consumption practices, not just to limit what they see as the undesirable side effects of modern lifestyles, but also because they have become dissatisfied with the supposed “pleasures” that come from consuming in this way. Consequently, they are choosing different forms of consumption that they consider both more ethically sound and more personally pleasurable. Similar themes have also been explored by many authors (Barnett, Cloke, Clarke, & Malpass, 2005; Clarke, Cloke, Barnett, & Malpass, 2007) who argue that the rise of ethical consumerism associated with the Slow Food and Fair Trade campaigns challenges the popular view of the consumer as an entirely self-interested and egotistical person. Instead, they argue that such behaviour involves “new forms of citizenly action... being configured through creative redeployment of the repertoires of consumerism” (Clarke et al., 2007, p. 233).

In response to the debate that such differing accounts of authenticity have created, Cohen (2002) offers a way forward by arguing that, if we are to understand the motivations for tourist behaviour we must focus, not on academic debates about authenticity, but on the ways in which the concept is understood by the tourists themselves. According to Cohen, contemporary tourists seek both objective and existential authenticity in their holidays because, while some tourists are spending more, travelling further and experiencing more discomfort in order to experience encounters with “untouched” environments and cultures, others are happy to simply relax, have a good time and experience the existential authenticity that comes from “being themselves”.

A further explication of Cohen's arguments can be found in his research into the Naga fireballs on the Mekong River in Thailand (Cohen, 2007). The fireballs, which are said to be produced by a mythical serpent, became a major tourist attraction and this resulted in widespread public debate over their origins (Were they supernatural? Manmade? Or a natural phenomenon?). The answer to this dilemma proved to be what Cohen described as a "postmodern" account where all three interpretations of the fireballs could coexist, leading to new insights into how authenticity can be theorised. According to Cohen, "The concept of 'staged authenticity' proves inadequate to deal with alleged supernatural phenomena, which are ingrained in a local tradition, and attract potential believers. Such phenomena could be 'staged' from one perspective, but nevertheless 'authentic' from another" (Cohen, 2007, p. 180). Therefore, in Cohen's account, the focus of authenticity is not on the fireballs themselves, but on the multiple meanings that the tourists bring to the event.

From this discussion of the literature, it can be seen that "local" food has the potential to play a central role within the sustainable tourism agenda, by encompassing everything from concerns about food safety and the impacts of agriculture on the rural environment to visitor demands for more "authentic" tourist experiences. However, despite the apparent synergy between debates around local food, sustainable tourism and authenticity, few studies have attempted to bridge the gap between the literatures (Bessière, 1998). Using a qualitative approach based around interviews in the Lake District and Exmoor, this study unites these themes by exploring how the link between local food and perceived authenticity can facilitate the development of sustainable tourism in rural areas.

Methodology

In order to explore the values and motivations behind tourists' holiday food choices, a qualitative approach based upon semistructured interviews was chosen (Mason, 2002). In total, 78 tourists were interviewed across the Lake District (42) and Exmoor (36) during a four-month period from July to October 2005. Interviews were carried out with available tourists across a range of locations, from popular picnic spots in "honeypot" villages through to "residents' only" facilities such as the lounge areas of youth hostels and the bar areas of top hotels. This strategy had two advantages: firstly, it allowed the researcher to access tourists from a wide range of backgrounds and, secondly, by interviewing tourists while they were relaxing, it ensured that respondents were able to talk in greater depth than would have been possible had they been engaging in other activities. During interviews, respondents were asked to describe the kinds of foods and drinks that they had encountered on their current holiday, and to explain why they had – or had not – chosen to eat them. They were also asked which foods or drinks – if any – they associated with being "typical" of their destination, and were encouraged to reflect on how these foods and drinks differed from those encountered on previous holidays and with the home setting. In this way, it was possible to explore how food was related to place in the case study areas, and to look at how this compared to respondents' past experiences of food at other destinations.

These conversations with tourists were supplemented by interviews with 24 café, pub and restaurant owners (13 from the Lake District and 11 from Exmoor) and 17 local food and drinks producers (8 from the Lake District and 9 from Exmoor). This was essential because, as consumers, tourists can select only from the kinds of foods and drinks available at their destination, and it was therefore necessary to talk to those supplying food products in order to establish how their attitudes towards food, place and authenticity compared to those of their customers. Café, pub and restaurant owners were selected according to price and apparent policy on local sourcing (see Table 1), while food producers were selected to

represent the principal types of product available in each region (see Tables 2 and 3). In both cases, the aim was not to produce a statistically representative sample but to reflect the range of businesses encountered in both regions. Interviews were conducted by the original researcher and were carried out during a three-month period from January to March 2006.

Table 1. Café, pub and restaurant interviewees by type and study area.

Type of establishment	Number of Lake District interviewees	Number of Exmoor interviewees
Traditional English country house restaurant offering luxury fine dining	1	1
Mid- to upper-price-range restaurant that was innovative (as opposed to traditional) in style, but which was passionate about local sourcing	2	1
Mid- to upper-price-range restaurant that was innovative but which did not appear to make a feature of local sourcing.	1	1
Foreign or speciality restaurant	1	1
Café/tea room that was passionate about local sourcing	1	1
Upmarket modern café that did not appear to make a feature of local sourcing	1	1
Inexpensive tourist café	1	1
Café attached to popular visitor attraction	2	1
Fish and chip takeaway	1	1
“Gastro-pub” with a reputation for good-quality food and beer	1	1
Standard pub offering typical pub fare at accessible prices	1	1
Total	13	11

Table 2. Lake District food producer interviewees.

Product type	Number of interviewees
Bakery products	2
Meat and dairy products	2
Drinks	2
Jams and preserves	2

Table 3. Exmoor food producer interviewees.

Product type	Number of interviewees
Confectionery	1
Meat and dairy products	3
Drinks	2
Jams, preserves and honey	2
Fish	1

Souvenir purchase: local food as a symbol of place and culture

In order to understand why local food is important to sustainable tourism, it is vital to investigate how tourists interact with particular food products during their holiday, and a good example of this is the purchase of food souvenirs. Over 50% of the tourists interviewed said that they had bought, or were definitely planning to buy, food and drink souvenirs of their holiday, with less than 10% saying that they were not interested in doing so. The souvenir purchasers varied in their levels of enthusiasm, from “reluctant” buyers who felt compelled to buy small gifts for family or colleagues, to one enthusiastic couple who, while visiting Exmoor, had spent £60 on specialist tea and coffee by a renowned local tea merchant in addition to “the usual stuff like fudge.” Interviews also showed that ideas about the food identity of certain regions can frequently precede the holiday itself:

Interviewer: Will you take back any food or drink as souvenirs, at all, do you think?

Respondent: Oh yes! I’ve heard fudge is quite a good thing to take back, and I’m hoping to get something in the Scrumpy cider line for my neighbour who is doing little jobs – you know, gardening.

Urry (1990) and Wang (1999) have argued that tourists look for “typical” signs of place that accord with their own perceptions, and foods and drinks are good examples of these signs (Ilbery et al., 2003). As a result, visitors are likely to want to try these “typical” products during their holiday because there is a sense that, if you want to be a “good traveller”, as opposed to an “irresponsible tourist” (Rojek, 1993), you must engage with these regional specialities. This notion of being a “good traveller” is important to sustainability because previous research has shown that “local” foods are popular because they are associated with a host of values, such as being better for the environment, conserving “traditional” rural landscapes and supporting the local economy, and there is, therefore, a “feel-good” factor associated with consuming them (Allen & Hinrichs, 2007; Boniface, 2003; Enteleca Research and Consultancy, 2001). Soper’s ideas of “alternative hedonism” are helpful here because it could be argued that, by selecting “local” foods on holiday, visitors can experience the moral satisfaction of choosing what they consider to be a more ethical form of consumption *and* the personal pleasures of eating and shopping differently (Soper, 2007).

It can also be argued that “local” food aims to “reconnect” consumers with the people and places that produce their food (Kneafsey et al., 2004) and that this connection is a powerful part of an integrated tourism experience (Clark & Chabrel, 2007). Unlike other popular souvenirs, such as a decorative key-ring or craft item, foods and drinks engage all the senses and have stronger connections with place because we have personal, sensory memories of consuming them in that setting. This ability of food to recall emotions was described by one Lake District interviewee who owned a delicatessen.

I think food evokes a memory. . . You know, you eat something, not just because it feels good, but because it evokes that memory of the good time – whether it’s the Cornish pasty or a cream tea, or a Cumberland sausage – and it doesn’t matter where in the world you eat it. The time when you first ate it is what the memory relates back to, and it’s very unifying.

Thus, local food can be an asset to integrated tourism development as a result of its ability to symbolise place and culture, provide a moral “feel-good” factor associated with its consumption and enable visitors to experience a sense of connection to their destination – both during and after their visit. These links between food and place become more apparent when we analyse what kinds of food experience tourists are seeking during their holiday. The following section argues that local foods and drinks are an asset to integrated and sustainable tourism because they enable host communities to capitalise on visitors’ desire

for some form of “authentic” experience that will enable them to connect with the place and culture of their destination.

The search for “authentic” food experiences

Local food is not only valuable as a souvenir of a holiday. Over 60% of the tourists interviewed said that they had deliberately chosen to consume foods or drinks that they considered “local” while on holiday which suggests that, rather than just looking for something “different”, tourists are seeking products that they feel will give them an insight into the nature of a place and its people. As one interviewee explained, “I think you need to try the local food because it’s part of the culture really, isn’t it?” Another said, “You want to try the local food wherever you are, and get a taste of the place”.

Visitors often rationalised this desire for “genuine” food experiences by explaining that it formed part of a search for some kind of authenticity on holiday.

I do think, yes, if you go and stay somewhere, then obviously you could get an Italian meal anywhere – it feels fake and not quite right. . . And so it’s nice to have something that purports to be local.

This example indicates two things: firstly that, for tourists, local food is about the search for products that are not “fake” and which appear to say something about the place and culture that created them. Secondly, this demand for a “local, authentic” experience can persist even where there is a degree of scepticism about the “local” claims being made for the product (as indicated by the use of “purports”). This theme will be explored in more depth later in the paper. However, the key question is why it is that *local* food experiences come to be seen as “authentic” events that represent place and culture while other kinds of food experience do not. To understand why this is so, it is important to examine the ways in which food and place relationships are constructed by visitors. As discussed previously, tourists may have their own ideas about what a “typical” food experience of that place might look like, and anything that fits this image – including the setting, the ambience and the food itself – is more likely to be identified as “authentic”. For example, when asked what kind of establishment they would look for if they wanted to stop for lunch while out touring around the Lake District, several respondents explained that they would prefer something that appeared traditional and English:

It’s either got a charm to it, or it’s got a sort of look that’s authentic. Not the fast-food type place – that’s not us. It’s got to be authentic and ‘olde tea shoppy’ for me.

We tend to avoid loud and plastic! You know, I think if we’re going to eat, we’d rather be in a cosy little real-ale pub that looks like it is home cooking, you know? Rather than something that’s been zapped in a microwave.

These comments can be said to reflect concerns about food quality, on the grounds that home-cooked food should be tastier than its microwaved equivalent. However, the choice of a “cosy little real-ale pub” above anything “loud and plastic” also indicates a desire for a more authentic, traditional, Lakeland eating experience.

The preceding examples illustrate three ways in which the tourist socially constructs authentic relationships between local food and place. Firstly, an occasion is more likely to be considered authentic if it corresponds with our preconceptions about what a typical food experience for that place will look like. A second – and related – factor is that a food experience can seem more authentic if it takes place in a sympathetic surrounding environment. Finally, authentic experiences tend to emphasise some element of tradition or naturalness. For example, Yeoman et al. (2006) has argued that tourist attractions must not

appear too contemporary or manufactured because “authentic” implies origins in the distant past – the idea that a certain activity has been going on for generations adds a sense of legitimacy to an experience. Here, this is reflected in the preference for “olde worlde” Lake District charm over anything too modern. Therefore, the concept of heritage is relevant here as it appears that tourists value local foods, not just because they are perceived to be local but also because they are seen to be “traditional” products with a long history of production in that location.

This is important for the development of an integrated and sustainable tourism agenda because it shows that there are market opportunities for local products that can satisfy the visitor’s desire for experiences that promote a connection with place, culture and heritage (Bessière, 1998; Boniface, 2003; Buller & Morris, 2004; Clark & Chabrel, 2007; Kneafsey et al., 2004). It also allows destinations to use “iconic” products to build a “brand” that can be used to distinguish the region from its competitors (Urry, 1995). However, this account assumes two things: an unproblematic understanding of “local food” and an unproblematic understanding of authenticity. Neither can be assumed.

“Local food” and “authenticity”: two contested concepts

Any study which attempts to understand the relationship between food and place must first consider the question of what is meant by the term “local food”. In accordance with Allen and Hinrichs (2007), this study revealed extensive debate about the meaning of the term “local”, with tourists, food producers and restaurateurs adopting a range of definitions in accordance with their own interests.

For example, tourists tended to associate local food with particular speciality products. Of the 36 Exmoor tourists interviewed, 32 were able to name specific examples of foods and drinks that they associated with the area, with a similar trend being observed in the Lake District, where 38 of the 42 tourists identified at least one food or drink product with the area. Figures 1 and 2 show how both destinations were conceptualised through food

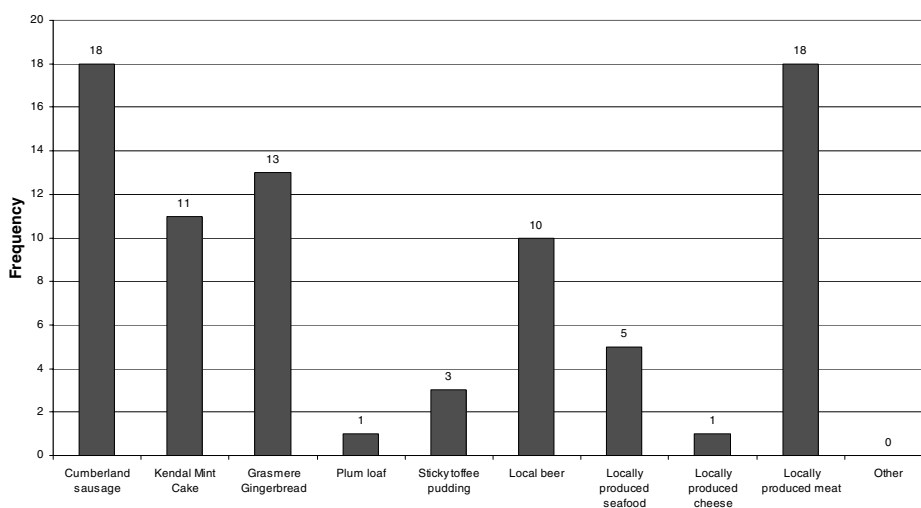


Figure 1. Local specialties identified by visitors to the Lake District.

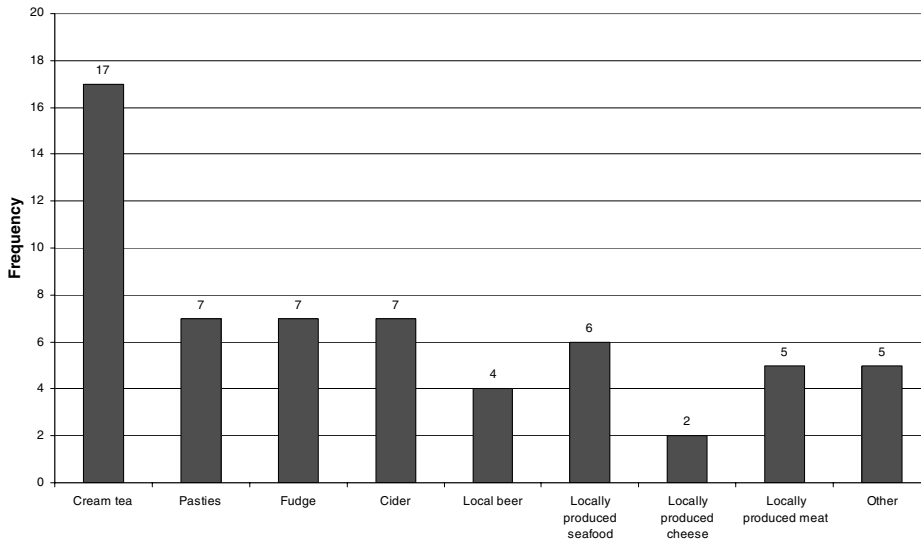


Figure 2. Local specialities identified by visitors to Exmoor.

and, although there is some overlap (meat, cheese and beer appear on both graphs), it is clear that both regions have distinct food identities, with cream teas, pasties, fudge and cider being seen as characteristic products for Exmoor, and Cumberland sausage, Kendal Mint Cake and Grasmere Gingerbread performing this role for the Lake District.

However, interviews with food producers and café and restaurant owners revealed different understandings. For example, 10 interviewees favoured a geographical definition, where “local” referred to products from within a defined area. There was, however, considerable disagreement over the extent of this area. In the case of the Lake District, one producer felt that “local” should mean products from the county of Cumbria, whereas another thought the definition should extend to the whole of the North West of England.

There was also debate about the relative importance of local ingredients and local manufacture. Interviews revealed that a spectrum similar to that described by Watts et al. (2005) was operating, which ranged from strong definitions of locality based upon the use of local ingredients, at one end, to weaker definitions based upon local manufacture of imported ingredients – or even the use of local supply companies – at the other. For example, one Lake District jam producer felt that the concept of “local” would be too limiting if it could be applied only to local ingredients. He felt that his company should be considered local because, by manufacturing locally and employing local people, he was helping the Cumbrian economy.

I always get quoted the thing about adding value to the product, which I think is a very good way, because you couldn’t possibly make apricot chutney in Cumbria and call it local. . . So if you went along the lines of saying it’s got to be reared or grown locally and then produced locally. . . you’re limiting yourself. We couldn’t make chilli jam. Even red onion marmalade – the onions aren’t produced within Cumbria. . . So, especially on ours, you can’t have anything that you can say is really local, local.

However, other respondents argued for a stronger definition of locality, including a jam producer from Exmoor who made her preserves by handpicking local fruit, before peeling

and chopping all the ingredients in her kitchen. She was angered by rival producers who used preprepared, frozen fruits from abroad to make their “local” jam.

Their whortleberry jam, the fruit comes from America! Personally I think that’s mis-selling, because everybody thinks they are eating Exmoor whortleberries and they’re not. . . . An awful lot of product comes from abroad and yet, because they are processed here, it’s called a local product. And, in my view, that isn’t a local product. It’s a local product if it’s grown here.

Such a diversity of opinion illustrates how the concept of local is socially constructed according to a person’s beliefs and circumstances. These examples show that, by concentrating on the ingredients and manufacturing processes involved, producers are using an “objective” understanding of authenticity. By contrast, tourists focus less on the origins of the products, preferring, instead, to concentrate on their symbolic attributes – thus reflecting more of the “constructed” aspects of authenticity. However, producers were aware of the symbolic importance of food for tourists and some were attempting to “stage” the authenticity of their products accordingly, as this Lake District bakery owner described:

We had a product which was a very nice sultana cake. . . . We made that as Devon Fruit Cake for years, and it did nothing – it just stayed on the shelf knocking around. I changed it to Cumbrian Fruit Cake, and it’s one of our better-selling products. . . . It’s like our Dundee Cake – we made a Dundee Cake, and we can’t sell that here. We now call our version of the Dundee Cake a Westmorland Cake.¹ And it’s not a big seller – it’s not like the Cumbrian. But it still does better than Dundee.

Such differing interpretations of the “local” and the “authentic” might appear to present a serious challenge for those wishing to use food and drink as part of a sustainable, integrated tourism offering: how can we develop an “authentic local food industry” if the concepts behind it are so contested? However, this research shows that, if we focus on tourist understandings of authenticity and ask *why* visitors are seeking it from their holiday food experiences, we are able to interpret their decisions in a different light.

Finding meaning in food

To re-establish the meaning and value behind local food, it is necessary to begin with Cohen’s (2007) analysis which shows that different understandings of authenticity can coexist within tourism. This study shows that similar claims can be applied to holiday food because, while some descriptions – such as that relating to the “olde worlde tea shop” – reflect an enjoyment resulting from what felt like a “typical” experience of local culture, other stories show visitors having a good time despite knowing that an experience is not “genuine” in this way, as illustrated by the diner who enjoyed trying things which “purported” to be local. Existential accounts may also be present on occasions where the enjoyment of the meal is less about the foods being consumed and more about the feelings provoked in the individual – for example, the sense of personal satisfaction and wholeness that comes from sharing food in a relaxed holiday setting, as this interviewee described: “It’s spending time with people that’s important and I think part of that, when you’re relaxing, is eating and drinking, and I think that’s part of the social occasion and food and drink are important in that context, you know? It’s that shared experience that’s important for me”.

By recognising that holiday food experiences can involve different kinds of authenticity it can be seen that “local” food is important to the sustainable tourism experience in several ways. Firstly, it allows those with objective or socially constructed understandings of authenticity to try foods that they may consider to be related to the landscape, culture and heritage of their destination – hence, the attraction of Cumberland sausage and Kendal Mint Cake in the Lake District, and cream teas, fudge and cider on Exmoor.

However, local food can also contribute to the experience of existential authenticity. As described by Wang (1999), existential authenticity is about identity formation and the chance to experience a more intense feeling of connection with ourselves and the world around us. It could therefore be argued that a greater sense of existential authenticity can result from the consumption of local foods because the imagery surrounding these foods can help us feel that we are connecting more deeply with the people and places that produced them (Clark & Chabrel, 2007; Kneafsey et al., 2004). This is particularly important for those who may be dissatisfied by what they perceive as the “inauthentic” nature of contemporary consumerism (Soper, 2007). For example, when describing the attraction of farm shops, one interviewee, who worked for a regional food group on Exmoor, explained, “A lot of this is about the story of the food, which you don’t get if you buy in the supermarket. And that’s what people are getting from coming to a farm shop – they’re getting a bit more of an experience, really.”

Similar comments were made by a Lake District bakery owner when describing the popularity of her Victorian-themed shop:

You’ve got the smell, you’ve got the atmosphere of the shop, you’ve got the tradition . . . it’s really like hand to mouth, isn’t it? It goes all the way through a little production system and then you literally get it in a bag, walk out and eat it, and it can still actually sometimes be warm. And people aren’t just buying that – they’re buying the whole package.

Of course, not all tourists will have such an encounter because, as Yeoman et al. (2006) describe, there must be a personal desire to engage in this process of “authenti-seeking” first. However, for visitors who may be disillusioned with consumerism (Soper, 2007; Taylor, 2001) or anxious about the growing industrialisation of agriculture (Boniface, 2003), “local” food products can offer a way to achieve a more authentic sense of self and a more satisfying form of engagement with the people and places around them. This is because “local” products have a story – and a meaning – behind them that can be related to place and culture. This meaning is particularly important for tourists, because the search for existential authenticity can also be interpreted as a search for meaning. Thus, tourists choosing to consume local products may not just be enjoying the physical taste of the food. Instead, they are also consuming the meaning behind it. Eating and drinking thus becomes a three-dimensional experience that enables the visitor to connect with the place and culture of their destination.

Conclusion

Despite extensive disagreement about the precise meaning of “local” food, the idea of a link between food and place remains a powerful one and the evidence presented here shows that offering visitors a way to experience some form of authenticity through food can assist the development of sustainable tourism in a number of ways. Firstly, and most obviously, the promotion of iconic food and drink products can help to create an “image” for a particular destination that will help it attract new visitors and boost its economic sustainability in the long term (Ilbery et al., 2003). Food and drink products are a particularly effective means of creating such an image because they can be linked to the kind of “traditional” landscapes and farming methods that tourists will “gaze” upon during their holiday (Enteleca Research and Consultancy, 2001; Urry, 1990).

Secondly, in contrast to some of the more “traditional” discourses surrounding sustainability where “trade-offs” are involved, “local” products promise the kind of all-round social, economic and environmental benefits for hosts and guests that have been sought as part of IRT initiatives throughout Europe (Clark & Chabrel, 2007; Ilbery et al., 2007).

For example, tourist consumption of local foods creates a market opportunity that can encourage the development of sustainable agriculture, help conserve traditional farming landscapes and assist the local economy (Buller & Morris, 2004). The results of this study thus accord with previous research which shows that the appeal of local food lies in its ability to encompass everything from a concern for environmental and social sustainability, through to consumer demands for foods that are safe, distinctive and traceable (Boniface, 2003; Ilbery et al., 2005; Marsden, 2004).

Local food is able to achieve all these things because of its ability to appeal to the visitor's desire for authenticity within the holiday. This study shows that "local" products can appeal to tourists on a number of levels, from the simple demand for "typical" products that can be purchased and consumed as a symbol of place, through to the complex and deep-seated quest for a more authentic sense of self. In this way, those who are worried about the environmental consequences of contemporary agriculture or disillusioned with what they perceive to be the "inauthentic" nature of modern life (Soper, 2007; Taylor, 2001) can choose to engage with "local" food and drink products on holiday as a way of restoring a more meaningful sense of connection between themselves, as consumers, and the people and places that produce their food. For these consumers, the fact that local products are equated with economically and socially sustainable behaviour acts as a further attraction because it enables them to cast themselves in the role of the "good" and "responsible" tourists who care about the destinations they are visiting (Barnett et al., 2005; Clarke et al., 2007; Enteleca Research and Consultancy, 2001; Rojek, 1993; Soper, 2007). In short, it is the meaning behind food that many tourists are seeking and, by harnessing this meaning through the foods and drinks on offer at particular destinations, sustainable initiatives can have a better chance of success.

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Note

1. Westmorland was a small ancient county subsumed into the county of Cumbria in 1974.

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