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Research Report

Site; The Welsh Food Centre, Bodnant, Conwy, North Wales.

Background.

The Welsh Food Centre is a newly restored area of the Bodnant estate, a well known and long established acreage of gardens and buildings which attracts thousands of visitors in all seasons. Some of the buildings which now form the food centre are reconditioned from the run down empty yet vernacular shells of small farm buildings to a substantial and pleasant area, including shops, cafe/restaurant play area a bee centre and holiday accommodation, the style of the buildings is in keeping with the original period.

Publicity and Marketing.

The information source (English version) for the public, (see images at end of text) is a three-fold paper leaflet, printed on both sides with rich colour images and text, it is titled with the words Bodnant, the coat of arms insignia and underneath the 'Welsh Food Centre' with the words 'shop, discover, eat, drink, stay'. inviting the public into a centred area of hospitality. There is also a website which mirrors the leaflet and includes an online shop.

Two tangible cultures of this region of Wales are evident in the food centre as a group of buildings accommodating food and services, which is produced and sourced locally, which has some historical roots in the building's use as farm barns and a residence, and partly. There is also an outside influence in the range of products presented, for example, authentic Mediterranean and other European regional influences and products such as olive oils, pastas, cheeses, wines and condiments.

The images (colour photographs) and text continue to describe a welcoming and engaging atmosphere. An award winning farm shop, 'The Hayloft' restaurant and wine cellar. The Bee Centre, also an educational source and an outlet for marketing and selling local honey, there are display boards with ecological explanations, examples of hives. It has the function of a tiny museum for bee life where much of the displays are at child's eye level so that the inner workings of a hive, for example, can be seen.

The texture of the leaflet has a soft lightweight quality, to it, produced from recycled paper, it is as though the subject it represents has influenced the design and tactile quality, perhaps further representing the type of visiting public hoped for by the centre, in the sense that it may appeal to people who have an existing sensitivity around countryside, rural and ecological matters, or, it may entice a visitor who is unfamiliar with this kind of culture and is to be surprised by what is on offer, a change of scene from the usual tourist attractions of the region, which tend to be high activity family tourist themes. A part of the whole Bodnant food centre experience could be described as being closely related and influenced by the 'slow food' culture;

‘Slow Food is an organization that promotes local food and traditional cooking. It was founded by Carlo Petrini in Italy in 1986 and has since spread worldwide. Promoted as an alternative to fast food, it strives to preserve traditional and regional cuisine and encourages farming of plants, seeds, and livestock characteristic of the local ecosystem. It was the first established part of the broader slow movement. Its goals of sustainable foods and promotion of local small businesses are paralleled by a political agenda directed against globalization of agricultural products.’ (from wikipedia online searched 2017).

Further images within the leaflet show associated activities which enhance the experience for the visitor and equally for the local who may want to engage on a regular basis with the centre and to learn more about the ‘slow food’ context. There is a cookery and wine school who hold regular events and group experiences. The variety of foods are shown in high quality photographs, breads, meats, cheeses wines and olive oils are all included, an image of a chef, the cafe full and busy and rows of delicatessen products on full shelves.

The imagery is rich and inviting. At play in the marketing is the passionate aspect of artisan food culture, since over the last few decades quite a fast proliferation of Welsh made products have entered shops and cafes regionally and further afield including abroad. One image advertises the various food hampers available at seasonal times and celebrations of the year. This whole package for tourists and locals is neatly described in context;

‘Slow Food initiates become (ideally anyway) authentic connoisseurs of transient pleasure whose cultivated and purified inclinations determine what is genuine in the world around them. Kept afloat by what they believe is their good taste, they are not washed away by the waves of modernity; they surf on them. And so a universalizing social movement has been created out of the fleeting and intimate aesthetic experience of personal pleasure. (Lindholm 2008: 74)’ (quoted by West) in Anthropology of Food, chapter on Authenticity, Heritage and Artisan Foods.

It is relevant to explore the nature of artisan food centres to the Slow Food movement, not only a movement which concerns ‘taste and pleasure’ but as a social movement stemming sometimes from traditional rural cultures to try to counteract the extremities of hyper-capitalism and food buying such as a mass of processed food in large supermarkets.

In parts of Italy, an example of this type of culture might be, for example, the area of Liguria, Italy, where intangible cultures connected with nature and human interaction are recognised by UNESCO;

‘The most famous UNESCO World Heritage in Liguria is undoubtedly the coastline between [Cinque Terre](#) and [Portovenere](#). According to UNESCO these 15 km of jagged, steep coastline represent ‘the harmonious interaction between people and nature to produce a landscape of exceptional scenic quality that illustrates a traditional way of life that has existed for a thousand years and continues to play an important socio-economic role in the life of the community’;

(<https://italiannotes.com/unesco-world-heritage-in-liguria/> searched Jan 2018)

Cultures such as this have no doubt had wider influence recently with reference to the public interest in Mediterranean foods for health benefits and to growers of artisan foods which are evident as commercially placed products in centres such as Bodnant and other sites in Wales i.e. the Rhug farm estate and shop also in North Wales near Corwen.

Another aspect of the home grown food and drink movement is the establishment of new vineyards which have appeared over Wales in recent years, bringing a wider range of locally made wines to the artisan food market and to the visiting public, the vineyards become a tourist day out too.

The importance of encouraging the public to take part in these experiences enhances their knowledge of the depth of ecological resources which we depend on for 'original' and wholesome food products. Products which tend to do less damage generally to natural resources, with regard to production, such as industrial farming can do on a massive scale, an example would be the 'overkill' scenarios of 'chain' fast food beef farming and genetically modified crops, or our dependence as a population on caged hens for en-mass daily eggs. West points to another quote to expand on the 'authentic' alternatives which explore the origins of the movement but also the 'owners' engagement with their own production, to quite a degree in terms of heritage;

'The products [that visitors to argiturismo in Bergamo] may buy and take home with them to savor later will be enjoyed not just for their taste, but also for the links that they carry to the 'authentic' Bergamasco experience in which the consumer first encountered them. In the process, social networks for the distribution and circulation of Bergamasco products will be (re-)created. (Cavanaugh 2007: 164)' (quoted by West) in Anthology of Food, chapter on Authenticity, Heritage and Artisanal Foods.

The activities on the Bodnant estate are also promoted for the local visitor to enjoy at regular intervals, at weekends or other times in the week as sessions which are repeated. This type of engagement may shift some of their viewpoint away perhaps from a fast food disposable buying culture and supermarket chain habit, a weekly routine for most, they may also leave the centre with a fuller understanding of original smallholding farming methods regionally. If it wasn't for some organic and other movements these techniques would be almost lost in the British Isles. Cheeses handmade and wrapped 'in breathable linen', free range meat, dairy and organic ingredients in wines and in restaurant foods.

Packaging, although very evident in the shop is reduced remarkably by shopping for quality rather than short term convenience. A decent olive oil, for example, may have a longer term health benefit than most other convenience cooking oils in plastic containers. Environmentally the movements which grow from the artisan trend can benefit local regions and the wider world. Small towns in Wales, for example, are relatively geographically distant from each other, so a range of small shops exist centrally in each one, some longer term, to supply the essentials of quality foods.

Delicatessens, green-grocers, whole-food shops, cafes, with packaged fresh tea and coffee, bistros, all providing local products in keeping with this trend are crucial to the spread and survival of the local artisan food and other economies, inspired by the artisan.

Two market towns taken as example; Dolgellau and Machynlleth) show semi self sufficient local economies, Machynlleth has it's own edible movement, partly sprung from the environmental milieu of The Centre of Alternative Technology, where it is possible to find 'free food' growing in certain parts of the town. Dolgellau has small shops, green grocers, cafes who make their own artisan bread etc. The passing tourist trade has also fuelled the small town experience in terms of local produce. The foods and wines seen and bought at Bodnant can be eaten and bought also in these and other towns.

In the publicity for Bodnant the term 'Welsh Food' is used as an umbrella term, to describe local production rather than the origin of the actual dish, for example one wouldn't expect to see a shop full of only Welsh recipe based foods such as Bara Brith (Fruit bread) and certain types of Cawl (Soup) the point is; that it is a living multitude of relative industries often based in small to medium size companies in rural areas, but not always, it could be produce from medium sized factories, in Cardiff for example, producing Welsh butter or a supplier of Italian cheese from Genoa, more importantly the main of the companies use original and sustained methods to *produce* the items they sell and quite a few methods have been revived, including vineyards, orchards, cheese making, herbs and fruit juices from organic home grown ingredients to name a few.

The courtyard space.

The courtyard at the centre of the buildings is used for different events, market stalls and children's activities, for eating food at some of the outside cafe areas for passing tourists. This space between the buildings is a temporary walk through, to loiter and browse at stalls. Visitors 'people watch' from the cafe seats. There is a sense of the internal dialogue of visitors greeting each other in holiday mood.

It could be argued that around this area there is a 'de-marketed' kind of approach to attracting tourists, as opposed very organised with behind the scenes food work areas, it relaxes into some transparency for the tourists, the cafe and shop workers appear casual but attentive, they serve or enter areas such as open plan kitchens where they can still be seen carrying out their activities such as cooking or preparing drinks and at serving counters, the trail of visitors is visible to them and vice-versa, they are marked by a relaxed 'uniform' so a worker is visibly identified but has an approachable relaxed and open manner.

With this in mind, any de-marketing aspect may not necessarily be deliberate strategy by the managers, but forms into one as a result of naturally changing boundaries, through design, i.e. open plan kitchen/restaurant, open courtyard. There is a transparency around these areas in the main restaurant so that the customer can fully see the activity of the worker, from specialist (chef) to waiter's and kitchen assistants, this adds to the feeling of an atmosphere within the restaurant where boundaries are lessened between consumer and provider.

More visitor involvement with the tactile and visual side of the food and restaurant experience can bring a special attraction to the tourist, that experience will be passed on, word of mouth maybe, in the form of comparative examples such as the restaurant having a more relaxed atmosphere than certain other sites and restaurants in the region and in turn attracting more of the long term re-visiting clientele, who wish to learn at one of the food or wine 'schools', which the economy of the food centre thrives on.

As Park points out; (Heritage Tourism, Hyung Yu Park)

'De-marketing is defined as the 'aspect of marketing that deals with discouraging customers in general or a certain class of customers in particular on either a temporary or permanent basis' (Kotler & Levy, 1971: 76)

To attract those who relish time to enjoy the whole food experience, sometimes families for the whole day, to 'look, eat, shop, learn' at leisure, as a social event too rather than a quick dash into a

cafe, seems to be the whole aim of the centre. The experiences resonate a continental environment where time is taken over meals and forms a large part of social bonding.

The leisure atmosphere of the centre subsequently acts toward the 'conservation' of the products as heritage. The courtyard provides a point of decision making by the tourist, whether it's to the shops or sitting for food and coffee or buying local produce to take home.

In terms of the sustainability of the artisan food milieu, the 'selected' client serve a purpose in making sure the heritage site isn't damaged, equal to the way crowds are controlled in the 'de-marketing' of fragile site visiting, such as cave paintings or ancient buildings. It could also be argued that a specific 'atmosphere' can be retained if the visitor is relaxed and has plenty of time to enjoy the site experience rather than rushing to various activities and parts of the site.

The centre buildings, environ for visitors.

There is no doubt that the centre and satellite industries it supports is well presented and welcoming to the visitor, which in turn encourages footfall in terms of income, for both the estate and for those companies, therefore any publicity is marketing specifically for the interest of all parties.

What is not mentioned enough perhaps is the beauty and craft of the enhanced and re-conditioned vernacular architecture which houses the shops and cafes. There is some mention in the leaflet of the 'stunning' five star farm house for holiday tourists to stay on site but the details of the architecture are left to the imagination. The overall layout of the buildings and courtyard are reminiscent of a working farm. Bringing to mind a nostalgic feeling which fulfils the curiosity of tourists who may not have experienced such an environment.

On entry to the centre there is ample parking space and conveniences, pleasant paths to walk along in a green and stone environment. One of the most impressive buildings is the long ground floor tea room, (Ystafell De) interior, a reconditioned long brick 'barn', in contrast to the interesting but very high ceilinged shop area with attractive porthole shaped windows. The architecture overall retains a small farm atmosphere and has a welcoming homely feel. The Hayloft has a warm interior, with wooden beams and antique style furniture which add to the decor.

On arrival the visitor building experience could be described as being close to visiting a small living museum. Thus it is marketed as a whole experience.

'Welsh Food'

The term 'Welsh Food' in this context, encompasses the many aspects of local produce which is new and developing. There is a working relationship between the shop and the local radius and national advantage with the availability of the online 'farm shop' which delivers produce. The aim of the organisation is fulfilled then, to reach the satellite towns, as well as providing a 'day out' for people. Another step back to the authentic experience is to have a food hamper within the home. Bodnant food centre itself has an online shop which allows people in the local area and even further afield, to chose the foods they like and have it delivered. The food experience being seasonally targeted to willing customers. But what does the term 'Welsh Food' imply culturally? Is it a national identity, a marker simply for location and produce, or something more complex. It seems to signify that the centre is consolidated by the overall use of the word, as nation (with other influence) just as the bee centre is called the 'national' bee centre, it also indicates a sort of 'collective' term, where location becomes nation.

Further questions could be explored with regard to the artisan food experience such as; is the populous interest in artisan foods related on a deeper level to 'food security', organics, a sense of back to earth living? Or is it simply that we have travelled around enough in the modern world to try various foods and that we know we want more of that speciality, because it may be better for our health than processed foods.

In 2016 Rebecca Hosking's film documentary for 'Nature' BBC, *A Farm for the Future*, explores her challenge of reverting her family farm to more sustainable farming methods, her argument is partly that we've been so removed from regional food growing by supermarkets and fast foods which use masses of energy i.e. oil, that there could now be a serious examination of the way we are working the land.

Maybe there could be more room within heritage contexts too for a conversion to more sustainable lifestyles by using models such as the food grown in kitchen gardens and forest garden models in some appropriate acreage? involving the local community adds to the very local structures of these ideas and is nothing particularly new, but tends to be quite limited still in the UK. In heritage the key factor seems to be the drawing out of particularly interesting historical methods (farming and food making for example) and putting them into action for the public, the extension of these ideas in the community for local food wealth could perhaps be expanded if needed, some boundaries dissolved to allow the traditional 'kitchen garden' to flourish into forest garden (a permaculture technique for fruit and edible plant growing) with local input. The National Botanic Centre of Wales is one such pioneering organisation which is developing some of these aspects, in terms of education, since they are advertising posts for ecology tutors to work with the public/community within their own kitchen gardens.

The wider picture.

Artisan and slow food products have shifted gradually into supermarkets, so that local companies producing, for example, cordials or yogurt are represented on the shelves of local supermarkets for shoppers to buy, the customer feels that they are contributing to a local and familiar company. But interestingly this in itself has created an almost back-slide on an environmental scenario and perhaps in some cases can even prevent some small producers from expanding with their wares, as West further explores;

'Jackson writes: ' Many of the qualities attributed to artisan food are now being appropriated by large-scale industrialized food producers, sold through high-street supermarkets rather than through local independent stores or farmers ' markets ' (Jackson and CONANX Group 2013: 26). 8 By some definitions, for example, more ' craft baking ' is done today in supermarket bakeries than in small-scale bakeries. Many British supermarkets now trade in high volumes of 'artisanal cheese ', making it difficult for specialist cheesemongers to protect their market niche.. ' [West, Overview of Heritage Food in the Handbook of the Anthropology of Food](#)

This appropriation by supermarkets perhaps takes away the novelty focus for artisan food centres but is yet to be seen, considering that new products appear all of the time and are market tested in a small food centre environment before expanding out into supermarket chains. A recent display of 'Welsh local foods' on an eye-catching display in a well known supermarket demonstrates the point.

Conclusion

It appears that artisan food centres are here to stay, although the nature of what they provide and how they provide it will no doubt change. How much centres like this support the production of local produce and small producers further afield is also a changeable factor due to the parallel activities of the supermarkets, as discussed above.

How important is the ability to consume and buy these foods on the premises and how is it important that it is named 'Welsh Food'? It could be said that it is paramount to a tourist visiting Wales who expects to see these special products within a few miles of their Welsh itinerary rather than foods which come from further away, or, they may have already seen 'Welsh' products in shops en route. An example may be, a particular confectionery which is sold also at the airport shop as Welsh/ British and happens to supply the Bodnant food centre too.

In the future can we envisage a rise in community engagement with the production of artisan foods for visitors? Already there are examples of whole towns creating their own method of food as welcoming visitors, schemes in Machynlleth for example where on leaving the train station a person can take what they need from plant troughs filled with herbs and other edible plants, although not a specific heritage site, this kind of activity adds to the authenticity of the whole town as originator of real (and free) foods other than processed supermarket items.

In terms of heritage and the visitor experience to the town it adds a certain novelty angle and is much discussed, if the products (plants) then reach the local cafes and people, it has a multi faceted purpose and ties in with the wider area as it encourages people to also visit nearby sites such as The Centre for Alternative Technology which has similar permaculture garden areas, or the Owain Glyndwr Museum which has regular special events with activities for children.

On other Bodnant food centre, although a later addition to the large Bodnant garden estate is more closely related to artisan food as a commercial interaction, exchange of money, a shopping experience and novelty item, but there are similarities in the drive and motivation of both groups here which could be contextualised as a need to preserve some aspect of the way food was produced in the past.

Some of the older residents of Machynlleth have said that they recall that up until the late 1960's a substantial number of residence had the equivalent of an allotment in their front or back garden, there was of course no supermarket at the time and before that only a handful of shops sold basic groceries. Needs were different, and yet some of the original country food recipes and dishes have ironically become artisan foods in the modern world.

Bibliography;

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Heritage Tourism, Hyung Yu, Park, Chapter; *Heritage Marketing* Chapter 8 pg's 145-49.

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Video and other online sources;

www.bodnant-welshfood.co.uk

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slow_Food

Rebecca Hosking, Natural World, BBC A Farm For The Future, 2016

Link to video on Vimeo

<https://vimeo.com/136857929>

Italian notes UNESCO sites, Liguria, Italy.

<https://italiannotes.com/unesco-world-heritage-in-liguria/> searched Jan 2018

Bodnant Food Centre website

Images of leaflet;



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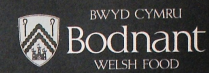
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