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HAS A PANDEMIC PROVIDED AN OPPORTUNITY FOR FOOD *IN* TOURISM?

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ABSTRACT

This is an autoethnographic perspective, informed by my experience over four decades as a practitioner, policy maker and academic. The primary thrust of my argument is that, within the wider tourism industry, food in tourism is integral across all sectors, markets, and populations with enormous and sustainable social and economic potential. Realising that potential requires a shift beyond the existing traditional tourism paradigm that is based on narrow economic objectives. The pandemic may have created a tipping point, forcing that paradigm to shift to holistic, collaborative, and sustainable objectives reflecting fresh societal, cultural, environmental, and economic concerns. It is therefore critical to prepare for action in a post-pandemic world where challenges are different. This entails an awareness, and an understanding, of some of the conventions and practices of key elements outside of tourism and food. While there are many, I suggest focusing on those most critical to food-focused activity in tourism - that is, academic researchers in tourism, tourism industry practitioners, and tourism policy makers. In practice, these parties, and how they interact, inevitably require detailed attention and consideration in successfully advocating for any food-focused activity in tourism in general, and food *in* tourism in particular.

KEY WORDS: tourism, food, practitioner, policy, paradigm, auto ethnographic, gastronomy, pandemic, Ireland

UNDERSTANDING MY APPROACH, BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an autoethnographic perspective, informed by my experience over four decades as a practitioner in the tourism and hospitality sectors, and as a public servant in a government tourism agency and in hospitality education. Furthermore, as a practitioner who, relatively recently, has turned academic researcher (Mulcahy, 2020), my perspective is also informed by the knowledge acquired through practice, reading, research, and networking. This recognition is comparable to Joppe’s experience when writing her opinion piece on tourism research (2018, p 203). My autoethnographic approach facilitates a wider perspective that is both multi-disciplinary and extradisciplinary¹ (Tribe, 2010) and goes beyond the traditional academic boundaries described by Tett as “artificial, reflecting university tribalism” (Tett, 2021, xx). On reflection, in true autoethnographic mode, I am probably more of a tourism practitioner than an academic researcher. However, my familiarity with both allows me to make valuable contributions to either knowing the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Arguably, the limitation of my approach is that it may be considered insular given the restrictions of the pandemic over the last two years. My approach may also have been influenced by what I have seen happening close to me here in Ireland, a small country on the western edge of Europe and a member of the European Union. Nonetheless, I believe that this contribution might contribute to further development of how the intersection of food and tourism is understood and conceptualised in any location.

Against that background, the primary thrust of my argument is that, within the wider tourism industry, specific food-focused activity (like culinary tourism) is more niche than mainstream but food *in* tourism is something that is integral across all sectors, markets, and populations

¹ Tribe suggests that knowledge creation occurs in three ways: through multi-disciplinary, interdisciplinary, or extra-disciplinary efforts. Of particular interest here is extra-disciplinary knowledge, that is, knowledge derived from problem solving which is context-specific and industry-related (2010).

with enormous and sustainable social and economic potential. By simply arriving at their destination, all tourists initiate a range of opportunities for tourism providers and the wider economy (Mulcahy, 2016, p 223). On a practical basis, in terms of foods and beverages, these are cultural, social, cross-sectoral, and commercial opportunities for local communities whenever a tourist wants to eat – whether that be a drink, a snack or a meal, either prepared by themselves or as part of a service. Unfortunately, realising these opportunities requires a shift in mindset beyond the existing traditional tourism paradigm that is based on narrow economic objectives (largely revenue levels, tourist numbers and marketing) which is followed by some academic researchers and by the majority of tourism industry practitioners, politicians, and public policy makers.

In the recent academic literature, pre-pandemic, there was little evidence that any significant structural change would take place to disrupt, or even slightly alter, that traditional tourism paradigm (Dredge, 2016; Rinaldi, 2017; Dwyer, 2018). This is despite what Dredge and Jamal later described as the emerging discourses focusing on re-valuing tourism as a means of achieving a wider range of objectives (such as political, social, cultural, environmental outcomes) rather than just being a means of economic development (2015, p. 295). However, the pandemic has ensured that there needs to be more extensive, collective action: a massive global response to a huge global crisis (Tooze, 2021). It appears that many of the 20th century tools we have been using to navigate the world in the 21st century are simply not working well, as they are used “without an awareness of culture and context, and built assuming that the world can be neatly bounded or captured by a single set of parameters.” Clearly, in the 21st century, a new approach is needed (Tett, 2021, p xiii).

Over the past ten years, as part of those emerging discourses, I have advocated for the conceptualisation of food *in* tourism as an agent of change in Ireland with limited success. This is largely due, I believe, to the strength of the traditional tourism paradigm, despite having an advantageous emic position as a public servant in the national tourism development agency.

As I have highlighted elsewhere (Mulcahy, 2019), generic food tourism is neither new nor fully understood. As it is specific to place (through embedded features shaped by the combination of senses, language, climate, culture, etc.), it is not easily replicated but it is dynamic, reacting to its environment. Furthermore, a person’s food preferences and their

ability to discriminate aesthetically is deeply ingrained and socially embedded, according to (Mennell, 2005, p 470). As a result, Stephen Mennell (a sociology professor at University College Dublin) explains, gastronomy, its discourse, and its evolution, act as a highly sensitive marker for much broader social, political, and economic changes in society.

Over fifteen years later, Mennell's observations are apposite in light of the pandemic as 'gastronomy', in this case meaning both 'food in tourism' and niche food-focused activity, is finding space to be the change agent which could shift the tourism paradigm focus away from solely economic objectives. Accordingly, the pandemic, its collateral damage, and increased anxieties such as climate change, may have created a tipping point where the traditional tourism paradigm is forced to shift to one with holistic, collaborative, and sustainable objectives. These objectives are likely to have to reflect fresh societal, cultural, environmental, and economic concerns over and above the conventional economic and marketing objectives.

Success in this respect will require purposeful, collaborative, and collective relationships in and between networks of academic researchers, tourism practitioners, and public policy makers. This will be challenging, as their diverse and volatile priorities will be difficult to determine and reconcile. Equally important for success is that those of us who advocate for food-focused activity in tourism as an agent for change in society understand how those disparate relationships and networks regard food and tourism, and where the interdependencies might be – or could be.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT GOT US HERE AND WHAT MIGHT NEED TO CHANGE

In assessing the current status and future potential of food-focused activity in tourism as an agent for change, it is critical to prepare ourselves for action in a world and in organisational frameworks where the challenges are different. This entails an awareness, and an understanding, of some of the conventions and practices of key elements outside of tourism and food which have dictated that status up to now, and how change may take place during, and after, the pandemic. While there are many, I suggest focusing on what I consider to be the three parties most critical to food-focused activity in tourism. Specifically, they are academic researchers in the field of tourism, tourism industry practitioners, and tourism

policy makers. In practice, these parties, and how they interact, inevitably require detailed attention and consideration in successfully advocating for any food-focused activity in tourism in general, and food *in* tourism in particular.

Academic Research – Disconnections, Silences and Exclusion

A good place to start is the range of terms and concepts which have emerged over the past twenty five years, largely from academics, to describe a tourist's activity around food.² For example, it is not entirely clear that there is a common understanding of, or agreement on, what constitutes 'food tourism' (Hall and Sharples, 2003; Wolf, 2006, p 5; Getz *et al.*, 2014, p 6; Ellis *et al.*, 2018, p 252). Indeed, the phrase 'food tourism' appears to be regarded by tourism practitioners and policy makers (not to mention tourists themselves) as interchangeable with, for instance, culinary tourism (Long, 1998, p 181), gastronomy or gastronomic tourism (Hjalager and Richards, 2002; Santich, 2008, p 1; World Tourism Organization, 2012, p 7), gourmet tourism, cuisine tourism, or tasting tourism (Henderson, 2009), to take a small sample - even if the authors were quite specific in their typology of food-focused activity in tourism.

At a fundamental level, it is important to point out that all tourists are food tourists occasionally, but very few are food tourists all of the time – their relationship with food is dynamic and varies constantly (Getz *et al.*, 2014; Andersson *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, what is often missing from the discourse is the necessary distinction between tourists who consume food as a part of the travel experience, and those tourists whose activities, behaviours and even destination selection is influenced by an interest in food (Hall and Sharples, 2003; OECD, 2012, p 52; Mulcahy, 2017). The former is a motivator of satisfaction, while the latter is a reason to travel – a distinction that is very relevant to both tourism practitioners and tourism policy makers in their marketing work, but it is possibly a subtlety that some academic researchers might not be aware of.

This suggests an asymmetric information problem where academic researchers are strong on theoretical information but weak on up to date operational knowledge of tourism, while the tourism practitioner has the opposite problem. It may explain why the academic discourse

² In this paper, please note that, where appropriate, I have used the following terms interchangeably in order to be somewhat lucid and to avoid repetition and confusion for the reader.

around food and tourism appears to have been limited to three disciplinary approaches (management and marketing, social and cultural studies, and geography), and why the discourse is largely silent otherwise even if it is a relatively new one. As of 2016, 60% of articles on gastronomy tourism were published after 2011, which suggests a field of study finding its academic feet. (de Jong *et al.*, 2018; Ellis *et al.*, 2018, p 255).

Contemporaneously, there is a disconnection between the insights that academic researchers are providing, and the insights that tourism practitioners need or want. In terms of food tourism, each tends to see it as a subset of a specialism or through a specialist lens such as marketing, community activities, human resources, or food supply, for example. This disconnect has been recognised critically - Chambers acknowledged the abundance of tourism research over the previous fifteen years, particularly critical tourism studies since 2005, but she questioned if there was “anything that can be deemed innovative, original or cutting edge”, and she makes a call to create “tourism knowledges which stem from our own reflections and experiences of being in tourism” (2018, p 193). This view was echoed by Ellis *et al.* when they conducted a qualitative systematic review of the food tourism literature from 1994 to 2017 (2018, p 256). Joppe appears to agree, noting that “there are few practical recommendations coming out of academic research”, and suggests that the solution might lie in industry practitioners taking on the task (2018, p 203). Both Airey (2015) and Joppe (2018) highlighted the disconnect of academics in tourism with those outside tourism, in contrast with other disciplines, such that there are silos of activity (conferences, for example) where public policy makers, tourism practitioners and academic researchers rarely share a platform to any substantive degree. A consequence of this is that a substantial body of work resides not only in the journals, but also in books and in “grey literature (e.g. conference papers, theses, books, research/technical reports, and institutional repositories)” (Dredge and Jamal, 2015, p. 288).

These disconnections are aggravated by issues of exclusion and access. Any tourism practitioner who wishes to keep abreast of the literature being published in the journals quickly discovers that access to the kind of library resources (such as peer reviewed journals, and associated bibliographic databases, the majority online) which academic researchers might take for granted is generally denied to those outside the academy. Equally, Joppe notes that a lack of time and accessibility (in the sense of readability) is also a characteristic of “senior bureaucrats” involved in tourism policy. She also points out that although close

collaboration between government and academia is common, access to these opportunities are rarely the case for academics working in tourism (Joppe, 2018, p. 202).

This suggests fertile ground for collaboration and collective action, but primarily for improved communications to properly situate food tourism into the mainstream of activity and thought.

Public Policy Makers – Tourism is a Means to an End, but Where’s the Food Tourism?

Here, in this part of the discussion, in addition to my autoethnographic approach, I have relied on tourism policy literature, as distinct from food tourism policy, as there is little by way of literature on the latter, the reason for which will become clear.

Tourism policy is principally used by governments (that is, public policy makers and politicians) as a means to an end, and by DMOs³ to set marketing objectives. They value the economic contributions the orthodox tourism paradigm makes, particularly in terms of higher tax income levels from increased revenues and job creation. In order to maximise the economic contributions required by the policy makers, DMOs compete to attract higher spending international tourists, given their typically longer holiday duration, and higher degree of reliance on a wider range of hospitality, entertainment, transport, and cultural products and services than domestic tourists.

A reasonable assumption might be that those public policy makers and politicians are abreast of tourism issues generally, and possibly even food tourism issues in particular. But the reality is that politicians are generalists rather than specialists as they are subject to the vagaries of election cycles every four to five years, ministers changing portfolios, and programmes for government (based on election manifestos) are often adjusted during terms of office. In response to this volatility, public policy makers must often refine and recalibrate their work to accommodate the prevailing political priorities. Unfortunately, this exposes “bureaucrats to be captured by special interest groups” (Edgell *et al.*, 2007, p 264) or causes them “to narrow policy perspectives, and to limit the role of stakeholders to that of industry, rather than community” (Hall, 2008, p 165). Similarly, recent research by a British

³A DMO is a Destination Management Organisation, or a Destination Marketing Organisation. Frequently they are the same organisation. In Ireland’s case the management is carried out by Fáilte Ireland (the National Tourism Development Authority), while marketing the island of Ireland overseas is carried out by Tourism Ireland (established under the Good Friday Agreement, accountable to the North South Ministerial Council, and jointly funded by the Irish and Northern Ireland Governments).

government behavioural insights team stressed the importance of thinking about how elected and unelected government officials are themselves influenced by the same heuristics and biases that they try to address in others (Hallsworth *et al.*, 2018).

It should be no surprise, then, that it is rare to find a department solely concerned with tourism in any government for any sustained period of time⁴. Arguably, there is a valid reason for that – although tourism is referred to as ‘the tourism industry’, tourism is actually comprised of a disparate collective of interdependent industries, interest groups, and elements of the State, characterised by varying degrees of fragmentation, specialisation, and diversification (Sessa, 1976; Gibson, 2009). That broader interpretation is reflected in the public sector, when responsibilities for sectors are diffused across the government administration system (Rinaldi, 2017). Accordingly, the majority of policy is made in government departments not directly concerned with tourism. In Ireland, for example, local food is managed within the Department of Agriculture; sites of consumption, such as restaurants, are managed by planning agencies, local authorities and health authorities; transport by the Department of Transport, signage by the Department of Local Government; and heritage sites by the Office of Public Works. Hence, tourism is rarely on any policy work agenda as it is seen as a means to an end, not an end in itself. As Joppe points out, “the appropriate development of tourism is highly dependent on decision-makers who have little regard for, or knowledge of, tourism” (2018, p. 201). Undoubtedly, given this assessment, food tourism has a singularly significant challenge for any level of recognition, much less as a change agent, although nothing is impossible.

Clearly, the pandemic has forced politicians and public policy makers to reassess tourism differently in order to contain contagion in society. But the real question is whether their cultural and operational framework will change in any meaningful way as the pandemic has not altered electoral cycles or public administrative structures. Nevertheless, the pandemic has altered public opinion so that it is no longer appropriate for tourism and food to simply achieve the primary metrics of success (tourist numbers and revenues) set by public policy makers. There is now an increased awareness of the need for a wider set of responsibilities and metrics (such as assessing the return on investment and the value of the circular

⁴ For example, in Ireland, over fifteen years, tourism has been in the following government departments: Arts, Sports & Tourism (2002); Tourism Culture & Sport (2010); Transport, Tourism & Sport (2011); Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport & Media (2020). It is a useful measure of how tourism is regarded by contemporary administrations.

economy, of food *in* tourism), that need to be satisfied by not only the public policy makers, but also tourism practitioners, and academic researchers. There is potential to create a virtuous circle (or a vicious one, if one is careless) by developing policies which creates engagement within the wider tourism community. This creates “general interpersonal trust in the society”, which in turn builds “public trust in tourism institutions”, which influences political support for tourism beyond the usual economic metrics (Nunkoo *et al.*, 2012, p. 1557).

Meanwhile, the pandemic has revealed fault lines in how tourism policy makers, and their policies, has guided the evolution of the ‘tourism industry’, quite often to the detriment of domestic tourists, local communities, and the plethora of micro businesses that support tourist activities (see Fountain, 2021, for the New Zealand experience of this).

Most notably, a sustained period of severely constrained or, in some places, negligible tourism activity has highlighted a significant over-reliance on international tourism to sustain significant segments of national economies and labour forces – particularly the hospitality, entertainment, transport, and cultural sectors, all of which have significant food and beverage components. Aside from highlighting how critical food and beverages are to the tourism experience, the lack of international tourists has also highlighted how the cultural and social needs and expectations of international tourists are different from those of domestic tourists, particularly where food and beverage experiences are concerned.

Similarly, the negligible tourism activity has also revealed an over-reliance on seasonality where high levels of activity (which is revenue) are required by operators and service providers during the season in order to survive the off season. Again, this is to the detriment of not only the domestic tourist, but also local residents, communities, and micro businesses. In the context of the role of food and beverage in tourism, it is clear that improving the levels of awareness and knowledge of policy makers (or not!), has significant implications for consistent and sustainable local and regional food supply chains, for development and availability of relevant skillsets, for the retention of tourism practitioners, their businesses, and their suppliers, and for increased food and beverage heterogeneity that the experiential tourist now seeks. It should go without saying that any damage or loss of this nature has a tendency to be irreversible and long term, and must be prevented.

Tourism Practitioners – Pivoting, but Conventional and under Threat

As outlined earlier, tourism practitioners, supported and encouraged by tourism policy makers and the existing tourism paradigm, tend to be a conventional and traditional cohort, despite the diversity of the ‘tourism industry’. Nevertheless, one of the remarkable features of the pandemic has been the surge of creativity and innovation demonstrated by tourism practitioners (especially micro businesses offering ‘front line’ food, beverage, hospitality, and accommodation services) as they pivoted from conventional business models to replace customers, to find or keep staff, to remain viable, and to survive. This reveals a critical characteristic of any tourism practitioner, such as a restaurant, taxi, or B&B - not all customers need to be tourists especially when viability, or even survival, is at stake. Indeed, not all industries or businesses are interested in making a distinction between tourists or locals (Leiper, 2008).

It is reasonable to infer, therefore, that these particular tourism practitioners, such as the ‘front line’ food, beverage, and hospitality services mentioned earlier, are actually generalists for whom tourism provides some, but not all, of their revenues, despite the insistence of their special interest groups to government that they are part of the tourism industry. It is useful, therefore, to consider what other threats to ‘front line’ businesses are arising from the pandemic.

First, those businesses congregate in large centres of populations with significant retail, hospitality, cultural, and entertainment attractions, where they have relied on concentrations of local transient shoppers, office workers and tourists for revenues. But the pandemic has ensured that tourists are absent, substantial numbers of office workers are working from home in commuter towns, and local transient shoppers stay in the suburbs preferring to shop online. Therefore, city centre businesses have to work much harder, and invest more, on the ‘experience’ than they offered previously if they are to replace the lost revenues from locals. This means that either food and beverage experiences now have major competitors, or, preferably, that they collaborate based on quality, authenticity, and relevance to a domestic tourist audience.

Second, the loss of revenues is compounded by behavioural change and availability of staff. Recent research by Accenture⁵ shows that, in Ireland, most people are living, working, spending, and thinking differently now than previously. The pandemic appears to have initiated their re-evaluation of what is important to them in life. They are increasingly focused on their personal purpose, and this is having a direct impact on what, how and why they buy, with obvious consequences for our tourism practitioners (Curtis *et al.*, 2021). However, the economic fallout of the pandemic has been shown to disproportionately affect those who cannot work remotely, such as service, food preparation, and front of house workers, who are essential to the operation of those ‘front line’ businesses. According to the IMF⁶, this manifests itself in a number of ways. As these workers, usually women and younger people, are on lower scale and less secure wages, they are exposed to either unaffordable rents for their accommodation in cities to be near their workplace, or high transport costs (and time poverty) if they commute. Ironically, one of the contributing factors to unaffordable rents is an increase in short-term lets caused by tourism (Kammer *et al.*, 2021).

Third, according to the Financial Times, the pandemic has “crushed competition” – it quotes analysts who note small and medium-sized businesses have been disproportionately hurt. It appears that may have been a shift in the share of income going to larger (listed) firms from smaller (unlisted) ones (Somerset Webb, 2013).

Finally, using Ireland as an example, the pandemic has ensured that the challenge for tourism practitioners is how to adapt a summer offering, traditionally designed for international tourists who were worth over 70% of the total Irish market, into a year-round offer for the domestic market. It is concerning that, in Ireland at least, tourism policy makers and tourism practitioners appear to be planning on a resumption of ‘business as usual’, post pandemic.⁷ This strategy appears to ignore indications on a macro level which suggest the prospect of a more active domestic tourism market than an international one. For example, the European heatwave of 2021, along with the associated fires and lack of water, is likely to have affected

⁵ An Ireland based multinational professional services company that specialises in information technology services and consulting.

⁶ International Monetary Fund

⁷ For example, anecdotal evidence in Ireland is that tourism practitioners in the incoming tour operators sector plan to reduce bus driver and tour guide rates by 25%, and to require a reduction on the already demanding rates agreed with other tourism practitioners they deal with, such as hotels and food outlets.

tourism from Ireland to traditionally popular tourism destinations in Turkey, Greece, Spain, and Italy. In future, a combination of climate change and the pandemic may well make this a familiar pattern and make domestic tourism more appealing to consumers. Further impetus may come from the EU, which is proposing a suite of new aviation fuel taxes that will make it more expensive to fly from 2023.⁸

In this environment, a focus on how to cater for the market closest to home might be a more productive strategy to replace revenues. As a result of the pandemic, these domestic tourists are likely to bring a more informed attitude. Consequently, they might be more focused in what they want and how that might impact where they are visiting – a new gastro-nationalism, perhaps (Mulcahy, 2014). This is an opportunity for tourism practitioners, which could easily include features which address those expectations, such as zero waste, farm2fork initiatives, 100 km radius sourcing, food seasonality, organic diet, zero plastic, use of bio detergents, etc.

THE TOURISM PARADIGM-POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE, BUT IS IT POSSIBLE?

Throughout this paper, the discussion has concentrated on the parties, and their relationships, that I believe are most critical to food-focused activity in tourism, and it suggests that they are also drivers of the tourism paradigm, whether they are conscious of that or not. It is useful, therefore, to consider how paradigm change can be generated at individual, community (whether social, imagined, or practice based) or activity level, as distinct from national or macro levels. While relationships in tourism are not fully understood, it is clear that relationships and networks are increasingly seen as key to effective planning and policy. They are also key for understanding not only what was important to disparate stakeholders, but also understanding tourism itself (Dredge and Jamal, 2015; Wray, 2015; Merinero-Rodríguez and Pulido-Fernández, 2016; Mottiar, 2016; Mei *et al.*, 2017). It seems obvious that the matter cannot be judged in isolation - it needs to be considered in a way that integrates the relevant areas for success to happen, and this means that there is no one solution. Instead, each county, city, parish, and village must initiate incremental change. They must achieve this by purposely focusing on the economic benefits that were attractive to those who subscribed to the traditional tourism paradigm. Crucially, they must also highlight

⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/business/sustainable-business/draft-shows-eu-propose-aviation-fuel-tax-green-policy-push-2021-07-04/>

the other benefits that a new paradigm, through food in tourism, could bring to society, its culture, and its environment in their locality.

Critical to this is that food *in* tourism has to start ‘at home’. This means it must be a vibrant and valuable year-round attraction to domestic tourists, and that it is the vector which provides a sustainable business model for hospitality and tourism businesses upon which international business can be ‘the cream’. The benefits are wide-ranging, similar to tourism itself, and include the professionalisation of careers at all levels in many sectors; the creation of circular economies which encourage communities to recognise the value and benefits of collaboration; and ensures more integrated, authentic, and meaningful experiences for visitors which reflects (and protects) a collaborative community in a way which ensures sustainable continuity.

CONCLUSION

Food and beverages, allied to tourism, have real potential to be the multifaceted solution (incorporating social, cultural, environmental & other elements) to long term perennial problems (climate change, urbanisation, sustainability, inequality, and others). It also provides a path of recovery and regeneration post pandemic for tourism practitioners and policymakers alike - subject to those parties recognising and understanding that role and leveraging it to good effect. However, this cannot be taken for granted. As a means to this end, this paper sought to bring a different perspective to the advocates of food-focused activity in tourism as an agent for change. This perspective will help them discover how those disparate parties, their relationships and their networks, regard food and tourism, and where the interdependencies might be – or could be, such that progress is made, quickly.

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