

3-31-2021

Virtual Culinary Tourism in the Time of COVID 19

Lucy Long

Center for Food and Culture, lucymlong@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/visions>

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Recommended Citation

Long, Lucy (2021) "Virtual Culinary Tourism in the Time of COVID 19," *Visions in Leisure and Business*: Vol. 24: No. 1, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25035/visions.24.01.04>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/visions/vol24/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Visions in Leisure and Business* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

VIRTUAL CULINARY TOURISM IN THE TIME OF COVID 19

Lucy M. Long, PhD

Director

Center for Food and Culture

Bowling Green, Ohio

Lucymlong@gmail.com/LucyL@bgsu.edu

ABSTRACT

As the COVID-19 pandemic closed borders and shut down travel in 2020, culinary tourists have turned to virtual experiences for satisfying their curiosity about new foods and tastes. Individuals as well as industry professionals have focused their energies on cooking shows, cookbooks, food memoirs, blogs, and both formal media and informal social media. These activities represent a philosophical approach to tourism as a state of seeing or attitude that represents the humanities-based definition of culinary tourism as “eating out of curiosity” rather than the more industry-driven one of food-motivated travel to a destination.

These virtual formats may be reaching a larger number of audiences than pre-COVID-19 culinary tourism marketing and including a larger number of potential destinations that tourists previously would not have considered visiting in person. They also are creating opportunities for educating people about various dishes and food cultures. Those opportunities may be "whetting their appetite" for future travel, resulting in heightened interest in culinary tourism experiences in the future. It is possible that these audiences will be more aware of the nuances of food cultures and of the impacts of tourism and will therefore seek experiences that are more multifaceted and more sustainable for all parties involved.

KEY WORDS: virtual, internet, communities, humanities, education

INTRODUCTION

“Itching to travel? Subscribe to Nat Geo - we'll take you there.”

ng@email.nationalgeographic.com

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/?cmpid=org=ngp::mc=crm-email::src=ngp::cmp=editorial::add=emailredirect>

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, culinary tourism was one of the top niches within the tourism industry, not just in countries or regions historically famed for their cuisines, but throughout the world. This culinary tourism was defined by physical movement--travel motivated by an interest in experiencing the food culture of a specific place—that frequently translated into visiting selected restaurants and tasting selected dishes and cuisines. As we all know, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down most travel and closed many borders. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council, annual revenues for travel and tourism lost in excess of \$2.1 trillion, with hundreds of thousands of small- to medium-sized enterprises worldwide ordered to close; thirty to forty percent never to be revived, and similar impacts cascading throughout supply chains associated with both food and tourism (2020).

Culinary tourists, meanwhile, turned to virtual experiences to satisfy their curiosity about new foods and tastes, and culinary tourism providers and hosts re-focused their energies on creating online food tours and travel shows, web-based cooking classes, meal delivery services and kits, cookbooks, food memoirs, blogs and videos for formal media outlets as well as informal social media (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube). These activities represent a philosophical approach to tourism as a state of seeing or attitude that channels John Urry’s notion of the tourist gaze in which our attention is directed to something perceived as being out of the ordinary (1990). They also represent a turn away from the social science and the more industry-driven definition of culinary tourism food-motivated travel to a destination (Everett 2015; Hall and Sharples 2003; Hjalager and Richards, 2002) to folklorist Lucy Long’s humanities-based definition of culinary tourism as “eating out of curiosity” or “the voluntary intentional participation in the foodways of an Other” (1998: 101; 2004). Similar to what geographers David Bell and Gill Valentine call “kitchen table tourism” (1997), this latter approach to culinary tourism sees travel as a state of mind as well as a physical activity.

From this perspective, these virtual formats are actually reaching a larger number of audiences than the pre-COVID culinary tourism industry, and they are including a larger number of destinations and cuisines than previously offered for in-person visiting. They also are creating opportunities for educating people about various dishes and food cultures. Those opportunities may be “whetting their appetite” for future travel, resulting in a heightened interest in culinary tourism experiences in the future, particularly in destinations perhaps not previously considered. In fact, a report from April 26, 2021

states that the Global Culinary Tourism Market is poised to grow by \$ 31.42 billion during 2021-2025.

I suggest here, that these virtual experiences are offering opportunities for tourists to not only become more knowledgeable about the cuisines and cultures they visit, but to also become more aware of the complexities and humanity of the foods they “consume,” whether that consumption is metaphorical or physical. Recognition of the possible economic, cultural, social, and environmental impacts on destinations, attractions, and products can then be channeled into concerns for the sustainability and well-being of those places and the people inhabiting them.

While we cannot yet conclusively identify the impacts of COVID-19 on culinary tourism, especially since the pandemic is not over as of January 2022, I give a brief overview of some of the forms of virtual culinary tourism that have become popular. I also muse about their implications and the possibilities they suggest. How has the shift from physical to virtual affected the content and nature of culinary tourism experiences? How has it affected tourists themselves? Can this be a time of opportunity for positive change in the tourism industry as well as how we as tourists think of tourism?

FORMS OF VIRTUAL CULINARY TOURISM

If we take a broad view of culinary tourism as exploratory eating or exploring through food without necessarily travelling to experience that food in a specific geographic destination, we see that some forms of virtual culinary tourism have always been with us. These existing formats include things like cookbooks, food-inclusive or cooking-focused periodicals, and memoirs that revolve around food or that use food in the narrative. Developments in technology brought film, television, radio broadcasts, and audio recordings (particularly now as podcasts) that oftentimes offered vicarious experiencing of new foods or foodways, even when those were not the main focus. The advent of the digital age allowed for newer forms, some of which, blogs, for example, were similar to the old ones while others were brand new: vlogs, YouTube videos, and social media pages. All of these forms have been used for exploring food and foodways—culinary tourism—but the digital formats have emerged as particularly significant in enabling people to break out of the physical and social isolation created by the pandemic. Numerous “communities” have developed around some of these formats, with food oftentimes being the focal point or the excuse for gathering. Additionally, some new forms have emerged during the pandemic, or at least, become more public, with more people aware of them: on-line cooking classes, cooking shows, lectures, podcasts, and virtual “tours” of a place and its food. There also are newer business models around meal-kits and home delivery services.

One of the difficulties in identifying forms of virtual culinary tourism, however, is that tourism might not be the primary mission or purpose of a product. In some cases, the product is even presented as the opposite of tourism, playing on the assumption that

tourism represents a superficial and exploitative “consumption” of an Other without concern for impacts on that culture (or on the tourist). Educational travel is at times presented in this way, as well as some social justice projects that involve exploring groups’ food culture. I suggest, though, that during the pandemic, organizations as well as audiences have blurred those distinctions, expanding the parameters of what might formerly be considered tourism. Since this blurring results in an enormous range of resources, I focus here on products that use the words “tours,” “travel”, or “tourism” or in some way suggest the experience of exploring through food.

This overview is based on my own experiences during the pandemic as well as those of friends and colleagues, representing unsystematic auto-ethnographic research. I look here at the range of virtual experiences I found and suggest some frameworks for organizing and comparing them as well as thoughts about their implications for how we think of culinary tourism. Descriptions revolve around several characteristics, suggesting possible typologies: static vs. active forms or presentation; passive vs. interactive formats that allow for audiences to “chat” with the presenter in some way; and cognitive vs. experiential-kinetic activities. Further categorizations can be made according to the medium used, including written texts, photographs, sound recordings, and moving pictures, as well as types of platforms through which the materials are delivered-- websites, television, radio, YouTube, social media, or even, home delivery of foods and materials. Producers can also be categorized according to how their mission and purpose connect to tourism, especially since some of the producers of virtual tours are not tied to the tourism industry, but see themselves primarily as educators or cultural ambassadors. All of these categories can overlap, with products drawing on several categories simultaneously. Again, this list is not exhaustive but meant to suggest a framework for studying this phenomenon.

Printed and Online Texts: Websites, Cookbooks, Periodicals

Printed texts tend to be static and passive in their presentation of information. These are similar to traditional advertising or marketing efforts in that they are presented to audiences and do not include interactive elements. For example, some online posts draw attention to destinations, cuisines, establishments, or tourism providers by simply listing them. During the pandemic, these forms offered suggestions for destinations that tourists could think about for future travel, and frequently appeared on the websites of tourism providers or governmental organizations. An example comes from the social media platform, LinkedIn, where a tourism company posted a link to a video of 23 culinary traditions listed by UNESCO with the introduction: “As the world will eventually reopen to travel, local cuisine is one of the great things to look forward to!” (Mac Duff tourism). Such lists frequently include food festivals, restaurants, and wineries as well as food-focused tours of specific cities, regions, or countries known for their gastronomic reputations.

Many advertisements and discussions of culinary tourism, however, were active, using videos to make the information come alive and grab audience attention. Audio programs about specific cuisines or dishes appeared on radio and as podcasts available for audiences to access at their convenience. NPRF (National Public Radio) and HRN (Heritage Radio Network), for example, frequently included segments on food that audiences could turn to for vicarious culinary tourism. Not all of these were presented as tourism, however, but as informational or educational programs or even advertising for destinations.

Cookbooks, food memoirs, travelogues, food-centered periodicals, and food sections in magazines and newspapers can also be considered static-passive forms of culinary tourism. Readers have long used those to learn about and even vicariously experience a cuisine or food context. Restaurant reviews similarly are an established part of newspapers and some other periodical publications and seem to have become more widely read in recent years. Rather than critique the food or service, reviews during the pandemic oftentimes described how specific establishments were addressing safety issues and adapting to the current situation.

Culinary Trails

Trails are a popular format in tourism for linking attractions within a specific geographic location. Each attraction can be treated as its own destination, but a common theme ties them together to make a logical route for a tourist to follow at their own pace. Pre-pandemic, such trails would have encouraged tourists to visit the attractions in-person, enabling them to select those that sparked their interest. The trails themselves, however, can be seen as a form of virtual culinary tourism in that they are usually offered on websites or printed brochures as descriptive listings of places to go. These lists can be perused, and tourists can pursue Internet links to find out more about them and to even “experience” them.

Culinary trails usually focus on restaurants or other public and commercial producers or purveyors of food or beverages—wineries, breweries, farms, and so on. They might be focused on a single foodstuff or a variety of food sites in a specific city or region. Such trails are oftentimes now created for economic reasons--to attract tourists and customers to an area, a food industry, or specific establishments. They are also created as educational initiatives that can teach about the culture surrounding the food.

An example of trails illustrating an educational purpose are those developed by the Southern Foodways Alliance (<https://www.southernfoodways.org>). These are actually presented as oral histories in their educational programs and include interviews with community participants, giving the stories around the food and helping audiences understand food as a cultural phenomenon. The webpage for its Southern BBQ Trail, for example, established in 2011, includes a written history and overview of barbecue along with links to a dozen oral history interviews that combine narration, documentary

photographs, and clips from the recordings (<https://www.southernfoodways.org/oral-history/southern-bbq-trail/>). These can be viewed and listened to at the “tourist’s” leisure, offering a culinary tourism experience. Similar trails are available for tamales in the Mississippi Delta (<https://www.southernfoodways.org/oral-history/hot-tamale-trail/>) and *boudin* (sausage) in Louisiana (https://www.southernfoodways.org/oh_project/southern-boudin-trail/).

Regardless of the producer or purpose of culinary trails, these projects offer maps for future culinary road trips. During the pandemic, they offered one way for people to travel, at least in their imagination, and could inspire attempts to actual experiencing the featured foods, perhaps by ordering restaurant delivery, purchasing samples from providers, or searching for recipes to prepare and consume the food at home. All of these activities can be viewed as culinary tourism.

Virtual Tours

Virtual tours offered through media or the Internet became prevalent during the pandemic as an opportunity for tourism providers and hosts who needed to maintain or create public visibility as well as to offer something for current and potential customers. These varied widely in quality, content, and purpose as well as format. Some were passive lecture-style with a “tour guide” describing attractions, oftentimes including clips from interviews with “locals” or other knowledgeable individuals. If these were on visual platforms, they might include photos or videos of a destination. Podcasts, such as those offered by Southern Food and beverage Museum (<https://southernfood.org/>), and radio programs obviously had to rely on aural content only and usually involved a narrator with clips from interviews.

Some tours included or consisted primarily of videos of tour guides taking viewers to attractions with the camera following the guide as he or she travels, pointing out sites, objects, or people to viewers. These frequently show the guide actually experiencing the food of a place, tasting new dishes or ingredients and commenting on them, participating in meals in restaurants, street markets, or family homes, or helping to prepare a dish. This type of food-focused tour was also popular pre-pandemic, and could be produced by individuals as well as official tourism or governmental organizations. Numerous examples of these self-produced tours are on YouTube. The shutdowns caused by the pandemic posed an obstacle to the creation of new video tours, but it is likely that viewer numbers of all of these went up.

These virtual tours are organized by a range of organizations and for a variety of purposes. Some organizations are tourism-focused, while others emphasize education or economic development and include tourism as part of their community outreach or educational programming. Also, segments on food were oftentimes included as part of larger tourism projects.

As illustration, one program geared specifically towards tourism and travel is the hour long “Travel with Rick Steves Radio Show,” aired on National Public Radio stations. On these, Steves interviews tourism providers, hosts, and writers asking them to describe or explain the significance of attractions in geographic locales across the world (<https://www.ricksteves.com/watch-read-listen/audio/radio/programs>). The attractions frequently include foodways—markets, farms, restaurants, events, and specific dishes—so can be considered virtual culinary tourism. Steves and the guest speakers act as tour guides, oftentimes sounding as if they are interacting with a group of tourists and taking them on an actual tour.

Steves’ programs also illustrate how virtual culinary tourism can use multiple formats and offer flexibility that is not found in actual tourism. He also produces a travel show for public television, most of which focus on Europe, but includes specials from other continents. These were produced prior to the pandemic, but are available for viewing online and through public television stations. One episode addresses hunger in Guatemala and Ethiopia, a subject usually considered the opposite of culinary tourism, but definitely within the humanities conception of it. This program also comes with a free downloadable file giving more information about the places featured in the show as well as issues and solutions around hunger. The eighty-page booklet includes photographs and reflects Steves’ philosophy of using tourism for the benefit of people and the planet (<https://podcasts.ricksteves.com/pdfs/books/rick-steves-hunger-and-hope-book.pdf>).

For tourists who can actually go to a place, he offers audio tours that they can follow on their own: “Take Rick Steves along as your personal guide! Our free self-guided walking tours cover Europe's most fascinating destinations.” During the pandemic, he offered a weekly video session called “travel happy hour” via zoom: “Experience the fun, conviviality, intimacy, and spontaneity of joining Rick in his living room as he drinks his favorite wine and shares his inspirational and sometimes hilarious behind-the-scenes stories” (<https://www.ricksteves.com/travel-tips/travel-classes/monday-night-travel>). These were presented as informal lectures with photographs and videos, followed by a question and answer session in which audiences could write questions in the chat room. Steves would respond, giving a semblance of the kinds of interactions that might happen on an in-person tour or talk.

The example given above is presented as tourism by an individual who identifies himself as a travel guide. The multiple formats used by Steves allows for audiences to find their own interests and level of comfort with unfamiliar places. Also, Steves’ expertise is travel in Europe, but the virtual formats allow him to expand to a much broader international perspective. Similar programs are offered by educational organizations, and a number of these feature food, while others might include a segment on food practices as part of the larger tour.

Road Scholar is one such organization illustrating the range of virtual tourism opportunities during the pandemic.¹ Formerly known as “Elderhostel,” the not-for-profit organization was started in 1975 to provide educational programming for seniors and

retirees but changed its name in 2010 to reflect its mission to offer “transformative learning adventures” <https://www.road scholar.org>.

Their over 5,500 programs, both virtual and in-person, include some that focus on food. For example, “Flavors of Mexico: A Culinary Adventure in Oaxaca and Puebla” lasts for eight days and costs \$2,399, while a New England food program is seven days and \$1,799. The company shifted their programs to online during the pandemic but in summer of 2022 began offering in-person travel to vaccinated guests.

Their thirty-three “Educational Travel Adventures Online” range in length from three to five days and cost from “\$349 to \$499. While none are listed as culinary programs, food and foodways practices are included as part of the cultures presented. A friend took one of these tours and said that they learned a good deal about the culinary heritage and contemporary customs of the featured country. She also felt that the program was successful in recreating the actual experience of traveling by showing videos of the group leader and instructors in those places. She enhanced her own experience by looking up recipes for dishes shown and trying to recreate them.

The description on Road Scholar’s website also emphasizes the social nature of these adventures even when they are online: “Join a group of new friends and expert instructors for an “Adventure Online” and be fully engaged with a week’s worth of live lectures, performances, discussions and more that will re-create the Road Scholar experience online. These virtual learning adventures are the next best thing to being there in person” (<https://www.road scholar.org/collections/adventures-online/>).

Road Scholar’s “Virtual Classroom” also offers 45-60 minute lectures conducted via zoom on numerous topics. Some of these focus on food, such as the class, “Greek Gastronomy—A Journey of Flavors, People and Landscapes.” This free hour-long lecture includes a question and answer session in which participants can write their questions, and the instructor answers live! Others, such as one titled “Opium, Coffee, & Tea—The Case for Social Entrepreneurship,” cost \$25.

These online lectures are described as “curated virtual travel experiences” (<https://www.road scholar.org/collections/online-lectures/>). Such wording emphasizes the possibility of travel as a state of mind or attitude and, although it does not use the phrase, specifically presents these lectures as virtual culinary tourism.

Experiential Interactive Cooking Demonstrations and Classes

While some of the virtual tours included cooking demonstrations, others offered hands-on, experiential participation by the viewers via zoom or similar platforms. Also, some programs were presented as cooking classes rather than tourism, but they function as culinary tourism by taking the viewer on a “journey” through the act of cooking. The organizers usually send a recipe to those who register and pay for the class, and in at least

one case, they sent the actual ingredients. For only \$14 in 2021 (now \$19), Airbnb Online Experience offered a “Korean Master Chef Class” that included a “virtual Korean food tour (of the cities of Incheon and Seoul) and seventy-five minute cooking class via zoom (<https://www.airbnb.com/experiences/1684386>). They list the equipment needed but state that they will send the actual ingredients the week prior to the class. (This may have been problematic with the disruptions in the U.S. postal system during 2021.) The host is identified as “a Korean food consultant, cookbook writer (*Home-style Korean Cooking with OME: The Five Tastes*) and CEO of OME Cooking Lab and, as is common in today’s world, has an Instagram page (@omecookinglab). Along with wonderfully appetizing photographs of Korean food, the website states that the program is taught in English and broadcast internationally. It includes a personal invitation that speaks to the vicarious experience hoped for:

“Now I’m bringing my tips for Korean Food. Let’s make delicious Korean food together. At the moment when we cook together, we will feel like we are in Korea! Let’s make special Korean food history together. :-)”
(<https://www.airbnb.com/experiences/1684386>)

The example given above is clearly related to tourism since it is sponsored through AirB&B, a travel company. It also is part of an initiative by the governmental agency, Korean Tourism Organization, to promote tourism to Korea and is a form of soft diplomacy known as gastrodiploamacy. The OME Cooking Lab project is meant to draw tourists to that country as well as provide activities and programs (cooking classes and market tours) once they are there. Links on the OME website show a number of opportunities for virtual culinary tourism and also show the pre-COVID international presence of the group (<https://www.5-tastes.com/exhibitions>).

These and similar classes are taught over zoom, meaning that they are in real-time, with viewers able to see and hear the teacher (tour guide) and sometimes each other. They can be interactive with participants able to ask questions and make comments either by writing them on a “chat board” or by turning on that capability on their own computers (and unmuting themselves).

An example of a culinary tourism company that offers even more personal and interactive experiences is Traveling Spoon (<https://www.travelingspoon.com>). Based in San Francisco, the group started in 2011 to promote travel and food experiences with the motto “travel off the eaten path.” According to their website:

“Traveling Spoon connects travelers with local, vetted hosts to share the joy of a homemade meal in their home and learn about their cultural and culinary traditions passed down through generation.” And “To help you experience local cuisine while traveling, Traveling Spoon offers in-home meals with our hosts. In addition, we also offer in-home cooking experiences as well as market visits as an add-on to many of the meal experiences. All of our hosts have been vetted to ensure a safe and delightful culinary experience.”
(<https://www.travelingspoon.com/about>).

Referred to by *Forbes* magazine as “the next generation of culinary tourism,” the company shifted its emphasis during the pandemic to online cooking classes, offering classes with cooks based in sixty countries. Costing \$40 a class (with \$20 for additional screens), classes are 1 ½ to 2 hours, and most of the cooks grew up immersed in the culinary culture they represent, oftentimes teaching family recipes. These classes are private, one-on-one sessions between a student and teacher with the option of booking the class for a group. The emphasis, though, is on exploring a cuisine through hands-on experiences and personal interactions with a “real” person, who is usually a home cook well versed in making dishes of their own culture.

Experiential Food Deliveries and Meal Kits

The most common and expected place to experience culinary tourism is probably in public, commercial eating establishments--restaurants. The pandemic caused restaurants in numerous countries to shut down or to change their seating and serving spaces by adding outdoor dining or small enclosures for small groups. Many shifted to take-out and delivery services, limiting menu options or adding dishes that were suitable for such treatment. Discussions on social media as well as some public figures advised that a positive way individuals could help during the pandemic was to support their local businesses. This translated into trying unfamiliar restaurants or ordering unfamiliar dishes from familiar restaurants, both of which can be seen as culinary tourism. Some restaurants even appealed to the touristic impulse in their advertising, as did some grocery stores and supermarkets, offering new dishes and dining experiences.

Another strategy for obtaining food at home was meal kits, boxes of ingredients and recipes for specific dishes that were then prepared by the recipient. Numerous such companies had started prior to the pandemic, and some, such as Hello Fresh and Blue Apron, had acquired national attention, but the shut-downs of stores, public transportation, and individuals’ concerns over their own health and safety, meant a huge increase in customers. Companies frequently specified the types of food included, and most of these were related to health concerns or specific tastes. At least one can be seen as promoting culinary tourism. Little Passports offered a “Food Around the World Kit” for 3-5 year olds for \$24.95. Their description is similar to some tourism brochures and restaurant ads:

“Open your own international café! Use the guide to assemble from around the world, like sushi, crêpes, phở, and more. Serve up smiles as you take customer orders, prepare food, and get to know global cuisines with this hands-on kit.”
(www.littlepassports.com/product/food-around-the-world-kit)

A similar concept is the monthly delivery of specific foods, whether it is wine, cheese, meat, fruit, and so on. One company, Universal Yums, specifically presented their products as culinary tourism, offering materials along with the food for a successful tour.

“We dreamed of creating a box that could take you around the world, and bring the best snacks from a particular country straight to your door.... Universal Yums sends you a box of snacks and candies from a different country every month. The products we select are delicious, unique, and often extremely difficult (or even impossible) to find in the United States. But we send more than incredible Yums. Each box also comes with an interactive guidebook to steer your adventure – including trivia, games, recipes, culture, and more!”
(<https://www.universalyums.com>)

The company started in 2014, but their presence on social media and websites, like that of other delivery services, seemed to become more visible during the pandemic.

Informal Social Media Groups

Twenty-first century technology innovations have enabled the development of culinary tourism around social media pages and groups that offer “tours” of new cuisines. Not surprisingly, these grew in popularity during the pandemic since physical isolation drove individuals to seek social interaction as well as ways to mentally and emotionally escape their geographically-bounded locations. Some of these were established by individuals hoping to provide a space for socializing, using food exploration as the theme. An example is a Facebook group called “Fiddle and Dough” in which members who are also interested in traditional music can post photos, recipes, and anecdotes about baking. The forum seemed to inspire members to try new recipes or new forms, oftentimes from unfamiliar culinary traditions. There is definitely a sense of exploration and curiosity expressed in these posts—a virtual and sometimes vicarious “traveling” through this baking, although they do not identify themselves as culinary tourists.

Another example of a Facebook group that does identify itself as culinary tourism, both in its name and purpose, is one that I am involved with. 419 Culinary Nomads is sponsored by the World Affairs Council of NW Ohio, a non-profit promoting awareness and engagement of world affairs in this region. The Facebook group grew out of brainstorming on developing a culinary tourism trail in the area that could be used for educating the public as well as promoting local businesses offering international foods. Any member can post about a restaurant or event as well as repost informative materials. Administrators oversee the page to make sure posts are relevant and appropriate to the mission, and individuals actively use the page to explore food in the area, sometimes by visiting or ordering delivery from a restaurant; other times by finding others to accompany them on culinary tourism outings.

An even more informal form of culinary tourism has developed during the pandemic in which friends get together over a video platform such as zoom to share meals and recipes, sometimes even cooking together simultaneously. These platforms allow individuals to see and hear each other but they are in their own kitchens. In a group of which I am a member, we take turns leading the group through a dish, sending out recipes and

ingredient lists ahead of time. We gather the ingredients and “meet” at a given time and day to prepare the dish watching and discussing preparation methods, then “visiting” while the dish cooks. If we have time, we then eat the dish together and evaluate the recipe as well as chat about our own lives.

OBSERVATIONS

This essay offers a preliminary look at some of the forms of virtual culinary tourism that are prevalent during the pandemic. It is by no means a complete listing, especially since the pandemic has continued into 2022, but it does expand the definition of culinary tourism as requiring physical movement from one locale to another. Travel in the mind and imagination also includes perusing forms such as cookbooks, food magazines, food memoirs, travelogues, films, television shows and any other projects that enable us to satisfy our curiosity and impulses to explore, escape, re-create, replenish, learn, self-actualization, or contribute to other’s welfare—all of which can be motivations for tourism.

Some of these virtual forms were already in existence when the pandemic started. Others emerged because of it, or gained attention and momentum due to the isolation created by it. Some are also emergent (Williams 1977) in that they challenge common paradigms of culinary tourism developed by industry providers and elite consumers as first of all, actual travel, but more importantly, as consumption of high-priced, distinctive, gourmet dishes and meals in restaurants. These examples suggest that culinary tourism does not have to be about the most exotic, expensive or rare foods. It can feature mundane, everyday foods that are meaningful to individuals for some reason or that embody a culture, history, or place. Also, they suggest that culinary tourism experiences can go beyond consumption to include the complexity of practices and activities and beliefs around food, the network known as foodways (Long 2015). Some of these other components of foodways are featured as their own tourism niche—agro-tourism, wine tourism—or attractions within food tourism—cooking classes, tastings. This range of activities would not easily be combined in in-person tourism because of external constraints of geography, time, expense, and other practicalities. Virtual tourism, however, offers the opportunity to include all of these in one experience. Foodways furthermore emphasizes the connections between all of these components as well as their connections to other aspects of life, giving tourists a more holistic perspective on food. Such a perspective is emergent in that it challenges the American tendency to evaluate food according to its nutritional content and economic costs without recognition of its cultural and social implications and meanings. It similarly challenges the usual classifications and stratifications of activities into separate and independent “silos.” Motivations for human choices are multiple and complex and so are the meanings we assign to our actions and products.

Some of these forms and initiatives are emergent also in that they are being developed outside the tourism industry for non-tourism purposes. Virtual culinary tourism requires fewer resources and capital and little infrastructure, allowing individuals as well as small organizations to participate and benefit as providers. The reduced expense also allows for

tourists to participate who otherwise might be hesitant because of lack of funds, time, physical abilities, or other concerns. In theory, then virtual tourism opens the possibility of these experiences to everyone.

Furthermore, providers are using these virtual forms for a variety of purposes beyond profit. Attracting customers and earnings might be one motivation, but others include the desires to share one's story, educate others, express creativity, create a social network, support economic development or cultural sustainability, and so on. Virtual formats might allow for a greater range of motivations among tourists as well as providers.

IMPLICATIONS OF CULINARY TOURISM GOING VIRTUAL

The pandemic has clearly been devastating to the travel and hospitality industries. Many food establishments have closed, as have many businesses dependent on physical travel and visitation. Similarly, host communities looking to tourism for employment opportunities have lost that income so that many individuals have seen their livelihoods disappear during the pandemic. Is it possible that virtual culinary tourism can make up for these losses? Numerous governments, organizations, and individuals have shifted strategies in hopes of doing just that.

I suggest here that virtual culinary tourism offers benefits—as well as possible harms—that go beyond these measurable economic ones. Anecdotal evidence suggests that such programs can make tourists more knowledgeable about a place and its food culture, increasing their desire to travel to those places. That is partly because they become more aware of what food attractions exist, which then stirs curiosity about them. The tourism industry hopes that this is the case, as suggested by this statement from one analyst:

“Faced with cancelled trips and the inability to plan them for the future, many consumers sought out international food and flavors in order to bite the “travel” craving. While eating Vietnamese Pho in one’s pajamas or making Mexican Street Corn (Elote) from one’s grill does not equate to travelling to these countries in the slightest, they do create the feeling of exciting new experiences reminiscent of a new cuisine in a new place.”

“In this way, consumers are trying to access different worlds that they otherwise cannot. Not only do they want to escape the routine and monotony of daily home life, they also want to immerse themselves in cultures they only hope to travel to.”
(<https://www.speccpage.com/culinary-tourism-at-home-2021/>)

The knowledge gained from virtual culinary tourism can also give tourists a sense of familiarity with another food culture, ingredient, or dish so that they will feel comfortable enough to venture into in reality (Long 2004). It can offer them a sense of cultural competency, albeit possibly a false one, for interacting within that culture. Knowing what to expect prepares them for addressing differences that might otherwise negatively color their entire experience. They will know, for example, what dishes to request in a

restaurant or what utensils they may want to bring with them if they feel incompetent with “native” ways of eating. Since the experiences are virtual rather than in-person, these formats offer a “safe” way to view another culture since an individual tourist can withdraw at any point that they feel uncomfortable, tired, bored, or even fearful. Such assurances of safety are an attraction to those tourists hesitant about a specific cuisine or destination, creating a foot-in-the-door, so to speak (Everett 2019; Richards 2016).

There are drawbacks to virtual culinary tourism as well. Along with carrying the usual criticisms of tourism at large (Everett 2015, 2019; Long 2014, 2018, 2022), these forms lack physical contact with the people preparing or serving the food. This means that there are no social relationships or cultural mores to navigate—an attraction for some tourists and tourism providers—but that lack of contact can de-contextualize and even dehumanize the food, divorcing it from its culture and the people for whom it has meanings tied to their histories and identities.

Furthermore, although some formats offer consumption of selected dishes, most virtual tourism lacks the multisensory experiencing of food, its taste, texture, odor, temperature, and even sound. Photographs and video recordings may replicate part of the experience, but food ultimately is about physical consumption and the involvement of the tourist’s body. Also, sensory perceptions go beyond the food itself to include the physical context and surroundings in which it is experienced. The lack of these experiential components can make tourists feel more knowledgeable about a culture than they really are. Learning about specific ingredients, dishes, or foodways practices can be an excellent entryway into a culture, but that information remains intellectual or cognitive until actually embodied. Virtual formats may also make it easier for tourism hosts or providers to present only those parts that they want to have seen. That, of course, is always an aspect of tourism, but it is even more so with virtual formats.

The shift to virtual formats also raises questions about the relationship between the tourist and the tourism subject. The de-contextualization and de-embodiment of virtual experiences may turn culinary tourism into a simulacra of reality that then exploits food cultures, making it easier for tourists to objectify, exoticize, essentialize, or romanticize that subject, all dangers of tourism in general. Similarly, virtual tourism can focus attention on the aesthetics of the food itself apart from the contexts in which it is produced, prepared, and consumed—all involving real people. Such a focus can be considered a form of what Casey Kelly calls “food porn,” as “a genre that arouses desires that can only be satiated by visually pleasurable corporate food” (2020: 64). In some ways this is actually what the travel industry is hoping—that virtual experiences will stimulate tourists to physically travel to those places or to establishments offering that food, but it also creates false and unrealistic expectations around that food.

In conclusion, tourism is always a negotiation between exotic and familiar—a place or attraction needs to be new and strange enough to pull a tourist from home, whether virtually or corporeally, but it also needs to be familiar enough for the tourist to feel safe visiting it and will choose to do so voluntarily (Long 2004). Personal identities and experiences shift the line between exotic and familiar, making an exotic food familiar and

vice versa. From this perspective, it is possible that these emerging virtual tourism formats are making other food cultures less exotic and less “other.” Donovan Conley points out in his rhetorical study of “strange foods” that the repeated viewing of exotic foods—as offered by a number of food travel shows—actually makes the strange familiar; it is reframed as someone else’s everyday food, and exposure to it allows it to be incorporated into one’s culinary universe (2020). From this perspective, it is possible that virtual culinary tourism, by making the exotic more familiar, will enable tourists to see commonalities between themselves and others. The hope is that they will then be more aware of the potential impacts of tourism and will want to insure that it is beneficial in the long run for everyone involved. A number of tourism scholars, critics, and activists have long worked towards making tourism more sustainable (Everett 2019; Meeth 2015), and the pandemic may have given us the push that was needed (Ateljevic 2020; Filep, King and McKercher 2021; Fountain 2021; Gössling, Scott and Hall 2021; Hall, Scott and Gössling 2020; Haywood 2020; Lew, Cheer, Brouder, and Mostafamezhad 2021; Richards 2021; Tremblay-Huet 2020).

REFERENCES

Ateljevic, Irena. 2020. Transforming the (tourism) world for good and (re)generating the potential ‘new normal.’ *Tourism Geographies*. 22/3: 467-475 (DOI: 10.1080/14616688.2020.1759134).

Bell, David and Gill Valentine. 1997. *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat*. London: Routledge.

Conley, Donovan. 2020. More Than Just a Membrane. In *Cookery: Food Rhetorics and Social Production*, eds., Donovan Conley and Justin Eckstein. Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, pp. 105-128.

Everett, Sally. 2019. “Theoretical Turns Through Tourism Taste-scapes: the Evolution of Food Tourism Research,” *Research in Hospitality Management*, 9/1: 3-12.

Everett, Sally. 2015. *Food and Drink Tourism: Principles and Practice*. London: Sage.

Filep, Sebastian, Brian King, and Bob McKercher. 2022. Reflecting on tourism and COVID-19 research. *Tourism Recreation Research*. (AHEAD-OF-PRINT), 1-5 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2021.2023839>).

Fountain, J. 2021. The future of food tourism in a post-COVID-19 world: insights from New Zealand. *Journal of Tourism Futures* [Online], (ahead-of-print). <https://doi.org/10.1108/JTF-04-2021-0100>

- Gössling, Stefan, Daniel Scott & C. Michael Hall. 2021. Pandemics, tourism and global change: a rapid assessment of COVID-19. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. 29/1: 1-20 (DOI: 10.1080/09669582.2020.1758708).
- Hall, C. Michael, Daniel Scott & Stefan Gössling. 2020. Pandemics, transformations and tourism: be careful what you wish for. *Tourism Geographies*. 22/3: 577-598. (DOI: 10.1080/14616688.2020.1759131).
- Hall, C. Michael, Liz Sharples, Richard Mithell, Niki Macionis, and Brock Cambourne, eds. 2003. *Food Tourism Around the World*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Haywood, K. Michael. 2020A. post COVID-19 future: Tourism re-imagined and re-enabled. *Tourism Geographies*, 22/3,5: 9-609. (DOI: 10.1080/14616688.2020.1762120)
- Hjalager, Anne-Mette and Greg Richards. 2002. *Gastronomy and Tourism*. London: Routledge.
- Kelly, Casey. 2020. Food Pornography. In *Cookery: Food Rhetorics and Social Production*, eds., Donovan Conley and Justin Eckstein. Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, pp. 61-85.
- Lew, Alan A., Joseph M. Cheer, Patrick Brouder, and Mary Mostafamezhad. 2021. *Global Tourism and COVID-19: Implications for Theory and Practice*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Long, Lucy M. 2022. Culinary Tourism . In *The Oxford Handbook of Tourism History*, ed. Kevin James. Oxford Press, in press.
- Long, Lucy M. 2018. Cultural politics in culinary tourism with ethnic foods. *Revista De Administra..o De Empresas*, 58/3: 316–324.
- Long, Lucy M. ed. 2015. *The Food and Folklore Reader*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Long, Lucy M. 2014. Culinary Tourism, *The Encyclopedia of Food and Agricultural Ethics*, eds. Paul B. Thompson and David M. Kaplan. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, pp. 1-8.
- Long, Lucy M. 2004. *Culinary Tourism: Eating and Otherness*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Long, Lucy M. 1998. Culinary Tourism: A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness,” *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 55/3.
- Meethan, Kevin. 2015. Making the Difference: The Experience Economy and the Future of Regional Food Tourism. In *The Future of Food Tourism: Experiences, Exclusivity,*

Visions and Political Capital, edited by Ian Yeoman, Una McMahon-Beattie, Kevin Fields, Julia N. Albrecht and Kevin Meethan, 114-126. Toronto: Channel View Publications.

Richards, Greg. June 22, 2021. Rethinking Cultural Tourism. *TRAM* (online) Originally published on the Edward Elgar Blog.

Richards, Greg. 2016. Tourism and Gastronomy: From Foodies to Foodscapes,” *Journal of Gastronomy and Tourism*, 1: 5-18.

Tremblay-Huet, Sabrina. 2020. COVID-19 leads to a new context for the “right to tourism”: a reset of tourists’ perspectives on space appropriation is needed. *Tourism Geographies*. 22/3: 720-723 (DOI: 10.1080/14616688.2020.1759136).

Urry, John. 2000. *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Routledge.

Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford.

World Travel & Tourism Council. <https://wttc.org>

ⁱ I want to thank Kelsey Knoedler Perri, Director of Public Relations for Road Scholar Remote Campus, for taking the time to insure the accuracy of my comments on the organization.