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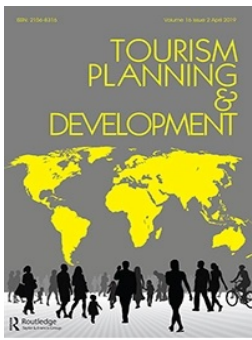
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Local Food in Tourism Destination Development: The Supply-Side Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Although the importance of the role of local food in destination marketing and development has begun to form an academic debate in the last decade, little effort has been invested to empirically underpin the concept of local food. Thus, in addressing the research gap, this study explores the perceptions and views on local food among supply-side representatives in Yorkshire, England. The findings suggest multiple understandings and discursive constructions of what constitutes “local food” among supply-side representatives. These are broadly presented as three dimensions: geographic; cultural; and socio-economic. Practical implications are offered to producers, service providers, and management, and future research avenues are suggested.

KEYWORDS

Local food; tourism development; food tourism; destination marketing organisations; Yorkshire; England

Introduction

While an increasing number of destinations use food as part of destination marketing efforts as an asset for and means of differentiation, it is now widely accepted that “destination marketing should not only aim to increase the number of tourists travelling to a destination but also aim to facilitate sustainable tourism development” (Okumus et al., 2007, p. 254). Thus, increasingly, amid the highly dynamic global tourism environment, many destinations and destination marketing organisations (DMOs) have integrated local food into the official destination marketing and management efforts (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Choe & Kim, 2018; Okumus et al., 2007; Roustia & Jamshidi, 2020). According to Ellis et al. (2018) locality is often linked to the sustainability of tourism, which emphasises the regional identity and conservation as the core of destination competitiveness. This recognition has led to a renewed focus upon trying to incorporate local food in many destination marketing and development strategies to benefit not only the tourism industry and the visitor, but also economic, social, and environmental aspects of destinations (Everett & Slocum, 2013; Gössling et al., 2011; Sims, 2009, 2010).

However, while local food holds much potential not only in terms of effective destination marketing strategies, but it also has a number of positive characteristics related to sustainable tourism, which is increasingly valued in destination development (Andersson

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et al., 2017), there has been a continual failure to empirically underpin the concept of local food. Although local food's contributions to destination marketing and development have been explored within tourism studies, it appears that empirical investigations into the understanding and meaning of local food are few. This ongoing ambiguity and highly contested nature of local food has been remarked by a number of previous tourism researchers (Avieli, 2013; Caber et al., 2018; Roy et al., 2017; Sims, 2010), yet it appears that this resulted in a constellation of multiple meanings. This is because a myriad of definitions has been adopted in previous tourism studies which tend to adopt conceptual definitions and view local food as either food produced in the local area (Birch & Memery, 2020; Kim & Eves, 2012) or as food from within specifically defined distance (Frash et al., 2015; Kang & Rajagopal, 2014). More complex understandings of local food convey cultural factors and production process (Alderighi et al., 2016; Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Boesen et al., 2017; Caber et al., 2018; Frisvoll et al., 2016). Among these various understandings of local food, it also appears that some researchers (Avieli, 2013; Roy et al., 2017) have noticed the fluid and subjective nature of the concept of local food.

According to Sims (2009), such differing interpretations of the local food might present a serious challenge for those wishing to use food as part of destination marketing and a sustainable tourism offering if the concept behind it is so contested. Taking this into consideration, it is timely to conduct an empirical investigation to further explore various understandings of local food among the under-researched group of supply-side stakeholders. This is because while local food is increasingly being used in many destination marketing strategies, most previous research (e.g. Alderighi et al., 2016; Birch & Memery, 2020; Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016; Choe & Kim, 2018; Frisvoll et al., 2016; Gálvez et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2009; Wijaya et al., 2017) has been conducted from the demand-side focusing on food-related visitor experiences and motivations for the consumption of local food.

Thus, rather than focusing on the demand-side, which has already been heavily explored in previous studies, this study explores the under-researched perspectives of the supply-side representatives to provide a clearer picture of the complexity of the concept of local food as well as offer a more informed basis for empirical research. Thus, in addressing this research gap, this article aims to enrich our ability to understand the complexity of the term and to add empirical weight to this discussion. This paper, therefore, fills this important knowledge gap by investigating the perceptions and views on local food among members of private sector tourism organisations (e.g. accommodation establishments, guided food trails, restaurants) and public sector organisations (e.g. regional and local DMOs) in Yorkshire, England. How does the supply side perceive local food? Do they see value and potential in using it in destination marketing? Can the ideas of local food be used in tourism development? These are the questions that this article attempts to address.

Using qualitative methodology to explore the topic from a destination marketing and development perspective, this study focuses on local food in Yorkshire, England. The following sections provide the foundations for this analysis by reviewing the literature on local food in destination marketing and its links to destination development. The methodology used for the study will be outlined, before going on to discuss the results of the research. Lastly, the conclusion is presented, summarising the findings, outlining

theoretical and practical implications as well as presenting limitations and indicating directions for further research.

Literature review

Local food in destination marketing and development

Whilst tourists enjoy a plethora of choices of available destinations, DMOs (Destination Marketing Organisations) at all levels find themselves competing against other destinations more than ever before (Crouch, 2011; Knollenberg et al., 2020). Thus, amongst intensified competition between destinations as well as concerns over limited resources, differentiation, and uniqueness have now become essential in destination marketing (Pike & Page, 2014). Accordingly, the destination marketing literature emphasises that each destination should differentiate itself by highlighting its unique tangible and intangible features (Okumus et al., 2007). Given this, identifying and promoting local food products and experiences related to a specific destination can be influential in destination marketing efforts (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2006; McKercher et al., 2008; Okumus et al., 2018). In particular, Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016) claim that local food holds much potential in terms of attracting travellers and contributing to the overall tourist experience which indicates marketing potential for hospitality industries, tourism businesses, and regional development.

However, while this in itself is not a new activity, what is new is the scale and extent of this highly competitive activity. More specifically, while emphasising differentiation is essential in destination marketing activities (Knollenberg et al., 2020), it is now also widely acknowledged that destination marketing should be done in a way that offers benefits sought by travellers, and represents the interests of destinations' stakeholders (Page, 2020). Consequently, destination marketing should not only aim to increase the number of visitors by emphasising unique tangible and intangible features but should also aim to meet the expectations of multiple stakeholders, each with different aims and agendas (Okumus et al., 2007). This means that DMOs work within a constant tension between harnessing the collective offering of a destination to attract visitors and the more local differentiation to win the visitor's attention within the destination (Knollenberg et al., 2020).

Given the above, the use of local food in destination marketing has been accelerated in an attempt by destinations to position themselves strongly in the fiercely competitive environment. However, while local food can be important in providing a means of differentiation and acting as a marker of distinction (Henderson, 2016; Okumus & Cetin, 2018), it is also widely accepted that "destination marketing should not only aim to increase the number of tourists travelling to a destination, but also aim to facilitate sustainable tourism development" (Okumus et al., 2007, p. 254). This recognition has led to a renewed focus upon trying to incorporate local food in many destination marketing and development strategies to benefit not only the tourism industry and the visitor, but also economic, social, and environmental aspects of destinations (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Everett & Slocum, 2013; Gössling et al., 2011; Legendre & Baker, 2019; Sims, 2009, 2010).

In particular, Andersson et al. (2017) note that economic impacts from local food in tourism remain to a large degree within the local economy; local food tourism has the

environmental advantage of reducing food miles; and in terms of socio-cultural benefits, local food products and dishes may have positive effects on local residents' sense of cultural belonging, just as it may enhance tourists' understanding of the visited place. In a similar vein, using evidence from two UK regions, the Lake District and Exmoor, Sims (2009) argues that local food can have an important role to play in sustainable tourism development as a result of its ability to satisfy a complex range of demands—from producer concerns about the importance of reducing food miles, to local community's desires for supporting local businesses, to tourists' demands for food products that appear to reflect destination's culture. In this way, local food can improve the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural sustainability of both tourism and the host community.

Overall, the review of the literature presented in this section illustrates that local food holds much potential not only in terms of effective destination marketing strategies, but it also has a number of positive characteristics related to sustainable tourism, which is increasingly valued in destination development (Andersson et al., 2017). However, despite repeated arguments that local food can contribute to the sustainability agenda (Hall & Gössling, 2013) which is now widely encouraged in destination marketing (Okumus et al., 2007), there has been a continual failure to theoretically underpin the concept of local food. Thus, akin to such a view, the following section of this article will now consider different approaches to defining local food in previous tourism studies which have created a constellation of multiple meanings. While this article does not intend to solve this issue, by explicating the different meanings of local food, this article aims to enrich our ability to understand the complexity of the term and to add empirical weight to this discussion.

What is local food?

As described in the preceding section, local food initiatives at the destination level can be viewed as a response to the economic, environmental, and social facets of tourism destinations (Hall & Gössling, 2013). Indeed, their promotion has been equated with a sustainable turn in destination marketing practises, aiming not only to increase the number of tourists travelling to a destination, but also intending to facilitate sustainable tourism development (Okumus et al., 2007, p. 254). However, despite the many arguments in their favour, it appears that ambiguity surrounds the definition of local food (Roy et al., 2017; Sims, 2010; Trivette, 2015). In particular, Caber et al. (2018, p. 8) specifically state that: "a widely acknowledged definition of 'local food' is not yet available in the literature". This view is echoed by Broadway (2017), who claims that "local" is a highly contested term with no widely accepted definition. It appears that a number of earlier studies on local food and tourism (e.g. Choe & Kim, 2018; Gálvez et al., 2017; Okumus et al., 2007, 2018; Okumus & Cetin, 2018; Roustai & Jamshidi, 2020; Wijaya et al., 2017) do not even address this issue which demonstrates a continual failure to theoretically underpin the concept of local food. This is alarming, as a good starting point to a discussion including local food in tourism and the marketing thereof would be to define the concept of local food, yet it appears that these studies leave this to the interpretation, or confusion, of the reader.

Moreover, even when previous tourism studies do define the concept of local food, it appears that various conceptual understandings are utilised, which have resulted in a

diverse landscape of meaning. For example, some previous studies adopt a geographic distance when defining local food. For example, Frash et al. (2015, p. 414) state that in order to “create a stable research framework”, their study defines local food as produced within a 100-mile radius of the given restaurant’s location. However, such a definition appears to be based on the authors’ assumptions and it is not clear why such a definition was adopted. In a similar vein, Kang and Rajagopal (2014) also favour a geographic definition by indicating that, in their study, local foods are defined as locally grown (within 200 miles) or agricultural food products purchased directly from farmers through various outlets (farms, food markets, etc.). However, once again, no indication was made as to why and how such a conceptual definition was adopted. Elsewhere, side-stepping a clearly defined geographic distance, but still referring to geographic proximity, Kim and Eves (2012) define local food adopting Nummedal and Hall’s (2006) definition of foods produced in the local area and including locally produced and regionally branded products, such as cheeses, meat, and pies. Similarly, based on previous literature, Birch and Memery (2020) describe local food as the food produced near the customer, thus, once again, the idea of geographic proximity is emphasised. However, it can be argued that such definition is too simplistic as the question of where the local area ends and another one begins can be subjective, depending on context (density of populations, accessibility, and rural or urban character for example) and purpose of travel. Furthermore, Roy et al. (2017) also note that these may range from the municipal to the country level or even beyond adding to the ambiguity which surrounds the concept of local food.

Elsewhere, other studies appear to be emphasising the physical and cultural factors when defining local food. For example, Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2016, p. 178) adopt a conceptual definition of local food as food that is served at a particular destination. However, their definition of local food also incorporates local food specialties and food that is prepared from local ingredients, thus hinting at the production process, and emphasising the importance of local ingredients. Similarly, but referring to previous literature, Boesen et al. (2017, p. 76) view local food as food that is produced within a limited geographical area and which has characteristics from the *terroir*¹ of this area or from its production traditions or modern principles. The concept of *terroir* is also used by Alderighi et al. (2016) who, referring to previous literature, view local foods as strictly tied to their area of and deriving their characteristics from the *paedoclimatic*, technical, and organisational peculiarities of the destination.

The discussion in the preceding paragraph emphasises a more holistic understanding of local food which encompasses food culture rather than a specific geographic distance or location. This is also visible in Frisvoll et al.’s (2016, p. 77) comprehensive, but the conceptual definition of local food as: “food products or dishes made or prepared locally, based on traditions, techniques, and non-generic products that are associated with a given geographical area”. In this sense, the definition of local food is not only about the geographic proximity of locally grown and consumed produce, but about the process of production based on local knowledge, the people, culture, and traditions (Kim et al., 2009). Thus, definitions analysed here emphasise the production method which is expected to be traditional. In this context, local food constitutes foods that are grown in a specific area, can be bought from local markets or producers, have a limited distance between their production and consumption locations, and reflect the local culture (Caber et al., 2018).

While various definitions of local food have been adopted in previous studies, it appears that there are very few examples of studies that have empirically addressed and explored the concept of local food. For example, Avieli (2013) attempts to question and uncover the various meanings of the concept of local food. In his article, aptly entitled “What is Local Food?”, he consequently fails to achieve such an aim. Based on the long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Hoi An between 1998 and 2011, Avieli (2013) concludes that local food dishes “are dynamic, responsive to social changes and involved with multi-directional processes of negotiation and interpretation” (Avieli, 2013, p. 131) thus hinting at subjective and context-dependent nature of local. Elsewhere, through an empirical analysis involving sellers, shoppers, and managers at 15 farmers’ markets in the Province of Ontario, Canada, Smithers et al. (2008) note that while the local clearly emerges as being widely valued by customers and producers attending local markets, at the same time it appears to be highly interpretive in its meaning.

In the context of the UK, using evidence from qualitative interviews with tourists and food producers in two UK regions, the Lake District and Exmoor, Sims (2009) reveals different understandings of local food in accordance with personal beliefs and circumstances. Another UK example is Sims’ (2010) attempt to explore the concept of local food as it is constructed and reconstructed throughout the tourist food chain. Through semi-structured interviews with producers, consumers, and suppliers, she found that when it came to defining what was local, the producers and suppliers had the broadest range of viewpoints. These ranged from largely geographical understandings of products made in the region, through to more complex understandings based upon economic, social, and cultural factors, such as where the product was to be sold, where the value was added during its production, and who it was made by. Sims (2010) states that such finding was in direct contrast to the tourists, who in comparison to the other two groups of interviewees were the least willing to engage in debates about the meaning of local food, and the definitions they offered tended to be based either on geographical criteria or on the symbolic qualities of particular products that were considered typical of the places and cultures that produced them.

This summary of the literature highlights an apparent abundance of tourism research publications that are devoted to local food. However, as illustrated, while various definitions have been adopted, the empirical evidence on what constitutes local food is still lacking. On this basis, it is timely to conduct an empirical investigation to further explore various understandings of local food among supply-side stakeholders. How does the supply side perceive local food? Do they see value and potential in using it? Can the ideas of local food be used in tourism development? These are the questions that this article will address. To follow, the methodological approach to this study is detailed.

Research context and methodology

The research undertaken for this study took place in Yorkshire, the historic county of Northern England covering just over 15,000 km² with a population of 5.45 million (Statista, 2019). Yorkshire has a diverse landscape featuring cosmopolitan cities, traditional market towns, rugged coastline, and the famous Moors and Dales, something which is reflected in the range of food experiences on offer (Visit Britain, 2020). In addition to numerous rural locations offering traditional pubs, Yorkshire has seven cities, each with

its unique, distinct food offer (Welcome to Yorkshire, 2020). According to Welcome to Yorkshire (the region's DMO), the travel and tourism industry play an important role in Yorkshire bringing a total of £9 billion to the Yorkshire economy each year. In 2016, Yorkshire became marketed as a food destination through the "Tour de Yorkshire Cuisine: an edible journey" campaign which was promoted alongside the Tour de Yorkshire cycling tour (Welcome to Yorkshire, 2016). Elizabeth Truss (the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at the time of this research) explained the importance of the campaign in the following comment:

"Yorkshire is home to some of our finest farm land and food producers, from forced rhubarb and Wensleydale cheese, to afternoon tea, pub lunches and Michelin star dining. This year's "Tour de Yorkshire" will also celebrate food (...) We have more planned to champion our proud food heritage and boost investment and jobs in food tourism across Britain". (Welcome to Yorkshire, 2016)

Clearly, the above quote demonstrates not only the variety of food on offer but also the significance of local food in Yorkshire tourism and destination development. This makes Yorkshire a suitable destination for studying the understanding, perception, and willingness of the supply-side stakeholders to use the ideas of local food in the tourism destination development context.

As highlighted in the previous sections, the concept of local food is far from straightforward and a key objective of this research was to explore the perceptions and views on local food among supply-side representatives. Thus, an exploratory case study strategy (Yin, 2009) was adopted. This is because the present study aimed to explore and investigate a distinct phenomenon characterised by a lack of detailed preliminary research (Yin, 2009). Thus, the main focus of this study was on discovery rather than explanation. In particular, this study followed an interpretivist approach that allowed the understanding of local food tourism through the collective perspective of the researcher and the participants (Goodson & Phillimore, 2004). An interpretivist approach posits that understanding the context in which data is gathered is pivotal for its interpretation (Willis, 2007). This understanding relies on the incorporation of multiple perspectives and a flexible data gathering method (Willis, 2007). Thus, the use of a semi-structured interview guide allowed the researcher to ask probing questions to gain a deeper understanding of the context. Moreover, the inclusion of a diverse variety of local food tourism stakeholders aligns with an interpretivist approach.

It is thought that this supply-side approach can be valuable because it involves those who are knowledgeable about the entire portfolio of destination resources. What is more, they are in regular contact with consumer groups and thus may offer reliable insights into the marketplace. According to Crouch (2011), gathering and analysing professional opinions from individuals (e.g. destination marketers) based on experience, expertise, and insight is, in itself, a valuable source of information. Moreover, Everett and Aitchison (2008) note that private sector tourism representatives (e.g. restaurant owners) act as conduits between local producers and the visiting tourist, communicating with both groups, and being aware of local conditions and issues. Thus, the point to be made from this is that data gathered from semi-structured interviews with supply-side representatives exploring the perceptions and views on local food is a viable approach, yet very little research has concentrated on these participants.

Table 1 summarises the features of the participants who included members of private sector tourism organisations (e.g. accommodation establishments, guided food trails, restaurants) and public sector organisations (e.g. regional and local DMOs). Several participants represented both sectors simultaneously. For example, the same person was representative of a public and a private sector (e.g. member of a DMO and running a private tourism business). Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were applied. For the former, potential study participants were identified by reviewing public databases and online information. Participants were selected according to their apparent commitment to local food, as demonstrated on their respective business websites. These stakeholder groups were purposefully selected to capture diverse perspectives on the local food tourism industry. Purposive sampling worked well as the researcher was able to deliberately select participants who were likely to produce the most valuable data (Saunders et al., 2016). As a result, including different supply-side stakeholders generated a comprehensive knowledge of the various definitions of local food; resources needed for the development of local food tourism, and the industry's perceived economic and non-economic benefits. For snowball sampling, participants were asked to identify other relevant stakeholders, which expanded the sample (Saunders et al., 2016). In this case, the researcher identified other participants on the recommendation of the initially identified participants. Thus, the researcher relied on informal networks of association between participants in the field. In a similar vein to the approach adopted by Sims (2010), the aim was to produce a sample reflecting the range of businesses encountered in the region.

Table 1. Background of the participants and their respective businesses.

Participant	Type of business	Relationship to business
P1	DMO (regional)	Senior official
P2	DMO (local)	Senior official
P3	DMO (local)	Senior official
P4	DMO (regional)	Senior official
P5	DMO (local)	Senior official
P6	DMO (local)	Senior official
P7	DMO (local)	Senior official
P8	Food shop	Business owner; local and regional champion in the food industry
P9	Guided food trails and pop-up dinners	Food tourism event planner and coordinator; chef
P10	Guided food trails and pop-up dinners	Food tourism event planner and coordinator
P11	Food shop	Local and regional champion in the food tourism industry
P12	Hospitality consultancy	Leading professional in the food and hospitality field; food historian and forecaster; chef
P13	Food tourism events planning and marketing	Food tourism event planner and coordinator; local community leader utilising local and regional food as a marketing tool
P14	Tourism and hospitality consultancy	Leading professional in the food tourism and hospitality field; food tourism event planner and coordinator
P15	Tourism and hospitality consultancy	Food and travel journalist; food heritage specialist
P16	Restaurant	Restaurateur; food tourism event planner and coordinator
P17	Restaurant	Leading chef
P18	Restaurant	Restaurateur; food tourism event planner and coordinator
P19	Hotel and restaurant	Restaurateur; food tourism event planner and coordinator; local and regional champion in the food tourism industry

The selected potential participants, 30 in total, were sent an email invitation, stating the purpose of the study and requesting a meeting if they were interested in participating in the study. These interviews were conducted by the original researcher and were carried out during a four-month period from June to September 2016. The interview questions were non-directive and open-ended to allow respondents to frame and express their opinions as openly and freely as possible. The interviews were conducted in person at the participants' business premises and each interview lasted 60 min on average. The interviews were either audio-recorded when the participant consented or documented through extensive notes taken during the interviews and double-checked with the participant afterward. The interview material was then transcribed into texts. Data saturation was achieved after 19 interviews when concepts within the data started to be repeated by participants (Fusch & Ness, 2015). At that point, data collection was concluded. The data analysis process followed Miles et al.'s (2014) guidelines on qualitative data analysis as a process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and/or transforming information in order to develop conceptual interpretations. New research questions and interpretations emerged from this iterative interplay between empirical evidence and the theoretical perspective.

The following sections discuss the results of this research. Although participants included representatives from public sector tourism organisations, private sector tourism organisations and others represented both sectors simultaneously, no differences were identified between the results obtained in those participant groups. Consequently, data from all interviews have been combined in order to explore the important and timely issue of how the concept of local food is perceived, valued, and understood throughout the supply-side chain at the destination level.

Results and discussion

As outlined earlier, this paper aims to identify views on local food among members of private sector tourism organisations (e.g. accommodation establishments, guided food trails, restaurants) and public sector organisations (e.g. regional and local DMOs). How does the supply side perceive local food? Do they see value and potential in using it in destination marketing? Can the ideas of local food be used in tourism development? This section is structured into two sub-sections identifying the key topics that serve to draw a response to these questions: various interpretations of local food; and the attitudes towards local food as part of tourism development.

Various interpretations of local food

When it came to defining what was local food, the supply-side representatives had different viewpoints. In particular, one participant aptly stated that: "it is very difficult to put a cast-iron definition on what is local food" (P9). Thus, a variety of perspectives on what is local food was expressed during the interviews. Definitions offered by the participants ranged from largely geographical understandings of food products made and sold in the area, to more complex understandings based upon socio-economic and cultural factors.

Geographic dimension

When defining local food several participants referred to distance and geographic proximity as demonstrated in the following comments: “local should be something within 30 miles radius” (P14); “my definition of local food is from within 10 miles” (P16); “from down the road and from our fields here” (P13). The comments here illustrate perceptions of local food as food from the immediate vicinity or food produced near the customer (Birch & Memery, 2020). However, there was little agreement on the *geographic proximity* as participants demonstrated great variation in the distance, thus supporting the ideas of Frash et al. (2015) and Trivette (2015) that while local food is often defined by articulating some sort of proximity between producer and consumer, there appears to be a wide variation in the distance. Furthermore, some participants suggested that the distance may vary depending on the type of destination. For example, P13 stated:

“In England when we say local, we probably mean within 30 or 40 miles. However, we had some American guests who came the other day from Chicago, and they define local food as anything from a 100miles radius. But then, they are in America which is an enormous country”. (P13)

Similarly, P14 indicated that while, in her opinion, local food in Yorkshire should be sourced within 30 miles radius, at the same time the idea of distance will be different for large urban agglomerations. The same participant explained that in London or Manchester that distance “can be expanded to 50 or 60 miles. So, if you are holding a farmer’s market in a suburb of London you could say anything within 50-60-mile radius could be seen as local” (P14). Clearly, interview participants exhibited great variation in the distance they considered to be local which appeared to be flexible and dependent on the context (type of destination, density of populations, and rural or urban character, etc.). This finding corroborates the ideas of Roy et al. (2017), who suggested that the concept of local is relative and depends upon the context.

Furthermore, the dimension of geographic proximity appeared to be particularly challenging to some of the private sector participants. In particular, they indicated some trade-offs between their own personal values and business requirements to ensure that they could source enough products. For example, P16 stated that although her personal definition of local food was based on food from within 10 miles, it was not feasible to source particular food products (e.g. fresh seafood) due to the location of her restaurant and the geographical constraints. Thus, P16 explained that seafood had to be sourced from a destination located 100 miles away from her restaurant. The same participant explained further:

“The way our business defines itself as local is just from Yorkshire. So, I guess to some people it may not be local at all. (...) However, as long as we can say that everything is from Yorkshire, they should accept that as being local”. (P16)

Such “stretching” of the definition was previously observed by Sims (2010) who found that, in her study, café, pub, and restaurant owners had to constantly change and adapt their definition of “local” in order to accommodate what was available at any particular time. Similar views were common among DMO representatives. For example, P6 stated that although she personally associated local food as food from York due to the nature of her destination, some destination marketing activities had to be “stretched

out". For example, she explained that there were no local cheeses in York and therefore destination marketing activities had to extend and incorporate regional cheeses such as for example Wensleydale cheese. Thus, in her own words, due to the geographic constraints and customer expectations, the definition of local had to be "stretched out" (P6). Consequently, some participants referred to the concept of *geographic boundary* (e.g. region or county) rather than geographic proximity. Talking about this issue in particular another DMO representative explained: "for us [a regional DMO] local is anything that is produced in Yorkshire that is made from Yorkshire ingredients, so I would say anything that has been produced or farmed here [in Yorkshire]" (P1). Similar conclusions emerged from Smithers et al.'s (2008) work on local food markets in Ontario, Canada, where managers indicated that while it was important to present truly local food and local producers, that definition of local had to be stretched as consumers expected to see a good variation of food products.

Moreover, a number of participants noted that adopting a geographic definition of local food might be difficult because of the complexity of the food supply chain, as explained by P14:

"Is it grown there? Is it produced there? Is it manufactured there? Foods can travel for many, many miles before they actually get to our plate. We have got to look at that definition of local, because for something like meat it is quite obvious that when you get it from the farm that has been slaughtered nearby and then comes back directly to the farmers market and farm shop or local butcher, then great! However, with the complex food supply chain, things can travel for many miles before they actually get to our plate".

As the above quotation shows, private sector participants appeared to be not only grappling with inconsistent product availability but also having to negotiate the complexity of the food supply chain and suppliers' understandings of local. Similar concerns were also expressed by other participants. For example, P9 indicated that "local for meat can mean a lot of different things" as meat can travel for many miles, and thus meat could vary from pork bred and reared five miles down the road, to imported pork that has only spent two weeks in the local area before it is slaughtered, labelled, and sold as "local". This issue of the complexity of the food supply chain also accords with questions posed by Sims (2010, p. 107) "can gingerbread—a popular local speciality in the county of Cumbria—ever be considered a local product in the UK if the sugar and spices used to make it come from overseas"? While directly answering this question remains beyond the scope of this paper, it aptly indicates that adopting a geographical definition of "local" can be complicated by the distinction between the origin of the ingredients and the place of production which was noted by participants.

Cultural dimension

In addition to the geographic distance or proximity, some participants described "local food" as bringing together geographic and cultural aspects of the destination which, combined together, create a unique taste of place. Talking about this issue, one of the participants, a restaurant owner, explained that local food helps to deliver "a true Yorkshire dining experience" which embraces ingredients grown or foraged across the county which are then served with "relaxed Yorkshire hospitality" (P18). Within this dimension, the mixture of geographical and cultural characteristics influences food

which, in turn, creates a unique local product. This was further emphasised by another participant who stated: “it is about *how* it [local food] is created in first place as much as the ‘where’” (P9). Such comment highlights the importance of the production process seen as based on traditional methods which were previously emphasised by Kim et al. (2009). Consequently, the cultural dimension defines local food as being embedded in the landscape and influenced by local traditions and other intangible elements (Alderighi et al., 2016; Boesen et al., 2017; Frisvoll et al., 2016).

In contrast to the previous dimension of geographic proximity, the understanding of local food here does not rely on whether the product has been produced or sourced within a defined distance, but that it has been produced in a distinct area defined by the presence of a unique combination of soil, topography, climate, and locally embedded skills and knowledge. This is because participants believed that: “[local food] is the heart and soul of the destination and helps to distinguish a personality of a destination” (P4), and “in Yorkshire local food reflects Yorkshire’s mentality” (P2). The comments here suggest that participants viewed local food as capturing the essence of the place through its distinctive geographical and cultural characteristics. This finding is consistent with those of other studies which view local food as a window onto and representation of another culture (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). Moreover, in agreement with observations made by Ellis et al. (2018), participants indicated that local food provides visitors with the opportunity to learn about the culture and history of the destination. This, in turn, potentially elevates the role of local food as a perfect medium enabling tourists to gain a clearer knowledge and understanding of a place.

Socio-economic dimension

In addition to the other two dimensions, some participants defined local food based on perceived social and economic benefits to the locality. For example, they associated local food as a necessary element supporting the local economy and consequently vital for the survival of local communities. Enhanced job opportunities as well as protecting traditional heritage and skills were also mentioned by a large majority. Talking about those issues, P8 stated that: “what is missing from the debate on local food and tourism is that local food supports local jobs, so there is a wider destination effect”. When prompted to explain what was meant by “a wider destination effect”, he explained how, in his view, local food when combined with tourism destination development, keeps not only the local economy stronger but also local food traditions alive and going. Similar issues were previously emphasised by Andersson et al. (2017) who noted that in addition to the economic impacts, local food tourism drives the rediscovery and development of traditional crops and livestock, thus having a positive effect on local residents’ sense of belonging.

Thus, the “local” here is not necessarily attributed to a specific geographic scale or distance or seen as being rooted in the environment and culture of a destination and reinforced by its local traditions. The key point is that the control of economic activity associated with local food was perceived to be retained locally in Yorkshire where a range of socio-economic benefits was believed to be delivered to serve the local community. These potential benefits appeared to be based on participants’ perceptions of certain characteristics which they tended to associate with local food, such as production by a small family-run business or farm, conservation of traditional skills, quality food, preservation of small and independent businesses. This finding

matches those observed in earlier consumer studies. For example, Lang et al. (2014, p. 1810) found that individuals tend to associate local foods with a range of characteristics including for example smaller independent growers or manufacturers, non-industrial and non-corporate growers or manufacturers, family owned and operated growers or manufacturers, businesses that are part of a community, etc. This also accords with the earlier observation by Everett and Aitchison (2008) who explored the views and attitudes towards food tourism among restaurant owners in Cornwall, England. In their study, they found that restaurateurs associated increased levels of food-based tourism with socio-economic benefits celebrating the production of local food and the conservation of traditional heritage, skills, and ways of life. Thus, this dimension of local food is based on associations with perceived socio-economic benefits which are believed to be retained locally in the area.

Attitudes towards local food as part of tourism destination development

All supply-side representatives agreed unanimously that local food is vital in tourism destination development, as food is essential for physiological needs, but it is also an important element of the overall destination experience. This was demonstrated in the following comments: “local food is the fundamental part of the Yorkshire experience” (P2); “we have got so many local specialities ranging from Yorkshire Pudding to Yorkshire tea, chocolate, beer; it is kind of integral to what people do when they visit” (P6); “it is such an important tool to attract people to experience Yorkshire” (P9). The comments outlined here demonstrate that the supply-side representatives perceived local food as an integral part of the overall tourism experience of the destination, regardless of food being a primary or secondary motive to visit (McKercher et al., 2008). This finding is also in agreement with Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen’s (2016) findings which showed that local food holds much potential in terms of attracting travellers and contributing to the overall tourist experience which in turn indicates marketing potential for hospitality and tourism businesses.

In addition to the above, participants viewed local food as an important area of tourism spend. For example, a large majority of supply-side representatives linked local food with extending the tourism season by spreading the volume and value of tourism throughout the year. As one interviewee put it: “local food attracts people to destinations in the quieter seasons and I think that is a quite important and good way of extending the season” (P14). This finding accords with the earlier observation by Everett and Slocum (2013) and Andersson et al. (2017) who noted the economic significance of local food in tourism which remains to a large degree within the local economy. Within such context, participants viewed local food as a “marketing hook” (P1) which is “a very easy way to market and to get some visitors spending” (P6). Thus, participants saw local food as a means of differentiation and a marker of distinction in the struggle to attract visitors, investment, business, and growth (Henderson, 2016).

However, it appeared that participants also conceptualised local food as much more than sustenance, an economic commodity, or a marketing hook. In particular, participants stated that local food “tells the story about a place” (P1) and “local food is part of the jigsaw puzzle of the place” (P4). Within such context, participants emphasised the role of local food in helping the local community to create a sense of place, a purpose, and

vision for tourism destination development (Ellis et al., 2018). In addition, community cohesion was also frequently mentioned as illustrated in the following comment:

“That [local food festival] is something that is good for the community and it might be a good reason to hold it. So it may not be about bringing people from all over the region, but it may be a good thing for our community in bringing groups of people together”. (P14)

As the above quotation shows, participants perceived local food as a tool for community cohesion which, in their view, could improve a sense of belonging and develop local pride in the destination. Consequently, this potentially elevates the role of local food in destination marketing from a mere economic commodity towards a means conveying social identities and cultural landscapes at the destination level. However, within such context participants acknowledged the need for coherent guidelines in order to further utilise local food as part of tourism destination development. This was explained by one of the participants: “I believe that we need a food and drink strategy that collectively maximises the opportunities to develop, promote and emblazon Yorkshire’s local food offer in a way that nationally and internationally recognises us as a ‘must visit’ culinary destination” (P10). Thus, in agreement with previous studies (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2006; Legendre & Baker, 2019) participants believed that if destination development goals are to be met through local food tourism, improved guidelines, and destination governance must be established as means to ensure destination development.

Conclusion and future research

Local food has been used in many destination marketing and development strategies to benefit not only the tourism industry and the visitor, but also economic, social, and environmental aspects of destinations (Everett & Slocum, 2013; Gössling et al., 2011; Sims, 2009, 2010). However, while the highly contested nature of local food has been remarked in previous tourism literature (Avieli, 2013; Caber et al., 2018; Roy et al., 2017; Sims, 2010), it appears that empirical investigations into the understanding and meaning of local food are few. This study responds to this gap in knowledge by focusing on the perspectives of the supply-side representatives to provide a clearer picture of the complexity of the concept of local food as well as offer a more informed basis for empirical research. Thus, the aim here has not been to suggest a fixed definition, but to explore various understandings and perceptions associated with local food. The findings and discussion suggest that the concept of local food has peculiarities that have not been adequately elaborated within the existing literature.

This study indicates that there appear to be multiple understandings and discursive constructions of what constitutes “local food” among supply-side representatives. These range from largely geographical understandings of local food understood as either geographic proximity or geographic boundary. However, there appears to be little agreement on the geographic proximity and a great variation in the distance. What is more, the dimension of geographic proximity seems to be flexible and dependent on the context such as type of destination, the density of populations, and rural or urban character, etc. (Roy et al., 2017). Interestingly, the findings also indicate some stretching of this geographic dimension among supply-side representatives who indicated some trade-offs in order to accommodate business requirements and meet customers’ expectations.

Such finding adds weight to Sims' (2010) argument that different definitions of local food arise from the need to negotiate the tensions between the values that people hold about the food sector and the practicalities involved in producing, shopping and buying food products.

Moreover, the findings also indicate that it is doubtful whether a definition of local food could ever be based purely on geographical dimension because, as suggested by the participants, local seems to be equated with a host of values relating to social, economic, and cultural criteria (Alderighi et al., 2016; Boesen et al., 2017; Frisvoll et al., 2016). Within such context, on one hand, the cultural dimension of local food posits local food as capturing the essence of the place through its distinctive geographical and cultural characteristics. Here, understanding of local food does not rely on whether the product has been produced or sourced within a defined distance or from the clearly defined geographic boundary, but that it has been produced in a distinct area defined by the presence of a unique combination of soil, topography, climate, and locally embedded skills and knowledge. On the other hand, the socio-economic dimension appears to suggest that local food is also associated with perceived social and economic benefits to the locality such as preservation of local traditions, enhancement of local job opportunities (Andersson et al., 2017; Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Lang et al., 2014).

It has to be noted that the three dimensions of local food identified in this study do not suggest that one dimension takes precedence over the others. In some ways, the dimensions may compete, as they can substitute each other, but perhaps in more important ways, they seem to complement each other. In other words, each dimension adds significant elements to the understanding of local food. In terms of practical implications, this study provides some insights into the opportunities and challenges related to the use of local food as part of tourism destination development. On one hand, the findings indicate that supply-side representatives perceive local food as an essential element in destination marketing and wider destination development. In particular, local food may be used as a tool for community cohesion improving a sense of belonging and developing local pride in the destination. Consequently, this potentially elevates the role of local food in destination marketing from a mere economic commodity towards a means conveying social identities and cultural landscapes at the destination level. On the other hand, the findings indicate that more support, clear guidelines, and improved governance at the destination level are the pre-requisites if local food is to hold much potential to enhance sustainability in tourism.

Although there are valuable academic findings and practical contributions, limitations are also acknowledged that can be further investigated in the future. While this article reports on the views and perceptions of the supply-side representatives at the destination level, the aim was not to produce a statistically representative sample but to reflect the range of businesses encountered in the region of Yorkshire, England. Moreover, it has to be noted that while someone who, for the purposes of this study, is described as a food producer or restaurant owner will also be a tourist and consumer at other times and in other places—for example, when travelling or shopping for the family in his or her home life. Yet, given the importance of consumer perceptions, to gain a better insight into local food in destination marketing and development, more empirical research is necessary on the demand-side. Finally, a single case approach adopted limits this work, though simultaneously provides avenues for further scholarly

investigation in the future. However, whilst generalising the findings was not the intent, further case studies in other destinations could be executed to further appraise the findings of this study.

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Note

1. “terroir” (an untranslatable French word that connotes the local spaces and soils). Terroir can be simply defined in environmental terms, however, the origins and significance of the phrase may be located within much wider philosophical, historical, social and cultural debates that define a particular destination (Tresidder, 2015).

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