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STALMIRSKA, Anna

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## **Food as a Component in Destination Marketing: A Case Study of Visit England**

**Anna Stalmirska**  
Sheffield Hallam University,  
United Kingdom  
E-mail: a.stalmirska@shu.ac.uk

### **INTRODUCTION**

The marketing of tourism destinations is an increasingly competitive global phenomenon (Pike and Page, 2014). In particular, from the demand side, tourists enjoy a plethora of choices of available destinations, while from the supply side, destination marketing organisations (DMOs) at all levels are trying to compete for attention in this highly competitive market.

As the competition between destinations becomes increasingly fierce, culture becomes a key differentiator. This is because of recent shift from an era of industrial to one of cultural capitalism (Yeoman, McMahon-Beattie, Fields, Albrecht and Meethan, 2015) as well as the rise of the experience economy and experience marketing (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). For that reason, at the destination level building on the cultural resources and experiences, such as food, becomes an important aspect in contemporary tourism (Yeoman et al., 2015).

However, while food tourism has clearly emerged as a part of the cultural experience within many destinations, little is still known about food and tourism and the academic community has been surprisingly slow to consider the theoretical potential in the context of destination marketing (Du Rand and Heath, 2006). This study therefore aims to critically examine how food is used in the destination marketing in England. In particular, this study applies a qualitative content analysis of the official website of England's National Tourism Board (Visit England.com). The main aim of this study is to gain an understanding of how food is used to market England as a tourist destination.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to the destination marketing literature, each destination should, where possible, attempt to differentiate itself by highlighting its unique features (Pike and Page, 2014). However, it is becoming more and more difficult for destinations

to differentiate against rivals offering the similar attributes and benefits. In particular, from the demand side, tourists enjoy a wealth of choices of available destinations, while from the supply side, DMOs at all levels compete for attention in this highly competitive market.

Destinations, therefore, need to offer a unique and differentiated tourism product in order to remain competitive (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003). As such, the marketing of food is seen as a way of developing the distinctiveness and uniqueness of place (Hall, Sharples, Mitchell, Macionis, & Cambourne, 2003). However, although there have been numerous studies on marketing tourism destinations, the empirical evidence on how food is used in destination marketing is still limited (Lee & Scott, 2015).

It is only recently that food and food tourism have received growing research interest. Evidence suggests that food can play an important role in tourists' destination choice and food can be a reason to visit and revisit a destination (Getz, Robinson, Vujicic, & Andersson, 2014; Long, 2004). In particular, local food has been presented as the embodiment of culture (Long, 2004).

Food not only differentiates destinations, but also provides opportunity for DMOs to supply tourists with a more meaningful form of experience based on active participation rather than simple and passive consumption (Smith & Xiao, 2008). In the context of the experience economy, the focus of many tourists has changed from the classic "must see" physical sights towards a "must experience" desire to consume intangible expressions of a destination (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). This approach is entirely distinct to the "gaze" perspective which for many years championed a detached stance (Urry, 2002). Consequently, food can provide a unique and multisensory experience that can only be consumed in a destination if one goes beyond the visual.

Arguably food is gathering momentum in destination marketing. This is because food can be viewed as a reflection of the culture of the destination and its people (Du Rand and Heath, 2006). It conveys something indigenous and unique to a specific destination (Smith, 2015). Therefore, it can be seen not only as a way to provide a greater enjoyment of the unique and multisensory nature of place, but also as a source of touristic competitive advantage and as a differentiation factor in destination marketing (Yeoman et al., 2015). However, despite this, empirical evidence on how food is used in destination marketing is still limited and deserves more scholarly attention (Kim, Yuan, Goh and Antun, 2009; Okumus, Okumus & McKercher, 2007)

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a case study approach which is understood as an inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2013). It is believed that such approach will provide an in-depth investigation and evaluation of how food is used in the destination marketing of England. The decision to

choose this destination was in line with recent growth in food initiatives emerging from this area. What is more, according to the latest statistics (VisitEngland, 2015) food plays a vital role in the marketing of England as a tourist destination. However, to date there have been no studies of food in the marketing of England. This therefore, will make a unique and original contribution to our understanding of this emerging phenomenon.

In January 2016 the official DMO website ([www.visitengland.com](http://www.visitengland.com)) was manually scanned to identify food-related content. As a result, "Food and Drink" section was downloaded and saved in a pdf format. This included a total of 387 food-related experience results presented in 8 extant categories.

In order to investigate how Visit England uses food in the marketing of the destination, this study applied a qualitative content analysis with an open coding technique to discover the themes and keep the relevant categories true to the essence of the data (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). In total, 71 pages of textual material and 283 photographs were analysed using NVivo 10. Textual material was examined line-by-line and sometimes word-by-word. Photographs were coded by first describing what the photograph depicted and then allocating it to a category that appeared to represent the photograph. Open coding involved breaking data apart and describing concepts to stand for interpreted meaning of raw data. Some of the research findings are presented in the next section.

## **RESULTS**

### **Food descriptors**

Content analysis of adjectives used to describe food on the website identified a total of 41 food descriptors. Interestingly, the most often used adjective was "local" which shows that there is an emphasis in the use of locally sourced food products. This is not surprising, as according to the literature local food can help differentiate destinations by offering tourists unique and authentic experience. Accordingly, local food can be viewed as a reflection of the culture of the destination and its people (Du Rand and Heath, 2006). It conveys something indigenous and unique to a specific destination (Smith, 2015). As such in the increasingly competitive tourism industry, destinations are keen to market local food as a way to achieve local distinctiveness of place (Ab Karim and Chi, 2010).

### **Rural/Urban**

The marketing of food in rural destinations was mostly based on three themes-"nature", "history" and "tradition". The theme "nature" was the most common theme and within this theme information on food was presented with peaceful and relaxing images of the English countryside. Images of food tended to show only traditional and regional dishes such as for example Melton Mowbray Pork Pie, Bakewell Tart, Wensleydale Cheese.

Food descriptors in rural destinations emphasised seasonality, freshness and locally sourced ingredients. For example, Yorkshire was described as providing best seasonal food- from forest floor to plate. This indicates that in rural destinations the crucial part is played by ingredients, which are locally sourced and unique, and reflect the "terroir" (an untranslatable word that connotes the local spaces and soils) which can be simply defined as the combined effect of environment and the customs and ceremonies of the people who produce local dishes (Hammer, 2011). Therefore, it can be summarised that in rural destinations food is shown as rooted in the environment and culture of a destination and reinforced by its local traditions.

Urban destinations on the other hand were presented as modern, exciting and diverse. Images tended to show busy restaurants and positive social interactions, with people smiling and interacting with each other. Photographs of food included diversified dishes representing various cuisines (Caribbean, Chinese, French, Indian, and Italian). There were also photographs of food districts reflecting the multicultural structures of urban destinations.

Urban destinations were described as cosmopolitan with a wide range of food establishments. One of the most interesting findings of this study was to find out that Bradford (an industrial city in the heart of England) has been named England's curry capital five times in a row since 2012. With a long industrial heritage, Bradford was once the wool capital of the world, however nowadays it is one of the most multi-ethnic cities in England. It can be interpreted that Bradford's multicultural community has a major impact on the cultural life of the city which has been recognised and embraced in destination marketing.

As a result, it can be argued that marketing of food in urban destinations reflects the global character of contemporary tourism and it also reflects the multicultural and globalised nature of cities.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has aimed to investigate how Visit England uses food in marketing the destination. The qualitative content analysis of both photographs and text indicate a clear difference between marketing of food in rural and urban areas. In particular, substantial differences can be noted between the description and presentation of food and the constrictions of images in urban and rural areas. Rural places tend to present only traditional and local food products reflecting their terroir as a point of differentiation. By contrast, urban destinations have a greater diversity of food products, cuisines and culinary cultures and are perceived as vibrant and multicultural destinations that embrace international cuisines.

Without doubt, the results of this research need to be interpreted within the context for which this research was designed- that of destination marketing in England. It is believed, however, that both the methodological approach and its application mean that the findings should be useful for those responsible for des-

ination marketing both in England and elsewhere as well as for researchers in this field in suggesting further areas of work. Clearly, this research is still at early stages and there is much work still to do. However, it is hoped that this study has *whetted the appetites* of academics interested in examining food as a component in destination marketing.

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