THE ETHICAL FOOD TOURIST

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Abstract

The exploration of food tourism as a phenomenon and food tourists as consumers raises numerous ethical considerations. This chapter is about food tourism and ethics and focuses on the concepts of sustainability and slowness. It discusses the complexity of such topics using two case studies from Italy: one a plant-based café and the other the owner and manager of an agritourism business. These cases suggest that sustainability and slowness in food tourism can be interpreted and implemented differently, pointing to two important lessons. The first concerns the view of ethics in food tourism not as a limiting factor but as contributing to the needs of ethical tourists and appealing to generic tourists. The second lesson concerns the opportunity to shape food tourism by evaluating the food heritage sold to tourists and, ultimately, integrating ethical considerations that reinvent or rediscover traditions.

Keywords: sustainability, slowness, plant-based food, dining out, agritourism, rural tourism

Introduction

In food tourism, there has been a burgeoning focus on ethics, with considerable attention on exploring ethical dimensions. A particular emphasis has been placed on the concept of sustainability. Many studies have delved into the multifaceted ways in which food tourism can contribute to regional development, sustaining local economies, preserving cultural identities, and safeguarding the rural landscape (e.g. Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Sims, 2009; Hjalager & Johansen, 2013; Sidali et al., 2015). Sustainable practices, such as waste management (e.g. Fennell & Bowyer, 2020), have been discussed. Some studies have considered the justice dimension of food tourism (e.g. Moskwa et al., 2015; Gürsoy, 2021; Santafe-Troncoso & Loring, 2021), highlighting how ethical considerations extend beyond environmental and economic sustainability to encompass cultural heritages and fair and equitable treatment of those involved in and influenced by tourism.

Ethical considerations in food tourism encompass a myriad of issues. Several studies have adopted a food systems perspective to explore this broad spectrum, coupling it with sustainability. This approach illuminates the intricate challenges faced by the tourism sector, prompting a heightened focus on the potential value of some tourism experiences, such as local food markets and farm-to-fork restaurants, and the emergence of green, sustainable, responsible and fair certification processes (Kline et al., 2014; Gössling & Hall, 2013; Hall & Gössling, 2016; Hjalager et al., 2016). A few scholars have broadened the spectrum of ethical issues relevant to food tourism, including, sometimes together with sustainability reflections, animal ethics considerations and, in some cases, discussing the case of ethical vegan travellers and their food experiences (e.g. Bertella, 2020; Kline, 2018a, b; Fusté-Forné, 2021; Li, 2021). This extended

exploration underscores the evolving ethical dimensions of food tourism, encompassing a range of perspectives that extend beyond traditional sustainability.

Within this landscape, the notion of slowness has been proposed and applied by several tourism scholars and practitioners. In particular, the case of the Slow Food movement initiated in 1986 in Italy responded to the establishment of fast-food chains and promoted a food chain based on the principles of *buono* (good, tasty), *pulito* (clean, uncontaminated) and *giusto* (fair) (Slow Food, n.d.). The movement promotes sustainability for tourism and presents Slow Food Travel as "a sustainable model of tourism based on the exploration of gastronomic traditions and the communities behind them". (Slow Food, n.d.) This concept resonates with other forms of tourism, such as soft and alternative tourism (Lowry & Back, 2015), prioritising quality experiences and meaningful relationships with stakeholders over sheer quantity (Caffyn, 2012; Jung, 2014). While the Italian movement is not free of contradictions and has sometimes been criticised as too elitist (Hall, 2012; Simonetti, 2012), the broader concept of slow food tourism promises a valuable pathway to fostering healthy ecosystems, cultural heritage and local livelihoods (Fusté-Forné & Jamal, 2020).

In this chapter, we revisit the concepts of sustainability and slowness applied to food tourism through the presentation of two case studies and their discussion. Case studies offer valuable insights into complex phenomena, providing insights in real-world contexts (Yin, 2014). Being flexible and pragmatic, case studies can help explore and present examples of best practices (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Harrison et al., 2017). The case studies are based on the authors' investigation of the tourism and hospitality context, especially rural and food experiences (Bertella & Cavicchi, 2017; Bertella, 2020). The selection of the cases was based on their relevance in relation to various aspects of what ethical food tourists search for, their experiences, and how such experiences emerge and develop. The presentations of the cases are descriptive and partly based on the concept of experience and experiential tourism, as discussed in the literature (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). The following discussion is argumentative, reflects on food sustainability and slowness in tourism and identifies important lessons about sustainable food tourism and food traditions.

Background

Both cases are in Italy, more precisely in the southern Tuscany and Marche regions, which are relatively marginal concerning the many tourists attracted by art cities such as Florence and Rome. Despite being characterised by a considerable influx of tourists, who are attracted primarily by the sea, the rural villages and the presence of a regional natural park, southern Tuscany does not experience the volume of international tourism as other areas in Italy and Tuscany (Bertella, 2011; Bimonte & Faralla, 2012). Consequently, it constitutes a suitable destination for slow tourism, as highlighted, for example, by *Ecobnb*, a platform that offers around 3,000 eco-friendly accommodations and that has gained several international awards and recognition for its commitment to sustainability and slow travel (https://ecobnb.com/blog/2022/08/ecobnb-certification-grinn-awards-europes-leading-travel-brand-most-sustainable-ota/; https://ecobnb.it/blog/2020/03/vacanza-slow-maremma-toscana/). Similarly, the Marche region is not particularly known to international tourists. Characterised by rural areas, which account for 95% of the regional territory and host 81% of the population (Cavicchi, Rinaldi, & Corsi, 2013), Marche hosts many small entrepreneurs, including farmers, who differentiate their production activity, as in the case of agriculture and tourism, precisely gastronomic tourism. The latter is included

among the "uniqueness" of the destination management organisation *Let's Visit Marche* (https://letsmarche.it/food-drink), along with other features that appeal to the value of slowness, namely spirituality and wellness, beauty (referred to art, culture and landscape), small villages and nature.

Plant-based café Essenza

Founded in 2016, *Essenza* (Figure 1) is a café serving plant-based food (breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks) in the small Tuscan town of Grosseto. The café has recently been certified as "vegan" by the Association Vegan OK, describing it as "one of the most beautiful vegan food places in Italy" (https://www.veganok.com/essenza-locale-100-vegan-e-plastic-free-cerca-personale/). Several vegan food and tourism websites recommend the café as a place worth visiting. Websites include HappyCow and the Italian website *Vegani in viaggio* (Vegans on the move), which describes the café's "winning formula" as "Vegan + organic + zero kilometre food = Essenza Love Natural Food", and emphasises the importance of healthy local food (https://www.veganiinviaggio.it/2018/09/20/essenza-love-natural-food-di-grosseto/). Due to its emphasis on quality, the café is attractive for vegans and generic customers, presumably omnivores; this is evident from the numerous Google and TripAdvisor reviews being excellent/very good. Among these reviews, some emphasize the satisfaction expressed by vegans, while others depict the pleasant surprise experienced by non-vegans upon tasting certain plant-based options for the first time.

The theme of the *Essenza* experience focuses on providing a relaxed, mindful and aesthetically pleasing setting for dining. The owners encourage dedicating time to savouring food, learning about it, and making choices aligned with health and ethics. Devoting time to eating, often in company, is consistent with the traditional Italian way of relating to food by emphasising taste and conviviality. Learning about food is also part of the traditional Italian lifestyle. The café carefully selects the personnel, including competent chefs, such as vegan master chef Emanuele Di Biase (https://www.emanueledibiase.com/ , and servers, who explain the plant-based options to customers who might not be particularly knowledgeable about such diet.

FIGURE 1. The entrance to the *Essenza* plant-based café

The entrance of the café, with a counter elegantly displaying sweet and savoury treats

The aesthetic dimension is central to the *Essenza* experience. The café is characterised by a clear focus on beauty in terms of food, particularly the atmosphere, which, according to several customers, is reminiscent of urban centres like New York and London. Such an atmosphere is sometimes facilitated by cultural events that the café hosts, such as exhibitions, book presentations and music. Interestingly, such a comparison with big urban centres was somehow present in the owners' minds when planning the café. Their intent was to make the residents experience something they would typically experience when travelling and visiting international cities. Despite this cosmopolitan inspiration, the café includes in its offer traditional dishes, which are veganized aiming to eliminate any animal-based ingredient and still maintaining the appearance and the taste of the original recipes. This combination of new international foods and (sometimes revisited) traditional ones is appreciated by the customers, who feel positive about the "innovative" and "creative" food offerings and the more familiar dishes.

Overall, the *Essenza* experience encompasses aesthetic, educational, escapist and ethical aspects. The café means spending time alone or in company, tasting food and relaxing. The ethical aspect focuses on animal ethics and sustainability in environmental and socio-cultural terms because of its vegan choice: the café does not use foods with the highest greenhouse gas emissions (meat and dairy) and health issues (red meat); it is also plastic-free and emphasises local products, often from small producers. Notably, although the café naturally appeals to vegans and vegetarians, the target group is necessarily and consciously much broader, including customers who are ethically aware of issues other than those related to animals. Also attracted are generic customers who seek the healthy and partly novel offer, the elegance of the place and the relaxed atmosphere. The result is that tourists visiting the small Tuscan town where the café is situated can encounter something unexpected. Such a positive surprise has the

potential to provoke their curiosity and, ideally, foster a willingness to engage with ethical food choices. This may occur through tasting the food offered and interacting with the personnel.

Relational tourism with *Le Marche in valigia*

This second case concerns the project *Le Marche in valigia* (literally "Marche in your suitcase"). It is particularly embedded in a markedly rural context: 84.1% of the population of Marche live in rural areas (European Commission, 2022); such rural profiles shape the approach that people and operators have towards tourists, whose presence is neither criticised nor feared as it happens in some urban locations characterised by many tourists. In Marche, rurality is strictly related to rural food traditions, and the small villages' approach to tourism is relatively far from the mass tourism logic of more urban destinations. Concerning food, in 1958, the Fermo area in Marche was included in "The seven-country study", a programme that explored the correlation between diet and cardiovascular diseases and highlighted the benefits of the Mediterranean diet. Overall, the Marche is a region where rural traditions and food traditions are central to the local economy and culture; this is particularly emphasised in *Le Marche in valigia* (https://www.turismarche.it/it/progetti/le-marche-in-valigia/).

The original idea of *The Marche in valigia* comes from Roberto Ferretti, a psychologist who owns and runs an agritourism business. Since his retirement, Roberto has engaged in developing experiential tourism that emphasises the value of the relationships among people and with the territory. Roberto is a member of AgriTur-Aso (https://www.agriturasomarche.it/), an association founded in 2007 to support fair and sustainable projects for improving the quality of life of residents and visitors in the Valdaso area. *The Marche in valigia* was one such project, initiated by Roberto in 2009 to maintain and deepen the relationships with his guests. Since then, the project remains the ideal type of tourism that Roberto describes as "relational tourism". This leverages the value of relationships across categories (tourist operators and tourists) and cultures (the tourist operators' and the tourists' respective cultures), and relationship with the territory (the destination's natural and socio-cultural heritage). Figure 2 illustrates how dining together is proposed as a convivial experience.

FIGURE 2. Hosts and guests of *The Marche in valigia* dining together

Several people, including women, men, and children, sitting and standing in front of a table set with various dishes of food and drinks

The central role attributed to relationships is evident in the way *Le Marche in valigia* operates and in the resulting experience, which is a multifaceted experience embracing aspects of escapism, entertainment, education, and aesthetics. Tourists are welcome in Roberto's agritourism business; he is particularly enthusiastic about sharing his knowledge about the area and his network of contacts with other local businesses and organisations. The cosy and familiar environment offered at his business is nurtured by a deep knowledge of and genuine curiosity about the Marche traditions and a sustainable approach to food that celebrates seasonal local production. The tourists are encouraged to engage in the community's life by participating in local events and joining Roberto's cooking classes, which teach guests how to cook traditional recipes with ingredients like fruits, herbs, or vegetables, found on his property. Typically, during their stay, tourists attend the theatre, folkloristic festivals, cooking classes and rural walks. Importantly, all these activities take place in small groups.

The relationship between the host and guests relies on familiarity: Roberto treats his guests as part of an enlarged family, and based on this close and trusting relationship, several guests invite Roberto to their countries. Thus, the experience of the tourists develops further, and a sort of role exchange occurs:

Roberto manages to establish friendly relationships with the guests during their stay in the Marche and, quite often, he visits them in their country. It is from these visits that the project derives its name: when Roberto travels to visit his former guests, he takes with him a suitcase (*valigia*) full of Marche experiences (pictures, videos, products including food, wine and olive oil—evoking traditions, tastes, memories, and ideas for future visits).

Over the years, Roberto has visited many of his guests in Europe, California, and Japan and managed to involve others from Marche, colleagues and friends, who join him in welcoming the tourists to Marche and visiting them at their homes. When abroad, an essential part of the project is the organisation of tasting sections focused on local Marche gastronomy, promotional dinners and cooking classes. In addition, meetings and gatherings are organised, often in municipal halls, to illustrate the Marche's cultural and natural features and give details of agri-food production and related culinary traditions. Here, the collaboration among local food producers in the Marche is crucial as it provides Roberto with quality food products to serve his guests when hosting them and during his travels abroad. *The Marche in valigia* starts a virtuous circle that links agriculture to tourism and, based on a fundamental respect for everyone and leveraging on the universal value of friendship, blurs the line between the categories of guests and hosts. In such a context, local gastronomy is not only an attraction and experience: it becomes pivotal to facilitate gatherings and promote ideas and discussions about a form of tourism centred on what the local communities of small villages can and want to offer to potential and actual visitors.

Discussion

The preceding sections have showcased two compelling cases illustrating how sustainability and slowness are applied to offerings within tourism and hospitality, with implications for ethics and the ethical tourist/customer concept. Based on these cases, this section reflects on how sustainability and slowness are interpreted and implemented in food tourism. It focuses on two lessons about the opportunity to think and implement sustainability by highlighting the advantages for tourists and critically considering traditions by promoting their reinvention and rediscovery.

Sustainability and slowness manifest differently in each case, reflecting their unique contexts. The first case notably extends the concept of justice to include nonhuman animals, emphasising a holistic approach to respecting life (Bertella, 2020; Kline, 2018a, b; Fusté-Forné, 2021; Li, 2021). Conversely, the second case prioritises the local community, particularly local food producers, emphasising economic and cultural sustainability through co-creation experiences (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Sims, 2009; Hjalager & Johansen, 2013; Sidali et al., 2015). Although the latter is a rather traditional way to refer to the concept of sustainability in food tourism, the case is unique in its emphasis on blurring the line between being a host who designs and delivers an experience and a guest who has such an experience. Co-creation is an integral part of such an experience and a focal point of socio-cultural sustainability.

Regarding slowness, both cases, although not adhering to the official Slow Food movement, show an understanding of food as good, clean and fair and an adherence to the principles of soft or alternative tourism (Lowry & Back, 2015). Priority is given to quality experiences and to meaningful relationships with stakeholders (Caffyn, 2012; Jung, 2014). Slowness is related, in the café case to the relaxing time during which the guests can taste the food and, where emphasis is placed on the time spent around a

table with others. In the latter case, slowness is also about conviviality, which in its Latin and Italian meanings refers to the pleasure of spending time in company and sharing food together.

The first key takeaway from these cases is the positive interpretation of sustainability, viewed not as a compromise but as a conscious, enriching choice aligned with ethical considerations. The concept of sustainability is interpreted in favourable terms: sustainability is a choice taken by the operators consistent with their ethical considerations that might accord with those of ethical tourists, but also that do not limit the enjoyment of the tourism experience by other tourists. Despite these differences, both cases highlight the crucial role of tasty and healthy food. This leads to the first lesson of this chapter about ethical food tourists: Sustainable practices of food tourism, whether they concern the type of food offered or its production or distribution concerning human and nonhuman actors, are not to be considered a second-best, poorer option from an experiential point of view and a sort of sacrifice that is done in the name of ethical principles. Ethical food experiences can and should be multifaceted experiences that enrich the tourist/customer across the spheres of escapism, entertainment, education and aesthetics (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Only with such a positive understanding of sustainable food tourism is it possible to move towards a practice of ethics not restricted to those niches of tourists who might be ethically motivated, but to attract generic and broader segments that might contribute to encouraging greater sustainability.

The second key takeaway is how food tourism can be renewed through reinvention and the rediscovery of food traditions (Freytag & Hjalager, 2021; Bertella, 2023). Such practices are crucial to attracting ethical tourists and inspiring regular tourists to act more ethically. Regarding traditions and innovation, the first case about the café shows how substituting animal-based ingredients can be effective by reinventing food traditions. Here, the fundamental idea is that traditions must be critically reconsidered when in conflict with our knowledge advancements, such as animal sentience and environmental issues. Although such reinventions might not attract people who are not ethically motivated, their combination with good taste and elegance, which are central features of the café food experience, might help promote the acceptance of alternative foods. The second case about the project initiated by the agritourism business owner, which might appear rooted in the classical way of intending food tourism, offers another example of reinvention, although in terms of rediscovery. The Italian food offered to tourists is not always based on the Mediterranean diet, and adherence to such a diet makes the second case an excellent example of promoting a healthy lifestyle through tourism.

Conclusions

This chapter offers two ways to understand and implement sustainability and slowness in food tourism. The empirical cases are from central Italy: the first is about a plant-based café in a town in Tuscany, and the second is a project initiated by the owner and manager of an agritourism business in Marche. The cases were selected because they highlight various aspects of what ethical food tourists search for, their experiences, and how such experiences emerge and develop. Both ways to understand and implement sustainability and slowness in food tourism are centred on ethical values, including animal and environmental ethics, respect for human health and contribution to small communities' livelihoods. The operators and the tourists share such values, and the cases highlight the possibility that the experience based on respect for such values can appeal to niche market segments and generic tourists. The ethical

tourist can be the target of an offer that, if professionally and critically designed, can contribute to high standards for the sector.

Discussion questions

1. This chapter has presented two cases of ethical tourists who travel and experience food based on the principles of sustainability and slowness. Both cases are in areas that are not the focus of mass tourism and do not suffer from overtourism. To what extent and how can food tourism develop consistent with sustainability and slowness principles in large urban centres? In other words, are sustainability and slowness in food tourism conciliable with urban centres? If so, how? Is there an example that could help you illustrate your position in this regard?

2. The first case presented (Plant-based café *Essenza*) concerns a plant-based food offering. Although animal ethics was an important motivator to develop the business, the café's profile emphasises taste, health, and elegance. Considering the different socio-cultural contexts you might know, to what extent do you think it is important to downplay or emphasise the animal ethical aspect?

3. The second case (Relational tourism with *Le Marche in valigia*) shows how the social skills of an agritourism business owner and manager have been essential to initiating and running a project benefitting his entire community, especially agricultural producers and tourism operators. In addition, food gathers people "around the table" and establishes contacts that eventually develop into long-lasting relationships, leading to further travels and visits. To what extent and how would you say the "human factor" is important to developing a genuinely sustainable food tourism offer?

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