

Culinary Tourism:

Does Your Destination Have Potential?

BY DENNIS A. MARZELLA



Liza Graves' report on her success with marketing elite culinary adventures is merely one manifestation of the culinary tourism opportunity that awaits astute destination marketers and entrepreneurs alike. Culinary tourism is a vacation based around culinary endeavors such as wine country retreats, farmers market visits, culinary festivals, chef-lead cooking classes and restaurant, brewery and farm tours.

Sixty percent of American leisure travelers reported they are interested in taking a trip to engage in culinary activities within the next 12 months, according to the Travel Industry Association of America. This magnitude of predisposition suggests there is savory opportunity for small communities, as well as major destinations or attractions, to tap into this growing demand. How should you go about assessing your destination's potential? There are several existing or potential destination dimensions to consider:

- Local restaurants offering a unique and memorable experience
- Nature of local or regional cuisine
- Farmers markets
- Traditional artisan products and locally-made wines/beers
- Culinary festivals

Local Restaurants

A unique food and drink experience has the power to lure tourists like museums, recreation and shopping. Forty four percent of leisure travelers now find the opportunity to try different and unusual cuisine a very desirable attribute of a vacation, according to YBP&R/Yankelovich, Inc. 2007 National Leisure Monitor™.

Inventory the restaurants in the area separate them into "experiential categories." Go beyond the typical text-heavy restaurant guides. A destination Web site is a perfect place to bring the experience to life using high-quality photographs, live camera feeds and a feature allowing travelers to make reservations online. Encourage restaurateurs to support culinary tourism through their creativity and good business practices.

As a coordinator of leisure activities for well-heeled lodgers in Northern California's wine country, Liza Graves has seen the appetite for elite culinary adventures evolve firsthand.

"In the beginning, it was simply 'Make me a restaurant reservation' or 'I want to go to a well-known winery,' " says Graves, who co-founded the villa rental company BeautifulPlaces in Sonoma, Calif., five years ago. "But in the past two or three years, the requests for special, authentic experiences have doubled or tripled."

– USA Today

What can an individual restaurant do to promote culinary tourism?

- One of the main philosophies driving culinary tourism is the idea that tourists can get something in one of your destination's restaurants that they can't get at home. A restaurant should capitalize on this idea by identifying a local or regional specialty and creating their own version of it.
- Chef demonstrations or in-the-kitchen chef training are two other ways to create an unforgettable dining experience for guests by showcasing a famous chef or locally-grown or manufactured ingredients.
- Enlist the locals to be culinary tourism ambassadors. One of the top questions tourists ask locals when visiting a new place is, "Where's a good place to eat around here?" If restaurants build loyalty with locals, chances are they will direct tourists to their favorite restaurant.

- Make it easy for visitors to get through the front door by providing plenty of parking, a complimentary valet service or advertising a place where parking is available. Limited parking discourages culinary tourism. Out-of-towners are likely to pass over your restaurant if they can't find a convenient place to park.

- When it comes to culinary tourism, encourage local players not to view other restaurants as competition. Aligning with other restaurants in the area for a culinary event will benefit a city's entire dining scene. A group of restaurants can make a larger impact than one restaurant can individually.

Restaurant weeks are an ideal way to create a critical mass which may be promoted through public relations or other forms of marketing communication. In addition to attracting tourists to a city, a restaurant week brings local epicureans into restaurants they may have never visited or have not visited recently.

Restaurant weeks also generate awareness for the city's restaurant scene. For example, Sarasota, Florida launched their first restaurant week event in 2006. Twenty five restaurants participated in the inaugural event and offered prix-fix meals for lunch and dinner. This event garnered articles in local, regional and national publications that helped build credibility for Sarasota's restaurant landscape, a culinary scene that was overlooked by tourists and underappreciated by locals. The city continues to host the restaurant week based on the success of the first event.

A restaurant week allows a restaurateur to show off the unique atmosphere, cuisine and service their restaurant can deliver to a guest. New York, Chicago, Boston, Denver, San Diego, Miami, Atlanta and Philadelphia are a few of more than twenty six major cities hosting restaurant weeks. A growing number of smaller communities are following suite with scaled-down culinary activities and dining promotions.

In order to encourage widespread participation, destination marketing organizations should take the lead with respect to marketing efforts including the creation of appropriate collateral. It is reasonable to charge participating

restaurants a nominal participation fee to cover promotional efforts and advertising costs.

Culinary events are typically held during slower months. During Miami's low season, the Greater Miami Convention & Visitor's Bureau (GMCVB) hosts Miami Spice throughout the months of August and September. Nearly eighty of Miami's top restaurants offer a set menu of three courses, which includes an appetizer, entrée and dessert for \$35 at dinner and \$22 during lunch. The dining promotion offers locals and visitors a chance to sample signature dishes created by world-renowned chefs for a fraction of the price they would pay on a regular visit and generates traffic for area restaurants during the slow season.

Nature of Your Local or Regional Cuisine

The desire to experience regional and local cuisine is a major reason for participating in culinary travel. Consider these important facts from the Profile of Culinary Travelers, 2006 Edition, published by the Travel Industry Association of America:

- 85% of culinary travelers enjoy learning about the local culture and cuisines of different travel destinations
- 66% of these travelers say they want their travel always to be "experiential," so they make an effort to seek out regional cuisines, culinary specialties, local wines/spirits, etc.

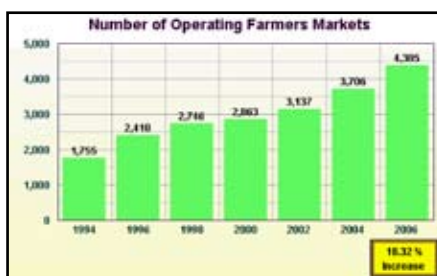
Look for local restaurants that have built a reputation around local cuisine. Perhaps a local chef may be suitable as a spokesperson for your destination. Consider including such an individual in a promotional tour in conjunction with other destination marketing efforts.

Roy Yamaguchi is credited by some industry observers with reinventing and reinterpreting Hawaiian cuisine. Opening his first restaurant in Honolulu, Yamaguchi became renowned for using only the freshest, locally-grown, raised or harvested ingredients and combining them in a unique style that married the best techniques and flavors of European and Asian cooking. This "Euro-Asian" style has become his signature and is now appreciated by consumers on the mainland and other world markets.

Another way to showcase a region's cuisine is to publish a cookbook with favorite restaurant recipes and specialties indigenous to the destination.

Farmers Markets

If you do not already have a Farmers Market in your area, now is the time to encourage cooperative efforts. The U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics show that farmers' markets have grown 66 percent since 1994, allowing greater access to local produce and expanding consumer awareness. The number of Farmers Markets increased 18.32% between 2004 and 2006.



Source: USDA

More chefs and local farmers are working together to satisfy consumers' appetite for fresh, home-grown foods. Farmers who work directly with chefs will tweak their harvests in ways that support the chefs' visions.

An event with local appeal may be expanded into a regional event that creates a broader geographic draw. In order to do this, destination marketers should identify regional producers.

With more widespread interest in healthful cuisine, an Organic Farmers Market may be in the cards.

There are more than twenty local organic growers between West Palm Beach and Homestead, Florida, according to Cassandra Maas, Director of Culinary Development at Quantified Marketing Group in Lake Mary, Florida. What kinds of producers are within your region?

Traditional Artisan Products and Locally-Made Wines/Beers

The Travel Industry Association reported 70% of culinary travelers like to bring back regional foods, recipes, wines, etc. from

places they have visited and share them with friends and family. There are a wide range of products that may appeal to visitors: cheese, fruits, produce, coffee, syrup, locally-crafted beer and wine. You may take many of the products for granted, but consider the states or regions that have built their reputations around artisan products: Wisconsin = Cheese, Napa and Sonoma = Wine, Vermont = Syrup, Kona Coffee and Macadamia Nuts = Hawaii, etc. Accordingly, inventory the products native to your locale, and you may find a basis of appeal to cultivate culinary tourism in a more assertive manner.

Culinary Festivals

Festivals are a cultural phenomenon throughout the world. Another way to tap into the potential of culinary tourism is to create a culinary festival. Such an event may be held on a grand scale such as the Taste of Chicago, the world's largest annual food festival. Held in Chicago, the two-week long Taste of Chicago event attracts millions of residents and tourists from around the world who are eager to sample a variety of food prepared by Chicago's most popular chefs and restaurants. The 2006 Taste of Chicago drew a record 3.6 million attendees.

It's not always necessary to create an event on such a grand scale. The Stone Crab, Seafood & Wine Festival in Longboat Key, Florida and the Strawberry Festival in Plant City, Florida are examples of successful smaller-scale events. Your inventory of artisan products or locally-made beers/wines may yield the basis for creating a culinary festival.

Implications

The future of culinary tourism looks bright. Expect destination marketing organizations to more fully exploit this marketing opportunity by placing more emphasis on this basis for economic development. There is a rising opportunity for select resorts to build brands underpinned by culinary tourism activities.

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