
‘Where’s the Bacon Gone?’

Have Irish restaurants enough traditional Irish dishes on their menus for the overseas tourists’ Irish food experience?

by

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RATIONALE

The authors’ backgrounds are within Culinary Arts, Professional Cookery and Tourism, thus an interest in food and food tourism is a high priority within their daily lives – both professionally and personally. Both authors are well travelled and would consider a destinations food and beverage offering(s) as an integral part of the overall travel experience, particularly with regards to local and traditional dishes/beverages. Delamont (1994, cited in Su & Horng, 2011, p.3), maybe put it best from the authors perspectives when he stated ‘...in today’s increasingly globalised world, food remains one of the most prominent points of cultural difference among regions and communities, as well as being an important cornerstone of cultural identity.’

Through discussions and general observations it became clear that Irish traditional dishes did not feature prominently on Irish menus in general, and particularly within the fine dining establishments. After some initial desk research to ascertain whether the subject matter/question has been posed previously, it became apparent that it has not been looked at in detail within the context of an overseas visitor’s food experience within Ireland.

The purpose, therefore, of this investigation is twofold. Firstly, to investigate whether or not Irish food service providers are presenting Irish traditional dishes on their menus? Secondly, to assess the food experiences of Ireland, by overseas visitors with regards to Irish traditional dishes and their availability, or lack of, on Irish menus.

INTRODUCTION

Shenoy (2005, p.1) tells us that ‘Consumption is an integral aspect of the tourist experience, with the tourist consuming not only the sights and sounds, but also the taste of a place.’ Food(s) are now recognised as being an integral component of a destination’s attributes, and, from a marketing perspective, a destination’s potential competitive advantage (Niininen, March & Buhalis, 2007). Food consumption is not only a necessity for a destination’s visitors, as everyone has to eat at some stage of their stay, but can also be ‘...highly experiential...’, and much more than just a function of necessity (Mitchell & Hall, 2003, p.60).

Indigenous national, regional and traditional food and beverage products and dishes are now also considered an essential constituent of an overall tourism destination’s product offering, and particularly within the context of the current global economic uncertainty, where differentiation and uniqueness are now deemed essential for long-term tourism sustainability (Canadian Tourist Commission, 2003; Croce & Perri, 2010).

In a survey of tourist consumption habits in a prominent tourist region of Mexico, Torres (2002), demonstrated the importance of local and traditional cuisines to a tourists overall food experience, and therefore cultural experience. Of all the meals consumed during the survey time period, 46% were local and/or traditional cuisines. Furthermore, from an economic point of view, nearly 100% of tourists spend money on food at their destination (Sidali, Spiller & Schulze, 2011).

According to Fitzgibbon (2009), although food, in general, has a lower priority when it comes to primary reasons for visiting Ireland, 31% of tourists surveyed preferred local restaurants with local ingredients as their choice of eating establishment. Fáilte Ireland (National Tourism Development Authority) (2010) confirm the importance of tourism sales within Ireland, where nearly €2 in every €5 is spent on food and beverage products, which equated to nearly €2.1 billion in revenue in 2010, with just over €1.5 billion, approximately, spent on food products alone. Thus, the impact of a destination's food and beverage product offering(s) can be said to be an essential component to a regions future economic success as an all round tourism experience destination (Hall et al, 2003; Long, 2010).

A key boost in recent times for Ireland in this regard was the endorsement of Le Guide du Routard¹ and Formmers Guidebook², who respectively, voted Ireland number one for 'Quality of Food, Value and Service' and 'Favourite Holiday Destination for 2011'. This is a very positive message for Irish tourism prospects internationally – particularly within the context of the mainland European markets, which, despite the European wide financial uncertainty, still regard leisure travel as an essential component of their lives, and continue to grow, albeit slowly (Tourism Ireland, 2010; Partridge, 2011).

TOURISM OVERVIEW 2010/11

With tourism globally becoming more and more accessible to a larger and much more discerning market share, it is paramount that any type of potential advantage, however niche, is to be explored (United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), 2010). According to Fáilte Ireland there were over 6.5 million overseas visits to Ireland in 2011. This was a slight increase on 2010, +7.7%, but still significantly below the peak year of 2007, -19.1%. These figures bring total overseas visits and expenditure back to 2004 levels of performance.

Tourists into Ireland, both overseas and domestic, spent nearly €2.1 billion on food and beverage products nationally in 2010, with overseas visitors spending, on average, 36% of their allotted expenditure on food and beverage products. While the top five mainland European visitors³ spent approximately 35% of their overall spend on food and beverage, the average spend per visit of the mainland European is €515, which is significantly higher than the traditional British visitor who spent, on average €386 per visit (Fáilte Ireland, 2010). This possibly indicates the extra value, in monetary and overall economic terms, and particularly from a food and beverage sales perspective, of the mainland European visitor to Ireland in the long-term.

The top five mainland European markets also declined at a much slower rate than the traditional markets throughout the 2007-10 periods, thus indicating potential further market opportunities yet to be exploited, particularly within the context of attracting food, culinary and/or gastronomy tourists (Fáilte Ireland, 2010; Tourism Ireland, 2010). Ireland, regardless of its economic and political upheavals, is still held in very high regard amongst international visitors and potential visitors, especially within its original two main markets of Great Britain (GB) and North America. Although these markets have declined significantly from the peak of 2007, they are still the core markets from an overall overseas visitor perspective (Tourism Ireland, 2011).

The South West Region of Ireland (Cork and Kerry) welcomed nearly 1.5 million overseas visitors in 2010, which spent close to €507 million within the region (Fáilte Ireland, 2011). Of this revenue figure for the region, +35% was spent on food and beverage products, which equates to €175 million approximately. The overall economic value of the overseas tourist expenditure into the region is vital, particularly within the context of the national, and therefore regional, economic downturn and the knock-on effects with regard to potential employment prospects within the region (Kerry Local Authority, 2010). This is particularly relevant to Kerry, where 21% of the county's workforce is involved in tourist, and tourism, activity in one form or another.

¹ Le Guide du Routard – travel bible of the French speaking world

² Formmers Guidebook – internationally recognised prestigious travel guidebook

³ German, French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch

FOOD IN IRISH TOURISM

With regards to the contemporary interest, and thus research, in food offerings for overseas visitors/tourists in general, Fitzgibbon (2009, p1-2) tells us that a nations food is an essential component of future tourism prospects and with proper management '*...it can fully connect food to tourism and tourism to food.*' And further tells us that '*...a food tourism strategy...and products are capable of dynamising other sectors of the [national] economy, including agriculture, manufacturing and services.*' Irelands food produce, and general food and beverage quality, are highly regarded internationally and this is an asset that is only being realised fully since 2008-09 (Irish Exporters Association, 2009; Bord Bia, 2010).

Fáilte Ireland has produced a dedicated action plan for food tourism – The National Food Tourism Implementation Framework 2011-13 – and with the natural environment of Ireland and agricultural expertise and culture as assets, food tourism, in whatever format, would seem to be a natural route for sustained advantage as a priority tourism destination (Su & Horng, 2011). A criticism of the Irish food tourism policy to date is that it may be too late, or '*bandwagoning*', in the sense that it is contemporary, thus fashionable to have an awareness of it, and thus it may not be taken as seriously as needed to be by Irish tourism organisations. It could be said that this is somewhat evident within the Fáilte Ireland National Food Tourism Implementation Framework 2011-13 document, where on p.3 the picture that greets the reader is a menu board which is clearly mainland European in origin (we do not write one/1 in that form within Ireland), and advertises no Irish dishes, and limited traditional Irish produce. It could be said to be a copy-and-paste exercise, or just an oversight in editing, but nonetheless seems to indicate that food tourism is an '*...add-on to policy as opposed to being essential to overall policy creation...*' (Hall et al, 2003, p.9). This seems paradoxical, as on p.16 of the same document, Fáilte Ireland state '*...Ireland will be recognised by visitors for the availability, quality and value of our local and regional food experiences which evokes a unique sense of place, culture and hospitality.*' However, taking the criticism on board and within a structured approach to full-development of its potential, food tourism in Ireland can grow and become an essential ingredient within the overall Irish tourism product portfolio (O'Brien, 2010).

Excluding public houses, as not all public houses have a food offering, thus exclusion is necessary, there are approximately 6,000 other traditional eating establishments within Ireland, including hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, and self-catering, including public houses this increases to over 13,000 establishments (Fáilte Ireland, 2010; Tourism Ireland, 2010). It is estimated that over 163,000 people are employed within this section of the tourist industry alone, thus making it a significant contributor to the overall Gross National Product (GNP) of the Republic of Ireland (RoI) – and currently estimated at 2.2% of GNP (Central Statistics Office, 2010). With this in mind it shows that the food element of an overseas visitor's experience, particularly mainland Europeans, where over 70% stay in non-self-catering establishments, is vitally important to the overall national economy, and the regional economies.

Therefore should be regarded as of equal importance as accommodation availability and standards, internal travel and accessibility to the regions and amenities, shopping, sightseeing etc. (Hall et al, 2003; Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Sims, 2009). This may also increase the quality and service expectations and satisfaction levels of the overseas visitor. Visitor food motivations vary according to national gastronomic cultural history, and the importance of food and beverage experiences, while overseas, is a high priority when choosing a travel destination (Dimanche & McCain, 2010). This was confirmed through Fáilte Ireland's Visitor Attitudes Survey (2009) where 67% of the top five mainland European visitors consider a variety of good food and food experiences as very important when considering Ireland as a travel destination. In 2010 68% of all visitors surveyed were satisfied that Ireland provided good value-for-money for food and beverage products and service, up 7% on 2009, and significantly, 84% of GB visitors said their expectations had been met or exceeded in 2010. Ireland's food offering ranks 5th overall amongst reasons why a British tourist would choose to visit Ireland, and, as mentioned previously, for mainland Europeans Ireland is now a recognised food experience destination (Tourism Ireland, 2011). Ireland is in competition with all tourist/travel destinations globally, as well as regionally within Northern Europe, and therefore must benchmark itself against these destinations when offering food choice, and value-for-money to the visitor – particularly with regards to menu offerings of local and traditional cuisines and dishes. Unique experiences when visiting another region and/or nation, and cultural diversity through food may be the future of tourism (Croce & Perri, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

The rationale behind the research approach was to ensure a level of objectivity in the authors' interpretation and utilisation of the data acquired, therefore, a quantitative approach was deemed to be most effective in this regard, particularly in the usage of survey, and later analysis, of the selected restaurant⁴ menus. However, some qualitative techniques for data acquisition were also deemed necessary – focus groups & interviews – to allow for a level of insight into Overseas Visitor Attitudes toward Irish traditional dishes and their availability on restaurant menus.

The quantitative research approach to the paper looks toward the use of standardised research instruments to collect numerical data (Gomm et al, 2003). In its simplest form, the quantitative approach looks at the hard data of the research question, namely do restaurants in the Kerry region offer traditional Irish dishes on their menus? The authors collated the data collected for empirical information that cannot be disputed and is not part of any pre-determined theory or idea as regards the research question, thus ensuring a strong level of validity and reliability to the data presented (Miller & Deutsch, 2009). The main source of statistical data acquired by the authors is primary in nature as no other significant research has been previously published within Ireland as regards the research topic. International research formulated an overall opinion, but was specific to global geographical regions which may vary in culinary tradition and context. To date, secondary sources from Irish national tourism bodies, national information publications, various industry stakeholders and industry organisations are also limited.

The primary data acquired was the result of an initial informal enquiry amongst two German Tour Operators and one Italian Tour Operator within the Irish market. After this initial enquiry, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the operators individually and then a focus-group (stratified) was chaired. After analysing the data from these, the authors decided to survey as many restaurant menus as possible to ascertain if certain dishes were being offered for consumption. The dishes chosen were Irish Stew, Bacon and Cabbage, Boiled Silverside, Pork Chops or Leg of Pork, Champ, and Colcannon. Due to time and logistical constraints, 67 establishments were surveyed within the towns of Killarney, Dingle, Tralee and Listowel. These towns would be regarded as hubs within the context of the Kerry County Development Plan 2009-15, hence the reasoning behind utilising them as key survey points. This number (n = 67) does provide a level of reliability, but cannot be taken as definitive with regards to menu offerings within the Kerry region due to availability/seasonality issues, and specific time/date surveyed. Of the 67 establishments, 22 were pubs with food offerings, 21 were traditional restaurants, of which 13 would be classed as fine dining, and 24 were hotels with restaurants, of which 5 would be classed as 5 Star⁵, 12 would be classed as 4 Star, and 7 would be classed as 3 and 2 Star.

All ethnic restaurants were excluded from the survey as these would not traditionally offer indigenous Irish dishes as part of their menu portfolio. Also excluded were cafes, sandwich bars, canteen style establishments, tea rooms, take-away/fast food outlets, and retail deli-bars. Although some of these establishments may offer a traditional Irish dish, their food service classification and menu portfolios suggest this not to be the case. The dishes selected do not indicate the limitations of culinary tradition of Irish food dishes, but were selected based on the initial enquiry of the German and Italian tour operators' general knowledge of Irish dishes.

FINDINGS, ANALYSIS & OPINION

LIMITATIONS TO ANALYSIS & OPINION

Due to the lack of previous research, and therefore comparable data analysis, in the area of traditional Irish food dishes, the analysis is based on the authors' opinions, based on the authors' expertise and experiences as culinary/tourism academics and culinary/tourism practitioners – both within the public and private sectors.

FOCUS GROUP – QUALITATIVE DATA (SELECTED)

As part of the initial enquiry amongst the German and Italian Tour Operators, it was suggested to the authors that within Kerry, Lasagne, Chips and Coleslaw could be considered Irish cuisine due to the

⁴ For the purposes of the paper, restaurant also includes Hotel restaurants

⁵ Based on the AA Star Classification system

prominence of the dish on Irish menus. While not discounting Irish cuisine in general, and certainly supporting and confirming the concept that Irish agri-produce is highly regarded internationally, the operators suggested that it was quite difficult to bring their clients to a genuine Irish orientated restaurant serving traditional Irish dishes, particularly during day-time/lunch-time hours i.e. 12pm-3pm. The most popular eating establishment amongst the tour operators' clients during the day-time were pub/restaurants, which were considered very welcoming, hospitable and comfortable by the majority of clients – over 80%.

In fact one of key reasons for visiting Ireland would be the hospitality and conviviality of the Irish people, as confirmed regularly by Fáilte Ireland through their Visitor Attitudes Surveys. However, they found the menus within the visited establishments to be generally poor as regards Irish food offerings within the context of Irish traditional dishes, and over 70% suggested that the food experience would be enhanced with the availability of Irish dishes such as bacon and cabbage and/or Irish stew, and others. This was not a criticism of Irish food per se, just a disappointment that more traditional Irish dishes could not be purchased or consumed.

During the focus group the authors suggested that a nation's cuisine was inextricably linked to the food produce and not the dishes a nation produces. However, this was disputed, and the tour operators suggested that a nation's traditional dishes formulate an image of the nation that is unique to that nation and could not be replicated anywhere else due to the fact that the consumer, in this case the overseas tourist, would only eat it within the nation he/she is visiting. Part of the visitor experience, particularly for the German tour operators, was the consumption of national dishes. This confirms the previous research by Hall et al (2003), Mitchell and Hall (2003), and Hall and Sharples (2008) regarding food as part of a visitor's overall experience of a nation and/or region.

SURVEY – QUANTITATIVE DATA (SELECTED)

The survey carried out by the authors of the 67 establishments resulted in the following data:

- 28% overall had 4 of the 6 traditional dishes on the menu – Bacon and Cabbage, Irish Stew, Pork Chops or Leg of Pork, Boiled Silverside
- No establishment had all 6 dishes available at the time/date of the survey – potato dishes seemed not to feature at all as a form of traditional dish
- None of the 5 Star rated hotels had any of the dishes on their menus – even in a contemporary format
- None of the fine dining restaurants had any of the dishes on their menus – even in a contemporary format
- 33% of the 4 Star rated hotels had 1 or more dishes on their menu – most prominent was Bacon and Cabbage in one form or another
- 100% of 2-3 Star rated hotels had 1 or more dishes on their menus – most prominent was Bacon and Cabbage in one form or another
- Excluding the potato dishes, Boiled Silverside was the least popular dish on the menus – available in 3% of establishments
- Pork Chops featured on 13% of menus overall, but on 47% of Pubs and Traditional Restaurants
- Leg of Pork (Roast) featured on 7% of menus overall, but on 21% of Pubs and Traditional Restaurants
- Irish Stew featured on 22% of menus – mainly within the eating establishments of Killarney and Dingle

- Listowel and Tralee, not traditionally tourism hubs within Kerry, featured more traditional dishes overall on their menus than Killarney and Dingle
- Dingle had the least number of the surveyed traditional dishes available on their menus, but had the highest number of fine dining restaurants surveyed
- Killarney had the most hotels surveyed, but was least likely to have more than one traditional dish available on their menus

ANALYSIS & OPINION

When looked at initially it could be said that Irish traditional dishes are less favoured as menu items on the majority of establishments within the Kerry region. However, there is a divide between traditional tourism-reliant towns and those considered not tourism reliant. There is also a divide between 5 Star rated and fine dining eating establishments and other eating establishments with regards to traditional dishes. Although Killarney and Dingle eating establishments rely on tourism receipts as an integral part of their annual business, they were less likely to feature traditional dishes on their menus. The more industrial and local towns of Tralee and Listowel seemed to regard traditional dishes as a significant proportion of their menu offering.

With the tourists, and in particular overseas tourist, looking for a unique experience as regards food consumption, it seems ironic that the tourism dedicated towns and their establishments were least likely to feature traditional Irish dishes. This is even truer of fine dining establishments, where it is more unlikely to be able to experience traditional Irish dishes. Although regarded as inferior to fine dining establishments, the pub and traditional restaurants businesses are more likely to satisfy the overseas tourist requirements for traditional Irish dishes.

CONCLUSION

Ireland's food heritage, food culture and traditional food dishes are in danger of becoming overtaken by international dishes on Irish menus. This is not to say that Irish produce is in danger of becoming overtaken from international produce as food materials within dining establishments, but it is possible to lose an integral part of Irish identity and culture through a lack of confidence of traditional Irish dishes and their ability to attract consumers, i.e. overseas tourist, in to their eating establishments. Food Business Proprietors, managers, chefs and culinary practitioners should equate food tourism with Irish dishes as a unique opportunity to develop Irish food and cooking, and distinctive differentiation from other destinations. More consumer focused product offerings will result in more economically viable establishments and sustainability for all stakeholders within Irish food tourism.

Fáilte Ireland, and other national tourism bodies, must ensure that Irish food tourism is associated with Irish traditional dishes – the essence of 'Place on a Plate'.

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