

# **Gastronomic tourism as an economic driver in Ireland, promoted and practiced by government, business, and civil society**

In 2005, the UN general assembly heard that “the very best solutions come when business, governments and civil society work together” (Blanke and Chiesa, 2008). Ireland is a country needing solutions, and gastronomy is one. Ireland can be reinvigorated and redefined through each person’s need to eat several times a day. Gastronomy has significance to all at some level, and it can transform Irish life – each citizen and organisation doing their part, so that, collectively, the nation benefits. This national activism will not be found in elitist or high profile restaurants, but in the authentic gastronomy of Irish domestic and workplace kitchens, grown by, purchased from, prepared and eaten by, Irish residents, supported and promoted by both a proactive business community and an engaged public service. This intuitively reflects Irish history, geography, culture, landscape, and all the other components that uniquely make Ireland what it is, thereby providing compelling reasons to visit.

Ireland is not the first to do this, despite the globalisation of food facilitated by transportation and technological innovation, and international tourism. Food, cuisine and gastronomy are tied to place. *À la France* (the archetypical culinary nationalist), culinary distinction is utilized as a marker of identity in places such as Norway and Singapore, New Zealand and Scotland in order to promote both tourism and exports. So this is about creating, in Ireland, an imagined community of gastronomy that accommodates and

balances innovation and tradition, individual creativity and time honored conventions, the singular and the collective.

Against that backdrop, this paper argues that a gastronomy driven economy is realistic, viable and sustainable, as gastronomy offers a scalable, cost effective means of local and regional development, with the potential to strengthen identity, enhance appreciation of the environment, and encourage the regeneration of local heritage and the local economy. Such a commerce focused business case gets the attention of policy makers and enterprises unaware of the centrality of gastronomy to Ireland's economic strategy and indigenous profitable enterprises, and creates the necessary awareness and buy-in for success at national and local levels.

### **Gastronomy & food in society**

As a philosophy, gastronomy can be traced back to Archestratus (4<sup>th</sup> Century BC) who perceived gastronomy as “the pleasure of taste pursued according to a gastronomic code or set of rules” and wrote what might be considered the world's first eating guide called ‘Gastronomia’ – literally, rules for the stomach (Santich, 1996). The modern champion of gastronomy, Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, defined gastronomy in 1825 as the “reasoned knowledge of everything pertaining to man, insofar as he nourishes himself” (Flandrin et al., 1999). A contemporary observation from Barbara Santich is that “gastronomy is the reasoned understanding of everything that concerns us insofar as we sustain ourselves” (Scarpato, 2002). Signalling how material food and its consumption is to human existence, the philosopher Terry Eagleton has observed that “Genuine eating combines pleasure, utility, and sociality, and so differs from a take-away in much the same way that Proust differs from a bus ticket” (Eagleton, 1997). No longer a survival

necessity (in some developed economies, anyhow), food is, at a philosophical level, “the thesaurus of all moods and all sensations” (Ellmann, 1993), and it is not only an important signifier within culture and the symbolic order, but it also plays a vital role in our sense of self. People’s food preferences and their ability to discriminate aesthetically is deeply ingrained and socially embedded so that it seems natural, although it has been learned rather than being innate (Mennell, 2005). Regardless of the variety of food presented to them, people (locals or tourists) consistently make food choices in keeping with their class identity, which in turn reproduces socioeconomic hierarchies of power and control (Everett, 2009). Thus, the relationship between people and their food is quite distinctive. Consequently, the selection of food by a person and how it is consumed becomes a marker of identity and difference (Richards, 2002). These perspectives suggest, at a human level, that food is not only fuel, but also a foil for philosophy, socialising, and a means of simultaneously enriching experiences, expressing personal identities, and adding to a quality of life.

However, at a national or regional level, food heavily influences (and is influenced by) the farming landscape and other environments through its production (Sage, 2005). These are elements of every destination, providing it with its own unique character and authenticity (Yeoman et al., 2007). Consequently, there are national and continental differences in relation to food, its production and its consumption that, although not obvious, have implications for the provision and consumption of gastronomic experiences. Within Europe, there appears to be significant differences in the agriculture systems; industrial level efficiency is the foundation of food production in Northern Europe, while ‘terroir’ and tradition dominates in Southern Europe (Parrott et al., 2002).

There is a similar polarisation in France, Italy and the Mediterranean countries where eating out patterns are predominantly based on traditional food and regional cuisines, while eating patterns in the UK and the US are leaning towards creolisation and internationalisation through the proliferation of exotic and ethnic cuisines (Miele and Murdoch, 2002). Similarly, Paul Rozin has observed that “The food-pleasure attitude of the French, in comparison to the food-poison attitude of Americans presumably leads to the popularity of all types of foods modified to be ‘healthier’ (low fat, low salt, no additives) in the United States” (Rozin, 1999). Clearly, food seems to have quite a functional role in northern Europe, the UK and the USA, with consequences for areas of economic activity. This reflects what has been a dominant narrative – in modern societies, food has always been considered as inconsequential (Scarpato, 2002). Not only is food invisible, but the issues that affect food have become invisible also (Symons, 1998).

Happily, various case studies demonstrate how food can combat parochialism and offer commercial benefits, creating an advantage over the northern Europe portrayed above. Indigenous cattle breeds in Italy have been shown to have additional social and cultural value as custodians of local traditions (Gandini and Villa, 2003), and the Italian ‘adopt a sheep’ project in the Abruzzo National Park both demonstrate food’s wider role in tourism, business and the economy (Holloway et al., 2006). In Sweden, the historical and rural context of local food was reinterpreted to achieve not only commercial business goals for rural food businesses, but also to serve a tourist agenda (Tellstrom et al., 2005). The French concept of “Cuisine de Terroir” demonstrates how food preparation and consumption must be grounded locally, how the food/tourism relationship goes beyond

eating out, and how a shorter supply chain creates a fundamentally different type of relationship between larger numbers of producers and consumers (Chossat and Gergaud, 2003). Essentially, food reaches the consumer “embedded with information at the point of sale” so that the consumer can make connections (an economy of regard) with the place of production, the methods employed and the values of the people involved (Sage, 2003). This, in turn, both creates and reinforces the affiliation that consumers seek with their environment, inevitably increasing their gastronomic expenditure. These and other initiatives have had a multiplier effect resulting in several types of economic returns from food, particularly in terms of rural development by protecting and creating employment, resulting in social and environmental benefits to communities (Boyne et al., 2003). Food, therefore, is not only an instrument of regional development, but also general economic development (Henderson, 2009).

### **Gastronomy creates capital**

Bourdieu’s (1984) study of class in French society showed how a person’s preference for food is a demonstration of cultural capital as prestige and success are functions of gaining access to cultural capital, which society values. Some argue that simply buying organic food at a market is an expression of cultural capital (Watts et al., 2005). Such a purchase entails a high quality personal interaction with an alternative form of value (the economy of regard) where there is a significant moral content to transactions beyond the exchange of products for cash. Cultural capital is also evident in the wide variety of ethnic cuisines consumed by middle to high-class consumers who are economically and socially confident enough to be able to order it – and have probably experienced it as tourists as well. Such experience, accumulated along with other travel experiences, is used to

exhibit cultural capital when relating those experiences to others. The outcome is that gastronomy is one of the ‘new’ forms of independent and sustainable activities that enable each person to enhance their cultural capital.

Scotland has already identified the need for cultural capital in their visitor profiles, for example. Scenario planning has demonstrated that Scottish gastronomic tourism can gain cultural capital and social cachet as tourists (and locals) trade up, and that food creates its own cultural capital, along with commercial opportunities (Yeoman et al., 2007). Swedish enterprises have already commercialised the cultural capital of local rural food through narrative in order to create competitive advantage for their businesses (Tellstrom et al., 2005). A “gastronomic centre of higher cultural capital” has even been proposed with the idea to consume less but to consume better, to support the view that products from small-scale high quality producers yield more satisfaction per unit consumed, so that consuming better in terms of quality may actually lead to consuming less in terms of quantity (Askegaard and Kjeldgaard, 2007).

Therefore, enterprises can “out local” global competition by leveraging on and sustaining, maintaining, developing/constructing local cultural capital. This perspective should inspire public administrators, policy makers, research institutions, and businesses to collaboratively focus on cultivating local cultural capital and resources rather than alternative systems of belief in global economics.

### ***Case studies***

These case studies show that gastronomic tourism, at several levels, has the capacity to create interdependencies that influence the development and acceptability of both a destination and its gastronomy to a visitor. From a business perspective, it should also be

evident that gastronomic tourism's primary advantage is its ability to adapt to and react to the effects of phenomena such as globalisation, localisation, or creolisation, mostly because the adjacent living culture changes (Richards, 2002).

### **Ireland - the success of the Fuchsia Brand in west Cork**

The Fuchsia Brand in West Cork is an initiative of the West Cork LEADER Co-operative Society (Dempsey, 2008). A review in 2007 demonstrated a strong local economy driven by food as a high value product. While the geographic size of the area was small, the review showed that, of the total direct value of output (€106.97 million), 54% was associated with the food and beverages sector, and 33% in the accommodation and catering sector (O'Reilly, 2001). Critical to these figures is not only a highly integrated indigenous food industry in the region, but also the fact that the local gastronomy forms an important component of the touristic experience (Sage, 2003). The tourist associated high quality local food with a natural environment in the region, and this was discussed when they returned home. Both the region and food products benefited, which facilitated the growth of wider economic benefits in the context of food exports to the tourist's place of origin, while also keeping imports in West Cork at a minimum, thus having a significantly positive spending multiplier effect. In Fuchsia's case, of the €106 million output, €69 million remained in the region and supported 1,131 jobs by contributing €88 million to the West Cork economy.

In that context, consider that tourists spent €2 billion on food and beverages in Ireland in 2009 (Fáilte Ireland, 2011). Food and drink represents the largest component of visitor expenditure in Ireland and exceeds the average spent on 'bed and board'. This should be a powerful motivator for both government and enterprise - the economic linkages are

very obvious between the hospitality sector, agriculture providers, value-added providers and distributors. Given the Fuchsia example, revenues of this magnitude can provide a considerable opportunity for development and growth, and all that this entails (i.e. maximised return on investment, regional spread, increased agricultural and services employment, and contributing to economic, social and environmental sustainability). It is worth noting that the Irish percentages (of visitor expenditure on food) stand up well in comparison with international experience. An estimated 36% of visitor expenditure is on food and drink outside of accommodation (Fáilte Ireland, 2011). In comparison, tourists in Canada spent, on average, one third of their travel expenses on food (Hashimoto and Telfer, 2006), while the proportion drops lower in South Africa and Australia where the amount spent by tourists on food ranged between 8% to 26% (Hall and Sharples, 2003).

### **Austria – integrating agriculture and gastronomic tourism**

Austria considers itself to have the reputation of being “Europe's Deli Shop” based on its 18,500 eco-farms and the fact that cattle farming contributes 30% of agricultural value-added business (Austrian National Tourist Office). Of the 137,000 farms in Austria, almost 33% are engaged in “economic activity other than agriculture”, over 8% were involved in tourism, and over 11% were processing farm products (Loverseed, 2007). Government policy seeks to ensure that these small farming communities are provided with relevant support in order to make a living. Marketing and selling local produce is seen as a central feature of that policy, and the vast majority of hotels in ski and hiking resorts work closely with local farmers and use their products. The emergence of several Michelin and Gault-Millau rated restaurants in the Salzburg province is evidence of the



popularity and quality of the local ingredients available (Loverseed, 2004). Recognising that tourists expect to find rural landscapes of communities farming local breeds producing local products and local culture, some Austrian villages and businesses subsidise farmers to ensure that these desired features do not decline, thereby attributing a market value to local breeds (Loverseed, 2007).

### **Norway - “Scary Food” as an economic driver**

Voss is a small farming community of 13,500 on the West coast of Norway, where farming traditions are based on milk and meat production from sheep and cattle. It has established a niche in the market mainly by relying on nature based and extreme sports as part of its image. A traditional Norwegian meal, *Smalahove*, has become part of that destination brand. Described as a “relic of Nordic gastronomy” a salted, smoked, and cooked sheep’s head is split into two halves for service. In essence, a national traditional food, dating from 1300, has become a lifestyle commodity – admittedly for a specific tourist market segment. The main features of the product are as follows (Gyimóthy and Mykletun, 2009);

- A unique, quality certified, industrial unit which processes 60,000 sheep’s heads a year, (120,000 meals). Approximately 90% are sold to supermarket chains and catering companies, while the other 10% services retail customers locally and abroad.
- The sheep’s head meal has evolved into a special occasion.
- Developed specifically around the meal, a microbrewery beer and an aquavit have replaced the traditional accompaniment of sour milk. Other product augmentation featuring sheep’s heads includes jewellery (e.g. tie pins, earrings, and cufflinks),

- cutlery, tableware, glasses and books featuring sheep's head songs, cartoons or, for strangers and those attending the meal for the first time, codes of conduct. An internet portal maintains a virtual community with songs, pictures, and stories ([www.smalahove.no](http://www.smalahove.no)).
- A farm restaurant serves over 6,000 sheep's head meals a year. The meal includes storytelling, a guided tour of the farm and the unique production facility, a home brew, and a specially grown Voss potato.
  - A Voss hotel has been offering the meal since the 1960s with an emphasis on exclusivity achieved by limited availability, a dress code, and various rituals or ceremony during the evening. These include entitlement to a symbolic membership of an unusual gourmet community on receipt of your sheep's head jawbone, which has been cleaned, and your name burned into it.
  - In 1998, Voss launched a two-day "Sheep's Head Release" festival similar to the Beaujolais Nouveau event in France. Based on a traditional sheep auction and exhibition, it celebrates local food and tradition. It includes a 'lambs run' for children, wool shearing contests, a sheep's head eating contest (requiring style, aptitude as well as speed), a food fair primarily showing local food producers, and the climax is a community feast for 850 at long tables in a festival tent.
  - Voss, also known for its Extreme Sports Festival every June, includes a "try it" package where the sheep's head meal is one of ten "extreme activities" which visitors can undertake (<http://www.ekstremспортveko.com>).

In spite of its arguably bizarre nature, the evolution of this traditional dish into a modern consumer product has greatly contributed to the image of Voss as a tourism destination.

The meal, with its invented ceremonies, accessories, and merchandise, manages to perform several gastronomic and tourism roles at once - as a traditional harvest type festival, a staged atmosphere such as the rural farm, as a community feast, a trophy event, an adventurous experience in the extreme, or a commercial food product with scale. The dish illustrates the ways that aspects of gastronomy such as food tradition, food adventures, culinary arts, and entrepreneurial activities interact when creating business successes.

The sheep's head meal renaissance is a creation achieved by individual entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial networks, which has contributed to growth and distinctiveness of the area and its branding as a destination. Moreover, the meal has inspired other entrepreneurs within farming and elsewhere to supply other products and services.

### ***A possible framework for gastronomic tourism in Ireland***

Ireland already has a significant presence through high quality foods or ingredients, or the products derived from them, which are exported in vast amounts (e.g. milk powder, cheese, meat, Kerrygold butter, Bailey's Irish Cream, Jameson whiskey) and this export market shapes Ireland's image internationally. In the face of the industrialisation of food that such exports require, the consequence is that Ireland is failing to take advantage of some of its prime food ingredients domestically. It risks permanently losing assets associated with food – examples include the Kerry cow, Iveragh lamb (compare it with the success of Shetland lamb) and varieties of fruit and grains, the loss of which impacts, at the very least, local, regional and national cultures, economies, landscapes, and environments.

Generating integrated solutions to such problems across economic sectors and geographical regions is complex, not least because most citizens, policy makers, politicians, or enterprise owners tend to look at food, eating, gastronomy (i.e. some sort of food experience), through their own 'lens'. They may not even have any personal interest in food as anything other than fuel so food may not be taken seriously or understood, as it has no obvious value to this audience - commercial, cultural, or otherwise. In contrast, the 'lens' should be food itself, if a range of desirable outcomes is to be achieved, particularly when policy, strategy, economics, habits, and perceptions are to be influenced effectively. If so, an important means of enthusing key influencers is to demonstrate food's capacity to add value by driving demand, increase business profitability, and achieve a return on investment for those that commit to food opportunities in addition to significantly enhancing activity in the Irish economy.

A possible framework to achieve this must include three groupings, the government, the public, and the business community.

**Government** can exert influence in various ways

- Integrated policy across all government departments
  - Agricultural policy acting locally so that the experience of the Iveragh lamb example is not repeated. Policy that facilitates *both* exports and domestic production
  - The development of public health policy that facilitates local food production, distribution and sale, rather than hinder it
  - Food must be a core feature of the education system and in Tourism Development

- Procurement policies, within EU legislation, which are biased towards the award of local and small contracts by large State institutions, and by insisting on a verifiable Irish provenance on all foods;
  - The State operates some of the largest food purchasing budgets through, for example, the Defense Forces, Health Institutions, Educational facilities, Justice facilities such as the Prison Service and a range of semi state bodies. Their change in food emphasis would have an immediate effect on food provision, although the effect would be so great, a gradual roll out would be necessary to allow various sectors to catch up.
- As the largest employer in the State, the civil and public service has the opportunity to directly influence, in a positive manner, the socialisation of gastronomy.
- A proactive approach to protect the intellectual property embedded in Irish food culture in order to maintain competitive advantage and the distinctiveness of products in the face of increasing competition from other countries. For example, producers of food and tourism products could be stimulated to take an interest in gastronomic heritage and intellectual property rights. This could include the preservation of indigenous food types and varieties (such as breeds of cattle or varieties of apples), recipes, food combinations, and local life and traditions related to eating and drinking (opening hours, working days, festivals, fetes), all of which knit together to become a unique local, regional or national gastronomic culture. A key resource would be an gastronomic inventory of all the features that make up an area's identity - it would help to profile, contrast, distinguish, and emphasise its uniqueness. This implies concentrating on local capacity building – i.e. strengthen the knowledge, skills, and

attitudes of local people for establishing and sustaining gastronomic awareness within an area.

**The Public**, as consumers, would need to be convinced, through a public advocacy campaign, of the importance of their role in finding, purchasing, preparing and enjoying Irish food, and how that would contribute to the common cause. The key message would not be the commodities or the food, but how being loyal to Irish gastronomy through modern Irish cuisine would generate jobs in a wide range of sectors, such as agriculture, milling, dairy production, distribution, retail, catering, tourism, etc.

**Business**, as result of the demand created by the government and the public would need to identify the range of local opportunities emerging from a food nationalism campaign. Ideally, these should not be national or international sized businesses, but small and medium sized enterprises attuned to the needs of their locality, who source their raw materials locally so that all concerned stand to gain.

The implementation of the framework would have to be dovetailed with the refocusing of the Government targets so that demand and business provision scales up at the same time.

## ***Conclusion***

There is a substantial economic, social, and developmental rationale to argue for the viability and sustainability of gastronomic tourism in Ireland. Gastronomy's primary advantage is its ability to adapt to and react to the effects of phenomena such as globalisation, localisation, or creolisation. This because food is close to changes in local culture, especially cuisines where culinary vitality depends on adaptability and flexibility, and has been shown to be a highly sensitive marker for much broader social, political, and economic changes in society. It therefore becomes a very effective argument in

policymaking, as it is a cost effective, profitable option. Enterprises can “out local” global competition by leveraging on, and maintaining/sustaining, or developing/constructing local cultural capital through gastronomy. This perspective should inspire public administrators, policy makers, research institutions, and businesses to collaboratively focus on cultivating local food capital and resources, thus avoiding sectors and regions acting independently. It should also encourage a predisposition to the holistic nature of gastronomy. Such collaborative community action led by those who can demonstrate social and cultural capital has been critical to success both in Ireland and abroad. While these champions of food might have economic capital as well, they seem to be instinctively aware that some in the community will think differently, and that for any one project to work, it must benefit the entire community in multiple ways through sharing, communication, openness, and good management. This approach also identifies and protects local food assets and exploits them appropriately.

From a business case perspective, the most compelling and logical argument is that Irish gastronomy is a people business – both in terms of those who provide and consume the experience. The possession of economic capital allows and facilitates the investment in cultural capital through allowing the investment of time needed to accumulate cultural capital. A transaction can take place. Yet built into that transaction and because of it, are other transactions of cultural capital (on the part of the tourist, acquiring and displaying it) and social capital (on the part of the service provider in assembling and providing the experience), all of which generates further capital, especially economic capital, thus creating a virtuous circle for all. Gastronomic tourism is therefore a credible driver of the wider economy.

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