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# Harnessing Ireland's Food Heritage: The Role of the Artisan Food Producer in Ireland's Food Tourism Offering

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## Abstract

This research paper examines the role of the artisan food producer, not just as an entrepreneur and service provider but with a focus on how they contribute to the preservation of Ireland's food culture and heritage. Using a qualitative methodology and in keeping with a phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of ten artisan food producers from different parts of Ireland. A thematic analysis of the responses was carried out, with a desire to let the voice of the artisans themselves tell their story. The research shows that through the conservation and use of traditional ingredients, the integration of age-old skills and craftsmanship, and the painstaking restoration of mills, barns and outbuildings, the artisan food producer plays a pivotal role in preserving the food culture and heritage of the nation. The research findings provide an insight into the lives of the artisan food producer, showing how they are motivated by passion for what they do, as well as an intrinsic sense of responsibility to those who have gone before them and to future generations. These findings provide an opportunity for academics and policy makers alike to gain an understanding of the lived experience of these key stakeholders, which can inform decisions to enhance and develop future policies and practices underpinning Ireland's food tourism success.

## Keywords

Artisan food producer; experiential consumption; food tourism; food tourism experience; food culture and heritage; authenticity

## Introduction

With the increasing convergence of travel, tourism, food, and culture in society, it is timely that the lived experience of those involved in the day-to-day co-creation and delivery of authentic food tourism experiences be given attention. There is little in the literature that provides a view of the artisan food producer from an *inside out perspective*. Much of what is known about their motivations, values, and ambitions is found in the academic literature that considers them primarily through the lens of entrepreneurship (Tregear 2005). While these perspectives are insightful, this paper shows that the reality of who the artisan food producer is and their role in the Irish food tourism offering is considerably more nuanced than previously presented.

In Ireland, in recent years, the artisan food producer has come to prominence as a result of the merging of government-driven economic policies focussed on promoting Ireland as a tourism destination with a valuable and marketable traditional artisan food offering. This occurred in conjunction with the more widespread recognition of the pivotal role that food plays in the manifestation and preservation of a country's culture and heritage (Mac Con Iomaire 2018b). In recognition of food tourism's increasing importance to Ireland's tourism product, Fáilte Ireland (2018), Ireland's National Tourism Development Authority, has created a five-year stand-alone strategy covering 2018 to 2023, dedicated to developing and promoting food as an essential component of the visitor experience. The changing expectations of tourists, both domestic and international, has led them to seek out local, authentic, and unique food experiences while they are travelling (Richards 2002; Sims 2009; Lee, Scott and Packer 2014; Okumus 2021).

All these factors combine to highlight the role that artisan food producers play, as purveyors of authentic, traditional, handcrafted, and farmhouse products, and further confirms their contribution to food tourism in terms of curating the traditions, buildings, and processes around their food products as well as meeting these tourist expectations. On closer examination of the complex role which has been adopted or inherited by this group of food producers, it becomes clear that understanding their lived experiences through the lens of entrepreneur/ small craft business is simply understating, if not ignoring, the artisan themselves. The agricultural policy literature may applaud their ability to adapt and survive (DRCD 2021, 78–80), and the marketing literature may highlight their uniqueness (Knollenberg *et.al.* 2021), while the tourism literature illustrates their contribution to the experience economy (Hall and Sharples 2003), but where is the view of the artisan themselves? How do they perceive the role they play, are they essentially just small food producers in need of diversification to survive? How do they see themselves in the overall food tourism sector? What do they see as the main objective of what they do and why they do it? Are they custodians of a nation's food heritage or cultural innovators of the future, or both?

In Ireland today, multiple artisan food producers produce a wide array of products using traditional methods, many on site where the ingredients are grown or reared, ranging from traditional black pudding from McCarthy's of Kanturk, cheeses and charcuterie from Gubbeen Co. Cork, apple ciders, gins, and vinegars from Highbank Orchards in Kilkenny, full fat yogurt from "happy" cows made by Glenilen in West Cork, to wild smoked fish from Woodcock Smokery also in Cork, all with links to local history, culture, and heritage. These are the types of food that Boniface (2016, 141) suggests that tourists see as "traditional, wholesome, fundamental, real, authentic, and artisan delivered, and 'true' in some way," and as a counterbalance to mass and industrialised production these foods are considered as "having depth, and heritage and [a] good cultural 'story'" (*ibid.*), which arguably adds to the visitors' experience of

food in tourism when they encounter it, and highlighting once again the importance of the experience and those that work to provide it, that is the artisan themselves.

If the food producers are as integral to the food and tourism industries as the literature suggest (Simms 2010) and if, as Beer *et al.* (2002) contend, the real artisan is indeed the individual farmer/ producer, then surely it is timely that the voice of those at the heart of this offering is heard. These artisans are operating in a world where industrial food manufacturing has led to an ever-widening gap between food producer and food consumer and at a time where global economic uncertainty continues to squeeze profit margins for small-scale producers. While at the same time, there is a growing awareness and an almost palpable craving amongst consumers for being transported through their food and drink experiences back to a more wholesome, simple, and nostalgic time (Boniface 2016).

Through an interrogation of their own words, this research paper positions the views, opinions, and feelings of a sample of artisan food producers, some of whom are also food tourism providers, at the centre of a discussion around their role in preserving and promoting Irish food heritage. The authors argue that the insight gained from a deeper examination of the lived experiences of these artisans gives due prominence to those at the core of the Irish food tourism offering.

## Review of the literature

### The Growth of Food Tourism

Predating food tourism, wine tourism was established as a popular leisure pursuit in the 1990s, precipitating an interest in wine tourism research from the mid-1990s onwards (Mitchell and Hall 2006), a decade ahead of food tourism research which really began to appear around 2005 (Getz *et al.* 2014; Lee, Scott and Packer 2014). During the intervening years, along with wine, people's interest in food has developed, and food tourism has experienced significant growth. This means that today it has become "one of the most dynamic and creative segments of tourism" (UNWTO 2012, 5) and is on the increase, with the prediction that the global market is expected to reach almost \$1.8 billion by 2027 (UNWTO 2012).

Food tourism has been defined as a "visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of specialist food production regions are the primary motivating factor for travel" (Hall and Sharples 2003, 6), while Williams *et al.* (2014, 4) describe food tourism as "the pursuit of appealing, authentic, memorable culinary experiences of all kinds, while traveling internationally, regionally, or even locally." However, it is important to note that within the tourism literature there are a number of other terms referenced when discussing food tourism, such as "culinary tourism" and "gastronomic tourism," which together with "food tourism" represent the most commonly used terms (Ignatov and Smith, 2006; McKercher *et al.* 2008; Henderson

2009; Horng and Tsai 2010; Richards 2002, Long 2004). Although these terms can often be used interchangeably by some academics (Horng and Tsai 2010; Ellis *et al.* 2018), and often by tourists themselves (depending on their level of knowledge and motivation), Ellis *et al.* (2018, 253) suggest that the term “culinary tourism” is often used to link food with culture which emphasises “a relationship between the insider and outsider,” that the term “food tourism” suggests the “physical embodied and sensual experience itself,” while “gastronomic tourism” “concerns the place of food in the culture of the host.” The reality is, that for many tourists, their experience of food tourism is most often a combination of each of these definitions and interpretations. The academic literature acknowledges the important role that food plays in tourism, presenting it from a number of key perspectives. Food has been identified as a key influencer in how tourists experience a destination (Kivela and Crotts 2006; Jung *et al.* 2015; Erkman 2019). With tourists demonstrating a growing interest in participating in food related activities, such as cooking classes, attending food events and visits to food production sites (Bessière 1998; Che 2006; Garibaldi *et al.* 2021), the role of food in the marketing of tourist destinations is also well recognised (Ab Karim and Geng-qing Chi 2010; Bjork and Kauppinen-Raisanen 2015; Knollenberg *et al.* 2021).

Research has also examined how the medium of food can be used to connect people to place (Hall and Sharples 2003; Sjölander-Lindqvist *et al.* 2020). Cavanaugh (2007) in her work on the salami makers of Bergamo in northern Italy highlights the transformation of a simple traditional type of local salami produced and consumed by the ordinary people of the small town of Bergamo into an internationally recognised brand, carrying with it connotations of quality, history, and authenticity. Interestingly what is most evident from this example is the importance placed on connecting the product, its production techniques, and its everyday consumption to the place and to the people of Bergamo; this, Cavanaugh found to be the core value of the brand being created. The contribution of food and the traditions of food production techniques as components of heritage have been argued for by Bessière (1998, 2013), and more recently within an Irish context by Mac Con Iomaire (2018b) and Mac Con Iomaire and Nic Philibín (2022). However, some of the conflicts and tensions faced by artisan food producers to maintain these traditional production techniques while at the same time embracing the necessity to innovate is also evident in the literature. West (2020), for example investigates how contemporary artisan decision-making reconciles innovation with the preservation of heritage. Set against the backdrop of artisan cheesemaking, he suggests that the demise or death of cheesemaking traditions and their renaissance or rebirth are complex and interdependent processes, often happening in tandem with one another and embracing a respect for the traditions of old while forging new paths to success for the future.

While the literature highlights both challenges and opportunities for the artisan food producer, it is evident that food tourism plays an important role in the economic development of an area (Sidali *et al.* 2013), particularly from a sustainability

perspective (Sims 2009; Star *et al.* 2020). While from the tourist's perspective, exposure to local foods of a destination can provide an opportunity for tourists to satisfy their curiosity of "the other," and how they eat and live (Long 2004).

### **The New Food Tourism Experience**

Today, the experiences that tourists are looking for have evolved, no longer happy with just being provided with an experience, they also want to be involved in co-creating them (Richards 2015), meaning that they want an input into how experiences are shaped, so that they can be an active participant in, rather than just a passive consumer of them. So how are these expectations being fulfilled by food tourism providers? Ireland's National Tourism Development Agency, Fáilte Ireland (2018, 25–26) outlines four components considered key to the provision of successful food tourism experiences— the product must be authentic, the service must be of high quality, the story must be distinctive, and the telling of it unique in character.

Similar to how wine tourism has developed, food tourists now want to do more than just taste the product (Cambourne and Macionis 2000; Meethan 2015). In food tourism, consumption is more than just eating or drinking. As Holbrook and Hirschman (1982, 132) suggest, it involves a steady flow of fantasies, feelings, and fun, encompassing what they refer to as the "experiential view" of consumption. What this means on the ground is that visitors want to meet the makers of the local foods, they want to hear their story, see where the ingredients are grown and where the animals are reared. They want to connect to the local culture and be immersed in the local traditions that give the foodstuffs their unique identity. They even want to get involved in the production process if possible. They want to have an opportunity to purchase some products to take home as gifts or souvenirs to display their newly acquired cultural capital through their new-found knowledge and experiences (Richards 2002; Henderson 2004; Lin and Mao 2015). As food tourism offerings are sensory and pleasurable, they lend themselves well to these types of creative and participative experiences which can engage visitors in the immersive and co-creative experiences they are craving (Rachão *et al.* 2021; Kivela and Crofts 2006; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982).

### **Local Production and the Search for Authenticity**

Local and artisan food has gained popularity as a counterpoint to the increased globalisation and McDonaldisation of food (Richards 2002; Hall and Mitchell 2003; Boniface 2016). This shift can be seen as part of what Ingram *et al.* (2020) refer to as Neolocalism, with many consumers seeking out regional cultures in response to uncertainty in the world around them. This has led to an increased emphasis on *local* production, distribution, and consumption generally and has brought about a deeper understanding of a sense of place. Consumers in general are rethinking their role as citizens in terms of what really constitutes a "good life" (Soper 2004). This shift in

mindset, in turn, is influencing tourists to make choices that positively impact sustainability and support local economies (Che 2006), as echoed by the World Travel Organisation (UNWTO) in their 2012 *Global Report on Food Tourism*, stating that food tourism and the appreciation for artisan producers is on the rise and that “people are voting with their feet and wallets for good, clean, fair food” (UNWTO 2012, 22).

Interestingly, this shift to local has become even more central in response to the Covid-19 pandemic which has emphasised the relevance of local food production and the value of shorter food supply chains globally (Cappelli and Cini 2020) with research suggesting that changes like this will continue to influence consumer behaviour post-pandemic (Bord Bia 2020). Artisan food is intimately connected to local people and places (McKenna and McKenna 2020), and this connection is often what tourists are searching for in their food tourism experiences (Sims 2009). As creators of specialised and often traditional food, artisan food producers are integral to meeting the increasing consumer demand for local, sustainable, and authentic food experiences (Hall and Sharples 2003). These experiences provide visitors not just with a taste of place, but with a connection to the heritage, culture, and traditions these places and people represent. Tourists are increasingly viewing local food as traditional, authentic, pure, and simple, as well as special and (sometimes) new (Sims 2009; Bjork and Kauppinen-Raisanen 2014), meaning that “local food is an important tourist attraction and central to the tourist experience” (Kauppinen-Raisanen 2014, 304).

This is key, because the success of Fáilte Ireland’s (2018) food tourism strategy relies on delivering quality local food experiences to visitors wherever they find themselves. While the term “local” can be contested from a producer, consumer, and a tourist perspective (Sims 2009; 2010; Carroll and Fahy 2014), the fact that artisan and specialty food producers must use ingredients from within a 100 km radius ensures their embeddedness in the local supply chain both horizontally and vertically (Bowen 2011), which can reinforce tourist’s notion of authenticity. The literature suggests that demands for foods perceived to be local and traditional is “linked to a quest for authenticity” on the part of the tourist and therefore is best understood from the tourist’s perspective (Sims 2009, 324). What food tourists are looking to experience, whether that be a taste of place, an escape from modern inauthentic life, the conservation of traditions and landscapes, addressing environmental concerns, or just reconnecting with places and people that produce the food they eat, highlights the key role the artisan food producer plays in satisfying the quest for an authentic food experience.

### **The Importance of Ireland’s Food in the Tourism Experience**

Research undertaken by Fáilte Ireland in 2019 identified some key reasons why domestic and international tourists holiday in Ireland. Reasons stated included interesting history, heritage and culture, beautiful scenery, natural attractions, and hospitality, as well as activities like walking, sports, events, and festivals amongst

others. Previous studies have found that food is seldom the key reason for visiting a destination (Hjalager and Richards 2002; Long 2003; Du Rand and Heath, 2006) and while acknowledging that Ireland's food offering may not yet be a key motive for travel to Ireland, research shows that approximately 90% of those that travel, do however expect high quality food and drink experiences while on their trip (Fáilte Ireland, 2019). Mulcahy (2020) also highlights the prominent role that food can play in the visitor experience in Ireland. Considering this, Fáilte Ireland in line with their food *in* tourism approach, have focussed efforts on ensuring that visitors' experiences with the foods they encounter across Ireland are the best they can be. This approach is underpinned by a strategy of "increasing the number of businesses engaged with creating an "Irish food movement"" (2018, 5), in order to make this outcome a reality. The results are evident in the creation of a number of successful food initiatives, food trails and events, often integrated into the existing experience brands, such as Ireland's Ancient East or the Wild Atlantic Way. These initiatives are supported by regional authorities, in conjunction with numerous food tourism networks around the country, such as Boyne Valley and The Burren (Fáilte Ireland 2018). Within this emerging and uniquely Irish foodscape, artisan food producers are presented with numerous opportunities to engage in providing great food experiences to visitors through featuring their produce on local menus, participating in food trails and events, involvement in farmers' markets and on-site visits. Therefore, by integrating a nation's food story into the overall visitor experience, the importance of the artisan food producers themselves is again highlighted, as it is they, who the tourist will interact with along their food tourism journey.

### **Ireland's Food as an Emblem of Culture, Heritage, and Tradition**

Food is acknowledged as an important element of a nation's food culture and heritage, but it is more than just that as Mac Con Iomaire (2018b) contends that food is not just an element of the intangible culture of a country but can act as a vehicle to explore and experience the culture, heritage, and traditions of places. He goes on to argue that our food stories not only allow for more authentic food experiences but also help to "safeguard our intangible cultural food heritage for the next generations" (Mac Con Iomaire 2018b, 109). From a cultural perspective, respected Irish food writers, McKenna and McKenna (2020), clearly articulate the links between food, people, and place, suggesting that "artisan food is defined by 4 Ps – the place, the person, the product and passion," adding that "if a food represented a person's creativity, reflected the place it came from, was a defining example of that type of food, and was driven by the need to be the best that it could possibly be, then it was true artisan food" (McKenna and McKenna 2020). Who then, is better placed to protect and promote a nation's food heritage than those artisans whose lives are dedicated to producing it?

To this end, in Ireland, there are artisan organisations and communities, whose aim is to ensure that those involved in telling the food stories and preserving their

associated traditions, methods and heritage are protected and indeed promoted. One such organisation is Euro-Toques, which was established in Ireland in 1986, with renowned artisan food champion Myrtle Allen, a recognized trailblazer, and the doyen of modern Irish food, being instrumental in its establishment (Allen 2015). Its aims included the preservation of Irish culinary heritage and traditional cooking methods as well as encouraging knowledge exchange and the promotion of local and artisan producers. Others, such as the Slow Food movement, founded in 1989, in Italy by Carlo Petrini, also has a presence in Ireland, and has its roots in its “attention and reverence to traditional, artisan-produced food” (Boniface 2016, 11) through the presidia and the Ark of Taste (Buittati 2011). It champions the ethos of good, clean, and fair food (Slow Food Ireland, 2020). The existence of these organisations, in conjunction with Ireland’s vibrant artisan food producing community, demonstrates not just the importance of the food itself, but also recognises the value of preserving the culture and traditions surrounding Irish food in order to conserve a sustainable food legacy for future generations.

#### **Food Tourism in Ireland – Rooted in Agriculture, Agritourism and Artisan Food Production**

Ireland has a long-held tradition of farming and agriculture dating back approximately 6,000 years to the arrival of the Neolithic people who were considered Ireland’s first crop growers and breeders of livestock. The plough, which according to Lamb and Bowe (1995) represents true agriculture, was most likely used for the first time in Ireland around 2,700 years ago and in around 500 BC, changes in climate occurred which provided the right conditions to introduce oats as a new crop (Mac Con Iomaire 2009). Ireland also has a rich history of foodstuffs that were widely consumed by the general population as detailed by Lucas’ seminal work (1960) through a review of early literature, hagiographies, and folklore. Of course, one such foodstuff, the potato, has arguably carried a heavier weight of responsibility through Irish history since its introduction c. 1600. This was due to the dependence on it of many ordinary Irish people. The disastrous consequences of that over reliance are all too evident in the Great Famine which lasted from 1845 to 1852 (Cullen 1981; Ó Gráda 1989; D’Arcy 2010; Mac Con Iomaire and Gallagher 2009), and which was further exacerbated by the political response to it at the time (Boylan 2016).

Fast forward to the present day, and there is a focus on Ireland’s food, both nationally and internationally as an island of quality production, of green and naturally produced meat, dairy, and seafood, of a standard comparable with anything produced globally. This renaissance in Ireland’s food industry has both been enabled and benefited from government investment such as Fáilte Ireland’s (2018) food tourism strategy. Additionally, the government has long recognised the economic and social importance of rural Ireland and recently has doubled down on its efforts, considering the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, to ensure its future sustainability and success with its *Our Rural Future. Rural Development Policy 2021–2025* (DRCD 2021). This

policy demonstrates a key focus on areas such as tourism, culture, heritage and local farming and food production amongst others. Government initiatives such as these, run in parallel with the work of food historians and food professionals who champion the story of Ireland's food heritage and help bring it to a global audience. Mac Con Iomaire (2018a) talks of a "Celtic food revival" as Ireland brings her food traditions and culture to life in new ways, while encouraging the documenting of the old to "safeguard our intangible cultural food heritage for the next generations" (Mac Con Iomaire 2018b, 109).

When we consider the importance of place, artisan food producers are often connected directly to the farms where their products are made. Artisan food production of high value, small scale products, with a closer link to customers, can be seen as a contrast to the shift to a globalised agricultural system over recent decades (Hall and Mitchell 2005). Beer *et al.* (2002, 215) argue that "the real artisan is the farmer," and Sage (2010, 91) suggests that "the recovery of craftsmanship" to directly manage production processes is a way to reconnect the farm to local economies. Participating therefore in agritourism or farm tourism (which sits within rural tourism), allows the farmer/artisan to connect visitors with food directly, inextricably linking local food production to tourism (Richards 2002). This supports farm diversification, which offers opportunities to counter the impacts of industrialised farming and falling prices, as well as allowing the artisan to share culinary knowledge and heritage and demonstrate how local food is produced (Getz *et al.* 2014; Che 2006).

There appears to be no one definition of agritourism in the literature, though it can be said that it encompasses visitors touring rural areas renowned for their produce, to learn about food and how it is produced, and can include farm stays, facilitate farm-gate shopping as well as include visits to farmers' markets (Gil Arroyo *et al.* 2013), but markedly absent is a connection between the farmer / producer and any links to food tasting experiences. This is revealing, as from an Irish perspective the government appears to recognise the clear link between artisan food producers and the role they play, in what they term "agri-food tourism," with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, stating that agri-food tourism is of great importance for rural areas as it allows rural Ireland to showcase its people, landscape, history and culture through agricultural produce, food, drink and local cuisine. In turn, the preservation of these activities allows rural businesses, including farmers, producers, and artisans, to develop their products and services, connect with their local community, as well as with visitors and thereby improve the rural experience for all (DAFM 2015).

#### **Who is the Irish Artisan Food Producer?**

The demand for locally produced food became a major trend in Europe over twenty years ago, driven partly by the environmental impact of global food chains and consumer alienation from the places where food is produced (Enthoven and Van den Broeck 2021). A breakdown of trust caused many consumers to redefine food quality

as they began to look for what Papaoikonomou and Ginieis (2017, 53) called “food with a farmers face on it.”

So, who then is the artisan food producer? Caricofe (2011) described food artisans themselves to be values-based individuals who emphasise product quality through their careful sourcing of mainly local ingredients and their use of traditional, time-consuming production methods. McCracken (2006) put forward ten points to define the work of the artisan producer; these include a preference for simplicity and authenticity, to be on a human scale, to be handmade, to be raw and transformed and to be marked by locality. These are helpful but there seems to be no one definition that classifies artisan food production and producers definitively, other than a tacit understanding that it requires local raw material to produce a product, manual input from the maker, and has a connection to local culture and traditions (UNESCO 1997).

From a business and enterprise rationale, the Food Safety Authority for Ireland (FSAI) published *Guidance Note 29: Use of Marketing Terms* in 2015, which objectively states that the terms artisan/ artisanal can only be used by businesses who can legitimately claim that the food is made in limited quantities by skilled craftspeople, highlighting that the processing method cannot be fully mechanised and must follow a traditional method. In addition, the food must be made in a micro-enterprise in a single location and the characteristic ingredient(s) used in the food need to be grown or produced locally, where practical and seasonally available (FSAI 2015).

In relation to Ireland's artisan food sector, the FSAI also provides guidance on a number of other terms, such as: “farmhouse” (must be made on a farm using locally grown or produced ingredients), and “traditional” (must be made to a traditional recipe that can be proved to exist for at least 30 years” (FSAI 2015, 4–5). A skilled craftsperson is defined as someone who has a special expertise in making food in a “traditional” manner (FSAI 2015), so arguably these three terms are interchangeable, or a producer could in fact be a hybrid of these and market themselves as such. Of note is that both artisan and farmhouse products must be made using locally grown or produced ingredients (designated as 100km from the location of the business), and only by micro-enterprises, which delimits businesses' ability to exceed a certain size, beyond which they can no longer classify or market their products using these terms (FSAI 2015). From the perspective of the artisan producer, this could potentially lead to conflict when Ireland's agri-food sector is so focused on growth and exports wanting to “create a pipeline of companies growing beyond Artisan/Small Food Business definition” (DAFM 2015, 87). However, arguably as a food tourism provider, it links them inextricably to local food and ensures that artisans' speciality foods stay true to their origins, protecting them from corporate industrial competitors who could otherwise disingenuously leverage these terms for profit. The artisan food producer clearly plays a multifaceted role in Ireland's food tourism landscape, but the existence of predefined boundaries, guidelines and expectations would suggest that there are numerous “push and pull” pressures they must contend with operationally, to be

successful. If policy makers are intent on driving economies forward through large scale growth and given the significant government emphasis on the large Agri-food sector which have the capacity to create large scale employment and contribute to the national economy, then to investigate how these pressures translate into the daily thoughts and lives of the small artisan food producers is particularly important.

## Methodology

In tourism studies, interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology has been utilised as a theoretical approach to “describing or understanding the experiential and lived existence” of stakeholders who participate in tourism (Pernecky and Jamal 2010, 1056). This approach looks at experience from the “perspective of meanings, understanding and interpretations” (*ibid*). Pernecky and Jamal (2010, 1071) suggest that the “information that emerges as the result of adopting hermeneutic phenomenology can be valuable to different stakeholders (e.g., marketers, service providers, business owners, and planners).” This information can also be of value to academia, as sharing knowledge across all stakeholders promotes understanding, stimulates communication, and can facilitate learning and development opportunities.

The primary research carried out for this paper sought to answer three main questions. Firstly, who is the artisan food producer in terms of their primary motives and drivers? Secondly, how do the artisans themselves see their role in the food tourism offering? And thirdly, what in their view, is their role in preserving Ireland’s food culture and heritage? The phenomenological approach taken in this study provided an opportunity for artisan food producers themselves to share knowledge of their day-to-day role within the food tourism offering. This method illustrates the cultural and economic space within which the artisan food producers operate and places their voice at the heart of the discussion.

## Research Sample and Data Collection

A purposive sampling, a nonprobability approach, was taken (Smith *et al.* 2009). This is a non-random technique which involves deliberately choosing participants based on their ability to provide the information the researcher seeks, based on their experience and knowledge (Etikan *et al.* 2016). It requires selecting individuals that are “proficient and well informed [on the] phenomenon of interest” (Etikan *et al.* 2016, 2). The use of purposive sampling allows the researcher to concentrate on those who are best suited to help with the research project undertaken, which, in this case led to the inclusion of a selection of artisan food producers of various food and drink products in a variety of locations across the island of Ireland. Due to Covid-19, data was collected in March 2021 via virtual face-to-face meetings, using semi-structured interviews, with a total of ten artisan food producers. Desk research supported the compilation of a list of Irish artisan food producers and an email was sent to prospective interviewees, outlining the background and aims of the research and inviting them to participate. In recognition

of issues of subjectivity and bias and the limitations sometimes attributed to purposive sampling in relation to participant selection (Etikan *et al.* 2016), sixteen artisan producers were initially contacted and the first ten to respond were those who were subsequently included. A full break down of the participants is outlined here in Table 1.

Table 1: Background details of interview participants

<b>Code/ Alias</b>	<b>Artisan Food Type</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Provides On-site Food Tourism Experience</b>
James	Berry Wine	Wicklow	Industrial Premises	Yes
Michael	Oysters	Galway	Coastal	No
David	Stone Milled Flour	Wexford	Rural Mill & Lands	No
Hazel	Garlic, Asparagus, Honey	Louth	Farm	No
Anne	Cheese	Clare	Farm	Yes
Lucy	Rapeseed Oils	Down	Estate, Gardens & Farm	Yes
Ciara	Beef	Tipperary	Farm	Yes
Patricia	Smoked Fish	Cork	Rural Premises	Yes
Sean	Beer	Westmeath	Industrial Premises	No
Harry	Cider, Brandy	Cork	Farm & Guest House	Yes

### Data Management and Analysis

To meet the aims of this research, the interviewing of participants was considered the best method as the researchers needed to learn about the experience and perceptions of the interviewee and capture their “thoughts and experiences in their own words” (Gard McGehee 2012, 365). A semi-structured interview approach was taken, as when used effectively and sensitively, it can generate an open and trusting rapport with participants, which in turn can yield interesting and rich data (Smith *et al.* 2009, 62). The researchers constructed a flexible interview schedule containing a topic-based guide for the interviews, including additional prompts, which aimed to answer the research objectives, while allowing room for additional information to emerge (Smith *et al.* 2009). The guide covered topics such as what artisan food and food tourism meant to the participants and whether they considered their role to be part of the food tourism offering in Ireland, as well as, but not limited to topics such as culture and heritage, their links to agriculture and agritourism and customer/visitor experiences. The interviews generally began with the artisan food producers telling the story of their business and how it started, leading to a detailed account of their experiences and the areas that are important to them, which provided a strong starting point to delve into

the other key topics, often prompted by the participants themselves. Each interview was recorded, and the notes taken were appended to the interview transcripts for consideration at the data analysis stage. The longest interview was 1 hour and 59 minutes, while the shortest interview was 1 hour and 3 minutes. Each of the interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim, using a transcription tool called *Otter*, and these were checked against the recordings and edited for accuracy and readability. In addition, each participant was asked to sign a consent form, allowing for the use of the qualitative data collected in the research findings.

The rich data collected was analysed using a qualitative inductive thematic analysis as a method to identify, analyse, and report on themes within it, which involved “the searching across a data set, be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts to find repeated patterns of meaning” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 15). This necessitated reviewing the data to enable the researchers to become familiar with the depth and breadth of the content, allowing for ideas and patterns to emerge and take shape which resulted in a list of topics about what was interesting in the data and allowed for initial codes to be assigned (Braun and Clarke 2006). Topics such as their motivations, local food, heritage and culture, their role in education, challenges in dealing with government bodies and departments in terms of funding and supports, and managing the customer experience came to the fore, amongst others. From there, a number of broad potential themes were identified, such as who is the artisan food producer, and the importance of the “food in tourism” experiences and the coded comments were organised under each of these themes with some becoming sub-themes. On review of the themes identified, the data was then further refined, leading to a number of themes being merged such as “Ireland as a food destination” and “sustainability,” or discarded, such as “the role of chefs in cooking artisan food,” which was considered beyond the scope of the research, while ensuring that the data within each theme was cohesive and each theme was distinguishable. This gave a substantive view of the various themes and how they fit together, highlighting “the overall story they [told] about the data” (Braun and Clark 2006, 21). A final review ensured that the themes were representative and supported an explanation of the phenomenon. The outcome of this analytical process is a narrative account where “the researcher’s analytic interpretation is presented in detail and is supported with verbatim extracts from participants” (Smith *et al.* 2009, 4).

## Results and Discussion

### Motivated by Passion

The literature tells us that “when people are passionate, their view of life is driven by positive affectivity; they tend to give their best and to surpass themselves” (Balon *et al.* 2013, 59), and when talking to Irish artisan food producers their passion is discernible, both in terms of the product itself and their commitment to those products. While the

literature shows that passion is a common characteristic amongst artisan producers, if they are producing a good for sale this passion is often unnoticed but being involved in food tourism provides the opportunity for these producers to show this passion and use it to create a story and experience for the food tourist. Despite any challenges faced, when artisan food producers speak of their products, they do not view them as fungible commodities but rather as small batch, quality items that are important to them, not simply from a business perspective but on a uniquely personal level as well. This was illustrated by Hazel who stated,

I want to grow garlic. I want to be the garlic specialist...so our passion is about quality, about provenance, our story, people buy people, so it goes back to that. Would I lose if I am pumping out thousands and thousands of garlic packs a week? Yes, you probably do. It becomes a commodity. So, artisan is about holding your quality, your premium(ness) and it is seasonal, and it should run out.

The sense of the product being part of who the artisan producer is, was echoed by Lucy, who said, "...I think [that is] the thing about doing any artisan food, [there is] so much to do – people say passion or love, or I don't know what it is, but you're putting part of you into it."

Interestingly, Ciara adamantly put the money motive out of the picture stating that "I wasn't driven by monetary gain. I was driven by the passion of it and the culture and the agriculture." While passion as a motivator for the artisan food producer is a topic absent from the food tourism literature currently, the idea of entrepreneurial passion is recognised as often providing the fire of desire (Cardon *et al.* 2009) and is of real interest here, because passion, possibly, is what gives these artisan food producers their competitive edge, particularly when this often-infectious passion is experienced first-hand by visiting tourists and indeed becomes an integral part of the experience for many.

### **Providing the Food Tourism Experience**

Artisan food producers as purveyors of local, handcrafted, and traditional foodstuffs are often connected to the places where their product is grown, reared, or made and are therefore well positioned to meet tourists' expectations, as previously discussed, explaining why they are an integral part of both Ireland's food, and food in tourism strategies (DAFM 2015; Fáilte Ireland 2018). It is interesting to note that delivering great experiences to visitors is as important to artisan food producers themselves as it is to policy stakeholders and what they provide, and how they go about it, is broadly in line with the literature. However, of note is that their provision of experiences appears to be driven by the intrinsic motivations, knowledge, and experience of the artisan producer themselves, rather than any push from external agencies or guidelines they have chosen to follow. These artisans innately know and understand what kind of experiences their visitors are truly in search of. As James explained,

I want people to come in and [then] they walk away with an experience, as opposed to just a tasting, you know, you could go into a wine store and taste wine, that's different. This is an hour and a half or so where I show people how it's done. And they get an experience that they will never have [otherwise]. ...You don't forget experiences. You just don't. It will stay forever and then they become brand ambassadors in many respects, you know, they go home or, and then they post stuff on the web.

This is perfectly in keeping with the definition of a positive memorable experience as suggested by Kim *et al.* (2010). It is clear also that artisan food producers use their own experiences as consumers to inform and translate what they consider to be good experiences into the creation of quality food tourism experiences for others. James spoke about authenticity, suggesting that

it's more driven by tourists who come to the area...they ask what beer is popular, what food is local..., a lot of them are looking for a bit of authenticity, and what's probably a real Irish experience in a real Irish restaurant....They're looking to eat what the Irish eat and eat with the Irish, and that's all come on in the past 5-10 years, driven probably by the way we market ourselves overseas.

This is very much in line with the existing literature outlining the importance of local and authentic food and experiences to visitors and confirming that it is indeed what they look for (Sims 2009; Bjork and Kauppinen-Raisanen 2014), while also acknowledging that Fáilte Ireland's strategic aim of shifting tourists' perception of Ireland as "a place with a great food and drink experience" (Fáilte Ireland 2018, 14) is bearing fruit on the ground.

### **The importance of the "Food Story"**

Of the four components that Fáilte Ireland (2018) consider to be key to the food tourism experience, two are related to the "food story," suggesting that the story must be distinctive, and the narration must have a unique character. Artisan foods are said to have "a good cultural story" (Boniface 2016, 141) and with visitors demand for co-created experiences continuing to increase, they want to do more than just taste a product (Richards 2015), they want to meet the artisan food producer and hear their story, in pursuit of a memorable tourism experience (Kim *et al.* 2010). In line with both the academic and grey literature, the research shows that artisan food producers are keenly aware of the importance of having a unique food story to promote their product and provide visitors with a memorable food experience, one that tells the story of the person, the product, its history, its connection to the land, all underpinned by the artisan food producers' passion and pride in what they do, and is arguably an integral part of the visitor experiencing the experience. Sean illustrates exactly this point when he says, "I think selling food and selling beer, selling anything now is all about stories, and being able to tell our story. So, I do think it's important." Ciara is emphatic about

how important her story is, not just to the locals as it is “their story too” but also to the visitor, stating,

I think they're fascinated with what we have to offer, you know, that they weren't aware of how rich the culture was, and how good the food is. And you know, what the backstories are, I think they're fascinated because they weren't made aware of it. Certainly, that's been my experience. I know, we've got something really special going on here. But you know, that's the feedback I'm getting from visitors. They're just blown away by the whole story and the product and everything.

Michael suggests that “everybody wants to hear a story nowadays. If you're not willing to expose yourself and tell the truth, you're going to get nowhere because everybody wants to know who you are, what you are, why you are,” a sentiment echoed by Hazel observing that, “people buy people, they like your story, they like your provenance, and you know, they enjoy supporting your business,” indicating that it is an important part of her business and brand to be able to articulate her story and the history of the farm.

### **Preserving Tradition, Culture, and Heritage**

The passion of the interviewed artisans is evident in their seemingly innate commitment to preserving their local and national food heritage, which they consider a part of who they are and where they see themselves playing several key roles. The first is in preserving important elements of intangible heritage in the form of traditions, crafts, skills, and knowledge relating to food and how it is produced (Heritage Council 2007), and Patricia epitomises this when she says, “it's also about preserving the skill because so much of food production is now super automated.” While for others it's just the way they always do it, as explained by Harry, who says:

Our ethos would be farm to fork, you know, we've been doing that all our lives. It's not some buzzword we picked up on recently. My dad and my grandfather were farmers. And we always grew our own vegetables and reared our own animals for the table. And so, I carried on the tradition with my wife.

While mill owner David, went so far as to say, “the mill is a hidden gem basically, and it is vitally important that people are able to see something that was done back nearly two hundred years ago because admittedly once it is gone, it cannot be replaced.”

At a national level also, there is a pivotal role played by the artisan food producers in relation to preserving the country's natural heritage, specifically in terms of their care, promotion, and sustainable management of the natural resources of land, landscapes, animals, wildlife, and natural habitats of Ireland. The suggestion by Urry (1995, 17) that society connects with the physical environment through “stewardship of the land so as to provide a better inheritance for future generations living within a given local area” is almost perfectly echoed by Lucy when she says, “a lot of people say that you're only custodians of the land, so it's what you can do for the time you're there

until you move off [it] that is important.” This sense of responsibility to conserve what the country has, is reflected also by Ciara who states:

The fact that you fight so hard against all the odds to keep this breed alive, you know, and how important a project that is, and it just happens to be a fantastic product at the end of the day, but we’re talking about a beautiful animal. Fundamentally, what I was trying to achieve was to keep this animal in Ireland. In its home place, you know, keep it from extinction.

While there is recognition at government level of the importance of preserving a nations’ tangible heritage in terms of the historical buildings, integral to the landscape itself (Heritage Council 2007), there is a real sense of awareness amongst the artisan food producers that they are only the caretakers of what they own. Ciara illustrates this saying:

I thought, it’s so rich in history. It’s such a shame that people don’t have any engagement with that, or sense of ownership over that, because I’m only the current custodian of these buildings. Like, I’ll be gone, and I’d like to feel I have bettered it somehow, which I have, [but] I’m only part of the story.

David also echoed this, stating, “this has to do with the mill, it has nothing to do with me, it’s always about the mill and I am just, excuse the pun, I’m just the cog in the wheel.”

However, there is also a note of concern that perhaps the importance of preserving Ireland’s heritage is not suitably recognised by government or its agencies, with Anne stating:

I think a lot of it is talk, but in reality, the understanding isn’t there [in terms] of how valuable it is, how valuable these cultural activities and our heritage is, because when they’re gone, they’ll be gone.

Arguably then, artisan food producers’ connection to both the food they produce and the places from where it originates is visceral, going beyond the functional and mundane connections of those producers who operate on a large scale, empirically supported by Berry (2018, 53), who tells us that when farmers are bound to the land through family, traditions, economic need and a “love that enforces care” they nurture the land in a way that corporations and machines never can.

### **An Eye to the Future**

The research illustrates how the artisan food producer is embracing Ireland’s evolving food culture as reflected by Sean who stated:

We did a lot of work in the last twelve months, on our brand, on our website, and on how we align ourselves with food. So, if you look at our labels now, we talk about food a lot, we always did, but we probably didn’t do it in a very polished manner, we tried

to polish that up and have a little bit of fun with it too. So, you can see some of our tasting notes recommend that people eat a “spice bag” with a beer or something like that, which is authentically Irish too.

This again, demonstrates an awareness of the importance of authenticity (Sims 2009) to visitors' experience, while also highlighting the importance of evolving to remain relevant. Richards (2002, 6) suggests that “food tourism cannot only be about preserving the past, it also needs to be about creating the future.” This is key, because while leveraging Ireland's culture, heritage and traditions provides a unique selling point for its food, it cannot become a parody of itself or conceivably it runs the risk of appealing to just a very niche type of tourist resulting in food tourism becoming unsustainable in the long-term. In keeping with Wests' (2020) discussion of the artisan cheesemakers, these food producers in Ireland also are keen to take their businesses successfully into the future while at the same time wishing to remain true to their heritage and traditional ways of production.

## Conclusion

This paper sought to investigate three main questions, firstly, who is the artisan food producer in terms of their primary motives and drivers? Secondly, how do the artisans themselves see their role in the food tourism offering? And thirdly, what in their view, is their role in preserving Ireland's food culture and heritage? These research findings show several key drivers for the artisan food producer. What is clear from the outset is their infectious passion for the products they make and all that they do. But also evident is a keen interest in conserving and continuing the traditions around those products as well as an inherent awareness of the importance of Ireland's heritage and food culture and the role they play as food artisans in preserving it. Whether it is milling flour using the same mill as their forefathers or producing beef from an Irish breed of cattle with historical links to their estate, these artisans are examples of living, breathing Irish food heritage. For them, and others like them, they endeavour to keep alive, and proudly present anew, a selection of traditional Irish food stuffs including oysters, smoked fish, rare breed beef, honey, cheese, cider, and berry wine. But the artisan does more than use traditional techniques and heirloom tools and recipes, they rebirth the food ways of old through their stories and unique knowledge of how things were done and by whom, and how these practices both drew from, and contributed to, their local community.

They exhibit a pride in the places where they live and how they are connected with the food they grow, the products they create and the importance of protecting them. They display a palpable desire to educate and inform locals and tourists alike. They make every effort to ensure that tourists understand the importance and nature of local artisan foods and the need to value and promote them. They possess a passion for the land and the waters around them and the traditions of agriculture, as well as a

commitment to the environment and its protection which they are proud to share to all those who visit.

They are keenly aware of their responsibilities, as mere curators, and temporary custodians, of not just the lands and properties they occupy but equally of the skills, knowledge and craftsmanship they possess and their role in disseminating the story of their product to the attendant visitor as well as handing down the rich traditions to the next generations.

This research concludes that there is more to the role of artisan food producer than was previously considered, uncovering a nuanced and in-depth view not currently found in the extant literature. The insights presented here can provide, perhaps, an alternate lens for policymakers, destination marketing organisations and local tourism networks, through which to consider future food tourism strategies. The key role played here by the artisan food producer is hugely important from a tourism policy perspective and while the tourism policy literature acknowledges the role of all stakeholders in the creation of the “great food and drink experience,” these findings highlight the irreplaceable part played by the artisan themselves.

It is evident from the research that artisan food producers are passionate about their products, their connection to them and the place where they come from, irrespective of the challenges they face. Their particular food stories are a key part of the visitor experience, reemphasising the importance of policymakers working to alleviate some of the challenges that artisan food producers face, to ensure that both they and their food remain an integral and valuable part of Ireland’s foodscape into the future. The rich content of these stories can provide leverage for future marketing campaigns to help bring the artisan food producer to life in their food tourism role, further enhancing Ireland as an attractive food tourism destination in the future, leaving the final word on this to Patricia stating, “if you understand the food of your culture, then that’s such a gift to have.”

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