

Title: The power of champions' in developing food tourism destinations in Ireland

The key role of leaders and champions in the development of food tourism destinations, is clearly recognised (Hall, 2004; Hall & Gossling, 2016). They play an important role during the initial stages (Poskas & Messer, 2015) but they also encourage others to engage in this activity and aide the development of a local vision, creating a diverse range of food tourism products. Yet to date there has been little research on these champions, internationally as well as in an Irish context.

Using qualitative research methodology, this research aims to understand the 21 Food Champions currently operating in Ireland, exploring their motivations, objectives and sources of power and support. By exploring the method by which they were chosen and appointed, using in-depth interviews with the champions and key informants, this study aims to investigate the issue of power in relation to the champions, identifying how the power, or status, is assigned at national level yet for them to effectively act as a champion their power is dependent on the support and respect of those in their local areas. Entwined in this discussion is the identification of their role as champions rather than leaders and the power and practical implications of this. The findings of the study will allow us to better understand not only the influential role of these individuals but their sources of power and the way in which factors such as the context, relations in the area, stage of development and individual personalities affect how they play this role.