Culinary Tourism: Negotiating Exoticness, Negotiating Power

Lucy M. Long

In the last decade, culinary tourism has emerged as a burgeoning and profitable industry that focuses on food destinations — specifically, exotic and expensive ones that require travel and money.[1] The industry emphasizes gourmet entertainment for a select few who can afford it along with other amenities, and the product being sold on the surface is actually the experience of the tourist as a consumer — which needs to be satisfying and fulfilling — so that he or she will return or recommend the experience to others.[2]

Tourism in general is frequently critiqued as a colonialist project, as the exploitation of another culture for the amusement, relaxation, even edification of members of a hegemonic culture.[3] In this critique, the tourism industry is part of the larger capitalist, free-market economy that is globalizing the world in its own image. Individuals who participate in tourism, regardless of their intentions or actions, are then participating in the structures of this post-modern colonialism.

While I agree that tourism as an industry reflects historical class inequalities and cultural 'othering,' I argue here that culinary tourism also offers the potential to 'see' the world differently in a manner that empowers individuals to effect real change. A folkloristic understanding of culinary tourism as an exploration of the meanings of foods and the cultures surrounding them challenges peoples' notions of 'good food,' local and regional identity, and of tourism itself.[4] As such, it reclaims the power to define the meanings of these phenomena. Is it possible to then insert those meanings into tourist activities, rendering those activities 'counter-hegemonic', so that they defy, subvert, or at least challenge the authority of the power structure? I explore these possibilities here by examining a culinary tourism project in a small town in the American Midwest.

The project: history

In 2005, I began working with civic, educational, and economic institutions in the college town of Bowling Green in the northwest corner of Ohio on a project to identify local food traditions. Until pioneer settlement in the early 1800s, the region had been largely swampland and oak forests. Known as the Great Black Swamp, it still reverts in places to its original character every spring after a hard rain. The area had abundant wildlife and was a prime hunting ground for Native Americans who traveled it seasonally. Rivers and streams provided ample water sources, and the temperate climate tempted early Anglo- and German-American farmers who began draining the swamp for farmland in the mid 1800s. The resulting soil was extremely fertile, and a rich farming culture emerged throughout the region. An extensive train system during the latter 1800s connected it to markets in the East and South, making a number of the cities very cosmopolitan that are now isolated and in decline. Oil deposits discovered at the end of the 19th century brought a rush of settlers to the town of Bowling Green and outlying areas, but these deposits ran out within several decades, leaving behind Victorian homes and mansions, as well as a world-famous glass industry in the city of Toledo on the northeast border of the region. Established in the early 1800s on the southern shore of Lake Erie, Toledo became a port city and center for auto industries.

Bowling Green now has a number of small manufacturing and food processing facilities (Heinz ketchup used to be manufactured there), but its largest industry is a state university. Bowling Green's population of around 30,000 increases by about 19,000 when students are counted, and the university population adds a diversity of cultures and races that are missing in the otherwise homogenous, German- and Anglo-American heritage of this rural region. Nearby Toledo is much more diverse with historical Irish, Polish, Hungarian, and Hispanic neighborhoods along with African-Americans and southern Appalachian migrants.

The local food tends heavily towards the basic meat-and-potatoes stereotype of middle America: white bread, deep-fried foods, relatively few fresh vegetables, heavy use of dairy products and sugar, and salads that emphasize iceburg lettuce with bacon bits, mayonnaise-based mixtures of vegetables with cheese cubes, and jello with fruits (and frequently cool whip or marshmallows). Heavily German-influenced, there were also traditions of sausages and sauerkraut, and in the past, beer brewing.[5]

The first task was to identify local food traditions and individuals representing those traditions. Initially, I had a grant to oversee undergraduate and graduate students doing fieldwork and library research. Much of their work was based on fieldwork that I had done over the past two decades. We then developed an extensive exhibit for a local history museum, a food ways section for the annual 'Heritage Days' festival, and public programming to accompany a three-week viewing of the Smithsonian Institution's traveling exhibit on American food, *Key Ingredients*.

These projects were fairly standard public folklore work, however, they led to collaborations with the local chamber of commerce and economic development office to develop two more projects: a 'Culinary Expo' at the town mall of

local food producers and distributors, and a brochure and activities for a 'Culinary Tourism Trail' of Bowling Green.[6] Whereas most of the museum staff had a background in history and cultural studies, the individuals from the tourism and economic sector did not. Their focus, by job definition, needed to be on the pragmatic areas of marketing, business profits, and revenue for the city.

This group of 'stakeholders' tended to be concerned about the lack of 'good' food establishments that could attract tourists to restaurants in the area. The only gourmet restaurant in the town had lasted only a few years, and most of the restaurants offered standard fare — hamburgers, pizza, and 'home-cooking.' The few ethnic restaurants survived on the whole by including some popular 'American' items, as well as by adapting their recipes and menus to the somewhat bland and conservative tastes of the area. Also, although the surrounding county is heavily agricultural, there seemed to be little connection between the foods offered and a sense of place. Produce in local grocery stores tended to be shipped in, and there was a heavy use of processed and mass-produced foods. Few of the restaurants advertised locally grown ingredients. There also was very little perception among residents that the food they ate had anything to do with identity. Food was simply to be eaten and enjoyed; if any thinking about it went on, it was about how much it cost or what its nutritional content was. In general, the economic and tourism sectors felt the traditional food was neither interesting, distinctive, nor good enough to be profitable. Even the museum staff and students were a little perplexed as to how to identify and present the local food culture. Judging by the usual responses of residents to the project –which ranged from bemusement to dismissal — very few individuals felt the local food to be worthy of recognition, much less celebration.

By introducing some basic folkloristic concepts of food along with a humanities-based approach to culinary tourism, however, we were able to collaborate on projects that blended both academic theory and pragmatic concerns. In doing so, we expanded understandings of both food and of tourism. I argue here that these understandings then challenged more mainstream, profit-driven definitions of food, place, and tourism, and that this challenging can be read as a political act, not only by reclaiming power to define the meanings of these cultural processes, but also by leading to actual practices that challenged and subverted the usual power structures.

The Project: Issues

The initial challenge was to expand people's notions of food itself. It could be more than fuel or commodity. It carries identity, memories, emotional associations, and those meanings can be private ones even if not recognized publicly. In order to demonstrate this principle, I conducted ethnographies to collect 'food stories' about meaningful memories of food. These stories revolved around favorite foods, both holiday and everyday foods, but I also asked for disliked foods and foods that reminded them of people or events.

Secondly, we focused on food ways rather than food — so that we looked for the activities surrounding food, not just the dishes or recipes.[7] We found, for example, that chili is a common dish for everyday and celebratory meals. The recipe is often taken from a can of chili beans or a packet of seasoning. However, the beef was frequently home-produced or the basic meat was venison that had been obtained from inter-generational hunting on family land. This focus on food ways also helped us deal with the perception — and actual reality — that there were few publicly symbolic foods. The only iconic food in the region publicly accepted as such is a confection called 'buckeyes,' peanut butter mixed with powdered sugar and dipped into chocolate. Sauerkraut balls, deep-fried balls of sauerkraut mixed with sausage or ground beef, were also occasionally presented as icons. Neither of these, however, was gourmet nor expensive enough to present an image that would be profitable in the tourism industry.

There was also concern that the local food was not good enough. Local residents felt that the food tasted good, but they knew that it would never be considered gourmet. This was where we introduced the idea of culinary relativism, that there are different genres of food, each with its own logic and evaluation criteria. The genres tend to be divided by class (as well as region and ethnicity), and genres associated with lower or middle classes are frequently dismissed as invalid. We pointed out that there existed an aesthetic system for the food that was here; people definitely discussed the merits of one shredded chicken sandwich over another. We also explored the possibility of artistry in everyday and mundane foods. The choice of Jell-O flavors based on the juxtaposition of colors, for example, represented creativity in the same way that a presentation of plates in a gourmet restaurant did.

We also challenged the elite, gourmet approach to food as cultural capital. Food in the Midwest tends to be treated as social capital. It is valued for bringing people together rather than showing off an individual's status, so that the focus is frequently on foods that are familiar and commonplace.[8]

There similarly was a concern that there were no food traditions, however, we found there was the usual misunderstanding of tradition as a static, romanticized set of products or processes handed down from the past. Since much of the food is mass-produced and no one seems to have time to cook anymore anyway, there seemed to be little carryover from the past. By treating tradition as processes by which we create a sense of connectedness with the past, we were able to explore how personal creativity and variations are possible within tradition. The area had always incorporated technology, the modern, and the commercially processed — to the extent that, I argue, that this characterizes the region. Green bean casserole, for example, a corporate invention using canned cream of

mushroom soup, canned fried onions, and frequently canned green beans, which appears at both public and private, everyday and celebratory meals, can be considered a reflection of the region's ethos and aesthetic. Furthermore, substituting sliced almonds or crushed potato chips for the French fried onions required in the commercial recipe could represent both traditionalization and personalization of a mass product.

The heavy reliance on mass produced foods, though, raised questions about the area as a distinct region. There was definitely 'local patriotism',[9] loyalty to a place grounded in a geographically-bounded space. Being 'from here' to long-time residents meant specifically from one town or neighborhood. However, they also felt they were just 'plain old American' — their food displayed no distinctive regional identity — it was simply what most Americans ate. There was no sense of their food expressing terroir, taste of place.[10] This raised questions about the nature of region — is it simply a 'performative discourse'[11] or is it an essentialist identification of distinctive characteristics?

To address this, we divided foods into those that were distinctive in that they were unique to the area, such as sauerkraut balls, hot chicken sandwiches, pork-a-leans, homemade sausage, morel hunting, and those that were representative in that they in some way embodied local resources, aesthetic, and ethos even though they were common elsewhere, for example, green bean casserole, Jell-O salads, pizza, chili. By exploring the natural resources of the area as well as the cultural, economic, and political history, we identified a logic to the foods that were traditional to the area, regardless of their actual origins. They reflected the German and British heritage, a philosophy of 'scientific farming' that embraced industrialization and technology, as well as a valuing of food as social capital that brought people together and celebrated the familiar. This approach challenged notions of region, defining them not by contrast to other regions, but by their own local logics.

And finally, the project challenged notions of what constituted interesting and exotic food, food that would draw tourists and be suitable for restaurants. People felt the food was too familiar, too boring, not exotic enough to warrant curiosity. This was where I was able to explore further some of the implications of culinary tourism as a humanities and scholarly construct.

The project was based on a conceptual framework suggested in my book, *Culinary Tourism*, in which I define Culinary Tourism as 'Intentional, exploratory participation in the food ways of an other.'[12] The original idea was to examine the meanings and motivations of such eating. Drawing upon John Urry's concept of the tourist gaze,[13] I suggested a framework for interpretation that focused on a philosophical-psychological shift between the exotic and the familiar. This meant that every individual's experiencing of a culinary other was a combination of their personal history and the larger cultural context. It also meant that the focus of the 'tourist gaze' could be shifted to explore culture through food as well as explore food as a culture experience.

Culinary tourism from this perspective then challenges people's notions of Otherness. One person's other is another person's familiar. It demonstrates the logic of an other; shows how they are like us, but, more significantly, it turns the question of othering back to the individual viewer. Why is something an object of the tourist gaze for that individual? How is that individual's universe defined and what are the historical, cultural, and social factors shaping that universe?

It is in this reflection of Self, that the project had the most impact. It moved individuals from thinking of tourism as only a profit-making endeavor to a cultural one, in which both producers and consumers could then think more deeply about food and identity. Furthermore, tourism itself helped people to 'see' and to recognize the possibilities of meanings within their own food. Typical responses to the culinary tourism brochure and exhibit included comments such as:

> Now I can't eat without thinking about the food and all the meanings behind it.
>
> I had no idea there was so much interesting stuff. It's not nearly as boring as I thought!
>
> So, the people here actually have a reason for what they do? I still don't like the food!

Observations and musings

Although we were unable to conduct a quantitative evaluation, the responses that I observed demonstrated to me that these projects broadened people's understandings of food itself, made them aware of its power to communicate identity and relationships, and to carry memory and meaning. It helped them recognize the potential of seemingly mundane, necessary chores, such as eating, shopping, cooking, reading cookbooks, to be more meaningful activities that connected them to place, the past, and other people. These responses echo environmental philosopher-activist Wendell Berry's statement that 'a significant part of the pleasure of eating is ones accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which food comes.'[14] The real issue, is whether or not this 'mindful eating,' in which the here and the now is fully attended to and engaged in, can move beyond a self-satisfied and self-indulgent contentment with one's own life to also recognize the ways in which hierarchies of power have shaped those meanings of food. Does it create an awareness of other individual's lack of opportunity or access to that power for creating meaningful relationships? Awareness does not lead directly to empathy or to action, and if it does, it may take any number of forms.

Cultural geographers David Bell and Gill Valentine point out, though, that this awareness is the first step in recognizing the connections between one's personal choices and the larger world.[15] That step can then lead to challenging the hierarchies of power that shape what is considered exotic, familiar, desirable, and marketable. The work of scholars such as Marion Nestle, Warren Belasco, Debra Barndt, and Sydney Mintz (to name a few) has inspired a generation of scholars to examine these connections, and this work has then seeped into and inspired a current social and political movement that has moved beyond the walls of academe. Journalists such as Michael Pollan with his best-selling book, *The Omnivore's Dilemna*, writers such as Barbara Kingsolver with her book, *Animal, Mineral, Miracle*, films, such as Morgan Spurlock's *Super-Size Me*, and organizations such as the Italian based Slow Food, have taken these ideas to a much larger public, challenging them to think about food and personal responsibility.

Americans are now thinking more about their food; they are discussing 'ethical eating,' and they are supporting alternative production and distribution systems, such as organic farms, community gardens, and local farmers' markets. An indication of the integration of these concerns into mainstream American culture is the fact that even gigantic commercial institutions (the ones many of us blame for the situation in the first place), such as Walmart and Campbell Soup, are now offering organic and fair-trade products.

So where does culinary tourism and a folkloristic understanding of food fit into these discussions over inequalities in and harmful consequences of the contemporary food system? In many ways, it feeds directly into it. The concept of food ways addresses the processes of production and distribution; the recognition of the everyday and the mundane illuminates the ways in which the larger structures and their philosophical underpinnings are unselfconsciously played out through our daily activities; and the awareness of food carrying identity demonstrates the ways in which our own identities are shaped, manipulated, and often misunderstood by other people and institutions.

I suggest that culinary tourism, though, is not simply thoughtfulness about the food. It can move us beyond deeper knowledge about food cultures. It can take a universal instinct — curiosity — re-channel it, and use it to lead the consumer into a deeper understanding of the culture behind that food, into the logic of the Other. This awareness of the Other also creates an awareness of the logic of one's own food — and of the power dynamics in it. Anthropologist Richard Wilk argues in his wonderful book on the food of Belize, that globalization actually creates local culture in that it creates the awareness of difference, uniqueness, and significance and creates the need for a sense of local.[16] Tourism as a strand of globalization, gives a larger (geographic) perspective that then creates recognition of local food traditions.

Tourism can also turn the tourist gaze inward, so that the tourist asks how and why a food is other for them. What then does that say about their personal culinary universe? And how is their familiar food other for other observers? Such questions draw individuals, not just scholars, into exploring issues of cultural politics over defining cultural processes. They also address the question of individual agency and the possibility of change. Social institutions do take on a life of their own, however, individuals within those institutions are making choices and can drive change. It was this sense of individual agency that I found people responding to with so much enthusiasm.

Success within the culinary tourism industry is usually measured by quantities — of consumers, of profits, of dollars spent attracting tourists. We lacked the funding, ironically, to do an economic impact assessment of the three year project. However, it seemed to be successful in other terms. By demonstrating that the exotic could be familiar and the familiar exotic, we illustrated how power comes into play in defining and negotiating those definitions. The project gave power to the individuals within this community to define their own food and to assign their own meanings. Where that leads, I'm not yet sure, but I hope that Berry and others are correct in that it is a first step.

About the author

Lucy M. Long obtained her PhD in Folklore at the University of Pennsylvania. She directs the non-profit Center for Food and Culture in Bowling Green, Ohio, and is an adjunct assistant professor in ethnic studies, American culture studies, and popular culture at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. She has published numerous articles, museum exhibits, and video documentaries on a variety of topics around food, including the books, Culinary Tourism (2004), Regional American Food Culture (2009), Ethnic American Food Today: A Cultural Encyclopedia (2015), Food and Folklore Reader (2015), Honey: A Global History (2017), and Comfort Food (2017). She also has written about Irish soda bread in Northern Ireland, the social negotiation of identity through that bread, and the interplay of politics and everyday life.

Works cited

1. World Travel and Tourism Council. 2017. *Travel and Tourism: Global Economic Impact*. https://www.wttc.org/-/media/files/reports/economic-impact-research/2017-documents/global-economic-impact-and-issues-2017.
2. Priscilla Boniface, *Tasting Tourism: Travelling for Food Drink* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); C. M. Hall, Sharples, L., Mitchell, R., Macionis, N., & Cambourne, B., *Food Tourism Around the World: Development, Management and Markets* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2003); Ane-Mette Hjalager,

and Greg Richards, *Tourism and Gastronomy* (London: Routledge, 2002); Lucy M. Long, 'Culinary Tourism,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Food History*, ed. by Jeffrey M. Pilcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Erik Wolf, *Culinary Tourism: The Hidden Harvest* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2006).

3. For an astute critique, see Lisa M. Heldke, *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer* (New York: Routledge, 2003). For a summary of the some of the issues connected to culinary tourism, see Lucy M. Long, 'Culinary Tourism, in *Encyclopedia of Food and Agricultural Ethics*, ed. by Paul B. Thompson and David M. Kaplan (Dordrecht: SpringerReference, 2013). For discussions from tourism scholars on the negative impacts of tourism, see Erve Chambers, *Native Tours: The Anthropology of Travel and Tourism* (2nd ed.) (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2010); S. B. Gmelch, *Tourists and Tourism: Reader*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2010); Kevin Meethan, *Tourism in a Global Society: Place, Culture, Consumption* (Basinstoke: Palgrave, 2001).
4. For definitions and articulations of culinary tourism from this perspective, see Lucy M. Long, 'Culinary Tourism: A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness,' *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 55⅓ (1998); Lucy M. Long, *Culinary Tourism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004); Lucy M. Long, 'Culinary Tourism in and the Emergence of Appalachian Cuisine: Exploring the Foodscape of Asheville, NC,' *North Carolina Folklore Journal* 57 (2010), 1 (Spring-Summer), pp. 4–19; Lucy M. Long, 'Comfort Food in Culinary Tourism: Negotiating 'Home' as Exotic and Familiar,' in *Comfort Food Meanings and Memories*, ed. Michael Owen Jones and Lucy M. Long (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2017), pp. 126–149.
5. For more description of the local and regional food culture, see Lucy M. Long, *Regional American Food Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009); Lucy M. Long, 'Food Traditions,' in *Encyclopedia of the Midwest* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004).
6. For a similar project, see Rachelle H. Saltzman, *Taste of Place: Place-Based Foods in Iowa*. Leopold Center Completed Grant Reports. 288. (Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, 2007). http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/leopold_grantreports/288.
7. For more on the concept of foodways, see Lucy M. Long, ed., (*The Food and Folklore Reader* Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2015).
8. Lucy M. Long, 'Greenbean Casserole and Midwestern Identity: A Regional Foodways Aesthetic and Ethos,' *Midwestern Folklore*. 33⅓ (2007): 29–44.
9. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977); Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974).
10. Amy B. Trubek, *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
11. The concept of performative discourse was developed by a number of scholars, perhaps most notably by Judith Butler who used it in exploring the construction of gendered identities. Judith Butler, *Excitable speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
12. Lucy M. Long, *Culinary Tourism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004).
13. John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (Sage Publications, 1990).
14. Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2003), p.326.
15. David Bell and Gill Valentine, *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat* (London: Routledge, 1997).
16. Richard Wilk, *Home Cooking in the Global Village: Caribbean Food from Buccaneers to Ecotourists* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006).