

## Back to the Future: The Artisan Food Producer in Ireland's Food Tourism Proposition

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**ABSTRACT:** Artisan food producers are arguably more than the sum of their parts when it comes to the important role they play within Ireland's food in tourism landscape. On the one hand, both food and tourism as well as the artisan economy are forecasted to grow globally (Yeoman and McMahon-Beatte 2016, 95; Avent 2018; Polites 2020), suggesting that there is a significant role for artisan producers to play in food tourism in Ireland, compounded by a developing interest in local and sustainable food (Sage 2010). On the other, artisan food producers are both purveyors and preservers of food culture, heritage and traditions while simultaneously driving creativity and innovation, which is important as food tourism needs to be about creating the future as well as preserving the past (Richards 2002, 16). And with the future predicted to be more like the past than was once thought (Fernández-Armesto 2002, 223), what brings artisan food producers to this conspicuous position in Ireland's food tourism landscape is arguably movement, movement between history and modernity, economics and culture, and tradition and innovation. This paper considers the increasing value of the artisan food producers' role in food and tourism that is reflective of these movements in a changing environment.

The world is evolving and in response to increased globalisation, food culture has arguably shifted, as people are thinking locally and revalorising local foods and traditions (Richards 2002, 7; Sage 2010). Local food is also considered instrumental in protecting the environment (Che 2006), as well as improving the social and economic sustainability of agricultural communities and practices (Sims 2009).

In parallel, tourism, and more recently food within tourism, is recognised as a significant revenue generator for many countries (FaladeObalade and Dubey 2014). Demonstrating this, Fáilte Ireland (2018) reported that in 2017 tourists in Ireland had spent €2 billion on food, equating to 35 percent of their overall spend, clearly illustrating how increasingly important food tourism has become to Ireland's tourism proposition, as a key lever for economic prosperity. This resulted in Fáilte Ireland (2018), Ireland's National Tourism Development Authority, developing a stand-alone strategy dedicated to developing and promoting food as an important component of the visitor experience. Additionally, the expectations of visitors have also shifted, as they increasingly seek local, authentic and novel food experiences while travelling (Richards 2002, 12).

Encompassing these developments, food and tourism is forecasted to grow significantly globally (Yeoman and McMahon-Beatte 2016, 95), and the artisan economy that predictably emerged (Intuit 2008) is also set to further develop (Avent 2018; Polites 2020).

It is therefore of interest to consider food tourism through the lens of the artisan food producer, as arguably their role is more nuanced than at first glance, identifying them as both purveyors and preservers of food culture, heritage and traditions, linked to the past, key advocates for sustainability, necessary to preserve the future, while also driving creativity and innovation now, adding value far beyond just economics.

And while clearly the covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on tourism and the food service industry as a whole, there are a number of key things at play that would suggest the role of the artisan producer is set to become even more conspicuous, and further embedded in Ireland's foodscape, into the future. On the one hand, the government has put the *Tourism Recovery Plan 2020-2023* in place (DTACGSM 2021) and Bord Bia (2021) is predicting an upsurge in consumer spending on food services in 2022, while on the other, consumers are displaying a growing interest in local foods (Sage 2010), arguably reinforced by the pandemic due to a forced contraction of consumers' sense of what local really means, as well as people's developing awareness of food's impact on the environment, sustainability and food miles (Carroll 2012; Wood 2020).

Within the existing food tourism literature there is arguably relatively little focus on artisan food producers. So, with an aim of contributing to this gap in research, this paper considers the increasing value of the artisan food producers' role in Ireland's food tourism proposition as they move between history and modernity, tradition and innovation, economics and culture in a changing environment that suggests the future may indeed be more like the past than was once thought (Fernández-Armesto 2002, 223).

### Food Tourism Overview

In recent years food tourism has experienced a significant growth resulting in it becoming "one of the most dynamic and creative segments of tourism" (UNWTO 2012, 5). Food tourism can be 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). However, it is important to note that within the tourism literature there are a number of additional terms used to describe food tourism, such as culinary tourism and gastronomic tourism, which together with food tourism represent the most commonly used (Ignatov and Smith 2006; McKercher et al. 2008; Henderson 2009; Horng and Tsai 2010; Richards 2002, Long 2004, 20), although they can often be used interchangeably by some academics (Horng and Tsai 2010; Ellis et al. 2018), and plausibly by tourists themselves, depending on their level of knowledge and motivation.

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### The Evolution of Food Tourism in Ireland

Recently, in Ireland, there has been a renewed focus on local, sustainable and seasonal food combined with the championing of producers and artisans and nurturing talented chefs, resulting in what Mac Con Iomaire (2018a) has called an Irish food renaissance. And while Ireland has long held a strong reputation for food quality, it is only in the last twelve years or so that significant efforts have been made to integrate food into its overall tourism strategy when following the recession, John Mulcahy, former head of food tourism at Fáilte Ireland, recognised that food had the potential to play a much more central role in tourism, to both drive the economy and have a positive impact on tourism in general, with Quigley et al. (2019, 195) stating that he was “instrumental in the shaping and implementing of a food tourism [or] food *in* tourism policy and strategy in Ireland from 2008-2018”.

Since 2010, Fáilte Ireland has promoted Irish food as part of its international and regional marketing strategy, leading to the current iteration, *Food and Drink Strategy 2018-2023* (2018), choosing to adopt a wider ranging definition to represent the role of food in Ireland's food tourism approach which states that: “Food Tourism includes any tourism experience in which one learns about, appreciates and/or consumes food and drink that reflects the local cuisine and culture of a place” (OCTA 2015, cited in Fáilte Ireland 2018, 9). This definition arguably serves to illuminate the integral role artisan food producers must play then in order to deliver this experience. And when compared to Hall and Sharples' (2003, 6) definition of food tourism, it is certainly a broader one, as it accounts for food *in* tourism, as every visitor, domestic and international, must eat during their stay.

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### Picturing the Tourist

Research undertaken recently by Fáilte Ireland (2019) identified some key reasons why domestic and international tourists holiday in Ireland - interesting history, heritage and culture, beautiful scenery, natural attractions, hospitality, as well as activities like festivals amongst others. Recognising that most visitors do not visit Ireland for its food offering alone as “food is seldom the key reason

for visiting a destination and most often is considered as part of the overall destination experience” (Richards 2002; Long 2004; Selwood 2003, cited in du Rand & Heath 2006, 209), the food tourism proposition has been integrated into all aspects of tourist destinations, reinforcing the country's food *in* tourism approach.

And while food may not yet be a key reason visitors travel to Ireland, research shows that approximately 90 percent of those that travel do however expect high quality food and drink experiences while on their trip (Fáilte Ireland 2019), with visitors confirming that their experience of local food and drink is mainly “satisfied through the smell, taste and visual image of local food” (Kim et al. 2009, 427) arguably positioning the artisan food producer as central to meeting visitor expectations.

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### A Snapshot of the Artisan Food Producer

On review, there is no one definition that classifies artisan food production/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 viewpoint, 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.ie 2015).

From a cultural perspective, more subjectively, Irish food writer John McKenna articulating a connection between food, people and place, expresses that “artisan food is defined by 4 Ps: the place, the person, the product and passion” commenting 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, n.p.).

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### The Role of the Artisan Food Producer

The artisan food producer then is both a business enterprise and a purveyor (and preserver) of food culture and arguably their role sits within both the production and consumption of food in tourism. On the one hand, from an economic perspective as well as within the applied field of tourism management, food tourism is a business (Getz et al. 2014, 26), and within that space, artisan food producers must operate viably to be successful, and in so doing they contribute to rural development and local economies (Ibery and Kneafsey 1999; Sidali et al. 2013).

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On the other, through the lens of cultural anthropology, they are important providers of both the food and drink experiences and often the environment through which tourists experience a destination (Getz et al. 2014, 27; Kivela and Crofts 2006; Hjalager and Corigliano 2000), as they look to connect to local culture and heritage through authentic experiences (Sims 2009; Bessière 1998), which arguably artisan producers are well positioned to provide as purveyors of hand-crafted, traditional and/or farm produced foodstuffs (Fáilte Ireland 2019).

Today Irish artisan food producers produce a wide array of products using traditional methods, many on site where the ingredients are grown or reared and these are the types of food that Boniface (2016, 141) suggest that tourists see as “traditional, wholesome, fundamental, real, authentic, and artisan delivered, and ‘true’ in some way”.

Interestingly, research shows that the artisan food producer considers their primary role to be the core production of their product(s) for purposes of sale, while their food in tourism role is secondary, with some not recognising that they play a role, even if indirectly (O’Flynn 2021). This means that their role in tourism often develops organically. And while there have been working groups to input into Ireland’s food tourism strategy such as Fáilte Ireland’s food champion group, within which they have participated in the past, it is not a regular, ongoing process, highlighting a disconnect. Of interest too, is that the food champions network is now a stand-alone entity, no longer connected to Fáilte Ireland, and operates as a paid consultancy service (O’Flynn 2021).

This would suggest that what is required then is a level of on-going consultation and dialogue to reconnect both the tourism agencies and artisan food producers on the ground, in order to plan for, and proactively provide the necessary supports, to embed them in a successful long-term food tourism strategy, by including them as a key stakeholder, as arguably this is not the typical approach currently and is a topic mainly absent from current literature.

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### Between History and Modernity: Past, Present, Future

So, in what space do artisan food producers operate today? Arguably they now play an important dual role in Ireland’s food tourism offering as they provide both a link to the past as well as to a sustainable future, through their use of traditional methods, recipes and skills to produce small batch food stuffs.

Looking to the past, while not often recognised, Ireland does in fact have a rich food history, originating in its ancient diet (Lucas 1960), through to the complex social, cultural, political and economic impacts of the potato on the land, its people and diets (Cullen 1981, 140-171; Boylan 2016, 403-420). Today, history and heritage is a huge draw for tourists as it is seen as a link to a rural past that is rapidly disappearing in a modern world (Storey 2017, 200). Richards (2012, 14) posits that food is “a key part of all

cultures, a major element of global intangible heritage and an increasingly important attraction for tourists” and while some exponents may argue that Ireland failed to develop a distinctive food culture of its own (Diner 2001, 114), there are others who argue that food is indeed a key element of Ireland’s intangible cultural heritage which significantly contributes to food tourism because “engaging and celebrating our food stories enable us to provide and enjoy more authentic food experiences” (Mac Con Iomaire 2018b, 109), and artisan food producers are well placed to provide these experiences through their food and the environments within which it is produced and consumed.

Local and artisan food has also gained popularity as a means to counteract the increased globalisation and McDonaldisation of food (Richards 2002, 7; Hall and Mitchell 2003, 85), as modern day consumers rethink their role as citizens in terms of what makes a “good life” (Soper 2004), influencing tourists to make choices that positively impact sustainability and support local economies (Che 2006), and is echoed by the World Travel Organisation (UNWTO) who outlined in their 2012 *Global Report on Food Tourism*, that food tourism and the appreciation for artisan producers is on the rise stating that “people are voting with their feet and wallets for good, clean, fair food” (UNWTO 2012, 22).

Looking forward, sustainability is key to ensuring the future of our planet, and while globally we may still be a long way from achieving this complex but necessary goal (Nemetz 2022, 3; IPCC 2022), Rinaldi (2017) suggests that when we talk about sustainability in food tourism it is about balance - people, businesses and their activities operating in harmony with a place, its history, culture and natural resources amongst others, while Everett and Aitchison (2008, 14) posit that “food tourism has a role in securing the ‘triple bottom line’ of economic, social and environmental sustainability”. And this is of interest because research shows that sustainability and the environment hold significant importance for artisan food producers in their role in food in tourism: from a farm to fork ethos; ecotourism, with a focus on the quality not quantity of tours to artisan food production sites; zero waste; biodiversity; organics; sustainable packaging; and the circular economy principals of reduce, recycle and reuse (O’Flynn 2021).

Linking back to how in a changing environment the future may [optimistically] be more like the past than was once thought (Fernández-Armesto 2002, 223), the artisan food producer arguably captures the zeitgeist of the 2000s in that they can provide a desired link to the past while also being an important link to the future, driven by their own values and ethos, which feasibly can be seen as more authentic when compared to how food corporations operate, for example. Compounded by the current Covid-19 pandemic, (and now the war in Ukraine), the move to local has become even more acute emphasising the importance of local food production and the value of short

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food supply chains globally (Cappelli and Cini 2020) and research suggests that changes like this will continue to influence consumer behaviour post-pandemic (Bord Bia 2020). Feasibly, this will provide opportunities for local artisan food producers to exploit this shift when both domestic and international travel grows again.

Currently, Ireland's food tourism strategy, (and agrifood), is relying on the artisan producer to meet tourist's expectations and deliver on the image of Ireland that is being promoted overseas. However, it would appear that it is the artisan food producers themselves who have organically evolved into this space, driven by their own ethos and values, which by default has enabled them to meet tourist expectations. This would suggest that there is scope for a more formal collaborative approach between government agencies and artisan food producers to build on this success further, as research highlights that while they may be extolled as the face of Irish food, the government's priority remains focused on "big agri-business" and food exports to drive economic prosperity (O'Flynn 2021). This means that there is untapped opportunity to be explored in pursuit of a well-considered sustainable food and food tourism strategy for the future as well as ensuring their contribution to Ireland's food tourism offering is protected today.

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#### **Artisan Food: A Medium for Preserving Culture, Heritage and Traditions**

Recognising the importance of food as an element of, as well as a vehicle to explore and experience, the culture, heritage and traditions of places, arguably it is important to preserve and protect it for future generations too, with Mac Con Iomaire (2018b, 109) highlighting 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". Artisan producers are passionate about what they do, and this passion is also channelled into preserving Ireland's heritage, which research shows is important to artisan food producers, where they play a number of key roles (O'Flynn 2021).

The first role is in preserving intangible heritage in the form of traditions, crafts, skills and knowledge (Heritage Council 2007) of food, through such ways as the continuation of traditional practice on the family farm, preserving old production sites, as well as manual skills such as cheese making and fish smoking, particularly because so much food production is now highly automated, and because admittedly once this knowledge is gone, it cannot be replaced (O'Flynn 2021).

The second is related to place and preserving the country's natural heritage, which is considered to be the land and landscapes, animals, wildlife and natural habitats of Ireland (Heritage Council 2007). In terms of the land, Urry (1995, 17) suggests that one of the ways that society connects with the physical environment is through

"stewardship of the land so as to provide a better inheritance for future generations living within a given local area" and research shows that artisan food producers often consider themselves to be only the custodians of what they own, with the job of protecting, preserving and adding to it for the time they are there, so that the story of a place and what it is used for will live on after they have gone (O'Flynn 2021). While a third is preserving a place's tangible heritage in terms of the historical buildings that are integral to the landscape itself (Heritage Council 2007).

Research highlights that 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 large-scale producers, at both the primary and value add stage of food production, as they do not operate in the pursuit of profit at any cost (O'Flynn 2021). Noteworthy here is agrarian 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 care about the land in a way that corporations and machines never can. Artisan food producers then, play an important role in preserving, protecting and perpetuating Ireland's tangible and intangible culture and heritage, raising the question as to whom this would be entrusted to ensure that it can be experienced and enjoyed by visitors (and locals) into the future, without them? This is particularly relevant when considered through the lens of collaboration, raised earlier, with artisan food producers expressing concern that while government gives voice to the value of traditions, culture and heritage, policies tend to favour big business at their expense (O'Flynn 2021).

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#### **From Tradition to Innovation**

Realistically, food tourism must also evolve in order for it 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" and 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 in tourism becoming unsustainable in the long-term.

Linked to the cultural and creative industries, artisan entrepreneurs are people who "use their skilled trade – especially involving working with the hands – to discover or create, evaluate and exploit opportunities for new goods, materials, processes, ways of organising and markets" (Ratten et al. 2019, 583) and arguably from a food perspective, it can include those who create or recreate traditional products in new and contemporary ways as well.

When it comes to entrepreneurship and innovation, Zhao (2005, 25) argues that the "combination of the two is vital to organisational success in today's dynamic and changing environment[...]" and recent research shows that

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often artisan food producers have innovation at the centre of their business, in terms of products, services and experiences, and notably all self-driven (O'Flynn 2021). To help put this into context, some examples, though not exhaustive, are: creamed honey, caramelised garlic and an interpretative centre from Drummond House; a new berry wine from Wicklow Way Wines, along with an intention to develop a 'centre for creation' involving an organic market garden, and facilities for visitors to work with metal and clay, suggesting a clear link between food tourism and creative tourism (Richards 2012, 17; OECD 2014); fish smoking classes combined with a lunch of local products from Woodcock Smokery; as well as Killenure Dexter Beef planning to open a Bovine Museum, a world's first, amongst others (O'Flynn 2021).

Artisan production has regained its value (Teixeira and Ferreira 2019) and is reflected in both Ireland's (DAFM 2021) and EU policy makers' increased interest in artisan food production and the positive impacts it can have on rural development and the economy (Tregear 2005). This is particularly resonant now as the Irish government makes funds available to artisan food producers through the LEADER program, as a result of the current pandemic (DAFM 2021), recognising their deep connection to, and the value they contribute to local communities and the economy as indigenous Irish businesses.

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### Between Economics and Culture

At a high level it is noteworthy that as well as driving tourism numbers and revenue growth through export earnings, promoting Ireland as a travel destination, including its food component, also underpins economic development in other areas, such as foreign direct investment into Ireland through tourism marketing. Arguably it is in the pursuit of this broader economic aim that the government recognises the convergence of tourism with other economic activities, such as the food sector and food tourism amongst others, as opportunities to enhance Ireland's brand and support this growth (DTTAS 2019).

And while the artisan food producer is motivated by more than just profit, driven by passion, preserving traditions and education for example (O'Flynn 2021), in order to play a cultural role in connecting artisan food to people and place, the artisan food producer's business enterprise must first be successful, subsequently creating economic value (Richards 2012, 23) and generating a multiplier effect within communities and reducing leakages in the economy (Boyne et al. 2003; Hall and Mitchell 2003, 83).

Through the lens of cultural anthropology artisan food producers provide an important bridge connecting the experience of food to that of the destination as often tourists are in search of an authentic cultural experience which they look for in local foods and eating places (Boniface 2016, 15-16), a desire to experience a taste of

place so to speak, and this can be a key motivator in destination choice (Reynolds 1993; Richards 2002, 12). Tourists have become increasingly interested in learning about the heritage, culture and history of the places they visit (Richards and Raymond 2000), and local artisan foods are seen as "authentic products that symbolise the place and culture of [a] destination" (Sims 2009, 321).

Aiming to bridge the gap between economics and culture, the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine (DAFM) recognises that in order to further develop agri-food in Ireland with a view to creating employment, it must think beyond "the strict definition of "food production" to incorporate cultural products linked to the environment and tourism" (DAFM 2010, 12), outlining how an integrated agri-food and tourism strategy can serve the growing segment of tourists interested in "authentic, culinary experiences from food trails to cookery courses" (DAFM 2010, 12) and as artisan food producers are embedded across the country arguably there are numerous opportunities for visitors to encounter their food.

However, while certainly adding to the success of food tourism, and ultimately Ireland's tourism proposition overall, it is important to note that artisan food producers are not the main focus of any food in tourism strategy specifically and therefore must navigate their role independently to be successful. Research shows that the experience of artisan food producers on the ground is at considerable odds with the valorising rhetoric contained within strategies and policies that purport to support them within their food in tourism role, in the context of access to funding and grants, navigating supports, existing outside the norms of "big business" and the lack of joined up thinking across various state agencies and departments (O'Flynn 2021). These challenges raise questions as to whether they are truly valued for their contribution to food and food tourism or instead whether this value is overshadowed by the government's pursuit of broader economic aims. And this in turn raises the issue of what impacts this could have in terms of their long-term success, highlighting a potential risk of loss, not just to the economy, but more worryingly, to Ireland's cultural landscape (Ibid) and is worthy of further consideration.

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### Conclusion

Amplifying the voice of the artisan food producer, this paper highlights the dynamic and nuanced role they play in food tourism today, as an important link to the traditions of the past, ensuring relevancy through smart innovation, as well as representing a model for sustainable practices to safeguard our future, all of which meets visitors' needs in an ever-changing environment.

In a post capitalist, neoliberal society, we are learning that it is imperative that we live within our planetary boundaries (Rockström et al. 2009) and sustainability and protecting the environment have become key

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considerations in how we live today. In a fast-moving world, links to the past, our history, food culture, and traditions provide knowledge and skills that can inform the type of future we build. And in the gap between what was and what can be, the value of artisan food producers is key, as they embody an important link to the past, present, and future of not just food in tourism, but food in general, connecting visitors to multi-faceted experiences that will serve to continue to evolve Ireland's food story sustainably.

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