

LOCAL CUISINE AND AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS AS A MEANS OF ENHANCING TOURISTS' GASTRONOMIC EXPERIENCES IN GREECE

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Abstract

Gastronomy in nowadays acts as a 'pull' factor and can create 'loyal' visitors, thus it has been used as a core element in destination marketing. Culinary tourism offers opportunities to the communities to connect tourism with the local food networks, responding at the same time to the specific needs of tourists. Moreover, culinary tourism constitutes a part of experiential tourism and also a source of sustainable tourism which supports the local producers and boosts the local economies. The 'Greek Breakfast' project is an initiative of the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels (HCH), which focuses on the Greek culinary tradition and aims to promote the wealth and authenticity of local agricultural products and gastronomy by uniting hoteliers and local producers. Focusing on this project, the paper examines the relationship between gastronomy, tourist experience and the agricultural production.

Introduction

The connection between tourism and gastronomy is very strong. Food is a crucial factor not only because it covers the biological needs of the tourists' but also because it contributes to the quality of their experience, and thus it can mark the overall travel experience.

The classic definition of gastronomy referred to the study of 'good eating'¹. The term gastronomy tourism was first proposed in 1998 by Long² to express that tourists can experience other cultures via food. According to Wolf³, gastronomy tourism defined as "travel in order to search for, and enjoy prepared food and drink... unique and memorable gastronomic experiences". In literature there are a number of definitions about travelling for the taste of food^{4,5,6}, the common points between all are two:

first, the gastronomic activities can be the primary but also the supportive motivation for travel and second, the gastronomic activities must be unique and memorable.

Until recently, food as a tourist attraction was considered as a secondary resource but nowadays, food tourism has been identified as a primary activity and form a concrete segment of the tourism industry. As a result, many tourist destinations have begun to focus on their local food and cuisine as an important element and pull factor in the promotion of their destination⁷. On the contrary, in Greece while its cuisine is internationally well known about the traditional agricultural food products such as olive oil, cheese (feta), honey, yogurt, etc., and the high nutrition value of the raw materials, the gastronomy does not form a significant element of the Greek tourist product. Two are the main problems: first the unstable quality along the spectrum of the gastronomy providers and second, the shortage of effective promotional strategy focusing on gastronomy wealthy of Greece.

The paper is divided into six parts. Following this introduction, section two presents the literature. Section three, briefly presents the 'Greek Breakfast' initiative. Section four, introduces the methodology of the research, while in section five the survey's results are analysed. Finally, in section six the conclusions of the study are discussed.

Literature Review

Richards⁸ designed a model of gastronomy tourism. This model depicted the links in gastronomy tourism starting with the production of food, consumption, and experiences. Gastronomy tourism can be related in to different parts of the production–consumption chain. For example, from sampling the 'raw' product at the farm to the gastronomic experiences provided by restaurants. In the former case the 'quality of opportunity', to savour the basic product is most important, whereas in the restaurant much more focus on the whole 'quality of experience'. Consequently, adding more elements to the basic product will enhance the experience for the consumer, and add more value to the product.

According to Heidegger⁹, authenticity has three characteristics: (a) mineness, (b) resoluteness, and (c) situation. In tourist experience framework, mineness includes a desire to understand by myself the tourist experience. The resoluteness, connected with the desire to visit unpopular to tourists remote places. Authentic tourists would find every experience as a unique situation valuable in itself¹⁰. The gastronomy experience embodies the Heidegger's approach of authenticity⁹. First of all, gastronomy it is not a common tourist activity but more a unique situation. It includes unique activities which lack conformity, such as harvest fruits and tasting

local ingredients, thus it offers rare experiences. Additionally, tourists have the opportunity to understand by themselves what is going on with the tourist experience. The consumption of the local products and traditional food provides knowledge about local culture, habits and nature, offers awareness about food/products preparation or production, gives the opportunity to explore traditions and emphasizes the authenticity of the experience.

At local level the gastronomy tourism offers opportunities for communities to integrate tourism and local food systems in order to improve both the economic and social environment of the tourism destination^{11,12}.

According to Hall, Mitchell and Sharples¹³, there are several practical components which can maximize economic and social leverage between producers and the tourism industry, such as: reducing economic leakage by using local renewable resources, recycling financial resources by buying local products and services, adding value to local produce before it is exported, e.g. use local food as an attraction to tourists thereby increasing the circulation of tourist expenditure through the local economy and attracting external resources. A significant element is the creation of an immediate relationship between the consumer/tourist and the local producers by selling direct to consumers via farm shops. At social level, the gastronomy tourism can provide opportunities to new generations, by creating new jobs and motivate young people and women not to abandon the countryside^{14,15}. Moreover, it gives to the farmers the ability to rethink their production activity and obtain adding value to their products by ensuring that the local products and the production methods are not lost in the face of globalization¹⁶.

In conclusion, gastronomy helps the destination to build a 'brand' that can benefit the region by attracting more visitors and investments, and creating a unique/authentic visitor experience that can connect the consumer with the people and places who involved in food production.

The “Greek Breakfast” Project

The Hellenic Chamber of Hotels' vision for 'Greek Breakfast' project is to become the connection between tourism, local communities and local produce. This connection is believed to have multiple positive social and economic impacts in the primary and tourism sector.

This project aims to give to hotel guests the chance to get to know the gastronomic wealth of Greece and to taste at breakfast the innumerable Greek products (such as

Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) products, Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) products, Traditional Specialties Guaranteed (TSG) products, traditional and organic products). 'Greek Breakfast' is a combination of 'Greek cuisine' – which is part of the 'Mediterranean Diet' - and the variety of local cuisines as reflected in Greek gastronomic destinations. The ultimate objective is the satisfaction of the hotel customer through the acquaintance with local products and local cuisine of every destination in Greece. This acquaintance will be gastronomic, but also cognitive and cultural.

The initiative brings together hoteliers, chefs, farmers, producers, representatives of chambers of commerce and local government of each Greek region. The challenge is for them to agree on a 'local quality pact' that would lead to the adoption of the 'Greek Breakfast' philosophy by hotels. The 'local pact' is the organizational structure set up by HCH and its main objective is the formation of the Local Portfolio in each region of Greece. Twenty nine portfolios have been completed until today. The Local Area Portfolio is composed of tangible and intangible goods, and the human power of each site associated with gastronomy. All culinary data (culinary history, products, foods, recipes, producers, literature, culinary personalities, culinary myths) are recorded in an open information system.

The chamber aims to establish 'Greek Breakfast' throughout all hotels of the country. Today, the project includes 608 hotels (for all classes) and 74 local producers¹⁷.

Methodology

The purpose of the research was to investigate the relationship between the local gastronomy, tourist experience and the local economy. The approach of the above objective took place through a primary survey, aimed to record the perceptions of managers of hotel accommodations which have joined the above project. The research sample included the total number (399) of hotels which have joined the 'Greek Breakfast' project until the time period that the survey was conducted. During the period March-May 2015 a structured questionnaire has been sent via e-mail to the respondents three times. Finally, a total number of 110 valid questionnaires were collected, which means a 27.5% of the total population. Bearing in mind the nature and the difficulties of the survey the percentage of the sample considers as an acceptable one. The collected data were statistically analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. The methodology adopted for the data processing, includes descriptive statistic measures and Non-parametric statistic.

Survey Results

Sample's profile

Of the 110 hotels participated in this survey, 22 hotels belong to 5-star class (20%), 37 hotels to 4-star class (33.6%), 33 hotels to 3-star class (30%), 16 hotels to 2-star class (14.5%), and just 2 of them to 1-star class (1.8%). Consequently, hotels ranked to the upper classes are dominant in this survey. Furthermore, the vast majority (80%) of hotels are operating as independent hotels rather than chain hotels (20%). Concerning the type of hotels, more than half of the respondents (57.3%) are resort hotels, followed by city hotels (26.4%) and rural hotels (16.4%). Of particular interest is the data analysis on the number of beds. Specifically, almost half of the sample's hotels (46.4%) are small units with 1 to 50 beds, while big units are a minority in this survey. In terms of operation period, the percentages are almost equally divided with 51.8% to 'seasonal' and 48.2% to 'all year' operating hotels.

Greek breakfast and its acceptance by hotels' customers

First, the participants were asked to indicate in a scale of 1 to 5 their perceptions regarding eighteen statements concerning the contribution and the benefits of 'Greek Breakfast'. It should be noted that all of these aspects constitute important objectives of the project, as set by the Chamber. Overall, the participants rated high most of those aspects. Specifically, 93.7% of the respondents found that 'Greek Breakfast' contribute much or very much in the promotion of local products and local cuisine of each region, 91.8% felt the same for the project's contribution in the promotion and enhancement of the country's culinary heritage and identity, 90.9% for the contribution in the diversification and enrichment of the tourist product offered by the country, and 88.2% recognize the important contribution of the project in the exploitation of the cultural gastronomic wealth of Greece. Table 1 provides also the mean evaluation of the eighteen different aspects. It turned out, that the lowest level of project's contribution always according the respondents' opinion concern the 'job creation', followed by, the 'acquaintance of producers and consumers', and the 'achievement of sustainable development'.

Table 1: The level of contribution of the Greek breakfast in various aspects

	Not at all	Slightly	Quite enough	Much	Very much	Mean	SD
In the creation of a unique and authentic experience for visitors	0.0	2.7	12.7	30.9	53.6	4.35	0.808
In the diversification and enrichment of the tourist product offered by the country	0.0	0.0	9.1	32.7	58.2	4.49	0.660

In the promotion and enhancement of the country's culinary heritage and identity	0.0	0.0	8.2	30.0	61.8	4.54	0.645
In the promotion of the natural production environment of every taste	0.9	1.8	23.6	31.8	41.8	4.12	0.896
In the diversification and promotion of the specific characteristics and the competitive advantage of destinations	0.0	3.6	17.3	40.9	38.2	4.14	0.829
In the promotion of local products and local cuisine of each region	0.9	0.0	5.5	26.4	67.3	4.59	0.681
In the enhancement of local producers	0.0	2.7	14.5	29.1	53.6	4.34	0.827
In the enhancement of local economy	0.9	3.6	19.1	29.1	47.3	4.18	0.930
In the acquaintance of producers and consumers	4.5	12.7	29.1	33.6	20.0	3.52	1.090
In the stimulation of the links between hotel businesses and local producers (collaboration between primary and tertiary sector)	0.9	6.4	23.6	41.8	27.3	3.88	0.916
In the preservation of the traditional ways / processes of production	0.0	4.5	30.0	38.2	27.3	3.88	0.865
In the exploitation of the cultural gastronomic wealth of Greece	0.0	0.0	11.8	37.3	50.9	4.39	0.692
In the change of tourism entrepreneurs' attitudes towards quality	0.0	1.8	11.8	34.5	51.8	4.36	0.763
In the development of gastronomic tourism and other alternative forms of tourism	0.0	1.8	14.5	39.1	44.5	4.26	0.774
In the achievement of sustainable development	0.9	4.5	35.5	38.2	20.9	3.74	0.874
In the attraction of more quality tourists	0.9	11.8	22.7	34.5	30.0	3.81	1.027
In job creation	3.6	20.0	36.4	23.6	16.4	3.29	1.078
In the promotion of healthy and Mediterranean diet	0.9	1.8	16.4	35.5	45.5	4.23	0.853

Another interesting subject to investigation in this research, is the level of acceptance of the 'Greek Breakfast' by the hotels' customers, as this will partly affect the success of the whole project. Impressively, the results are very promising as more than half of the participants (57.3%) reported that the percentage of their customers who choose 'Greek Breakfast' as their breakfast ranges from 76 to 100%. In the 26.4% of the hotels this percentage ranges from 51 to 75%, while in another 12.7% of the hotels the percentage falls and ranges from 26 to 50%. The smaller percentages (0-25%) are recorded only in the 3.6% of the hotels (4 units). In addition, 56.4% of

customers who tasted the 'Greek Breakfast' place it now as their first choice. Furthermore, the respondents stated that 73.6% of their clients expressed an interest to purchase products they tasted in the 'Greek Breakfast'. In conclusion, we can see that not only the level of acceptance of 'Greek Breakfast' among the customers is high, but it has been created a secondary demand for the local agricultural products. Essentially, local producers have earned a very effective 'shop window' for their products.

Conclusion

The results of this study confirm previous research that the development of gastronomic tourism can generate significant benefits for both tourists and tourism destinations^{11,12,18,19,20}. Gastronomy tourism as it embodied in 'Greek Breakfast' project, has a crucial importance to the creation of unique and authentic experiences. It offers to the tourists the opportunity to enjoy traditional food, explore the culinary habits of the locals and increase their knowledge about local and traditional food products. All this process is pivotal not only for the evaluation of the total tourist experience but also for the evaluation of our everyday life and the effort to find meaning in it¹⁰.

The "Greek Breakfast" project as it proved creates a strong relationship between local agricultural production and tourism, enhances agricultural production, and boosts local production and economy. The tourist enterprises which adopt practices like the 'Greek Breakfast' project, they can offer a rich and diverse tourism product to their customers, contributing to the increase of their satisfaction. In addition, gives the opportunity to the hotel to improve its image, develops a competitive advantage and expands its reputation as a different and innovative business. Thus, the gastronomy tourism can act both as a useful tool for the place branding²¹ but also as a pull factor increasing the number and the 'quality' of tourists.

In the context of globalization where the tourist product of whole geographical regions tends to homogenize, the construction of a discrete tourism destination image is a critical element of their sustainability. Towards this direction, the touristic image of Greece must be enhanced and diversified. The "Greek Breakfast" program represents a first crucial official effort to this aim.

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