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Food, art and tourism as a boost for innovation: successful experiences from Italy

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Introduction

Food tourism has grown considerably in recent years and has become one of the most dynamic and creative part of tourism (UNWTO, 2012;). Gastronomy is a key part of all cultures and nowadays plays an important role in tourism allowing visitors to access cultural and historical heritage. Its increasing popularity and attractiveness is the result of the growth of gastronomic offerings based on high-quality products and the development of innovative and creative food tourism experiences (Richards, 2011; Dodd, 2012; Getz et al., 2014). Traditional food experiences are being implemented with more innovative and creative elements in order to increase the quality of visitor experience. Food and wine museums, art exhibition in wineries, gastronomic events and festivals are some examples of more appealing products.

Italy has always been internationally recognised as a gastronomic tourist destination thanks to the highest number of EU-recognised certifications for its food and drink products and a wide range of traditional local cuisine. The current popularity of food tourism has led an increasing number of producers to develop projects that integrate food, art and tourism; such activities can provide benefits to the producers and also to the local economy; moreover, they can stimulate innovation and reinforce the linkages between different sectors.

Literature Review

Since the “Experience Economy” has developed (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), tourists have no longer required basic services but have been increasingly searching for something new and concerned with consuming culture and creativity of the places they’re visiting. The process of product development has therefore shift toward co-creation, and producers work together with consumers to create moments of contact and meaningful-experience settings (Boswijk, et al., 2005). However, a careful balance should be found between innovation and authenticity in order to meet new tourists’ needs and increase their satisfaction.

As stated by Richards (2012), food can provide a basis for tourism experiences developing the meal experience, linking culture and tourism, producing distinctive foods, developing the critical infrastructure for food production and consumption and supporting local culture. In this process gastronomy can be considered a fertile breeding ground for “creative tourism” (Richards and Raymond, 2000) because it allows visitors to create rather than consume.

Food and drink can provide add value to tourist experiences in several ways. Most popular gastronomic tourist products are, for example, unique and memorable dining experiences in local restaurants or at food trucks, farmers markets, agricultural fairs, food&beverage events and festivals, visits to wineries, breweries or distilleries, gastronomic and wine routes, cooking classes, ... (World Food Travel Association, 2016). Traditional experiences are often limited to visit and tastings and they can be augmented in order to create more appealing products (Getz, 2000). For example, a list of potential developments for winery experiences has been suggested by Jaffe and Pasternak (2004): winery as a museum, art gallery and monument to taste and sophistication; winery as a fun-filled event venue; wine estate

destination; family home and business, at which all visitors are personal guests; winery as a retail outlet; winery as an educational institution; winery as living history; cultural routes.

Combining traditional and non-traditional elements can help to create a link between innovation and authenticity and stimulate a sustainable development of food tourism not only based on the preservation of the past but also the creation of future (Richards, 2002). New augmented food experiences represent a way to improve the quality of visitor experience as well as to widen food experiences and market products.

Aims and Methodology

This paper aims at providing an overview of successful experiences combining food, wine and art in Italy in order to identify areas and modalities through which they stimulate innovation in the agricultural sector, involve the consumer in co-creation and create links between global and local cultures and narratives around food.

The experiences have been categorized into 6 types: 1) Contemporary art exhibitions and modern-designed wine cellars; 2) Performing arts events; 3) Labels and packaging designed by artists; 4) Cultural awards; 5) Restoration and enhancement of cultural heritage; 6) Food and wine museums.

To meet the objective of the study a two-stage research study has been proposed. An online research has been conducted to identify the experiences with the better ranking in the search engines and to assess their main characteristics. The number of experiences collected is 219. This phase has provided the context for the second stage of the research. Stage 2 consists of a survey in order to understand motivations and results of the experiences. The number of responses collected is 79 (36%).

According to the objectives of the paper, each experience has been analysed focusing on: a) which are the most common food and art experiences b) motivations, results, characteristics and the level of innovation in terms of distinctiveness, project ideas and public engagement activities; c) cultural and artistic values and their relationship with the territory.

Results and discussion

Although a representative sample of Italian experiences was not conducted, meaning that the data reported in this study are not representative of the Italian context, the study allow a better understanding of a key market segment to which researchers devoted a little attention in the past.

The main results can be summarized as follows:

- The most common experiences in Italy are food and wine museums (45%), performing arts events organized or sponsored by private entrepreneurs (23%) and contemporary art exhibitions in agricultural companies (13%). Other initiatives tend to be less popular.
- Most of the experiences considered have been undertaken by wine producers (59%) from Northern Italy. Piedmont, Veneto, Tuscany, Emilia Romagna and Lombardy encompass more than half of experiences. We noticed a larger interest and attitude towards cultural initiatives among these producers, and this fact may be linked with both internal and external factors, such as the propensity to quality (61% of agricultural producers obtained EU quality labelling schemes), the presence on international markets and a competitive territorial system.

- Entrepreneurs are mainly motivated by their own personal passion for culture and arts and they often succeeded in transforming culture into successful experiences. Passion represents the main reason for the respondents of the categories “contemporary art exhibitions and modern-designed wine cellars” (87%), “performing arts events” (75%) and “Labels and packaging designed by artists” (60%). Economic motivations tend to be less important.
- Respondents express a high level of satisfaction with the results obtained, meaning that investing in food, culture and arts helps to improve the economic competitiveness of the company. The level tends to be higher among respondents who have undertaken contemporary art exhibitions (100%) and projects of modern-designed wine cellars (100%).
- A recurrent element is the sustainability over time: such initiatives are not sporadic but are often taken on regular basis. The capacity to ensure stability and continuity should mean that such experiences have been undertaken in order to meet individual needs and desires (as previously mentioned). Entrepreneurs were able to develop mid-term strategies paying less attention to immediate profit.

Conclusions

The development of interactive and creative food experiences has become important in many regions. Traditional experiences such as tasting and visits to local producers allow to meet the desire of authenticity expressed by tourists but lacks of innovation and high level of engagement. Going beyond this vision allow developing initiatives that combine several elements, especially food, art, culture and tourism.

This paper shows that Italy is a fertile breeding ground for creative food experiences. There is a large variety of successful initiatives combining art, food and tourism, such as food and wine museums, art exhibitions, gastronomic events and festivals, cultural awards, ... And they are often undertaken by local entrepreneurs, especially wine producers, for the purpose of following their personal passion.

Investing in creative cultural activities does not often provide immediate economic benefits but the high level of satisfaction suggests that entrepreneurs seem to have understood the potentialities for the improvement of their activities and their attractiveness, also towards tourists.

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