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Katia Laura Sidali ^a, Elisabeth Kastenholz ^b & Rossella Bianchi ^c

^a Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development, Georg August University of Göttingen, Platz der Göttinger Sieben 5, Göttingen, 37073, Germany

^b Department of Economics, University of Aveiro, DEGEI, Aveiro, Portugal

^c Department of Agro-Environmental and Territorial Sciences, University of Bari Aldo Moro, 2 A, Bari, Italy

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Food tourism, niche markets and products in rural tourism: combining the intimacy model and the experience economy as a rural development strategy

Katia Laura Sidali^{a*}, Elisabeth Kastenholz^b and Rossella Bianchi^c

^a*Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development, Georg August University of Göttingen, Platz der Göttinger Sieben 5, Göttingen 37073, Germany;* ^b*Department of Economics, University of Aveiro, DEGEI, Aveiro, Portugal;* ^c*Department of Agro-Environmental and Territorial Sciences, University of Bari Aldo Moro, 2 A, Bari, Italy*

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The countryside hosts an increasing number of alternative food networks: rural tourists can play an important role in acting as both consumer and “cultural broker” between these networks. This paper provides a theoretical framework for niche marketing food specialties in rural tourism by combining two different consumer behavioural theories, the “experience economy” and the “intimacy” model, representing a reorientation from classical marketing thinking. It explores the meaning of local food, including the pursuit of reconnection with nature, resilience to globalisation, the role of local food in reinforcing personal identity, the search for freshness, taste and authenticity, support for local producers, and environmental concerns. It considers the challenges for rural entrepreneurs and policy makers in marketing food specialties and rural regions to the post-modern consumer. Using examples derived mostly from secondary literature it identifies seven dimensions that elevate food products to an appealing culinary niche, namely, coherence, anti-capitalistic attitude, struggle against extinction, personal signature, mutual-disclosure, rituals of spatial and physical proximity, and sustainability-related practices. Food providers may use these features to signal food distinctiveness to rural tourists; policy makers can include them in their regional development models to enhance rural tourism without altering historically, socially, and environmentally layered culinary traditions.

Keywords: rural tourism; food specialties; food chains; intimacy theory; experience economy; consumer behaviour

Introduction

Farmers’ markets, agriculture-based community projects, or farm-based food festivals are just some of the networks that have been built around the concept of local food in rural areas. Most of these regional food networks share the aim of (re)establishing “closer” relationships between food producers and consumers (Holloway et al., 2007; Kneafsey, 2010), thus resisting the dominance of powerful national and global players in the food sector (Holloway et al., 2007).

From a marketing point of view, the embeddedness of local food in such alternative agro-food networks can be an interesting niche for rural entrepreneurs wanting to establish a close relationship with consumers interested in local food, popularly interpreted as produced in a socially and environmentally sustainable manner (Edwards-Jones et al., 2008). Several studies provide evidence of a latent demand for food produced and/or sold through

*Corresponding author. Email: ksidali@gwdg.de

alternative social economies (Holloway et al., 2007; Tamagnini & Tregear, 1998). This demand is crucial: the existence of a small number of customers who share an unfulfilled need in the market is the premise for a niche marketing strategy (Shani & Chalasani, 1992; Tamagnini & Tregear, 1998). And, as will be shown later in this paper, this market niche offers important synergies for rural tourism and rural heritage conservation.

Rural areas with their specific history, traditions and eno-gastronomic heritage seem suitable for the development of successful food niches. An increasing number of farmers display a positive attitude towards the articulation and the development of food-related activities, particularly related to enriching rural tourism activities (Hjalager & Johansen, 2013). This is not only relevant in the context of multi-functionality, but, as highlighted by Baritau, Tebby, and Revoredo-Giha (2011) in their study on mountain products, it is especially small-scale rural operators that best understand customers' preferences. However, researchers have also identified several obstacles for successful development of local food specialties, such as the limited entrepreneurship capabilities (Veeck, Che, & Veeck, 2006) and the high levels of fragmentation and lack of coordination of many farm and rural businesses (Hjalager & Johansen, 2013; Hjalager, 1996). Furthermore, from a communication viewpoint, signalling the distinctiveness of food specialties to the post-modern consumer is a major challenge for farm and rural operators (Tamagnini & Tregear, 1998).

The marketing of local food in rural areas requires a reorientation from classical marketing thinking for entrepreneurs and for scholars. Several authors note that current marketing approaches fall short in tackling trends related to food consumption that Dagevos condensed into "consumption as experience" and the "politicisation of consumption" (Dagevos, 2009, p. 265).

Based on these considerations, this paper provides a conceptual framework combining two different consumer behavioural theories: the experience economy and the intimacy model. It analyses how these two approaches can build a successful niche marketing strategy taking into consideration the peculiarities of food consumption in rural areas, such as the active role of tourists in the co-creation of the (highly symbolic) value of food (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004), the gaze of the rural host (Popp, 2012) and the ideologies embedded in local food (Kneafsey, 2010; Winter, 2003).

We present a range of examples derived mostly from secondary literature. We then argue that marketing that targets speciality products perceived as authentic and linked to local culture and heritage would work as an effective tool to boost the economic and environmental sustainability of both tourism and the rural host community (Lane, 1994; Sims, 2009). Finally, suggestions are made for policy makers, planners, and entrepreneurs who wish to enhance rural tourism and economic, cultural, and environmental sustainability in their regional development models.

The distinctive setting of food specialties in rural areas

Local and traditional food specialties traded along alternative supply chains are often produced "using long-established methods which require skill and expertise on the part of the producer" (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 1999, p. 2208). Furthermore, the fact that such products tend to be produced by small and passionate entrepreneurs (Belletti et al., 2007), some of whom often work only seasonally or part-time, is a peculiarity which reinforces the perceived sense of "territorial identity" by local consumers (Marescotti, 2006a, p. 67). The environment-related resources that underpin such specialties are not only of material (e.g. ingredients from rare breeds) but also of immaterial and collective nature such as "the

oral passing of food processing traditions, the jealous custody of recipes, the handcraft” (Marescotti, 2006b, p. 16, authors’ translation) and the landscape history.

Since the maximum satisfaction from such specialties can only be gained *in situ* (Belletti, 2006), rural tourists show a higher willingness to pay for such embedded food specialties and associated experiences (Renting, Marsden, & Banks, 2003) and sometimes drive many kilometres to participate in food-related activities (Murray, 2011; Spiller et al., 2011). Thus, it is evident that rural tourists can play an important role in acting as “cultural broker” or “gatekeeper” between different actors’ arenas (farmers, consumers, institutions) (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 1999), thus contributing to rural development and cultural sustainability.

Although the meaning of local food is constantly adjusted along these networks (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 1999), some inter-sectorial narratives have been identified, including the pursuit of a reconnection with nature (Winter, 2005), resilience to globalisation (Marsden, Banks, & Bristow, 2002), the role of local food for the reinforcement of personal identity (Sims, 2009), the search for freshness and taste, support for local producers, and environmental concerns (Edwards-Jones et al., 2008).

For instance, from the demand side, whilst the mainstream consumer still displays a “calculating consumption” style (Dagevos, 2009, p. 263) represented by self-interest and indifference for food provenance (Amilien & Hegnes, 2004), there is a growing number of individuals interested in environmentally and socially sustainably produced food both in their day-to-day shopping habits (Grunert, Brunsø, & Bisp, 1993) and on their holidays (Murray, 2011). This alternative consumerism (Sims, 2009) ranges from the articulation of passive purchase, e.g. when consumers buy food with ethical labels in discounters or supermarkets, to food activism (Kneafsey, 2010) characterised by consumers’ (re)territorialization efforts (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 1999; Kneafsey, 2010), e.g. by joining co-production food projects (Holloway et al., 2007) or by purchasing food from alternative food chains.

This food activism is strictly connected with the multiple associations that individuals attach to local food. On the one hand, regional food specialties can be associated with outstanding experiences derived from individuals’ food neophilia (Kim, Eves, & Scarles, 2009), or on the other, with the evocative power of food in eliciting feelings of nostalgia (Tregear, 2003). In addition, as a consequence of repeated food scandals (Albersmeier, Schulze, Jahn, & Spiller, 2009) or the widespread sense of alienation from contemporary food production (Beer, 2001; McCarthy, 2006; Sims, 2009; Winter, 2003) and of the rejection of homogenised food (Baritoux et al., 2011), an increasing number of consumers tend to view local production as a quality attribute (Kneafsey, 2010; Marescotti, 2006b). Furthermore, many individuals feel an absence of knowledge regarding food production and preparation (Kneafsey, 2010) and consider the globalised agri-business system responsible for this perceived “food illiteracy” (Alonso, 2010; Jaffe & Gertler, 2006).

A similar opposition to the globalised agro-food market and the consequent adoption of practices “against economic categories and norms” (Winter, 2005, p. 613) has also been detected from the supply side. Ilbery and Kneafsey provided an example of farmers refusing to sell specialty food to supermarkets (1999, p. 2218), whereas Cederholm and Hultman (2010) showed that by adopting a de-commercialisation ethos, rural hospitality entrepreneurs were able to attract specific types of tourists and at the same time reaffirm their own identity. The adoption of labelling and accreditation schemes is another means that alternative supply-chain actors use to signal their willingness to establish closer relationships with consumers (Ilbery, Morris, Buller, Maye, & Kneafsey, 2005). Whilst from an agricultural economic perspective such labels attempt to remove information asymmetry for the end user (Nelson, 1970), thereby adding value to the agricultural sector (Marsden et al., 2002); from a sociological viewpoint such distinctive labels are also a way to

“culturally relocalise” traditional local food (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 1999, p. 2219) in manifold ways. For instance, Ilbery et al. (2005) identified a category of schemes that demonstrate general opposition to globalisation and that claim “moral/societal legitimacy” (Ilbery et al., 2005, p. 120). Many NGO-led schemes such as “Presidio Slow Food®” (characterised by the slogan “good, fair and clean”), can be placed within this group.

Such efforts to reconnect with consumers by offering them less anonymous food are accompanied by parallel practices of the personalisation of the selling channel: alongside the historic small-scale shops of the organic and fair trade systems, nowadays some supermarkets employ innovative means of creating “closer” relationships with their consumers. In Southern Germany, for instance, the family-owned distribution chain “Feneberg” (<http://www.feneberg.de/>) sells mainly foods with “transparent” provenance (e.g. through either voluntary or state-run schemes such as geographical indications). Other retailers promote their food with very “intimate” claims, such as the increasing practice of inviting customers to adopt the animals or the crops that are the sources of the products they buy (see, e.g. a scheme in the Netherlands, <http://www.adopteereenkip.nl>, in which individuals adopt a chicken in return for receiving the eggs she produces).

Figure 1 depicts the main tendencies outlined so far in the text, both from the supply and from the demand side. The vertical axis represents a continuum, ranging from the supply of standardised, “anonymous” food products to highly personalised food. The horizontal axis represents the personalisation of the selling channel, from anonymous commercial venues, e.g. a discount superstore, to more personalised and de-commercialised venues, e.g. a farm outlet.

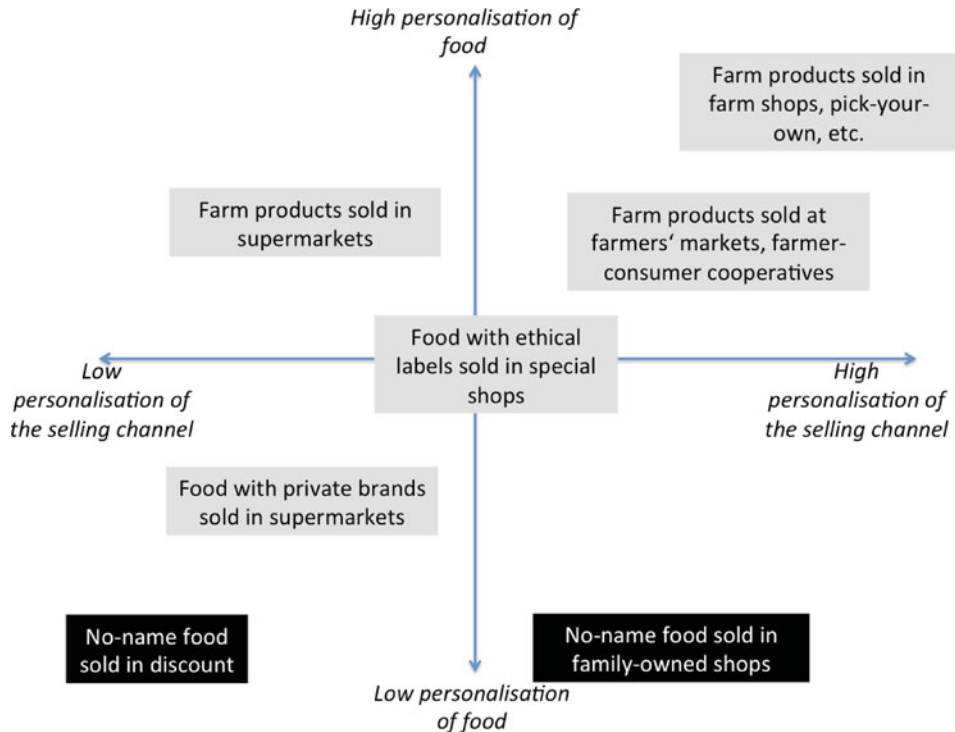


Figure 1. Personalisation of food and supply-chains.

Food and rural tourism

This study attempts to develop niche strategies that would allow rural entrepreneurs to address tourists attracted by food items embedded in alternative supply chains (i.e. the top right-corner in Figure 1). Prior studies show that rural tourists are well-educated consumers characterised by a medium to high income and interest in food-related traditions (Çela, Knowles-Lankford, & Lankford, 2007). A successful niche strategy should be able to attract both pleasure-oriented and highly involved tourists, for instance, by presenting the novelty setting and sensorial richness of food specialties for the former and by communicating the socialising and ethical practices related to food consumption in rural areas for the latter.

Currently, there are two main approaches to interpret the consumption of tourist products: (1) the experience economy model of Pine and Gilmore and (2) the intimacy model. These research approaches are analysed below. Both have been used as theoretical frameworks for tourism studies (Bügel, Verhoef, & Buunk, 2011; Cederholm & Hultman, 2010; Charters, Fountain, & Fish, 2009; Hudson, 2006). However, either the two approaches are juxtaposed (Charters et al., 2009) or both are conceptualised as alternative stand-alone theoretical frameworks rather than integrative theories (c.f. Hudson, 2006; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012; for an application of the experience economy model, Bügel et al., 2011; Cederholm & Hultman, 2010 for an application of the intimacy approach).

Since this paper's purpose is to combine both theories, we concentrate below on both the characteristics and the philosophies of each approach. In doing so, we seek to build the basis for a common theory of niche marketing for food specialties in the context of rural tourism, derived from both approaches.

The experience economy model

Several reviews devoted to understanding the tourist experience (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012; Quan & Wang, 2004; Ritchie & Hudson, 2009) confirm the paramount importance that scholars of both consumer behaviour and tourism literature attribute to this topic. According to the literature (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012; Ritchie & Hudson, 2009), Csikszentmihalyi's (1975, 1981) conceptualisation of "flow" is considered the first attempt to understand the tourist experience in the leisure literature. At the same time, in the field of consumer behaviour, an increasing number of scholars emphasise the importance of concentrating research on symbolic consumption (Hirschman, 1984; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) rather than focusing on the mere consumption of products (Ritchie & Hudson, 2009). This research area has led to important marketing and management advances related to the concept of total quality management (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1986; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1985) and brand-personality theories (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Kapferer, 1997).

In addition, the proliferation of conceptual models in the tourism literature has confirmed the relevance of the experiential view of the tourist experience (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012), which appears to be an extremely complex, multi-faceted construct. These studies showed the different understandings of the tourist experience ranging from a pure hedonic, pleasurable experience (Otto & Ritchie, 1996) to a search for novelty and change (Cohen, 1979; Farber & Hall, 2007); from a search for authenticity (MacCannell, 1973; Moscardo & Pearce, 2003; Wang, 1999) to opportunities for catharsis, the relief of emotional tensions (Ryan, 1997) (for an exhaustive overview of the major components of the tourist experience see Quan & Wang, 2004 and Ritchie & Hudson, 2009). In contrast to this well-developed area of research, there are very few studies conceptualising management strategies based on an experiential approach in the tourism literature.

In marketing, the studies of Pine and Gilmore (1998, 1999) are milestones for the theorisation of consumer behaviour in the so-called “post-service economy”, which they label the “experience economy”. This concept has been subsequently implemented especially in the tourism industry, where “experiences have always been at the heart of the entertainment business” (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 99). Essentially, Pine and Gilmore claim that experiences are different from services (as the latter are different from goods). Whereas in a service economy, experience is “wrapped around the offering just to sell it better” (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 98), in an experience economy, experience has its own “status”, i.e. the companies have to design it and “must charge a fee” to the customer for it. Hence, the experience is the new deliverable (which, however, does not mean that services and goods are not sold anymore) and the service acts as its stage. Thus, designing the experience is the most important task of the tourism “provider”, who, in Pine and Gilmore’s words, is now the tourism “stager” (1998, p. 98).

Pine and Gilmore’s contextualisation of experience in a post-service economy was so meaningful that it soon served as a tool for systematisation in the tourism literature. Ritchie and Hudson (2009) affirmed that it “has been the single most important catalyst for the widespread interest in, adoption of, and management utilisation of the experience concept in a truly systematic manner” (Ritchie & Hudson, 2009, p. 120). The managerial instructions concerning the successful provision of “memorable experiences” can be summarised as (1) provision of a theme to contextualise the experience and staging it by means of a story, (2) harmonisation of impressions, (3) avoidance of negative cues, and (4) creation of material and sensory memorabilia to reinforce recollections.

Pine and Gilmore’s experience economy constructs have been tested and employed in different tourism-related studies by several scholars (Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012; Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007; Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012) and practitioners (LTL Consulting, 2004; Voss, 2004).

Suitability of using a solely experiential approach for promoting traditional local food in rural tourism

Since this article seeks to build a framework for tracing innovative strategies for niche markets in rural tourism that go beyond the classical marketing approach, this section critically discusses the suitability of the experience economy approach to valorise niche markets in rural areas. To this end, the context of traditional local food is analysed.

The staging of a holiday experience using a theme that harmonises cues, while avoiding negative ones, relies on the classical assumption that individuals feel a natural aversion for disharmony and negative emotions. However, studies on expectancy violation theory show that under certain circumstances, negative cues can have positive effects on individuals. Specifically, the positive or negative outcome of a violation (e.g. as in the case of controversial advertising) depends much more on a complex set of factors such as the role of the communicator (Burgoon, 1993), the motive consistency (Roseman, 1991), the grade of consumer sophistication (Soscia, 2007), etc. Hence, depending on the context, negative cues can elicit positive emotions such as humour, positive associations, liking or increased attention (Waller, 2005).

In the case of food consumption in rural tourism, a positive outcome of negative cues seems plausible in some cases. Firstly, in rural areas individuals who are associated with the production and/or marketing of food specialties (e.g. farmers) are often seen as arbitrators of authenticity (Rangnekar, 2009). As a consequence, the total absence of negative cues in the staging of the rural experience could be perceived by rural tourists as incongruent with the

rural setting, and could accordingly elicit emotions of undesirability and unpleasantness. In addition, a certain degree of discomfort can be seen as necessary to reach a unique, “objectively authentic” experience (Cohen, 2002).

The question of to what extent harmonisation or disharmonisation is required to provide an experience that can still be memorable without losing authenticity appears difficult to answer using only the experience economy approach. For instance, successful examples of harmonisation strategies include the increasing number of food museums, in which a romantic view of agriculture prevails (see the Parmigiano Reggiano Museum, <http://www.parmigianoreggiano.com/where/museum/default.aspx>, near the Italian city of Parma). On the other hand, tourists may be attracted by negative cues such as in the case of the “scary food festivals” in Norway (Gyimóthy & Mykletun, 2009) or in the case of the “Festival del letame” the livestock manure festival organised in the Italian village of Pompeano (<http://www.caseificiosantarita.com/?page=6&lang=uk>).

Other elements of Pine and Gilmore’s toolbox are just as ambivalent, such as the use of stories to deliver “memorable experiences”. Agri-tourism facilities for instance very often use story-telling to present themselves as a popular venue of regional and vernacular food, especially in countries with a gastronomic tradition. For instance, the Italian farm tourism operation “ilcanticodellanatura” uses the personalisation of regional specialties with “Aunt Rosa” to relate the product assortment to a family member (www.ilcanticodellanatura.it). However, in the context of food consumption in tourism, the use of a story can also be problematic. A study conducted by Stockebrand, Sidali, and Spiller (2011) showed that among different communication sources such as a text, a story and a list of ingredients, it was the text and not the story that was the appropriate strategy to elicit customers’ preference for buying regional food. That may rely on the fact that the decision to ingest something that is very intimate and personal (Cohen & Avieli, 2004), as is the case with food, requires a communication technique that does not neglect familiar and tangible features while at the same time transmitting emotional and creative cues.

The involvement of all senses is another hallmark of the experience economy theory. This technique creates “happy and harmonious experiences” (Murtola, 2010 in Biehl-Missal & Saren, 2012) that make consumers’ shopping more pleasurable (Michon, Yu, Smith, & Chebat, 2007). Many scholars have shown how carefully designed atmosphere techniques make use of aesthetic and sensory devices to increase consumers’ desire to consume (Biehl-Missal & Saren, 2012). However, because of the manipulative effect of such devices, Biehl-Missal and Saren “raise issues of complexity and critique for the normative concept of Pine and Gilmore’s experiential approach” (2012, p. 176). They further present several examples in the literature of resistance against similar marketing practices. Hence, as highlighted in the previous discussion on alternative economies, not only rural tourism operators but also consumers are characterised by traits of resilience toward globalisation and classical marketing. Accordingly, seeking harmonisation “at all costs”, delivered by stories and reinforced by multi-sensory devices, may be less appropriate in the rural context of food consumption, since it may be considered unauthentic and ethically problematic.

The intimacy model

In recent years, the intimacy theory has gathered momentum, focusing on the individual pursuit of close or intimate relationships. This “intimacy approach” has its roots in psychological research on love and intimacy in relationships (Bügel et al., 2011; Sternberg, 1986) as well as sociological studies on embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985; Winter, 2003) and relationship marketing (Berry, 2000). The triggers for this pursuit of intimacy seem to

be manifold. Individuals show ambivalent feelings toward a process of globalisation, which permeates all spheres of life. This globalisation is experienced on the one hand as a menace to self-identity (Lull, 2000), and on the other as a powerful tool, in that it enables people to create networks with likeminded peers worldwide. Furthermore, scholars have identified a general sense of discomfort with current market-driven values, which leads them to adopt practices that reaffirm their identity and convey meaning to their consumption habits (Dimanche & Samdahl, 1994; Morgan & Pritchard, 1999; Winter, 2003). This can be described as a pursuit of love not only in personal but also in economic transactions (Bügel et al., 2011; Yim, Tse, & Chan, 2008).

This combination of de-commercialisation and sharing has been recorded in every economic sector. However, it is particularly evident in the tourism industry where many scholars detect a “back to the roots” tendency (c.f. Charters et al., 2009; Everett & Aitchison, 2008), which is particularly valid for rural tourism (Kastenholz, Carneiro, & Marques, 2012).

Accordingly, this pursuit of intimacy in the tourist context ranges from an intimate but totally a-sensual extreme of “second home tourism” (McIntyre & Roggenbuck, 1998) – a second home full of feelings albeit different in nature from the conventional home (Trauer & Ryan, 2005, p. 482) – to an intimate and extremely erotic example of sensual hotels (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006). A plethora of intermediate tourism forms lie between these extremes encompassing “sofa-hopping”, “house sharing”, “religious retreat”, “wellness oases”, “private clubs”, etc. (Romeiß-Stracke & Born, 2003). Also the personalised services and nostalgically idealised ambiances provided in typically family-owned, small country businesses, frequently provided by enthusiastic “lifestyle entrepreneurs” (Cederholm & Hultman, 2010) suggest intimate relationships potentially arising and sometimes explicitly marketed, as well as frequently sought by the market, in the rural tourism context (Kastenholz & Sparrer, 2009). Tourist attractions in the context of the intimacy theory are no longer just memorable, but personally valued and significant through authentic experiences (Wang, 1999). Here, the *mis-en-place* is replaced by ritualisation, which elicits protection and cocooning rather than adventure and thrills.

Compared to the experience economy theory, the intimacy approach in the tourist literature is still in its development step. However, a review of the studies devoted to the intimacy approach by Cederholm and Hultman (2010) and Trauer and Ryan (2005) in the context of tourism suggests the following main characteristics:

- A (staged) “economic irrationality” is defined by Cederholm and Hultman (2010) as a “seemingly non-strategic administration of the own business” (p. 20). This non-identification with a professional business-manager is further explained by the authors as a “by coincidence attitude”, which serves to differentiate the tourism operation from other “more conventional” entrepreneurial activities.
- Trust between hosts and tourists intended as responsiveness. This caring for the counterpart does not only concern the encounter between the tourists and the host since it continues also after the vacation (Cederholm & Hultman, 2010; Trauer & Ryan, 2005). Thus, even once back at home, the tourist senses a feeling of belonging to the place. This is reinforced not only by recollections of the (past) holiday but also by a post-vacational relationship between tourist and host, e.g. inter-generational linkages between hosts and guests (Stroud, 1995; Trauer & Ryan, 2005).
- Sympathetic communication between host and guest is defined by Stern (1997) as the self-disclosure of the innermost (cognitive and affective) aspects of the self.

According to Cederholm and Hultman (2010), the function of this is the transformation of the personal values of the host into touristic values.

- The physical and mental “sharing” of the tourist experience both among tourists and with the host.

Combining experience economy and intimacy theory for the promotion of culinary niches in rural areas

This section presents a framework for successful marketing strategies for food specialties in rural areas. Because of the specialised nature of the subject, we believe that a niche strategy approach based on Shani and Chalasani (1992) is appropriate. According to these authors, whenever the focus of a business is to create close and durable relationships with customers, a niche strategy is more effective than a classical segmentation approach. Whilst the latter presupposes a top-down approach (i.e. marketers segment a priori a market into smaller segments), a niche strategy approach implies a methodological rethinking that is radical in many aspects. Firstly, consumers should be identified on the basis of their common preferences for specific products, such as the *perceived high quality* of traditional food specialties, and not on the basis of their differences from other segments as in much of classical segmentation (Shani & Chalasani, 1992). Hence, the point of departure of a niche marketing strategy is the perceived superiority of a food product in terms of quality, which is either the outcome of expert (e.g. wine sampling by sommeliers) or laymen’s knowledge (reputation derived by word-of-mouth, prizes awarded in local competitions). Once similar consumers are identified, the aim is to expand the niche by means of relationship-based practices (Shani & Chalasani, 1992). However, this process does not aim at an *ex-post* modification of the product in order to adapt it to consumers. In other words, “it is the consumers who ought to adapt to the product and its producers” and not *vice versa* (Marescotti, 2006a, p. 69, authors’ translation).

In view of this, we claim that the experience economy and the intimacy theories can be suitably combined into the following features that elevate a food product to a culinary niche. We argue that the more features are attached to a food specialty, the more likely it is that this is perceived as an appealing culinary niche. However, whilst differentiation in only one of the following dimensions is insufficient, distinction in all is probably difficult to achieve.

Coherence

The commercialisation of food and wine routes, the staging of food festivals, or the building of a museum are some of the means that producers/retailers of local food use to create alliances with other stakeholders in the region that commoditise the common sense of place to tourists (Brunori, 2006). Thus, more appropriate than speaking of a quest for total harmonisation, the focus is on a coherent promotion of both the tangible and the intangible qualities of food specialties (Belletti, 2006, p. 23). The memory of the experience is provided through the “sense of belonging” that stems from both the contact of the tourists with the host or food producer and among the tourists themselves. One example of this is food festivals based on the collective promotion of rural entrepreneurs:

- German “Hoffeste” (i.e. farm-based food festivals) are events that take place on working farms. The farmer and his/her family stage a feast on their premises to celebrate their produce with the local community. Whereas this type of event has

recently become rarer among conventional farmers, it has remained a hallmark of organic farms (Spiller et al., 2011). The success of such events can be explained by the economies of scope derived by the collective and coherent promotion of the historical values of the organic system that have been established over the years. Networks of organic farmers have succeeded in creating an “informal circuit of knowledge” (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 1999, p. 2213) that cements the sense of belonging of guests with the locals and with the host, assisting the creation of enjoyable experiences.

Anti-capitalistic attitude

Tourists are attracted by the ambivalent nature of rural entrepreneurs: the latter show a strong sense of belonging to the community in which they are “embedded”. Yet, at the same time, they appeal to tourists because of their own, well-defined identity signified by their traditional know-how and by practices or attitudes that appear in opposition to the “Fordist” production regime of agro-food systems (Dagevos, 2009; Fonte, 2002). This “opposition” can be either passively showcased, such as avoiding personally undertaking business-related practices (e.g. delegating a relative to enrol the business in the register of the local commerce chamber, see Cederholm & Hultman, 2010, p. 21) or more explicitly by presenting a set of negative cues (e.g. refusal to use conventional distribution channels, see Ilbery & Kneafsey, 1999, p. 2218; Marescotti, 2006a, p. 74). Either as the outcome of staged behaviour (as in the *mis en place* tradition of the experience economy) or as a true rejection of the commercialisation ethos, this anti-capitalistic attitude may create a strong bid for attention that reinforces tourists’ sympathy toward the host or food producer:

- The Jamar cheese is a cured, handmade cow’s milk cheese, which is protected by the Slow Food movement. It stems from the Italian region of Friuli Venezia Giulia in north-eastern Italy, inhabited by an ethnic Slovenian population. In the 1990s, a cheese-maker and speleologist decided to devote a World War I weapon storage cave to a new use, namely, to cure the Jamar cheese for 2–4 months in the same way as the Slovenian community used to. Tourists on the “Routes of the Great War” are “incidentally” informed about the traditional cheese and the possibility to buy it directly from the cheese-maker himself, as it would be difficult to find it in conventional supermarkets. Furthermore, the cheese-producer does not use road signs because these are, according to him, useless. He states: “those who really want my products are able to find me anyway” (Zidarich, personal communication, 14 September 2009).

Struggle against extinction

“The more embedded and differentiated a product becomes, the scarcer it becomes in the market” (Renting et al., 2003, p. 401). Hence, small-scale facilities scattered in rural territories that are difficult to reach can turn these “drawbacks” into a major attraction for tourists who perceive the challenge of discovering a producer and his/her surrounding as a major draw (Cohen, 2002). As shown by Paharia, Keinan, Avery, and Schor (2011), the positioning as an “underdog” – i.e. a narrative of “humble beginnings, hopes and dreams, and noble struggles against adversaries” (p. 776) – is a sound strategy to obtain increased purchase intention. However, whilst among big enterprises such as Microsoft® or Apple® the narratives of struggle, intrinsic passion and determination are the outcome of fine-tuned communication strategies (“almost everyone believes Apple was started in a garage”;

Paharia et al., 2011, p. 775), in the context of rural areas small-scale operators carry such attributes by definition. An intimate approach valorising the small scale of rural operators appears to be a sound strategy to differentiate unknown food entrepreneurs in rural areas:

- The literature on alternative supply-chain actors is rich in such David-versus-Goliath examples. For instance, in Italy the Lardo di Colonnata is a PDO pig fat produced in north-eastern Italy. One of its characteristics is that it must be cured in special marble basins for about six months. For hygienic reasons, the European Union tried to introduce changes in the traditional method of processing and conserving the Colonnata pig fat. In response to this, the producers started a struggle against the EU, arguing that it was threatening the traditional production process of this specialty (Marescotti, 2006a). The final success of the producers conveyed a symbolic value to the product which explains why this historical battle is still explicitly communicated to consumers as a powerful differentiation strategy (Marescotti, 2006a).

Personal signature

The home-made character of many food specialties creates memories which are difficult to forget (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). The handmade character of these memories may be perceived by the “narcissistic consumers” (Dagevos, 2009, p. 264) as the outcome of a creative process that takes place (with those characteristics in space and time) only once and that therefore fulfils their desire of social distinction typical of “Veblen goods” (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996). However, according to a vast literature on “embodiment and sensuality in relation to food” (Holloway et al., 2007, p. 3), it is not only the artisanal quality that creates a culinary or artistic artefact, but the intimacy attached to the handmade production (Ananieva & Holm, 2006). Either by means of labels highlighting the handmade character of food or by using graphic devices, the linkage between the product and the corporal production creates a strong emotional bond for consumers:

- In the 1960s, an Italian grappa maker reached notoriety as a “grappa artisan” because he personally designed the labels of his bottles thus conferring to each one a unique characteristic. Over the years, his label designs have elevated the distiller into a myth with his labels and bottles auctioned on eBay[®] and sold on Japanese websites (Anonymous, 2006). After his death in 2010, the distillery business was taken over by his descendants, who have turned the storage grappa bottles with the handmade labels into collectables sold, bought and exchanged on the homepage dedicated to the “grappa artisan” (www.romanolevi.net/archivio.html). Apart from rural tourists, the distillery is a chosen destination of small groups of business travellers (Anonymous, 2006).

Mutual disclosure

A mutual communication is the basis for a close relationship among individuals. From the rural entrepreneur’s perspective, the revelation of the self coincides with the showcasing of both tangible and intangible attributes of food-related activities. Sharing family recipes with guests, showing the working environment and/or lodging tourists in one’s own home are but some of the practices that signal the entrepreneur’s willingness to establish a closer relationship with the guest. The latter, in turn, sends the same message to the host by

displaying the capacity to adapt to new, unconventional circumstances such as relatively basic accommodation, limited variety of food dishes, etc.

- Along the coast of the southern Italian region of Apulia, professional fishermen can host people on their boats giving them the opportunity to discover the maritime history of the region. Guests are involved in the crew's activities, are allowed to practise sport or traditional fishing, taste the freshly-caught fish cooked on board according to local recipes, etc. (Mazzapicchio, Dono, & Ruggieri, 2009). According to a study conducted within the Neptune Project (2008), this form of tourism is spreading rapidly, mostly due to the initiative of well-organised fishermen's cooperatives. A particular form of fishing tourism consists of hospitality provided by professional fishermen in their own houses or properties. They offer not only food and drink typical for traditional fishing communities but also cultural, recreational, and educational activities aimed at valorising local culture and traditions (Bianchi, in press).

Rituals of spatial and physical proximity

"Breaking-bread-together practices" are reported in experience economy manuals (LTL Consulting, 2004; Voss, 2004) as a way to elicit unforgettable experiences. The small-scale environment of many rural operators offers the appropriate context to "stage" practices that emphasise the spatial and mental proximity of tourists with each other and with the host. Examples of group consumption are already known, including specialties such as the Swiss fondue, or the Franco-Italian Café à la Valdôtaine. Such experiences can have a high symbolic meaning to guests if conveyed by the host in the form of a ritual. The act of sharing the same food in a context of physical proximity cements guests' feeling of belonging with other individuals as well as with place, eventually enhancing place attachment and correspondingly destination loyalty (Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bilim, 2010):

- The Serra da Estrela cheese is a cured, handmade PDO cheese with a creamy taste resulting from the slow draining of curdled milk after being coagulated with cardoon thistle. It comes from the Portuguese Natural Park of Serra da Estrela, in the country's central region, one of the coldest and highest regions in Portugal. The park, designated in 1976, protects the rural character of the Serra villages, its landscape, fauna and flora. The Serra da Estrela cheese is already recognised by tourists as an important local attraction (Leitao, 2004) because of its distinctive flavour and its particular eating ritual: this cheese is usually shared as a group, with everyone sitting around the table and serving themselves with a spoon. The cheese is simultaneously the highly valued outcome of a century old shepherding tradition (also associated with another icon of place - the Serra da Estrela dog), specific to this mountain area. So the cheese consumption symbolises a ritualistic, intimate sharing of a specialised quality food while simultaneously symbolising the sharing of an ancient mountain culture.

Sustainability-related practices

As stated by Lee and Wall, an environmentally friendly strategy is a "facilitator" in creating a successful food cluster (2012, p. 6), signalling a system of values that unites both responsible consumers and alternative supply chain actors. The demand for environmental friendliness and sustainability is becoming a pervasive trend, influencing even well-established food

practices as demonstrated by Mognard (2011) in her study on the gradual adaptation of artisan production of French foie gras because of consumer concerns about animal welfare:

- Hjalager and Johansen (2013) show the strong potential of natural parks as venues for combining food-related activities with environmental protection strategies. Based on protected areas in Denmark, the authors present product innovation strategies related to the consumption of sustainable food in tourism that supports biodiversity and landscape development. They identify events or food trails as ways to combine food production and tourism in protected areas. Furthermore, they detect a positive attitude to develop such strategies amongst those farmers who are already open to multi-functionality in the framework of the EU's rural development policies.

Conclusions

Earlier work on alternative supply chains in rural areas documented the importance of socially constructed food quality criteria for the differentiation of food markets (Marsden, 1998; Renting et al., 2003). As shown by Ilbery et al. (2005), the distinctiveness of food products coincides with a pursuit of both physical (e.g. with nature) and social reconnection (e.g. between consumers and food providers). However, the communication of food distinctiveness is a weakness of classical marketing theories, leading to a call for multi-disciplinary research on successful differentiation strategies for rural entrepreneurs.

Focusing on food consumption in rural tourism, this article illustrates a framework for identifying the dimensions that underpin the potential perception of food products as effective market niches that appeal both to novelty-seeking tourists as well as to more politicised, alternative tourists. The framework merges two theoretical approaches, the experience economy and the intimacy model, and we suggest seven dimensions as examples that elevate a food product to a culinary niche. The value of this approach lies in showing how food providers in rural areas can differentiate their offer by signalling different types of food distinctiveness that focus both on their own personality-traits and on the regional/local context in which they are embedded. The differentiation dimensions derived here should not be considered mutually exclusive, but rather should be seen as sets of success factors that can converge into a "unique combination of local resources, individual actions and institutional activities" (Kneafsey, 2000, p. 48).

Policy makers need to facilitate the promotion of such combinations of factors in order to obtain "new relationships between agriculture and society" (Marsden et al., 2002, p. 816). The 'Food Valley' near Parma in Italy is a clear example of this: there are a number of institutional (University of Parma, ALMA School of Italian Cooking), commercial (Barilla Academy), tourism (four food museums), and agricultural actors (Consortium of Parmigiano Reggiano, of Parma ham, etc.) that work "together" with food providers under the aegis of promoting local specialities. In countries whose awareness of their culinary heritage is still in a developmental stage, policy makers could envisage a suitable framework for the promotion of the mentioned differentiation factors. For instance, included in the selection of candidate products for PGI protection in the German state of Bavaria is the "Zoiglbier", a sort of beer whose consumption must take place in the brewing location (<http://www.zoiglbier.de/neuhaus/index.html>). This example illustrates the endeavours of policy makers to encourage tourism without altering historically layered culinary traditions.

Our study also provides important recommendations for rural entrepreneurs. The dimensions presented here show that the success of a niche product cannot be separated from

the entrepreneurs' personal characteristics. Food products are not only an important marker of consumers' identity, but also of the food providers who, consciously or unconsciously, use them to construct and affirm their own personalities. These food producers may benefit greatly from integrating their products into what has been conceptualised as "integrated rural tourism" (Saxena, Clark, Oliver, & Ilbery, 2007) or the "overall rural tourism experience" (Kastenholz et al., 2012). The entire rural destination would also benefit from presenting a richer, sensorially appealing, more meaningful, intense, "authentic" and memorable tourist experience, where food experiences can play a particular role. These experiences may be prolonged (Aho, 2001) through the continued consumption at home of the specialty food items after the visit or holiday. Food experiences should enhance both the rural destination's tourism appeal and distinctiveness and the local food production chain.

This study sets out a theoretical framework for the marketing of food specialities in rural tourism. Further studies may test the stated assumptions to provide empirical evidence. The focus should also be on qualitative research design to unearth the cultural specificities of different countries/regions including different levels of awareness of food heritage, or different proportions of indigenous or ethnic communities (Hashimoto & Telfer, 2006). It would also be interesting to survey whether the hypothesised differentiation dimensions also hold true for non-food niche markets, such as artisanal products, and to analyse to what extent these dimensions impact the overall quality of the rural tourism experience, both on site and later remembered and shared with others, how food and other regional/local resources combine in an experience that is co-created and shared by hosts and guests (Kastenholz et al., 2012). If the smaller, lesser known types of food providers in rural areas are becoming the venue of a new "contre-société" (Guilluy, 2013), they deserve significantly more attention both from scholars and policy makers.

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Notes on contributors

Katia Laura Sidali is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Göttingen, Germany, working in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development, within the Marketing of Food and Agricultural Products group. She has special interests in sensory marketing in tourism, consumption behaviour, and the role of geographical indications in culinary tourism.

Elisabeth Kastenholz is Professor of Tourism Marketing and Management in the Department of Economics at the University of Aveiro, Portugal. She has special interests in the marketing of tourist destination, and in rural tourism.

Rossella Bianchi is based in the University of Bari Aldo Moro, Italy, where she is a researcher in the Department of Agro-Environmental and Territorial Sciences. She specialises in rural development, sustainable tourism, and consumption behaviour.

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