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Francesc Fusté-Forné

University of Girona, francesc.fusteforne@udg.edu

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Futurizing gastronomic experiences in natural environments

Francesc Fusté-Forné 

Lecturer and researcher, Department of Business, University of Girona, Spain. Email: francesc.fusteforne@udg.edu

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Abstract: The current pandemic accentuated the need for a more responsible tourism system, where local food production and consumption become a cornerstone of sustainable tourism futures. Experiences embedded in natural environments are neither new nor recent, but the pandemic urged tourism stakeholders to look at nature again as a source of inspiration for tourism regeneration. The research analyses the configuration of gastronomic experiences in protected areas through the philosophy of a gourmet restaurant located in a volcanic setting in Catalonia, north-eastern Spain.

Keywords: food tourism, regional development, volcano tourism.

1. Introduction, objective and method

Experience local foods and beverages in a natural setting is anticipated to be a crucial component of future tourism experiences (see Sims, 2009; Newsome, 2020) which will contribute to the improvement of sustainable tourism management and marketing (Sharma, Thomas and Paul, 2021; Sigala, 2020). In this sense, foodscapes “can easily foster interactions between people, settings, and objects to enhance social wellbeing” (Su and Zhang, 2020, p.5). Moreover, local economic and social experiences that rely on food lead to “deeper human connections, wellbeing, and a greater sense of reciprocity with the natural environment” (Chassagne and Everingham, 2019, p.1911).

A taste of food provides a taste of local and this research is contextualised within the notion of slow food tourism (Fusté-Forné

and Jamal, 2020), which in this case happens in an environment featured by dormant volcanoes. The research analyses gastronomic experiences drawing from the example of *Les Cols*, a restaurant located in a Natural Park in Catalonia, north-eastern Spain. The research question is as follows: how and why this restaurant designs a close link to its local environment that makes it unique? How does it represent an avenue towards the transformation of tourism? In order to provide a response to the objective of this research, a case study method is adopted (Yin, 2012). This approach is particularly relevant when addressing questions prefaced by ‘how’ and ‘why’ to understand contemporary issues.

2. Food tourism in wilderness

Tourism in peripheral areas such as mountain and rural environments is based on a direct contact between people and

nature (see Lane, 1994). In particular, Boukas (2019) reports that rural tourism is “an instrument for the conservation and renaissance of rural society and culture” (p.63), where the protection and promotion of rural resources and traditions emerge as a source of a sustainable development. This is especially meaningful when tourism value is awarded to a protected area (Hjalager and Johansen, 2013).

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in the relationships between geology and tourism. Tourism in volcanic areas is important in countries such as Chile, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, or Spain, which involve many examples of volcanic environments, active and dormant. Volcano tourism is a type of geotourism (Erfurt-Cooper, 2011; Heggie, 2009). Geotourism helps travellers “to increase their knowledge about natural resources, the cultural identity of hosts and ways of preserving them” (Farsani, Coelho and Costa, 2011, p.68). A vast majority of volcanoes worldwide are located in protected areas (Erfurt-Cooper, Sigurdsson and Lopes, 2015), some of them being listed as World Heritage Sites. Thanks to their rural and natural location, volcanoes provide many opportunities for rural development and volcano tourism is “a vehicle to foster sustainable tourism development in a number of regions around the world” (Dowling, 2013, p.69).

Geological heritage and natural landscape are the drivers of tourism attraction (Dowling and Newsome, 2006) and revenue (Sigurdsson and Lopes-Gautier, 2000) in volcanic areas. However, food-based experiences are barely planned. While Fusté-Forné and Pont-Llagostera (2021) acknowledge the impact of geology on food taste, “the international research literature documents that [national] park administrations have tended to neglect the role of food and food-based experiences in parks, despite park visitors preferring more attractive eating facilities, purchasing

opportunities and food-related interpretation” (Hjalager and Johansen, 2013, p.417).

This is a topic of interest where “food tourism has a role in securing the ‘triple bottom line’ of economic, social and environmental sustainability and should not be peripheral to tourism research. It suggests an important role for food tourism in strengthening a region’s identity [and] sustaining cultural heritage” (Everett and Aitchison, 2008, p.150). This research provides a descriptive analysis of the linkages between local foods and local landscapes departing from the environment of a gourmet restaurant located in a protected area.

3. *Les Cols* and its unique volcanic identity

Les Cols is a two-starred Michelin restaurant located in Olot (Garrotxa), a county in Catalonia, north-eastern Spain, which is the home of the Volcanic Region of La Garrotxa Natural Park. The Park “is situated in the northeast of Catalonia, in the province of Girona, in the very centre of the La Garrotxa region. It covers an area of some 15,300 hectares, spread over eleven municipalities. Within the Park there are 28 nature reserves (1180 hectares) which are protected for their geological and botanical interest” (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2008). The Natural Park is “the best-preserved volcanic zone on the Iberian Peninsula, and one of the most representative of continental Europe” (*ibid*).

The Catalan Government awarded the protection of the volcanic region of La Garrotxa in 1982 in order to warrant a balance between the conservation of the area and its economic development. The Park “has about forty volcanic cones and more than twenty basaltic lava flows. The orography, the soil and the climate provide a varied vegetation, often lush, with holm oaks, oak groves and beeches of

exceptional landscape value” (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2021). It agglutinates over 1,500 species of fauna and 1,200 of flora. Added to its biological and geological values, the landscape and its distribution “into crops, pastures, woods and rural settlements” (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2008) is another reason of its tangible and intangible values. This environment is home of *Les Cols* restaurant.

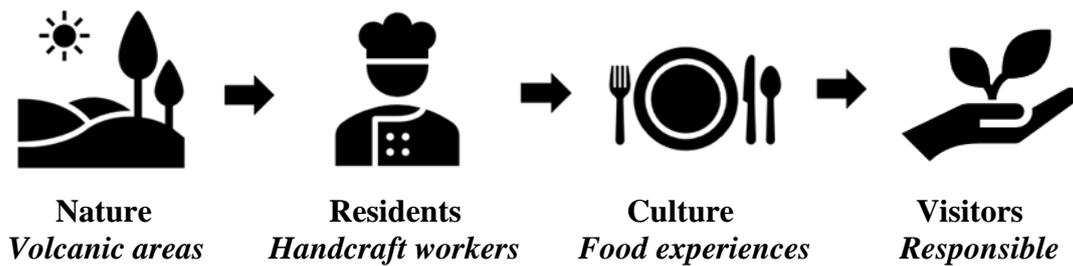
Les Cols restaurant or the so-called project of evocation is not just a restaurant, it is an architectural space designed by *RCR Arquitectes* which is internationally recognized (The Hyatt Foundation, 2021). The restaurant is developed under the mottos “the intimacy of a landscape” and “the immutable cycle of the seasons” and it is described as “all this environment has to make possible a cuisine based on the seasonality and the rural landscape of La Garrotxa; sober but essential; austere and humble but intuitive, intimate and authentic. A cuisine that must be the reflection of our way of being” (*Les Cols* restaurant, 2021).

Fina Puigdevall is the chef of the restaurant. *Cols* is the Catalan word for cabbages. *The splendor of nature* and *the fullness of life* are at the core center of *Les Cols* mission, also observed in restaurant menus. *Les Cols* offers two menus: ‘living and mystical nature’ with products embedded in the cycle of the seasons and the rural landscape of La Garrotxa, and ‘green and sustainable horizon’ which is based on the products of the own garden as a powerful example of sustainable cuisine and untraveled food (*Les Cols* restaurant, 2021). The names of the menus themselves reveal the strong commitment to the people and the places that surround the restaurant, and they also communicate the sense of place transferred to restaurant menus and to customer palates.

The restaurant has an own garden where local products grow and local seeds are recovered. Also, the garden allows the implementation of a composting system to minimize food waste. Among the local products based on La Garrotxa that the restaurant protects and promotes there are buckwheat, La Vall d’en Bas potato, corn, Santa Pau’s bean, ratafia (a traditional Catalan liqueur), chestnuts, mushrooms, and truffles. In a short film produced by Isabel Coixet (2011), *Les Cols* is described as eating in a place where everything you eat is fresh and where the chef ‘speaks to apples’. The magic of *Les Cols* relies on ‘a distillation of landscapes, sensations, emotions and a passion to achieve the essence of things’. In particular, *Les Cols* experience aims to explain things that ‘go to your stomach through your emotions’, and narrate what La Garrotxa means. Nature becomes the source of inspiration to deliver a cuisine which is based on local heritages and landscapes.

4. Conclusion

This research has discussed the role of food in tourism, and it has specially analysed how and why the identity of a restaurant can create a genuine experience in the context of a natural park in Catalonia, north-eastern Spain. *Les Cols* offers a cuisine which is rooted in the seasonality of local environments and proximity foods. It is a culinary experience which protects and promotes the authenticity of sustainable production and consumption in a globalized environment where the less the food travels, the more genuine it is. The philosophy of the restaurant relies on a nature-based experience and reports that ‘tasting the product in its own atmosphere gives it an unprecedented relevance’ (*Les Cols* restaurant, 2021).

Figure 1. The gastronomic experiences in wild environments (own source)

Implications

While this is a descriptive research which is limited in nature, this study presents implications for tourism management and marketing in volcano regions where nature-based tourism (see Buckley, Pickering and Weaver, 2003; Mandic, 2019) contributes to the wellbeing of both communities and visitors. As previous research reveals in relation to event food tourism, the attraction factor is developed when experiences (for example, dining) are focused on local foods and beverages (Fusté-Forné and Pont-Llagostera, 2021). A sense of place is conveyed to visitors in the form of festivals, markets or restaurants. Visitors must follow the rhythm of people and places as a sign of respect towards the environment and the empowerment of local communities as a source of responsible recovery, as it is observed in Figure 1.

Future research

Future research must analyse tourism systems from both supply and demand perspectives. Tourism recovery must promote a new normal where all of us who participate in tourism systems critically think about the sustainability of tourism. Is catharsis the sole solution to save tourism from the abyss? The philosophy of places such as *Les Cols*, a restaurant which is holistically planned within its local economic and social environment, demonstrates that a hopeful pathway is possible for the future of gastronomic and tourism experiences.

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Author profile



Francesc Fusté-Forné, PhD, is a professor and researcher at the University of Girona. He specialises in rural food tourism and communication and marketing. He studied food tourism phenomenon in different geographical contexts and at local, regional and national levels. Francesc is particularly interested in analysing media's role on the socio-cultural understanding of business and communities in the face of changing, challenging and evolving global trends.