

2021

Food producers and pandemics: a mystery shopping analysis

Francesc Fusté-Forné

University of Girona, francesc.fusteforne@udg.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jsr>



Part of the [Human Geography Commons](#), [Indigenous Studies Commons](#), [Strategic Management Policy Commons](#), [Tourism Commons](#), and the [Tourism and Travel Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fusté-Forné, Francesc (2021) "Food producers and pandemics: a mystery shopping analysis," *Journal of Sustainability and Resilience*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jsr/vol1/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the M3 Center at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Sustainability and Resilience by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.

Publisher's Note: Journal of Sustainability and Resilience (JSR) (ISSN:2744-3620) is published bi-annually by the Sustainability and Resilience Institute (SRI) of New Zealand. The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of SRI. SRI remains neutral about jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Food producers and pandemics: a mystery shopping analysis

Francesc Fusté-Forné

Department of Business, University of Girona, Spain

ORCID: 0000-0002-3800-9284

Received: 01/12/2020 Revised: 01/01/2021 Accepted: 03/01/2021 Published: 20/01/2021

How to cite: Fusté-Forné, Francesc (2021). Food producers and pandemics: a mystery shopping analysis. *Journal of Sustainability and Resilience*, Volume 1, Issue 1, Article 7.

Abstract: Recent research has widely analysed the significance of food in tourism. Departing from the understanding of ‘cheese’ as part of the food tourism system of a destination, this paper aims to analyse cheese factory tours as a tourism service provided by food producers. A mystery shopping approach is used to study the 75 cheese producers under the Manchego quality cheese. Results show the response behaviour of Spanish Manchego cheese producers to an email sent by a ‘tourist’ who asks for a visit during pandemic times. As a segment of food tourism, cheese tourism is gathering a growing attention by academics and practitioners, and some cheeses became international tourist attractions. While the majority of cheese producers have not stopped their operations, the current health crisis has led to a suspension of cheese-based tourism experiences. The paper informs the development of cheese-based tourism in pandemic times.

Keywords: cheese tourism, gastronomy, regional development, Spain.

Author profile



Francesc Fusté-Forné, PhD, is a professor and researcher at the University of Girona, Spain. 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.

Introduction

The health crisis has led to temporary closures of tourism services worldwide (Gössling, Scott and Hall, 2020). Spain is facing a complex situation with more than 2 million cases confirmed (Spanish Government - Ministerio de Sanidad, 2020). The country experienced a state of alarm between March 14 and June 21 (Spanish Government - Presidencia del Gobierno, 2020) and, after that, a progressive reopening of tourism has resulted in a slow recovery of domestic tourism. The gradual lifting of travel restrictions resulted in a growing demand by international tourists, starting from early July, however international arrivals have been limited because of the second wave of cases that happened in Europe in autumn.

The relationships between food and tourism have been vastly investigated during the last decade, and food tourism studies have approached the processes of planning, developing and marketing of food tourism experiences (see, for example, Ellis *et al.*, 2018; Hall, 2020; Rachão *et al.*, 2019). Food and gastronomy heavily contribute to tourism (see Rousta and Jamshidi, 2020). As an example of food tourism, cheese tourism is described as the process of attributing tourism value to cheese. Cheese tourism is a type of tourism which includes the journey to regions where milk production and cheesemaking are a significant part of local heritage and traditions (Fusté-Forné, 2015; 2020). As a consequence, visits to cheesemaking facilities and dairy landscapes have emerged as a meaningful cheese-based tourism practice.

Cheese is an identity marker of Spanish (food) culture (Fusté-Forné, 2018). There are up to 28 kinds of cheese in Spain that count on a quality label (26 Protected

Designations of Origin, PDO, and 2 Protected Geographical Indications, PGI). Among them, PDO Manchego cheese includes the largest production area (Spanish Government - Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación, 2020) and represents the Spanish cheese with the highest economic impact (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, FAO, 2018). Manchego cheese, which is named after La Mancha's region where it is made, provides a relevant understanding of Spanish cheeses.

This research, which is particularly framed on the relationships between farming and tourism, analyses how Spanish food producers are facing the Covid-19 crisis. While previous research has explored how cheese producers may find solace in tourism (see Fusté-Forné, 2016), this paper further investigates how cheese tourism is managed in a pandemic context. Drawing from a mystery shopping approach, it aims to explore the service quality of cheese producers and whether or not they organise visits to their facilities in pandemic times. Results are built on their response behaviour to an electronic message.

Study method

This research applies a mystery shopping and participant observation analysis (Miller, Hudson and Turner, 2005). A mystery shopping method aims to delve into service provision quality (Van der Wiele, Hesselink and Van Iwaarden, 2005). A mystery shopper refers to a person who acts as a customer in order “to monitor the processes and procedures used in the delivery of a service” (Wilson, 1998, p.148). Visits to cheese factories and workshops are understood as activities provided in the context of cheese tourism, a niche food tourism (Fusté-Forné, 2015). In this case, the researcher as a mystery

shopper contacted by email all the 75 cheese producers listed under the PDO Manchego cheese, in Spain. Each of the producers was contacted individually on Monday, August 3, 2020. The emails were previously programmed in order to assure they were sent at the same scheduled time.

The email content mentioned that ‘in mid-August, we will be in La Mancha, and we would like to visit your facilities and learn about the cheese-making process. Is it possible to schedule a visit? I would appreciate if you could inform us’. Previous research acknowledged that both “the speed of response and breadth of information” are crucial service quality indicators (Zehrer and Pechlaner, 2006). The recorded data included: if cheese producers replied or not; the exact time when they replied and the number of minutes it took them to respond to the email; if a visit to the facilities was possible or not; price of the visit; and any additional information provided by cheese producers. Data collection was finalised on Monday, August 10, 2020. The next section discusses the results of the study.

Results

The production of Spanish Manchego cheese is regulated by the quality label Protected Designation of Origin *Queso Manchego* (Manchego cheese), which was recognised at the European level in 1996 (FAO, 2018). There are up to 75 cheese producers certified by the PDO Manchego cheese (Queso Manchego, 2020) which are divided into four provinces (15 in Albacete, 28 in Ciudad Real, 13 in Cuenca, and 19 in Toledo) in the region of Castilla-La Mancha, south-east of Madrid. Among the 75 producers listed on the official website of Manchego cheese, 39 are industrial cheese factories, 30 are artisanal cheese workshops, and 6 are cheese cellars.

While the mystery shopper’s email was sent to 75 producers, only 32 have replied (42.67%). Among them, 17 are artisanal, and 15 are industrial cheese factories. The average response time was twenty hours. 25 of the 32 cheese factories (almost 80%) responded in day one, in less than four hours (240 minutes) as observed in Figure 1 below. Moreover, five cheese producers responded after day one (three on Tuesday, one on Wednesday and one on Thursday). Finally, two cheese producers replied the following Monday morning, after a week of sending the email. If these two cheese factories were not considered, the average response time would have only been eight hours and forty-five minutes.

In relation to the 25 cheese businesses that responded quickly, six replied to the query in less than an hour, eight in less than two hours, eight in less than three hours and three in less than four hours. Figure 1 showcases the timeline of the responses, where the fastest only took six minutes. In Figure 1, the two cheese factories that responded a week later do not appear to facilitate graph comprehension (a week means 10,080 minutes).

Among the 32 cheese factories that responded, only 15 reported that it was possible to visit their facilities (46.88%). Eight are artisanal and seven industrial cheese factories. While 60% of them (nine cheese producers) reported that tours are provided for free, three cheese businesses set a price (5 €, 12 € and 25 €), and another three did not report the cost of the activity. They were contacted again, but no response was obtained. Most of the cheesemakers highlighted that their tours are complemented with cheese tasting, and, in some cases, with wine and olive oil tasting. Specifically, one of the producers indicated that tourists could experience “a commented cheese tasting, see the

facilities, the livestock, the store and a short explanation about the work in the farm and the cheese factory”. This is the complete tour, which lasts around 90 minutes and offers a range of opportunities to build, implement and promote cheese tourism in destinations.

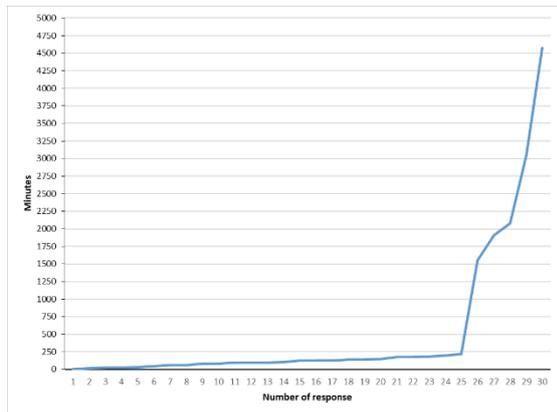


Figure 1. Speed of response of cheese producers

If we analyse the service quality beyond the response time, almost a third of the cheese producers (nine of them) informed that they do not arrange visits because of the situation derived from Covid-19. Some of them have also indicated that they do not provide organised tours and visitors must *only* “say the day you want to come, if it is in the morning or in the afternoon because we need to organize ourselves and do not manufacture that day”. This reveals one of the difficulties of the integration between farming and tourism. Thus, some cheese businesses that do not offer tours have invited to visit the store and buy the product, and one of them informed that a small free tasting would be provided.

Conclusion and implications

This research has revealed preliminary insights into the service quality of cheese producers in Spain by analysing their response behaviour to an electronic visitor message. This analysis informs food tourism management in pandemics.

Departing from a mystery shopping study and drawing on Manchego cheese producers, the research has showcased that almost half of them replied to the query. However, only 20% of cheese businesses who produce under the PDO Manchego cheese are open for tours in summer 2020. This demonstrates the difficult situation of cheesemakers in terms of recovering its relation with tourism and tourists, and how an experience focused on local production and consumption is framed during the coronavirus crisis. For example, promising results confirm that some producers offer a combined tour with other products representing Spanish food landscapes such as olive oil and wine. This cooperation may be critical to the recovery of food tourism experiences that contribute to the territory’s economic well-being.

This paper has approached cheese as part of food tourism, both from an industrial (Ermolaev, Yashalova and Ruban, 2019) and artisanal (Fusté-Forné, 2015) perspective. However, it should be considered that data collection was carried out in an uncertain period, thus its replication at another time (or another setting) could provide different results, for example, a higher response rate or a more significant number of tours. This study contributes to the emerging literature on the relationships between tourism and crisis (see Sigala, 2020). Specifically, it provides exploratory data on a tourism service at the first stage of Spain’s tourism recovery. This research also offers an innovative analysis of food tourism through ‘cheese’. It is one of the first studies that focus on food tourism in the context of Covid-19 with primary data (see Kim and Lee, 2020).

The research analyses a food tourism activity (a cheese tour) during the crisis at a practical level. Results assess the service quality from a food tourist perspective to

critically describe cheese producers' response behaviour (the speed and the information provided). This investigation incorporates a timely understanding of cheese tourism in pandemic times. It may lead to further empirical research on food tourism that informs academics and practitioners about the configuration of 'new' food tourism experiences.

Publisher's Note: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the Sustainability and Resilience Institute New Zealand official policy. The institute remains neutral about jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



© 2021 by the authors. The article is submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

References

- Ellis, A., Park, E., Kim, S., & Yeoman, I. (2018). What is food tourism?. *Tourism Management*, 68, 250-263.
- Ermolaev, V. A., Yashalova, N. N., & Ruban, D. A. (2019). Cheese as a Tourism Resource in Russia: The First Report and Relevance to Sustainability. *Sustainability*, 11(19), 5520.
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2018). *Strengthening sustainable food systems through geographical indications*. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.
- Fusté Forné, F. (2015). Cheese tourism in a world heritage site: Vall de Boí (Catalan Pyrenees). *European Journal of Tourism Research*, 11, 87-101.
- Fusté-Forné, F. (2016). Tasting cheesescapes in Canterbury (New Zealand). *New Zealand Geographer*, 72(1), 41-50.
- Fusté-Forné, F. (2018). Alimentación y turismo: potencialidades de la elaboración de queso en España. *CULTUR: Revista de Cultura e Turismo*, 12(2), 60-87.
- Fusté-Forné, F. (2020). Savouring place: cheese as a food tourism destination landmark. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 13(2), 177-194.
- Gössling, S., Scott, D., & Hall, C. M. (2020). Pandemics, tourism and global change: a rapid assessment of COVID-19. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 1-20.
- Hall, C. M. (2020). Improving the recipe for culinary and food tourism? The need for a new menu. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 45(2), 284-287.
- Kim, J., & Lee, J. C. (2020). Effect of COVID-19 on Preference for Private Dining Facilities in Restaurants. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 1-15.
- Miller, G., Hudson, S., & Turner, R. (2005). Applying the mystery shopping technique: the case of Lunn Poly. In Ritchie, B., Burns P. & Palmer C. (Eds.), *Tourism research methods: integrating theory with practice* (pp.119-130). Wallingford: CAB International.
- Queso Manchego (2020). *Denominación de Origen Queso Manchego*. Retrieved from <http://www.quesomanchego.es>
- Rachão, S., Breda, Z., Fernandes, C., & Joukes, V. (2019). Food tourism and regional development: A systematic literature review. *European Journal of Tourism Research*, 21, 33-49.

- Rousta, A., & Jamshidi, D. (2020). Food tourism value: Investigating the factors that influence tourists to revisit. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 26(1), 73-95.
- Sigala, M. (2020). Tourism and COVID-19: impacts and implications for advancing and resetting industry and research. *Journal of Business Research*, 1-10.
- Spanish Government - Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación (2020). *Mapa de Quesos y Mantequillas con Denominación de Origen Protegida e Indicación Geográfica Protegida*. Retrieved from https://www.mapa.gob.es/es/cartografia-y-sig/publicaciones/alimentacion/mapa_dop_igp_quesos.aspx
- Spanish Government - Ministerio de Sanidad (2020). *Situación actual*. Retrieved from <https://www.mscbs.gob.es/profesionales/saludPublica/ccayes/alertasActual/nCov-China/situacionActual.htm>
- Spanish Government - Presidencia del Gobierno (2020). *Estado de alarma*. Retrieved from <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/covid-19/Paginas/estado-de-alarma.aspx>
- Wiele, T. V. D., Hesselink, M., & Iwaarden, J. V. (2005). Mystery shopping: A tool to develop insight into customer service provision. *Total Quality Management and Business Excellence*, 16(4), 529-541.
- Wilson, A. M. (1998). The use of mystery shopping in the measurement of service delivery. *Service Industries Journal*, 18(3), 148-163.
- Zehrer, A., & Pechlaner, H. (2006). Response Quality of E-Mail Inquiries - A Driver for Knowledge Management in the Tourism Organization?. *Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism*, 7(1-2), 53-73.