

Sustaining through Gastronomy: The Case of Slow Food Movement in Slovenia, its Impacts on Socio-cultural Environments and Tourism Development

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Background

Rising out of the ashes of half a century lasting socialist regime, Slovenia after it got its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, was facing a period of transition in both the economic system, as well as in socio - cultural values. The transitional processes somehow coincided in the temporal perspective with the general acceptance of the concept of sustainable development as defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission) Report entitled "Our Common Future" in 1987, which described sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCDE, 1987, quoted in Murphy & Price, 2005: 189). Simultaneously, the concept of sustainable tourism development arose out of recognition of both the economic importance of tourism, as well as its realized and potential impacts (Berno & Bricker, 2001). Although the concept tends to be discussed with respect to the physical environment, definitions of sustainable tourism, such as the one by Inskeep (1991, quoted in Mihalic, 2006: 73) or the more recent one developed by the UNWTO (2004, quoted in Andereck et al: 484) also include the social and cultural environment of destinations (Andereck et al: 483). It is within these two environments, as Haukenland & Jacobsen argue (2001), that the concept of sustainable tourism has contributed to the increased interest in the employment of local resources in tourism development. Furthermore, with respect to food and beverages, the prevalent attitude is that as much as possible should be obtained locally, it is argued. In the eco-tourism movement and especially in the recent pro-poor tourism concept, there is a strong ethic prescribing that host communities should benefit as much as possible from tourism in terms of income and job opportunities for local people. Analogically, the Slow Food movement, constituted in 1989, works to defend biodiversity in the food supply, spread taste education and connect producers of excellent foods with co-producers through events and initiatives (Kjorstad, 2007). Slow Food's intention of bringing back taste, tradition and experience to consumers' food consumption at the same time aims to support small, local food producers and perhaps strengthen their position in the market, as opposed to international and industrial food producers. Slow food might secure local employment and keep rural communities alive. According to Petrini¹ (2003, quoted in Kjorstad, 2007: 194) it

¹ Movement's founder and president

wishes to offer opportunities for development even to poor and depressed regions through a new model of agriculture.

Moving aside from sustainability concepts and focusing on gastronomy, currently there is a growing recognition of the relationships between tourism, food and gastronomy, as proved by the publication of one of the first texts dedicated to this subject area (Hjalager & Richards, 2002). According to Haukenland & Jacobsen (2001) there is a growing awareness of the possible contribution of food in the development of character and cultural identity of a region or a place, as numerous “new tourists”, as defined by Poon (1994, quoted in Van Westering, 1999) search for the identity or the spirit of regions they visit, while food and beverage have always been crucial elements of place based tourism. Since place is also a key component of understanding culture, according to Harrington & Herzog (2007) thus the connection between gastronomy, culture and place must be established. Indeed, gastronomy is nowadays recognized as a part of local heritage and can, according to Van Westering (1999) be seen as a force of sustaining, developing and promoting heritage and thus literally adding to the sense of place that tourists search for. Furthermore, gastronomy tourism, a niche segment of cultural tourism, is supposed to add value to tourism product (Hall & Sharples, 2003) and in the same time enhance the quality of tourists’ experience (Van Westering, 1999; Haukenland & Jacobsen, 2001).

The change in socio – cultural values in Slovenian society has also been reflected in the restructuring of its tourism sector. Lying between the Alps and the Adriatic Sea, Slovenia has always been a crossroad of different cultures. As a matter of fact, until being reunited as republic inside the Ex-Yugoslavia, Slovenian national territory has for centuries been divided into regions under different political and cultural hegemonies. Even though the borders and authorities were changing through centuries, the western parts were constantly exposed to Italian cultural influences, while eastern and northern ones, were predominately influenced by German speaking, Central European cultures, whereas by the time of the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, southern parts, though never officially belonging to it, faced its cultural influences. Similarly, regarding to the landscape and agricultural terrain, the diversity ranging from the Alpine to Pannonian, as well as Carstic and Mediterranean world has offered a variety of agricultural product, rarely found on such a small territory. Due to its size and since the country does not have long coastlines or bustling cities to rely on, but is on the other hand characterized by vast and predominately unspoilt rural areas, focus on food as a part of cultural, heritage tourism seems natural and sustainable choice. However, it was not until the mid 1990s, when Slow Food formed itself in the country, that this was even seen as an opportunity and only with the new millennium the idea of developing gastronomy tourism in Slovenia was accepted and implemented in strategy of Slovenian tourism development (Strategija trženja slovenskega turizma, 2007).

Methodology

This paper is conducted within the interpretive paradigm, using subjectivist, non-positivist, qualitative approach to research started out of writer's personal motivation after being exposed to a couple of Slow Food conviviums in the recent years. Primary data for the paper has been collected with the method of recorded, in-depth interviews (three out of five of the similar sort conducted in October 2007 as part of research project on Slovenian Gastronomy) on a face to face basis in a semi-structured way, using the method of abduction while shaping contextual questions. In order to cover the thematic from diverse perspective, the interviewees were: an acclaimed gastronomy critic and president of the first Slovenian Slow Food convivium, owner of the first restaurant that followed the principles of Slow Food movement in Slovenia and owner/chef of the most innovative and internationally acclaimed Slovenian restaurant, located in a remote rural area. Furthermore, method of participant observation has nevertheless been present during the research since the writer spent a day in one of the two analyzed restaurants, researching while being fully immersed in the restaurant activities of that day, as well as was exposed to the field preceding the actual research phase, when participating in Slow Food events. Finally, secondary data was gathered from the official Slow Food Movement website², Slovenian Tourist Board website³, as well as some other academic sources dealing with the researched field.

Expected Outcomes

The case of the Slow Food's presence in Slovenia shows that the concept the movement is promoting shares a common philosophy and ethical background with the concept of eco-tourism and though not being able to be pronounced as sustainable by itself, it can, when properly applied, certainly lead to the sustainable practice in agriculture and food production and consequently tourism development, especially the one related to rural areas. As the practices surrounding the analyzed restaurants show, Slow Food's impacts in Slovenia, when applied to social and cultural environments have led to positive outcomes, both for the demand and the supply side. On the former, tourism product has been shaped around authenticity and therefore adopting to the needs of the "new tourists" as defined by Poon (1994, quoted in Van Westering, 1999) offering them parts of local traditions and identity, literally by adding smell and taste of local foods to enforce a sense of place the majority of them is striving for and in this way developing the aestheticisation of the rural. On the later, the supply side, representing the local population offering tourism products, the

² www.slowfood.com

³ www.slovenia.info

development of gastronomy tourism seems to have represented one of few existing possibilities for the rural areas to transition successfully to the new reality of market based economy. Furthermore, as practices of the selected restaurants indicate, with the establishment of the regional networks and partnerships within the supply chain of food producers, the quality of life, that is, according to Andereck et al (2007) how people view, or what they feel about their life, of rural population has been raised. As far as the economic environment is concerned, with the development of gastronomy tourism the value to the tourism product has been added, therefore the price has been raised, resulting in gains for local producers, however the niche gastronomy tourism continues to be perceived with an elitist prejudice in Slovenian rural reality and thus influencing the socio-cultural environments of those not directly involved in its gains, resulting in their perception of a diminished quality of life.

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Note: The full paper may be found in the conference proceedings folder entitled "papers".