



THE ROLE OF FOOD TOURISM IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL DESTINATIONS

RURAL DESTINATIONS AT A CROSSROADS

Worldwide, rural destinations are at a crossroads. The positive characteristics that set rural areas and communities apart—like their large open spaces, easy access to nature, small settlements, low population density, and agricultural land—are also at the root of several of the challenges they face. While urban populations are projected to keep growing, the lifespan of many rural communities is uncertain.¹ Although rural areas span approximately 97 percent of the United States, they are home to 18 percent of the total population. Rural population decline in the United States is undeniable, but it is not unique. The rural-to-urban shift is a worldwide phenomenon, and today more than half of the world's population lives in urban areas.²

Declining populations in rural areas have serious economic, social and cultural impacts. With fewer people, the workforce shrinks, and rural cultures and traditions can also start to fade. What's more, the median age in rural areas is 51 years, compared to 45 years in cities.³ This contributes to aging workforces and labor shortages. Underlying challenges experienced by rural destinations also include stagnant economies. This is brought on by fewer jobs, lack of investment in local businesses, loss of small-scale agriculture, and a scarcity of resources to maintain historical centers and infrastructure. Some rural regions also face threats to both

agricultural and natural diversity because of changing land uses and a disconnect between younger generations and rural livelihoods. Many of these challenges are familiar to Livingston and Wyoming counties in New York State.

A powerful resource for combating these challenges is the local spirit of collaboration that exists between municipalities in the Genesee Valley. Letchworth Gateway Villages (LGV) is a partnership between Perry, Mount Morris, and Genesee that seeks to advance regional economic growth and new tourism-related market opportunities for the communities that serve as "gateways" to the region's popular Letchworth State Park. The partnership is expected to include a growing number of municipalities; therefore, throughout this paper, the broader geographic area that includes LGV is referred to as the Genesee Valley.

Food tourism development is an increasingly popular approach used to attract more visitors, get them to stay longer, and spend more. The Genesee Valley has the potential to grow as a preferred rural destination by leveraging its local food and drink products, diverse food tourism assets, and unique food stories. This paper sets out context and considerations for pursuing food tourism as a rural economic growth opportunity.

RURAL TOURISM AND FOOD TOURISM

VISITORS ARE INCREASINGLY LOOKING FOR MORE IMMERSIVE TRAVEL EXPERIENCES; ONES THAT ALLOW THEM TO ENGAGE DEEPLY WITH THE PLACES THEY VISIT.

Visitors today seek authentic, sustainable, and experiential travel. When urbanites travel to rural areas, they often look for relaxing, invigorating escapes from the city. Rural tourism can forge connections to nature, family histories, alternative ways of living, and personal and authentic interactions with the people of the place.⁴ It is a form of alternative tourism that “presents an exciting opportunity for showcasing local culture, history and landscape, flora and fauna, and food and drink.”⁵

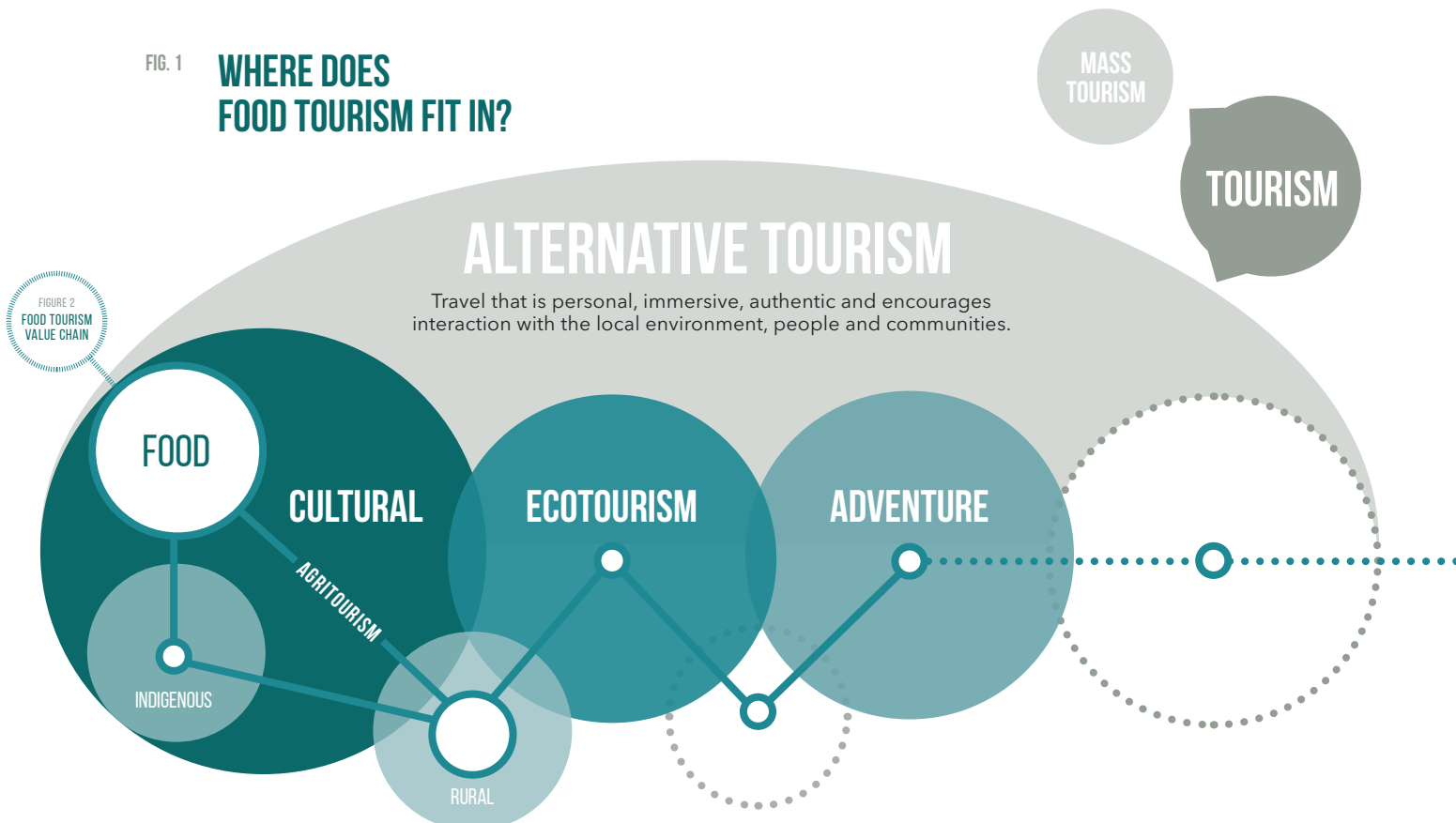
Food tourism has a large role to play in showcasing rural culture to visitors by providing them with the meaningful and multisensory local experiences they seek.

WHAT IS FOOD TOURISM?

The rise of food tourism stems from a shift towards more experiential travel; that is, travel which immerses the visitor in the culture of place in a meaningful way through unique and memorable exposures to people, food, and environment.⁶ Like rural tourism, food tourism is a form of “alternative” rather than “mass” tourism, which tends to focus on attracting large numbers of visitors to a destination or attraction through standardized and often prescheduled tours or packages. Food tourism is a direct subset of cultural tourism. It includes any tourism experience where a person learns about, appreciates, or consumes food and drink that reflects the local cuisine, heritage, or culture of a place.

FIG. 1

WHERE DOES FOOD TOURISM FIT IN?



FOOD TOURISM CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY OF LOCAL AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SYSTEMS, AS WELL AS COMMUNITY-BUILDING AND RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.

Notably, Skift Research estimates that US-based domestic and international travelers spent approximately \$58 billion on food and beverage in 2017 alone.⁷ Obviously, US tourists have an appetite for food and drink experiences and this can contribute to the growth of tourism in the Genesee Valley.

From Napa Valley to Tuscany, food tourism has transformed local landscapes and economies, but to achieve positive outcomes, food tourism must always be “conscious and thoughtful” of the environment and communities it involves.⁸ A focus on sustainability is key to preventing the commodification of rural cultures and related products. It is also essential to mitigating the risk of overtourism, which involves situations where local communities are overwhelmed and negatively affected by mass influx of visitors.

“Food tourism is about more than food itself,”⁹ it allows visitors to explore a place by “tasting, experiencing, and purchasing.”¹⁰

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reports that “88.2% of destinations consider gastronomy a strategic element in defining their image and brand” and provides five reasons for the current growth of food tourism:

- 1 It contributes intangible heritage and is an important point of differentiation;
- 2 Attracts visitors that spend more and spreads benefits across the tourism value chain;
- 3 Provides economic development opportunities for less-visited destinations;
- 4 Connects with visitor emotions to provide a more meaningful experience; and
- 5 Generates visitor loyalty and referrals for the destination.¹¹

Food and drink are innately linked to the history, heritage, culture, and geography of place. All of these aspects lead back to the people of the place, how their culture has evolved, how they’ve shaped the landscape, their traditions, and livelihoods. This relationship is called “foodways”.

FOODWAYS

ADDRESS THE WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY, AND HOW FOOD IS PART OF THE FABRIC OF A COMMUNITY.

They shed light on the physical, social, cultural, economic, and spiritual factors that inform their experience of food. When foodways are the foundation for food tourism development, food and drink products and experiences become manifestations of local traditions and techniques. As such, food tourism can play an important role in preserving rural heritage.

A recent Skift Research report, *The New Era of Food Tourism* expands the definition of food tourism by characterizing food tourists as “food-connected consumers.” In other words, the food tourism market also includes people interested in learning about and participating in the processes that go into food and drink production.¹² On the production side, visitors seek to connect meaningfully with the source of their food. These “food-connected consumers” are a growing market segment¹³ On the consumption side, the archetype “foodie” is looking for value-added food experiences, such as dining at new restaurant or visiting a specialty food retailer. This range of visitors can be motivated to travel and stay in the Genesee Valley specifically for food tourism, or they may simply enjoy food tourism experiences while exploring the region during their visit to Letcworth State Park. In either case, their visits to the Genesee Valley becomes more immersive and engaging through food tourism experiences.

AGRITOURISM AS FOOD TOURISM

Agritourism is a subset of food tourism that is ingredient-based and focuses primarily on the production side of food and drink by bringing together the tourism and agricultural sectors, along with the unique processes, people, and places involved. Visiting a vineyard or a cheese factory are both examples of agritourism and therefore food tourism. For the most part, agritourism takes place in rural settings and does not always include a taste element. As such, rural tourism is sometimes used as an encapsulating term for agritourism.

Agritourism is steadily growing within the world of food tourism, and this opens opportunities for agricultural businesses to participate in tourism and for destinations to work with a broader set of food tourism stakeholders towards the development of more meaningful visitor experiences. In 2012 the visitor spend on agritourism in the USA was at over 2 billion dollars, 481 million of which was spent in the North East of the country.¹⁴

Agritourism is often presented as an exciting opportunity for rural innovation, regeneration, and resilience. Diversifying agricultural revenue streams, increasing on-farm employment, repurposing un- or under-utilized farm infrastructure, increasing public access to and education around food and drink production, and growing demand for local products are some of the benefits to developing agritourism.

Agritourism also presents opportunities for one-on-one contact between farmers, locals, and visitors, allowing producers to tell their own stories and sell directly to their customers.

As such, by facilitating opportunities for visitors to connect directly with the people of the place, agritourism provides the immersive experience today's travelers seek.

Virtually any tourism experience can be enriched by food and drink. Developed properly, food tourism products and experiences tell the stories of the people and the landscape of an area. For the Genesee Valley this means that current tourism draws such as the region's outdoor landscapes and historic main streets can be enriched by incorporating locally-relevant food tourism experiences. Food tourism can include any visitor-facing business that contributes to a visitor's appreciation of the food and drink of a region, including accommodations, attractions, beverage producers, cooking schools, farmers' markets, festivals and events, growers, producers and suppliers, restaurants, retailers, and tour operators. Together these business-types are referred to as the food tourism value chain.

INVOLVING A WIDE RANGE OF BUSINESSES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOOD TOURISM EXPERIENCES IS KEY TO OFFERING A HOLISTIC TOURISM EXPERIENCE AND ATTRACTING VISITORS TO RURAL DESTINATIONS.

Building capacity among these businesses is important. One example of capacity building for agritourism is the "New and Beginning Farmer Program", a public service program run by Clemson University in South Carolina.

It assists farmers expanding in their agribusiness with entrepreneurial education and business training.¹⁵ Another example is the Colorado Tourism CRAFT (Colorado Rural

Academy for Tourism) program which offers "training and support for rural economic development through creation and branding of new or enhanced traveler experiences."¹⁶ Having diverse businesses, however, is only one part of what is needed.

EQUALLY IMPORTANT IS ESTABLISHING A CRITICAL MASS OF FOOD TOURISM BUSINESSES WORKING TOGETHER TO OFFER COMPLEMENTARY PRODUCTS AND/OR EXPERIENCES.

ONE EXAMPLE OF A FOOD TOURISM DESTINATION THAT HAS SUCCESSFULLY BROUGHT TOGETHER DIVERSE SMALL BUSINESSES IS CANADA'S CHARLEVOIX REGION:

- Located 1-hour outside of Quebec City
- Lively rural setting where a coordinated network of rural businesses offers food tourism experiences along a food trail.
- Small-scale fruit and vegetable farms to cheese producers, breweries, restaurants and animal farms visitors are able to experience the rural destination through local products and engage with the area's residents throughout their stay.
- The proximity of Charlevoix to Quebec City, a major tourism center, means that visitors can access the region easily, for day-trips or increasingly for longer rural getaways.
- The destination's key strengths are its strong regional identity, its recognizable Flavour Trail, and Charlevoix's certification program for food and drink products from the local region.

FIG. 2

FOOD TOURISM VALUE CHAIN



FOOD TOURISM AND RURAL ECONOMIES

Consistent with other rural areas, Livingston and Wyoming counties are experiencing slow population growth rates of 1.2% and 2% every ten years, respectively. This trend is not projected to change in the coming decades, which means there is an increasingly limited pool of local customers for community-based businesses to serve.¹⁷ As pointed out in an assessment of Perry's market characteristics: without population growth there is no organic growth in market demand. As a consequence, to provide opportunities for economic growth, local businesses need access to new customers.¹⁸

FOOD TOURISM PROVIDES THE GENESEE VALLEY WITH AN OPPORTUNITY TO INCREASE THE SALE OF LOCAL FOOD AND DRINK BY CAPITALIZING ON THE VISITORS THAT COME TO THE REGION FOR OTHER REASONS, SUCH AS VISITING LETCHWORTH STATE PARK.

Food tourism also has the potential to attract food-connected consumers specifically seeking to experience the local food and drink of the area. Over time, food tourism can help to bring in additional tourism dollars, create more jobs, develop pride-in-place, and ultimately, grow the local economy.

GROWING FOOD TOURISM IN THE GENESEE VALLEY

At the foundation of growing food tourism is the process of destination development that communities must embark on to ensure that they have a clear tourism offer. The UNWTO describes how destinations worldwide are developing customized strategies to leverage the culinary identity of their region.¹⁹ This process involves working to identify what makes a destination's food and drink offering unique. It is followed by strategizing around these points of differentiation so that the destination's foodways can be used to attract visitors and provide them with unforgettable experiences. To successfully grow food tourism in the Genesee Valley, the food tourism landscape needs to be assessed.

To start, and prior to engaging with prospective visitors, the Genesee Valley must establish a regional identity to both inform product development and inspire visitation. This process involves recognizing and celebrating local history and heritage, food products, and agricultural traditions, along with the breadth and diversity of businesses that bring these to life. This does not have to mean identifying one hero ingredient, dish, product, or experience. In fact, rural destinations with a range of offers and activities are more resilient. Vermont, for example, has a reputation built around specific products like cheese and maple-syrup, but it also has a range of complementary offers, including B&Bs, hiking trails, skiing, and agritourism experiences, which combined, draw visitors across all four seasons and are featured as part of its destination identity.²⁰ Similarly, Arizona's destination image includes iconic experiences, such as hiking the Grand Canyon, but it is also complemented by strong agritourism offers like accommodation on ranches and opportunities to participate in on-ranch activities.

IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RICH RURAL FOOD TOURISM OFFER, IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT COMMUNITIES TAKE PRIDE IN, CELEBRATE, COMMUNICATE, AND SHARE EXPERIENCES WITH LOCALS AND VISITORS ALIKE.

A big part of tourism development is communicating regional tourism strengths to local residents so that they can become ambassadors for their region. Identity-building processes also offer communities the chance to identify gaps in their tourism infrastructure and offer.

Another consideration for food tourism development is the sustainable growth of the industry, including responsible production and procurement of local food and drink and protection of the human resources behind tourism's key social and cultural assets.

Food tourism needs to grow in a way that is sensitive to community needs, demands, and diversity. Sustainable product development is both a participatory and inclusive process. Locals should be able to access the agricultural products that underpin food tourism products in their region, as well as participate in the food tourism experiences that are connected to the production of local product.

It is also important for communities to feel empowered by and take pride in meeting and exceeding visitor expectations around food and drink. Ultimately,

THE MORE COMMUNITIES PARTICIPATE IN FOOD TOURISM, THE MORE SUCCESSFUL FOOD TOURISM DEVELOPMENT WILL BE.

The Genesee Valley has already gauged the expectations of visitors to the area through its 2017 visitor survey, and as part of the process identified that “two of the top five areas cited for improvement dealt with a lack of local and farm-to-table restaurant options and events celebrating local food and culture.” Increasingly, visitors from around the world have come to expect that food will be part of their travel experiences, so food tourism development in the Genesee Valley must include raising awareness amongst industry around these expectations and any gaps that need to be filled in order to meet them. By sharing knowledge and building community support, the Genesee Valley can move forward in celebrating its foodways as part of a rural tourism offer. A good starting point is to look at best practices in food tourism development.

AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

A key component of developing any tourism experience is the honest portrayal of a destination. In other words, destinations need to present themselves to prospective visitors in a positive but authentic way, and food tourism experiences that are developed with integrity are those grounded by the foodways of an area.

SOUTH TYROL, ITALY IS AN EXEMPLARY RURAL TOURISM REGION THAT USES FOOD AND DRINK TO DRIVE INCREASED VISITOR DEMAND:

- Through its Red Rooster program, South Tyrol guarantees the delivery of quality food and agritourism experiences across its businesses.
- The program has strict participation criteria, which assures visitors that they will receive an extremely high-quality experience.
- South Tyrol is a very mature rural tourism destination, where agritourism has been established for over 150 years.
- It serves as a leading example rather than the norm but demonstrates that it is important to set visitor expectations, and communicate these to visitors in advance of their arrival.

A number of new technologies are making it easier for rural destinations to create innovative food tourism experiences as well as communicate details directly with potential visitors. These technologies also help visitors find the information that they need to plan trips to rural areas. Geotourism is but one example of a community-driven approach to showcasing key tourism assets. In April 2018, LGV launched Western New York’s first Geotourism Map Guide for the municipalities surrounding Letchworth State Park and the broader Genesee Valley.

Online presence is an equally important tourism development tool. When businesses have a strong online presence through their websites and social media channels, it is easier for visitors to access information and visit rural areas.

This consideration is especially important due to the geographic realities of rural areas. When food tourism experiences are spread out over a larger area and there is no critical mass of businesses, access to and mobility around rural destinations can be challenging. Self-guided food routes using mobile apps can “encourage visitors to explore the rural area and to spend locally” by simplifying the visitor experience.²²

Food tourists are not looking to purchase another mass-produced souvenir, they value craftsmanship, originality, and cultural integrity.²³ Although today’s food-connected consumers may want to both learn about and participate in the processes behind food production, they are still on holiday. This means that food tourism

experiences, including agritourism experiences, need to balance full immersion into rural life with providing an experience that is accessible. This is innately tied to setting up visitor expectations, which can be reset by sharing relevant information with visitors in advance. The best way to be authentic is to share the process, story, and elements that are actually manifest in the experience and tie it to the place. The beauty of food tourism development done right, is that it highlights products and experiences that showcase local foodways and the terroirs that define the place. Food tourism is also directly tied to the people behind food and drink. When these considerations are kept in mind, visitors enjoy an authentic tourism experience that is enjoyable without being staged.

MOVING FORWARD

Developing food tourism in rural destinations presents an exciting opportunity to help address the economic, social and cultural challenges these areas face.

The Genesee Valley has unique and valuable stories of agricultural history and traditions, culinary heritage, as well as quality food and drink. By celebrating these stories and incorporating them into diverse visitor experiences, communities have the potential to attract more visitors, expand the market for local goods and services, and foster business innovation and collaboration throughout the region.

THE GENESEE VALLEY CAN WORK TO INCREASE BOTH VISITATION AND VISITOR SPEND BY ENHANCING ITS CURRENT TOURISM OFFERING THROUGH FOOD+DRINK.

NOTES

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Letchworth Gateway Villages is a municipal collaboration to fuel economic growth, regional cooperation and new tourism-related market opportunities for the communities that serve as "gateways" to the region's popular Letchworth State Park.

LETCWORTHGATEWAYVILLAGES.ORG
INFO@LETCWORTHGATEWAYVILLAGES.ORG
@LETCWORTHGATEWAYVILLAGES



This report was researched, written and prepared for Letchworth Gateway Villages by the Grow Food Tourism team at the Culinary Tourism Alliance, including:

- TREVOR JONAS BENSON
- CAROLINE MORROW
- CAMILO MONTOYA-GUEVARA

Formatting and design was completed by Agatha Podgorski.



THIS PROJECT MADE POSSIBLE WITH THE GENEROUS SUPPORT OF USDA RURAL DEVELOPMENT