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Food Tourism in Cork's English Market - an Authentic Visitor Experience

Dr Lisa O'Riordan, Prof Margaret Linehan and Dr Aisling Ward

Abstract

Authenticity is deemed to be a crucial element in many tourism experiences. Tourism, however, is often accused of succumbing to notions of perceived authenticity to ensure commercial success, leading to misrepresentations of cultures. Food tourism, conversely, is advocated as a means of encountering genuine culture, history and lifestyle. This paper investigates the role of food tourism as an authentic representation of culture in Cork's English Market. In-depth interviews were conducted with market traders and analysed through the grounded theory method. Results indicate that, allowing for natural evolution, food tourism is providing a platform for the continuation, sharing and development of traditions, therefore offering an authentic cultural experience.

Keywords: Food, tourism, culture, authenticity, visitor, experience

Introduction

A cultural tourism product built on a foundation of authentic offerings such as unique cultures, lifestyles and traditions can present a lucrative economic opportunity (Briedenham and Wickens, 2004). The tourism industry, however, has often been criticised for selecting certain elements to represent culture, for example, in Ireland, much marketing has heavily focused on culture as a selling point and has been accused of providing a misrepresentation (Sheridan and O'Leary, 2005). It is suggested that people are looking for 'genuine', 'real' or 'authentic' cultural experiences as a response to globalisation. Authenticity captures genuineness; that is, it epitomises a situation where people can be true to themselves (Urošević, 2012; Jokilehto, 2006). Food tourism can provide a link between creating an economic opportunity, showcasing culture and traditions, and fulfilling the visitor's wish for authenticity. Food tourism, it is proposed, fulfils the criteria of 'authentic', offering both tangible and intangible cultural experiences (O'Riordan and Ward, 2014; Okumus *et al.*, 2007). This paper investigates this claim from the viewpoint of those working on the front-line of food tourism in Cork's English Market. This research explores how food tourism is allowing for an accurate representation of people and place in a high-profile tourism destination.

Cultural Authenticity in Tourism

It is suggested that there is an increasing desire to connect with, and participate in, genuine cultural experiences. The need to connect with 'real' and traditional cultures is fulfilled through the notion of 'cultural tourism'. What qualifies as cultural tourism, however, is very extensive, although it is broadly agreed it involves the consumption of 'cultural' entities. Such entities may include arts, customs, lifestyles, history and traditions (Hennessey *et al.*, 2014; Sillerberg, 1995). It is also proposed that intangible as well as tangible elements of culture play a crucial

role in the overall quest for an authentic experience. Immersion in the everyday lives of the local population, and visitor recognition that natural evolution and development of cultures occurs, allows for a more authentic experience. Such local communities play a key role in keeping alive folklore, traditions, in the creation of 'atmosphere' and offer a glimpse into the lifestyles and customs of a place (Aikawa, 2001; McCann, 2001).

Although cultural tourism may present an economic opportunity for places where there are few others, and incentives to rejuvenate and protect cultural heritage, the subject of staged authenticity often arises. With cultural tourism, the product may be presented or 'staged' in a manner to meet the pre-conceived expectations of the tourist. This misleading presentation then poses a threat to the cultural integrity of what is 'real' or genuine and risks eroding culture over time (Su, 2011). Indeed, in an Irish context, it is suggested that this phenomenon is broadly applicable. Culture, heritage, landscape and friendly people feature frequently and highly among the main attractions and motivators for visiting Ireland (Tourism Ireland, 2015; Fáilte Ireland, 2014). This suggests the selective choosing of cultural elements to meet pre-conceived notions. Interestingly, a study of agri-tourism by Daugstad and Kirchengast (2013) revealed that by going about daily life and activities, the authenticity of the experience was heightened. Daugstad and Kirchengast's study revealed how tourism took second place and everyday tasks took priority. It was highlighted that those providing the tourism product did not succumb to the pre-conceived notions of authenticity, thus providing a learning experience for the tourist, as well as reflecting real culture. This suggests that day-to-day life is on show and culture, lifestyles and traditions are not staged.

Food Tourism

Food is merited as offering a real insight into culture. According to the World Tourism Organisation (2012:7) food tourism 'applies to tourists and visitors who plan their trips partially or totally in order to taste the cuisine of the place or to carry out activities related to gastronomy'. Food tourism is increasing in popularity, with motivations arising from a range of sources. Chief among these motivations is the desire to participate in the local culture and absorb the whole atmosphere. With food tourism, the tourist is more than an observer; they are actively taking part in the experience and may gain a deeper understanding of the culture (Henderson, 2014; López-Guzmán and Sánchez-Cañizares, 2012). Interest in food, and food tourism, is also increasing in Ireland. This may be due to a number of factors including the increased interest in the provenance of food, a desire to learn the story behind the food and a wish to support to local economy. Moreover, it is contended that food tourism is a natural fit with Ireland's reputation for culture and hospitality, incorporating people and place, and offering the visitor a true reflection of culture and hospitality (O' Riordan *et al.*, 2015; Fáilte Ireland, 2015; Dunne and Wright, 2015; Bord Bia, 2014; Zittlau and Gorman, 2012). Cork's English Market, which is the focus of this study, is claimed to be such a place, reflecting history, food and local culture. Previous research by Ó Drisceoil and Ó Drisceoil (2005) highlights that at one time Cork was a centre of provision for the British army. Cork was strongly associated with butchering, and with particular cuts of meat and various products such as *tripe and drisheen, buttered eggs, and spiced beef*. Their research outlines how spiced beef, a product normally consumed at Christmas, is also a speciality of the English Market, and owes its origins to Cork's 18th century connections to far away trading ports, and also highlights the connection between certain

locations and certain food products. The English Market’s philosophy is one of supporting local producers and keeping traditional culinary specialities alive, while also showcasing different food fare from around the world. The Market is occupied with eateries and family stalls, many with multi-generational links. The Market is also a meeting place for locals as well as a destination from many tourists visiting Cork (Fáilte Ireland, 2017).

Methodology

The case study method is the chosen research method for this study. According to Yin, the ‘case study allows investigators to focus on a ‘case’ and retain a holistic and real-world perspective’ (2014:4). The English Market was chosen as it is one of Cork’s top tourist attractions and the only market of its kind in Ireland. The English Market has been trading since the 1700s and is noted for its distinctive and unique food fare (Ó’ Drisceoil and Ó’ Drisceoil, 2005). The sample of interviews ensured that the people contacted were directly involved in the front-line of the food tourism sector. A broad range of market-traders, for example, both new and old, and selling a variety of provisions, were chosen to get a more extensive view. Those selected included long-standing, family-run, multi-generational stalls, together with more recent enterprises that were relatively new to the English Market. Within the English Market, eleven participants were selected. These included market traders such as artisan produce sellers, fishmongers, butchers, bakers and restaurateurs, with varying generational ties to their stalls (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Interviewee Description

Occupation	Generation of Market Trading
Restaurateur	1st
Fishmonger	2nd
Butcher a	5th
Butcher b	4th
Butcher c	2nd
Butcher d	2nd
Butcher e	3rd
Butcher f	2nd
Baker a	1st
Baker b	1st
Trader of Artisan Produce	2nd

The in-depth interview was chosen as the research method. The in-depth interview as a method of inquiry allows the researcher to obtain an insight into the topic by providing a platform for the interviewees to express their thoughts and opinions (Yin, 2014: Chrzanowksa, 2002). Furthermore, Yin (2014:112) advises that an interview offers the researcher the opportunity ‘to capture an interviewee’s own sense of reality’, which is facilitated through the flowing structure of the interview. Following this advice, the interview was chosen as the

method of inquiry. The interviews were then analysed through the grounded theory method, allowing the generation of theory inductively from the data (Ezzy, 2002). From this analysis a number of themes emerged, in which the notion of authenticity featured strongly. The findings regarding authenticity are discussed in the findings below.

Findings

Unique Tangible and Intangible Culture

This research study revealed that the English Market has many distinct tangible and intangible cultural features. It is derived from the research that it is the combination of both tangible and intangible elements that give credence to its cultural uniqueness. Arising strongly from the findings was the inimitability of the English Market, both as a physical entity and in its food traditions. The following quotations are representative of this:

- *The English Market is unique. It's unique and you won't get it anywhere else (Butcher b, English Market).*
- *It's the only place in Ireland that does tripe and drisheen, like it always has (Butcher f, English Market).*
- *The English Market is famous for its unique traditions, like spiced beef, that was always available here (Butcher e, English Market).*

The above statements highlight how the English Market is a unique food market with its own traditions. The respondents highlight how they are carrying on distinct food traditions in the Market, such as spiced beef, and tripe and drisheen. The respondents outline that these traditions were maintained through the years, allowing for an authentic continuation of traditions through to the present day. In a similar vein, it also emerged from the findings that intangible factors play a key role in the English Market's culture. This is noted in the references to the 'characters' one may meet, and the opportunity to speak face-to-face with the stall-holder. This is highlighted in the following responses:

- *It's true tradition and its real life too. Even behind the counters you have all the characters. It's a massive part of Cork's culture (Trader of Artisan Produce, English Market).*
- *We are offering something unique here. We offer a person to person contact. We offer a service that's invaluable to people. We can tell people how to use the products. The butchers are saying how long to keep it in the oven (Baker a, English Market).*

The above responses detail how the relationship between stall-holders and patrons results in the creation of a unique atmosphere. The findings indicate that this atmosphere is a crucial element in the character and culture of the English Market. This implies that the intangible elements such as the ambience and 'feel' of the English Market are as critical as the concrete factors, with the amalgamation of the two resulting in an authentic cultural experience.

The Role of Family Businesses

The above section notes the importance of the English Market's intangible elements in its culture, including the relationship between stall-holders and customers. Sustaining this relationship, which contributes to the Market's authenticity and distinctiveness, is that many stalls have been in the same families for generations. The following statements outline how this characteristic of the English Market lends itself to the creation of an authentic experience:

- *We've been a family-run stall for over 50 years. The majority in here are family-run businesses. If it was just profit-oriented you wouldn't have as many stall-holders in here. There's a strong family tradition, and the people behind the counters here, the market is in their hearts. It's not about their pockets really. It's about being part of the market and about the people who stood behind the counter before you (Trader of Artisan Produce, English Market).*
- *We're still doing what my great-grandfather did. That's what we give the customer. The family is here since 1898 (Butcher b, English Market).*

The above responses show the unbroken link in family ties to a certain stall and place in the English Market's history and highlights how skills and traditions are passed down and built up through generations. This preserves the identity and customs of the businesses. Critically, the interviewees acknowledge that it is the way of life that is important, that 'it's not about their pockets'. The findings reveal that these expertise and skills which constitute ways of life in the English Market are rooted in its history and are contributing considerably to the survival of the cultural traditions. In addition, the findings also reveal a generational link and tradition of patronage among the users of the service. The long-term presence of certain stalls allows for families to continue a tradition of frequenting the business through the years. The following statements outline the generational connection between the patrons and the stall-holders:

- *We have four generations of families coming in here – great-grandmother, grandmother, mother and daughter. Three-quarters of my customers I'd be on first name terms with (Butcher f, English Market).*
- *The thing about the market is you can meet the owner/producer over the counter. Each stall would have its own followers and would have the same families coming back over the years. I hope it continues (Restaurateur, English Market).*

The above quotations highlight the long-standing connection and relationship between certain traders and local families. This is a crucial factor in contributing to the authenticity of the English Market. The findings indicate that these relationships are adding to, and sustaining, the unique intangible cultural elements, such as atmosphere, that is a feature of the English Market. Such relationships are critical in the deliverance of an accurate portrayal of local norms and every-day life. Additionally, it is revealed that maintaining the ethos of the English Market is vital in sustaining its character and integrity. This is illustrated in the following statements:

- *We've always had concerns about chain stores. There are loads that would love to get a unit in here. That's not what the English Market is about. These are family businesses that'd have great history. It's going back to the 1700s. The people who work here, their*

families have seen it through really bad times - two major fires, several recessions. It's still here. In a lot of cases it's the same families that went through those recessions (Baker a, English Market).

- *The council are very particular about who they leave into the English Market. They're trying to keep it family businesses, owner-occupier. The customers meet who is there, get the background. No more than three of four people behind the counter. They don't want big companies coming in (Baker b, English Market).*

As seen in the above responses, a critical aspect to the English Market's culture is the small, family-run businesses, often spanning generations. The significance of giving precedence to small, owner-occupier businesses rather than large-scale, impersonal businesses is stressed. The importance of meeting the business owner, or a person behind the stall who has the background story of the food which is being sold, constitutes a key element in the Market's culture and identity. Such thorough protocol and strict admittance of enterprises provides little opportunity for businesses not in keeping with the Market's philosophy. It is noted that the careful selection of businesses allowed to open a stall is contributing to the retention of the ethos of the English Market and to the sustainability of authenticity and contributing to the visitor experience.

The Combination of History and Tradition

A further element which the findings revealed is the longevity of the English Market's culture and its contribution to the local community. The following quotations outline this:

- *The history of the Market is incredible. It's a focal point of Cork. Everything about Cork is in the Market. It's a historical building (Baker a, English Market).*
- *I think the English Market encapsulates Cork's history. It's something that has been here since the 1700s. It suits everyone. We serve everyone from the person with nothing to the person with everything. You could meet anybody inside here. It's a proper market (Butcher b, English Market).*

As noted above, the English Market has been present in Cork for centuries. The findings indicate that it captures the essence of Cork's character. This endurance and permanence lends itself to the idea of an authentic experience. It is indicated that it is representative of the area's historical culture, both in a physical sense as a building, and as a meeting place for people. It is highlighted that the English Market attracts a diverse clientele through the variety of products it provides. Although the above notes the importance of maintaining a link to history and the importance of family businesses, it was also noted that culture and traditions in the English Market are constantly evolving, as noted in the following statements:

- *There is a demand for the things that their parents and grandparents used to cook. People want to go back to their roots but putting a modern twist on it (Butcher c, English Market).*
- *My father started it. There's been a bit of change since then but the heart of the traditions is still there (Butcher e, English Market).*

The above responses underline the importance of allowing culture to evolve and develop naturally in the English Market. As seen in the above statements, the stall-holders are retaining the core of their traditions while at the same time constantly updating and developing their products. While the findings infer that this evolution is necessary to remain current in today's market, this evolution and development is done with the 'heart' of the traditions and the ethos of the business in mind. Through this natural evolution, the English Market retains its authenticity and holds a true reflection of local cultural life.

The Importance of Local Produce and Local Support

Although the above section outlines the necessity of evolution in the English Market, one element that has remained constant is the dedication to using local produce. The findings infer that this is a critical aspect in the English Market's authenticity. The following statements highlight this:

- *People are looking for more local foods, more Cork foods. Lots of places are doing the five mile radius. Before people would take it for granted its local, now they're asking (Baker b, English Market).*
- *The market sources locally so all the money is going back into the local economy (Butcher d, English Market).*
- *We sell all local produce, all artisan. We don't buy from factories. Everything we sell is all handmade. Just as an example, last weekend we didn't have any baking because our baker, she works by herself, she went away for the weekend. She doesn't employ any staff (Trader of Artisan Produce, English Market).*
- *It's coming in fresh every morning and people are seeing that and saying 'oh it's fresh'. We get most of our product from Ballincollig or Timoleague (Butcher f, English Market).*

The findings indicate that the local suppliers are at the starting point of the traditions. It is revealed that the integrity of the food traditions would be difficult to sustain without the local suppliers. It is further implied that without the local suppliers, the food offerings available would be less authentic. The above statements also indicate the significance of sourcing food as near as possible and, therefore, to truly represent the area. The findings reveal that a vital factor in the English Market's authenticity is the use of local suppliers and produce.

Building on this, the findings from this study reveal that although a popular tourist spot, the real culture of the Market is based around the local community. Findings from this research outline how the tourists are not the most vital element in the English Market's success and viability:

The tourists aren't really our market here. I suppose they like to come in and look around and take pictures. They browse and they think it's great. But it's the locals who dictate the market. We have to source the fish they want. Our lifeblood is our locals (Fishmonger, English Market).

We need locals to come in here to do their weekly shop. The tour buses aren't much good to us because the tourists go through in about 15 minutes, in one door and out the other. The tourist will appreciate that it's a lovely market and that's nice but they're not spending much (Butcher b, English Market).

The above statements highlight the fundamental need for continuous local support for the English Market. The findings imply that although it is known as a tourism destination, it is the patronage of the local community that is the foundation of its success. The above responses indicate that tourism is secondary to the English Market. This may infer that the English Market is an almost unintentional tourism destination. It is revealed that the 'real' culture of the English Market can be observed and experienced through the market traders and the local community. The local customers are a vital element in providing an accurate portrayal of local culture.

Portrays Diverse and Representative Food Traditions of Locality

Another finding revealed by this research study is the visitors' reactions when encountering the food available and traditions represented in the English Market. It is indicated from this study's findings that what is seen and what is available in the English Market is a true representation of the area. This includes its food offerings, and the people providing the service, which may not be what the visitor was expecting. This is outlined in the following statements:

- *The Market is the heart of Cork City. There are lots of different traditions in here (Baker a, English Market).*
- *You need people to be educated about food. This is probably the best place for them to get an education. People can come in here and see what a mackerel looks like. Sometimes you get people in here and their reaction to what a mackerel looks like shocks you (Fishmonger, English Market).*
- *We've all nationalities in here now. It used to be just Irish. We have a South African and a French lady. You have quite a diverse culture (Butcher a, English Market).*

The above responses indicate that visitors may hold pre-conceived notions regarding food in Ireland and in the English Market. The above statements highlight how those who visit are educated about the provenance and natural state of food. The findings also reveal the diverse nature of the English Market stalls, namely, the multicultural traditions and products available. As noted above, the local customer is a vital element in the success of the English Market. The above findings note that the tourist is presented with an accurate display of foods and traditions and that none of the presentation is 'staged' for the visitor. The findings indicate that by visiting the English Market, real-life culture is experienced and the visitors' desire for an authenticity is fulfilled through education, observation and participation.

Conclusion

This paper explored the notion of food tourism as an authentic portrayal of culture in Cork's English Market. The findings from this study reveal that it is the English Market's unique heritage and traditions which are being utilised to provide an authentic representation of culture. The role played by family businesses in building up and passing down skills and traditions was found to be particularly important in maintaining culture. Although there is a consensus among the respondents that the core of the traditions must remain constant, the necessity of constant evolution was also acknowledged. The synergetic relationship of evolution and tradition is evident throughout the English Market, particularly in the family businesses, where skills and traditions are handed down, but with each generation bringing new ideas and contributions. The results further revealed that the maintenance of the English Market's ethos of small, owner-occupier businesses was vital in fostering and sustaining the culture. Furthermore, the dedication to the use of local produce, that is, sourcing as locally as possible to truly reflect the local area and suppliers, was found to be vital in providing an authentic representation. The study also reveals that the stall-holders are providing a connection between the customer and the producer, thus ensuring a short supply chain, as well as a direct link to, and in-depth knowledge of, the produce they are selling. Similarly, the necessity of support from the local community was found to be crucial, both for financial sustainability and for providing the interactions with the stall-holders and contributing to the atmosphere. It is indicated that it is the blending of these elements which allows for a true experience of culture. The longevity of the English Market illustrates that it has always been a central part of local community life through the years. Crucially, it emerged that that certain pre-conceived notions of authenticity were replaced by a true, real-life experience. This was especially evident in references to the diverse nationalities and products available in the English Market. Significantly, the premise of the English Market is the provision of food for the local community. It is this focus which lends to its authenticity, that is, it is a functioning food market and an almost accidental tourist attraction. This paper outlines that it is the English Market's family businesses, dedication to local produce, maintenance of traditions, personalities, acceptance of natural evolution and support from the local community that is providing the visitors' with an authentic experience. It is concluded that food tourism in the English Market offers the visitor the opportunity to immerse themselves in local cultural life in a historical setting.

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