

Enogastronomy: a path towards the discovery of the local culture

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The demand

Tourism is definitely a business activity. The main question we need to ask, and then to answer, is: why should a consumer choose my product rather than the one offered by my competitors?

More in general: why should a tourist come to me instead of travelling elsewhere?

Therefore the starting point in the analyses of this phenomenon is knowing what a tourist (the demand) expects today from his holiday, which is supposed to become an experience of life, something to remember and talk about.

But a life experience is possible only by immersing oneself in the country, discovering the value of its identity by direct contact with the local community. After all, one must not forget that tourism implies the mobility of the consumer, not the product.

Enogastronomy is:

- an expression of culture of a local community;
- a component of a region's identity and consequently an element of differentiation of its offer in the market;
- it has now become an important tourist segment, opening wide spaces of transversality.

Enogastronomy represents a synthesis, and a very pleasant one, of the context of life of a local community, and we must not forget that it always finishes by coinciding with the tourist's idea of a holiday. That idea contains many different components, such as the natural environment, history and culture, social models, particular economic produce.

So it is important to ask ourselves who is the enogastronomic tourist and what he is looking for. He is not a mere "gourmet", a lover of foods and wines, neither is he a tourist who is only interested in tasting foods and wines of the best quality.

The way to approach food-and-wine tourism has changed in recent years, because we have passed from a prevailing interest in the product – by passionate connoisseurs – towards a more general interest in typical products as a means of getting to know a whole region. It has come to involve an ever increasing number of people, becoming a real “fashion” from many points of view. As an alternative to the usual leisure activities, rather than a rejection of mass eating habits, food-and-wine tasting has become a cultural fact, ever more intrinsic to the experience of getting to know and visiting a country.

Under this perspective it is important to bear in mind the fact that the enogastronomic tourist’s expectation is not only to find quality products, typical and guaranteed, but also to taste typical dishes, to meet the producer and to be treated with courtesy everywhere.

These are the elements which “materialize” that search for direct and genuine contact which has been referred to, and satisfy a tourist demand that is complex and careful to the material and immaterial elements, related to service.

The enogastronomic tourist does not simply want to know, but what he expects is to have the possibility to live the food-and-wine culture of a region, the possibility to experience new emotions.

Between a cognitive and an emotional approach there is the same difference as between listening to one’s favourite singer on a cd and seeing him perform live.

It is important therefore to keep in mind:

- Enogastronomic tourism is a tourist segment developing mainly outside the classic holiday period, so the role it can play in deseasonalizing presences is also evident.
- Enogastronomy has become a plus also in the context of the traditional holiday, so it represents a valid instrument in the diversification and qualification of the offer.
- The trend is definitely positive, if we consider that we started from a restricted situation of mere excursions, typical of the 90s, while the last decade has shown a decidedly upward tendency in interest in enogastronomy, creating a new form of tourism with people staying in the chosen area for short periods – usually a week-end.
- The food-and-wine tourist expresses a strong orientation towards the “quality of the product” and “the quality of the context”, which means “quality of relations”.

- He shows a critical appreciation in the surrounding area preferring an interesting landscape, the aesthetic element is a factor of success no less important than the others.
- He is in search of connections between the products and history, local traditions and culture; or better, those products that show such a relationship. He is interested in all the occasions which allow him to get to know the region in its social and cultural aspects.

The offer

The availability of one resource (the quality of foods and wines) is definitely necessary, but it is not enough to create food-and-wine *tourism*: we need to transform the resource potential into a real tourist offer.

It is important in this context to consider the following elements:

- To talk about “enogastronomy”, and more in general about typical products, implies a reference to the context they arise from.
To transmit the culture of the product is a necessary condition, though not sufficient, to make one’s product irreplaceable.
- The enhancement of these plus elements undergoes a careful organization/planning procedure in the food-and-wine environment, within the more general context of organization and territorial planning.

In this respect two theoretical models exist to approach the enhancement of enogastronomy: one approach is aimed at the *enhancement of the product*, where the region is only considered in its geographical aspect. The other approach is directed at the *enhancement of the production area*: here the product represents the element of tourist appeal and a fil rouge in the discovery tour.

This last reference highlights the aim of the enhancement of the whole of the production environment, where the term “environment” has to be understood in its fullest meaning of *the context of life within a local community*.

The combination of tourism-enogastronomy, however, has to be carefully measured to the specifics of the different areas:

- In certain cases the segment of food-and-wine tourism may at present constitute the only possible tourism form in that area.
- In other cases it can be developed around other tourist segments which involve surrounding areas.
- Finally, in some other cases, it can represent the plus in a well established tourist offer.

It is clear that each of these typologies of enogastronomic tourism requires a different approach towards the constitution and management of the “route” and gives rise in this way to the existence of different operating models.

Conclusion

The success of an enogastronomic tourism offer depends on the capability to carry out a competitive strategy based on four factors:

- Differentiation (to enhance the identity elements)
- To be entrepreneurs (to do one’s own job well)
- To make system (to cooperate inside in order to be competitive outside)
- To ensure quality (quality of the product, the “site”, the environment, reception).

The third millennium tourist, more than ever, will be at the same time a “pilgrim” and a “gourmet”: a person who follows his route (pilgrim) in search of the treasures of a region, where he can live a life experience to remember and talk about; and where he can share the pleasures of the table (gourmet) with the local people, as a guest in their home.