

Seafood ‘speaks’ in Costa Daurada’s Michelin-starred restaurants (Catalonia, Spain)

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Abstract

Seafood tourism is recently gathering a growing attention as part of tourism practice and research. Fish production and consumption have also a significant role in food tourism management and marketing. This research note explores the role of fish in two fine dining restaurants located in the town of Cambrils, a coastal and marine destination in southern Catalonia. Results show the fish-based identity of both restaurants and reveal how fish-based menus communicate a sense of place which is focused on the knowledge of the territory and the seasonal component of fish-based products. Theoretical and practical implications, and further research opportunities, are described.

Keywords

culinary heritage, gastronomy tourism, marine environments, wild foods

Introduction and context

Food tourism is the journey to a place with the purpose of discovering its culinary and gastronomy heritages – through their cultural and natural idiosyncrasies (see Henderson, 2009; Everett, 2019; Fusté-Forné, 2020). Food as a tourist attraction factor refers to a wide range of experiences which involve the exploration of products, dishes, or landscapes (see, for example, Hall and Sharples, 2003). Food tourists explore a culture through food (Long, 2004), with different levels of engagement which define the searched experience (McKercher, 2020). In particular, the World Food Travel Association (2018) states that “food tourism is the pursuit and enjoyment of unique and memorable food and drink experiences, both far and near” (p.7), and adds that the act of traveling for a taste of place allows people to gather a sense of place. Visits to restaurants emerge as one of the most relevant spaces where to experience food tourism (Rachão et al., 2019; Knollenberg et al., 2021), and a significant expense for food tourists. Also, restaurants play an important role in linking local products with tourists. This connection is a potential example of the sustainable bridges

that can be created between producers and consumers (Zhang, Chen and Hu, 2019) as a path to contribute to the consecution of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (Sheyvens et al., 2021).

Fishery is an activity that showcases a close relationship between communities and territories. Fishing traditions both in river and marine environments are part of tangible and intangible heritages of coastal and rural destinations (see for example Nadel-Klein, 2020, who published a recent book on the case of Scotland). In this context, the relationship between fishing heritage and tourism development is gathering a growing interest (Jiménez de Madariaga and García del Hoyo, 2019) with an increasing attention paid to 'fishing tourism' (Hall, 2021) and 'seafood tourism' (Jodice and Norman, 2008). While fishing tourism refers to the role of recreational fishing in tourism (see, for example, Ditton, Holland and Anderson, 2002), the term seafood tourism is specific to culinary tourism. It allows the discovery of the history of fishing, the presence of fish in regional cuisine, or the understanding of food-based traditions in coastal destinations (Laecher et al., 2013). Restaurants are gatekeepers of local food (Bristow and Jenkins, 2018), which is understood as food that has its origin in the defined area (Morris and Buller, 2003) and favours the development of sustainable tourism (Sims, 2009). Specifically, fine dining restaurants contribute to the promotion of food tourism (De Albuquerque, Mundet and Aulet, 2019). This research note approaches seafood tourism from the experience of Michelin-starred restaurants (Daries et al., 2021) as part of local tourism services (Lam-González et al., 2021).

Study method and case

This exploratory research aims to analyse the incorporation of seafood products in menus of the two Michelin-starred restaurants located in the marine town of Cambrils, in the south-eastern Catalan region of Costa Daurada, Spain. Previous research highlights Costa Daurada in general and Cambrils in particular as a coastal destination featured by seafood-based tourism experiences and a seafood-based culinary heritage that contributes to Catalan maritime identity (Domingo, 2012). This region, a Mediterranean coastal destination, is an area with important maritime resources and a large local fishing industry which is popular for its iconic seafood products (Fusté-Forné, 2018) whose relevance is recently analysed in the context of food markets (see Fusté-Forné, Medina and Mundet, 2020).

This qualitative study is based on in-depth interviews with chefs of two fine dining restaurants in Cambrils: *Can Bosch* and *El Rincón de Diego*. They are the only restaurants in the city included in the Michelin guide and both restaurants offer a menu where seafood products take a principal role. The interviews were built from previous research in the framework of 'seafood tourism' as a niche form of 'food tourism'. The goal of the interviews was to discuss the value of seafood in the identity of fine dining restaurants, and the protection and promotion of cultural and natural heritage in tourism. The interviews were performed in February 2021, and analysed using a qualitative data analysis software. Results of the analysis are displayed in the next section with direct quotes from the interviewees that illustrate the meanings embedded in a seafood-based storytelling.

Results and discussion

As a result of the interviews with chefs of restaurants *Can Bosch* and *El Rincón de Diego*, this research note discusses the role of local seafood as a driver of local food tourist consumption. Seafood represents a sense of *terroir* which in this case is translated as a sense of *mare* (sea in Latin). "We are a seafood restaurant", highlights Arnau, chef of *Can Bosch*. He usually works with the fish market in Cambrils and the seafood also comes from Delta de l'Ebre, in the southern area of Catalonia. In the same vein, the chef of *El Rincón de Diego* emphasizes that "we do not cook nothing but the fish that

our boats in our town bring to our port”. The local origin of food increases the tourism attraction since visitors seek products that are attached to the region they visit (see Timothy and Ron, 2013).

The chef of *Can Bosch* highlights that “we feel flagged to carry ‘fish’ as the standard of our area, and our identity. It is not only a speech, it is a belief, to rely on our own product means to say who we are, where we come from and where we go”. Its way of protecting the seafood heritage and promoting an authentic gastronomic service is “to make people who sit at our tables enjoy a storytelling with the essence of our know-how, and based on the best product”, as Arnau reveals. It is a product that narrates the purity of nature and the respect for the marine environment. For example, Figure 1 illustrates a local scorpion fish, an example of a local product which emerges as identity marker of the restaurant and illustrates the significance of the local fresh product that arrives to the restaurant every day, which shows a direct connection from the sea to the table. Among the local products that communicate the sense of place from Cambrils there are seafood products such as sea snails, mussels, razor clams, squilla mantis’ shrimps (*galeras*), local shrimps or prawns, as well as soles, sea basses or monkfishes.



Fig 1. Scorpion fish at *Can Bosch*. (Source: @canbosch, 12 September 2020.)

Knowledge of the territory is crucial to know that, for example, “the Delta oyster is much saltier than other oysters due to the closure of the Delta and the temperature of the water which makes them saltier”, as Arnau affirms. In addition, there is a very important seasonal component that is also reflected in restaurant menus, as stated by chef Diego, who says that “we cook the fish that is available according to the seasons. Now is the time when sea bass is perfect and if we have three available menus then it is added to two, therefore we offer our menus according to what the sea gives us”. This is also acknowledged as part of the food tourism authenticity, which advocates that a food is authentically experienced in the place where it grows and at the right moment when it grows. Both chefs claimed that seafood can be found anywhere in the world, but the products do not have the quality and taste of those that come from the waters of Cambrils. The influence of the Delta de l'Ebre on the seafood that arrives at the port of Cambrils is very significant, as explained above.

While this exemplifies the impact of sea landscapes and the natural heritage on the taste of fish, the value chain of seafood (which also includes cooking) illustrates the relevance of the cultural heritage. For example, Diego states that “the prawns from Tarragona are red and have a strong flavor, but prawns from Cambrils are white and very full. The influence of the Ebre provides the fish with a genuine color and a unique taste. The color is different and the taste is different, because the sea currents bring prawns a lot of food, a lot of plankton and they are perfect”. The characteristics of the sea, as it happens with the configuration of terrestrial landscapes, make the product unique, attached to a specific space and time. As a Michelin-starred restaurant, creativity also plays an important part in menu design, as observed in Figure 2, which reveals that the innovation in food tourism experiences can also raise awareness among visitors and increase the motivation to explore the relationship between seafood and tourism in a restaurant.



Fig 2. A seafood-based dish at *El Rincón de Diego*. (Source: @rincon.de.diego, 8 February 2021.)

Conclusion and further research

Results of this exploratory research provide a preliminary understanding of seafood as an identity product that does not only reflect a local-based menu but also the process of awarding tourism value to the culture and nature attached to a place through ‘seafood’. This research offers a first discussion on the use of seafood as a gastronomic and restaurant product, also in relation to the incorporation of local and non-local seafood products by Michelin-starred restaurants. Seafood as a gastronomic product is a crucial ingredient of restaurant experiences as part of the seafood tourism and this research approaches this niche form of culinary tourism from the perspective of the delivery of seafood to customer palates in fine dining. This has several theoretical and practical implications which are materialised in a need to:

- protect local seafood products and the fishing cultural and natural heritage of coastal and marine populations.
- encourage the seasonality of *ephemeral* local products over *permanent* global products to design menus that change every season and rely on the availability of native seafood.
- combine local products from the land and the sea to reinforce the storytelling message of responsible cooking and sustainable consumption, to further enhance the territory according to what nature offers us.
- promote seafood from the source to acknowledge the gastronomic value of a local, fresh and quality product.

Findings also serve to better plan local seafood-based tourism experiences, which must rely on the sustainable relationships between fishing and tourism in the context of food tourism. Further studies could also look at supply chains to identify the variables that define the relationships between these chefs and the local seafood industry. Since this research note is limited to a town in Costa Daurada, further studies must develop comparative studies between coastal and marine destinations in Catalonia. Also, the analysis of the menus of national and international Michelin-starred restaurants that have seafood as a pivotal ingredient of their culinary narrative. This would allow to gain a more robust understanding of how and why food establishments incorporate local seafood as part of their menus and their storytelling as a form of responsible food tourism management and marketing.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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