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It Takes More than Just Food, Restaurateurs Advised

Ghanaian restaurateurs need to improve food quality and hygiene, and give diners opportunities to socialise, find Professor Sam Kim, Ph.D. students Frank Badu-Baiden and Munhyang Oh of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, along with a co-author in recently published empirical work. The researchers emphasise that food is a vital component of the tourism experience, but little attention has been paid by food tourism researchers to destinations outside of the West and Asia. Their findings offer important practical guidance for destination marketers in Africa and other developing countries seeking to leverage unique culinary offerings to boost local tourism.

The researchers note that for the adventurous tourist, there are few pleasures greater than sampling the local cuisine. From the Scottish haggis to the Ghanaian *kenkey*, or maize dumpling, homegrown dishes are in huge demand among today's ever more affluent and multicultural travellers. Some even travel solely for the pleasure of visiting local food markets, street stalls and restaurants – a trend known as food tourism.

No wonder, then, that gastronomy is central to the image and brand of almost every tourism destination. Tourists who enjoy unique and authentic culinary experiences overseas may be more likely to return to a destination and recommend it to others. But how this process works is less clear. As the researchers note, “there has been little work to empirically test the role of local food consumption experiences in explaining post-tasting behaviour”.

Even more conspicuous is the lack of food tourism studies outside Western and Asian countries. According to the researchers, little is known about how international tourists in Africa experience the local food, and how this affects their subsequent tourism decisions. Yet Africa's unique culinary offering may throw up an entirely new set of challenges and opportunities for destination marketers seeking to secure the continent a seat at the global table of food tourism.

Homing in on Ghanaian cuisine, the researchers set out to survey international tourists and deploying novel statistical methods “to reach a holistic understanding of the meanings that are embedded in tourists' food experiences”.

What makes a meaningful food tourism experience? First comes satisfaction, write the researchers, who conducted a careful review of the literature on this topic. A satisfied diner is a relaxed one. “Consuming local foods provides a sense of release from the mental or physical fatigue associated with travel”, the researchers explain. Satisfaction may also come from self-improvement. Tourists who eat local foods become more knowledgeable about their host cultures. Some, say the researchers, may even “obtain meaningful tourism experiences through the reinforcement of friendship, affection and family well-being.”

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Next, enjoying local foods can elicit affection and a sense of warmth and closeness. “Tourists gain a myriad of experiences from local food consumption”, write the researchers. “This experiential quality makes tourists feel that they know a destination.” The researchers term this the “favourability” of the destination.

The third and final dimension to consider is behavioural intention. Tourists who enjoy a memorable culinary experience overseas are more likely to recommend the destination to their families and friends, and even to return themselves in the future. “Food experiences relating to hygiene, flavour, menu variety and a good atmosphere influence tourists’ future behavioural intentions,” write the researchers.

Armed with this knowledge, the researchers’ next task was to develop a questionnaire to find out precisely how overseas diners experience Ghanaian cuisine. Pilot tests and in-depth interviews with foreign tourists who had eaten at “chop bars” (traditional restaurants) in Accra, the capital of Ghana, revealed some essential qualities of food tourism in Ghana. Hygiene is important, the researchers discovered, along with the opportunity to experience the local culture through food and talk about it afterwards on social media.

Kotoka International Airport, a hub for international travel, was the ideal setting to administer the final questionnaire. International tourists who entered the lobby of the airport or international tourists sitting in rest area” were approached. Most of the 336 respondents were American, German or British, and all had eaten at least two local foods during their stay in Ghana, such as *red red*, a stew made of black eyed peas, or *eto*, mashed plantain.

Using novel statistical methods to analyse their dataset, the researchers shed new light on the three key dimensions of a meaningful food tourism experience – satisfaction, destination favourability and behavioural intention – in Ghana. Their findings have important implications for both local restaurateurs who wish to attract custom and destination marketers seeking to boost the region’s tourism.

First, international tourists in Ghana attach great value to socialising with other tourists or local residents. The findings even suggest that international diners who do not have opportunities to socialise and talk about their experiences may become extremely dissatisfied! To fulfil this expectation, the researchers advise, Ghanaian restaurant managers should “create pleasant eating environments that facilitate the intermingling of tourists, service providers and other guests.” Open kitchens are a good way to enhance interaction between restaurant employees and guests.

Food quality and diversity are also important. To ensure that tourists sample a range of local delicacies and leave with full bellies, restaurant managers could work on “improving the originality and flavour of local dishes”. Meals could be served “with unique garnishes and/or on plates engraved with traditional designs to provide a memorable African experience”, note the researchers. Restaurateurs could also consider providing more information on the nutritional value and ingredients of local dishes, as few international tourists are familiar with African cuisine.

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Finally, although the tourists found the local dishes to be highly authentic, and enjoyed learning about Ghana's culture from its food, these factors did not necessarily encourage them to return. This disappointing result may be due to the "poor service and insufficient facilities found in most traditional restaurants in Ghana". International tourists in Ghana, conclude the researchers, want "high-quality local restaurants that meet good hygiene standards, are pleasingly decorated and are in safe locations".

This ground-breaking study reveals the mechanism linking tourists' experience of local food with their post-tasting behaviour, and shows precisely where effort should be invested to ensure that Ghana's culinary offering meets and exceeds the expectations of international diners. Some of its findings are specific to the African context. For example, the researchers urge Ghanaian restaurateurs to enhance the quality of local cuisine through hygienic food preparation, noting that "international tourists' experience of tasting African food may be unfavourable in terms of uncleanliness, mistrust regarding ingredients and sickness after eating".

Interestingly, however, the researchers note that most of the results are "consistent with those of other countries or continents", suggesting that strategies for boosting food tourism tried and tested in the West and Asia may also have promising results in Africa. As more and more tourists flock to the continent seeking authentic and memorable experiences of the local cuisine, this study offers invaluable guidance for supporting local tourism, an emerging driver of much-needed economic growth in Ghana and beyond.

Seongseop (Sam) Kim, Frank Badu-Baiden, Munhyang (Moon) Oh and Jungkeun Kim (2020). Effects of African Local Food Consumption Experiences on Post-Tasting Behavior. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 32, Issue 2, pp. 625-643.

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