

THE TERRITORIAL DIMENSION OF FOOD TOURISM IN CATALONIA (SPAIN). AN INTERPRETATION FROM A RELATIONAL ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY PERSPECTIVE

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I. INTRODUCTION

The initial study from secondary data is combined with fieldwork, which highlights the 320 surveys conducted with producers, retailers and restaurateurs. For the design of these surveys, aspects have been taken into account in relation to the four pillars of Relational Economic Geography (organization, evolution, interaction and innovation) proposed by Bathelt and Glückler (2003). The pillars represent the central analytical categories in the study of economic and social structures and processes from the relational perspective. The results of the research show how relational economic geography is a theoretical framework to understand and analyse not only how food tourism is spatially configured within a territory, but also how relationships, interactions and actions are taken by producers, retailers and restaurateurs within the context of this tourism phenomenon.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Food and gastronomy have always been present in tourism and form a significant part of the whole tourism phenomenon, accounting for a third of all tourism expenditure (Hall and Sharples, 2003; Quan and Wang, 2004; WTO, 2012). However, the importance given to the role that food plays in the tourist experience has not been broadly studied. Academia has been slow in recognizing the theoretical potential of examining this phenomenon (Everett, 2008; Sánchez-Cañizares and Lopez-Guzman, 2012). However, several authors, such as

Richards (2002), Fields (2002) or Hall and Sharples (2003), have revealed that food is not only important because it is a central element in the tourist experience, but also because it has become an important source of identity in postmodern societies.

Nowadays, much of the academic literature on food tourism focuses on its role as an economic generator and marketing tool (Telfer and Wall, 2000; Kneafsey *et al.* 2001; Du Rand *et al.*, 2003; Okumus *et al.* 2007; Beer, 2008; Gyimóthy and Mykletun, 2009; Lin *et al.*, 2011); as a companion of wine tourism (Charters and Ali-Knight, 2002; Hall and Sharples, 2003; Hedke, 2003); or on the tourist experience associated with this activity (Hall and Sharples, 2003; Kivela and Crofts, 2009; Sims, 2010; Chang *et al.*, 2010; Sánchez-Cañizares and Lopez-Guzman, 2012). However, a number of publications over the last decade (Hjalaguier and Richards, 2002; Boniface., 2003; Long, 2003, Gyimóthy and Mykletun, 2009, Mak *et al.*, 2012) and a selection of institutional documents (Bessière, 1998; Hall and Mitchell, 2001; Mitchell and Sharples, 2003;

Cohen and Avieli, 2004; Quan and Wang, 2004; Bertella, 2011; Mak *et al.* 2012; Mkono *et al.*, 2013) mark a new trend in the study of the tourism phenomenon. They reflect the growing need to transcend traditional disciplinary approaches towards interdisciplinary studies linking anthropological, psychological and ethnological perspectives (Beardsworth and Keil, 1997).

III. CONTEXT AND METHOD

Despite the growing importance of food or gastronomic tourism at all levels, the relationship between tourism geography and food or gastronomy has been little explored. Some of the most significant contributions from geography at an international level have been made by Hall and Mitchell (2001); Hall and Sharples (2003) and Montanari (2009). This evidence from geography highlights the the need for discussion and debate scenarios that enable a clear position to be stated on the relationship between tourism and food from a geographical perspective. Despite the advances and international academic efforts, it remains a field that needs to be explored in greater depth, especially in terms of the analysis of the processes of production and marketing of food products exchanged under the label of gastronomy.

Although some authors (Scarpato, 2002; Smith and Xiao, 2008; Sims, 2010; Bertella, 2011) recognize the multiplicity of actors involved in this recent form of tourism and the diversity of relationships and interactions that are woven through the exchange of goods (in this case, food products), few of the contributions developed propose a theoretical framework of analysis for this tourist phenomenon. Within this context, this research examines this phenomenon, focusing on the specific case of the region of Catalonia (Spain), in one of the fields little explored in research into food or gastronomic tourism, namely the analysis of production processes, distribution and restoration from a geographic perspective.

The purpose of this article is, therefore, to contribute towards a better understanding of the actions, relationships and interactions of the actors involved in the production and distribution of food products within the context of gastronomic tourism. To achieve this, the research takes the pillars of Relational Economic Geography and the principle of path dependency, and applies them to the case of Catalonia (Spain).

Relational economic geography is emerging as a new theoretical framework for the analysis and interpretation of complex realities. In relational economic geography, regions are not real actors, but are considered entities that depend on economic, social, cultural and particularly political contexts, within which people in firms and other organizations act and interact (Maskell, 2001). Relational economic geography allows, therefore, a complex understanding of economic action and localized consequences, from a spatial perspective (Bathelt and Glückler, 2003, 2011), based on evolutionary and institutional conceptions.

From a methodological perspective, a quantitative and qualitative approach is adopted. The information gathered comes from primary and secondary data from the period between June 2010 and September 2012. The information includes a review of academic publications, promotional material, reports and official documents produced by public and private entities working to promote gastronomic tourism in Catalonia. The fieldwork was conducted through the application of a total of 320 telephone surveys to 120 producers, 100 retailers and 100 restaurateurs, distributed across the 10 tourism regions defined as tourism brands in Catalonia. Each survey had a minimum duration of 10 minutes. This information was supplemented by direct observation of the phenomenon, taking the form of visits to restaurateurs, producers, retailers and attendance at fairs, markets and in general, food events that took place in the four Catalan provinces during the period studied.

IV. RESULTS: RELATIONAL ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY AND GASTRONOMIC TOURISM

As part of the results obtained, the article describes the phenomenon of gastronomic tourism in Catalonia from the perspective of the principles of relational economic geography and the conceptualization of the four basic pillars: organization, evolution, innovation and interaction. Therefore, the results were taken of the surveys of 120 producers, 100 retailers and 100 restaurateurs involved in one way or another in gastronomic tourism in the case of Catalonia. The results obtained in relation to these four pillars are described below.

IV.1. The organization pillar

In terms of the territorial distribution of firms, understood as organizations, and referring to the organization pillar based on the issues raised by Bathelt and Glückler (2003), the results show that organizational structures are not static and, on the contrary, they are embedded in social, cultural and institutional structures. The latter can be observed, for example, in the design and implementation of strategies such as gastronomy clubs or *gastroteca*, in which companies participate differently between one tourism brand or another.

IV.2. The evolution pillar

With reference to the analysis of evolutionary processes as a part of the evolution pillar, the most representative examples of gastronomic tourism in Catalonia were taken as a reference, namely fairs, food trails and food events, which involve a significant number of stakeholders from different sectors (public, private and mixed) (Smith and Xiao, 2008). Stakeholders are analysed because they sometimes interact outside of their political administrative boundaries.

Based on the analysis, it can be stated that the territorial distribution of fairs and food events per municipality in each tourism brand show the historical and evolutionary trajectory of organizations and institutions.

IV.3. The innovation pillar

In relation to the innovation pillar, which links the processes of knowledge creation, it was observed that knowledge and innovation can be found in the hotels and restaurants, particularly in the case of tourism brands like Barcelona and the Costa Brava. This fact may be explained by the diversification of tourism in these areas in relation to food in comparison to other tourism brands.

IV.4. The interaction pillar

Meanwhile, the pillar of interaction (which enables the analysis of the processes of interactive learning, creative variation and the collective production of knowledge as conceptual tools that link the pillars of organization and innovation and generate an evolutionary dynamic) enabled us to analyse and display the interaction, understood as a result of the relationships between producers, distributors and restaurateurs.

V. FINAL REMARKS

In the end, the results of the study of the territorial dimension of food tourism in Catalonia as a case study show how the re-conceptualized model of relational economic geography and its four pillars (organization, evolution, innovation and interaction) defined by Bathelt and Glückler (2003) enables the identification and analysis of the actions and interactions of the actors involved in the production, distribution and restoration of food products within the framework of an emerging tourist activity known as food tourism.

Based on Bathelt and Glückler (2011), it can be concluded that the spatial organization of the firms linked to food tourism is also strongly affected by the experience of previous innovation processes. In the case of Catalonia, this fact is reflected in differences between tourism brands, which are adapted to local cultures, institutions and particular territorial features that result in specific regions of culinary innovation and development.

There are tourism brands that can be considered as innovative and in which an innovative gastronomic environment is identified. This can be defined as a set of elements in which there is a mature, strong, prior tourism path that takes the form of product innovation. These elements are observed in product innovation and the production process, institutional support, promotion and marketing strategies, and entrepreneurship. Barcelona and the Costa Brava tourism brands are examples of an innovative gastronomic environment which are the focus of creativity and innovation, whose territorial resources give them competitive advantages also in the food tourism sector. In these cases, food tourism is enhanced thanks to the institutional role which strengthens the action performed by organizations, achieving more dynamic gastronomic activity.

As part of relational economic geography, it is confirmed that the economic action of those involved in food tourism is embedded in specific contexts. This framework allows a series of supportive environments to be produced for those involved in the exchange of products within food tourism. Stakeholders can benefit from the effects of food tourism, such as attracting more tourists, the development of food events and the consolidation of tourism products, such as the “ Xató Food trail”.

The case study (Catalonia, Spain) shows through the conceptualization based on the pillars of relational economic geography (organization, evolution, innovation and interaction) that regions are strongly embedded in their specific local characteristics. Thus, the consequences in terms of the political implications of food tourism must be based on the particular features not only of the tourism brands, but also of the counties. In this respect, and with regard to the implications for future research, network analysis is required on different geographical scales. These may contribute towards comparative studies that allow relational economic geography to be validated as a new theoretical framework for food tourism in other territorial contexts.

