

Contribution of food products in creating cultural identity of tourist destination

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Abstract: - Very well informed and globally oriented new customers are looking for high quality products and new experiences able to satisfy their needs and wishes. Generally, food is not the main but certainly a very important motive to visit a tourist destination. Food products become a source of pleasure and an unavoidable element in creating authentic and unique traveling experience. The aim of this paper is to accentuate changing customer behaviour on tourist market, i.e. the trend toward increased consumption of typical food products, and then explore tourist satisfaction with these products. Typical food products are reflecting historical, local and cultural specific qualities of particular place, and therefore could be regarded as gastronomic tourism resources that enable tourism development. Special attention is given to specific features of typical food products and their contribution in creating local and cultural identity of tourist destination. Due to dynamic and turbulent changes on tourist market, the approach to customer satisfaction has been changed. Tourists are evaluating tourist products not only during the consumption process, but also after this process. After buying tourist products, the consumer compares them with its own expectations, and dependable on his level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction develop positive or negative word of mouth. Tourist satisfaction with the quality and price of tourist products could lead to positive word of mouth and have implication on repeated tourist visit, and consequently be considered as important element in achieving higher level of tourism development. Istrian County as one of the most developed tourist region in the Republic of Croatia has been used by the authors as a case study. The survey took place in many hotels, camping, private accommodations and restaurants from June to August 2005. Based on research findings the authors suggest some guidelines in the field of food marketing that would be in the function of tourism development.

Key-Words: - typical food products, tourist market, consumer satisfaction, tourism development, cultural identity;

1 Introduction

Food has become an integral part of tourist experience and important element in tourism marketing, as well as an important element in determining the level of tourist satisfaction with integral tourist product [1]. In recent years it has become the issue of many researchers, and it is analyzed also as tourist product.

Due to the significance of food for economy development, agriculture together with tourism industry represents a strategic line of Croatian long-term development. Istrian County as the most developed tourist region in Croatia has a great culinary heritage and of course possibilities to use it as an advantage on

competitive tourist market. The advantage also lies in the fact that Istria is an ecologically preserved area without industrial pollution and tightly traffic. However, although Istria has all necessary conditions for traditional food production, the ecological preservation has not been adequately used in tourist promotion. Changes in food habits and tendencies in developed tourist destinations have not been followed. Because of the unorganized and unaccepted marketing concept in agribusinesses and tourism firms there wasn't yet any survey concerning this topic.

However, it must be considered that in Croatia and also in Istria, despite the available natural resources,

long-term insufficiency of food products has been present in relation with real and potential need on local and foreign market. The market of food products is unstable. There are inequalities in supply and demand, big price disparity, uncontrollable import and export activities and the lack of long-term development policy. A great part of food products used in tourism is hardly exported outside the country because of the unfavorable assortment, lack of quality and high prices [2]. In order to achieve higher level of tourism development Istrian County needs to utilize its resources in the best possible way.

Except in the process of image formation, food significantly contributes the tourism development by offering traditional and authentic food products that add value to tourist destination. In context of Croatian tourism development they should be regarded as important elements in value formation. In today's Croatia, gastronomic aspects have come to be regarded as complementary tourism resources or as basic resources to be used in developing tourism products. In other words, tourism products should be more often based on gastronomic elements in order to help distinguishing it from competitors and play a key role in evaluating levels of visitor satisfaction.

2 Problem Formulation

Food represents a basic and crucial element of tourism product, and thus it represents a very important issue among tourism researchers [3,4]. It can also be seen as one of the most important attributes used by potential tourists in creating images of tourism destination, and one of the most influential in terms of consumer satisfaction.

Today's experienced and educated traveler is constantly changing his behavior. The ability to recognize and deal with changing factors in the environment is the only way to survive on competitive marketplace. Tourists are also more conscious and better informed in food consumption. There are a significant number of them who expect the food to be source of pleasure or even a pleasant experience or travel adventure. Gastronomy is fundamental component of people's life. It represents not only a direct way to express natural value of some territory but also an authentic way to express the culture of its people. For these reasons, food products are strong attractions for tourists from different habits, way of life and tradition [1].

2.1 Typical Food Products as Tourist Resources

Due to their compatibility with new trends of cultural consumption, food products are appreciated as tourism resources [5]. Food products include not only intrinsic but

also a symbolic value. These elements enable them to present people and territories of the visited tourist destination, i.e. enable tourists to approach culture in a more experiential and participative way. Due to the cultural value assigned to food products, they have recently become one of the most highly valued tourism resources. In a globalized society where culture itself has undergone a process of standardization there is a need for authentic and traditional products. There is a growing consumer's interest and desire for „authentic” products; hence scholarships are concerned with authenticity in tourism studies [6].

Tourist consumers show great interest upon typical food products because of their distinctive historical, cultural and physical attributes deep ingrained in the area of production. The great competitive potential of these products lies in the non-export nature of their components and strong and uncontested link with the tradition. Thus the protection of these products has become of great significance [7].

Food products generally include key elements of local heritage [8]. A great quantity of traditional knowledge and special production skills gained through generation are embedded in these products. Through history, during soil cultivation and product cultivation, people have developed different techniques of food production. The influence of other cultures, technological changes, the experience and tradition of typical food products has been modified during the time, and as a consequence some regions have developed its own and unique character. It can be concluded that the production of typical products is a result of a mix of natural, social and cultural resources of some area. However, some food products can be concerned as local products. Thus, food can be considered as “cultural symbol and differentiating sign for tourist destination of high quality” [9].

As a result of all mentioned above it is possible to pose the following hypothesis: **H1:** Due to the fact that qualitative and authentic typical food products significantly contribute in creating recognizable local and cultural identity of tourism destination, it is very important that tourists consume typical food products of the visited tourist place.

2.1 New approach to customer satisfaction

In the new market environment the approach to customer satisfaction has been changed [10]. Consumer satisfaction is valued in the process of exploitation of tourist products and also after this process. Due to the fact that tourist consumers are more demanding there is a need to generate more qualitative tourist products. To create such products the first thing to do is to find out

tourist wishes and possibilities to satisfy them, then to realize how to anticipate their expectations. It is impossible to influence a great number of factors that have impact on tourist satisfaction. In the first line this is pertained to quality which arises as a result of individual and subjective perception of every person.

The concept of quality has great impact on marketing management and consumer satisfaction as its important determinant. For this reason Total Quality Management becomes principal tool to compete on high competitive marketplace [11]. For quick assimilation of positive management praxis and permanent orientation towards rationalization of operation procedures there is a necessity to be focused on quality. The mentioned management approach implicates some changes in marketing concept. Changes are visible in utilizing the concept of quality which enables to satisfy consumer expectations and accomplish market success in long period [12]. Because of the great consumer power in the tourist world quality is the first request that needs to be fulfilled.

The first stage of decision making process is a problem of recognition or perceiving a need. It occurs when the person perceived the difference between actual and desired state. By undertaking proper promotional activities unconscious consumer can be motivated to recognize their need and act in the direction to satisfy them. Adequate problem recognition is a base for successful decision making.

After recognizing the existence of a need or problem, the next step in the process of decision making is to find information about products. Information search is mostly referring to identify tourist products that can fulfill the recognized needs. The amount and type of information vary considerably in dependence on product types and on every single consumer. Tourists often decide to choose tourist products based on their own preferences and expected benefits. There are two types of factors that influence purchase intention and final decision to buy certain products. The first factors are consumer's attitudes, while the second are unexpected situational factors. These factors could change the purchase intention. Hence, the consumer's preferences about tourist products and its intention to buy it mustn't always result with buying the product.

After purchasing a tourist product, consumer goes through the last stage in the decision making process called after-purchase evaluation. This last step pertains to consumer's subjective evaluation about the results of its purchase activity. It is a process of "active physical involvement" in which consumer evaluates the chosen alternative versus all other possible [13]. Consumers evaluate tourist products according to their own expectations [14]. The fulfillment of consumer expectations is only the minimum to gain a successful strategy of consumer satisfaction. The key to obtain

successful consumer is to overmatch their expectations [15]. Constant quality improvement of products and services isn't the only way to accomplish it. The expectation is possible to overmatch by astonishing the consumer with something unexpected.

In literature it is possible to find two main interpretations of tourist satisfaction: satisfaction as a process and satisfaction as a consequence. The most common definition of tourist satisfaction considers satisfaction as a process, i.e., satisfaction represents the evaluation between what consumer expects and what he gets. It is about understanding cognitive process and their role in evaluating satisfactions. Recently the attention is focused on nature not at cause of satisfaction. In the process of post purchasing evaluation the cognitive element is dominant for obtaining satisfaction, but affective component is also very important and influences the satisfaction of the consumed product [16].

With the after-purchasing evaluation of tourist product, consumers get the feedback information about products in the form of experience. This influences its future decision in similar buying situation. Hence, satisfaction and dissatisfaction influence further consumer behavior. If tourist product fulfilled tourist expectations, they will probably buy again the product. The experience shows that in most cases satisfied consumers will repeat the purchase and become loyal to the product brand.

Understanding consumer needs and their behavior in each phase of decision buying process of tourist products is of big significance for marketing professionals in tourism. In that way they have important information and knowledge for creating effective marketing strategies in order to be able to satisfy the needs and wishes of tourist consumer. Based on all mentioned above it is possible to pose the following hypotheses:

H2: The post-purchase product evaluation contributes in gaining feedback information about tourist products and therefore determines consumer behavior in the future decision making process.

H3: Tourist satisfaction with the quality and price of typical food products lead to positive word of mouth and could be the motive for returning to tourist destination.

3 Problem Solution

With the purpose to accentuate the trend on tourist market toward increased consumption of typical food products, and then explore tourist satisfaction with these products a questionnaire was created. The survey took place in many hotels, camping, private accommodations and restaurants in Istrian County (Croatia) from June to August 2005. A total of 802 questionnaires were collected. For analyzing the questionnaire results a corresponding statistic procedure

was used (descriptive statistic, analysis of variance and correlation analysis). Socio-demographic structure of the sample is presented in Appendix 1.

In order to test the first hypothesis (H1), i.e. the importance of consuming typical food products while visiting tourist destination, a Likert 7 point scale was used. From the collected data it can be seen that majority of tourists (73.3%) consider that is very important to consume typical food products of the tourist place they visit (mean 6.03; standard deviation 1.3616). The significance of food for the quality of tourist destination offer has been recognized in high percentage by Italian (mean 6.29; standard deviation 1.0844) and British tourists (mean 6.08; standard deviation 1.0598), while less by Dutch tourists (mean 5.44; standard deviation 1.3908). In relation with the variable "educational level" there is a negative correlation ($r = -0.072$, $p = 0.05$ and $r = 0.084$, $p = 0.05$).

The amounts of knowledge consumers have about tourist products influence their behavior. With the aim to discover the way tourist behave after consuming typical food products the following question was asked: "Will you spread the news about typical Istrian food products to your family/friends like a positive or like a negative recommendation by word of mouth?." In that way the base for proving the H2 hypothesis was assured. The results from field research show that a great number of tourists (75.1%) will spread positive recommendations by word of mouth to their family and friends (mean 6.08; standard deviation 1.2998). Only 1.6% of them will spread negative recommendations (mean 1.64; standard deviation 1.2852). The country of visit has no influence on tourist's answers. No matter from where they come from tourists will spread positive recommendations to their family and friends. Although a very small number of tourists will spread negative recommendations, tourists from Austria will do it more frequently then other tourists. According to frequency of visit, statistically significant difference can be seen among positive recommendation by word of mouth ($F=5.673$; $p=0.004$). A correlation analysis shows the existence of correlation ($r = 0.121$; $p = 0.001$) but not of great intensity. With the frequency of visit slowly increased the number of tourists who will make positive recommendations to their family or friends. According to gender, age, educational level, occupation and average monthly income there is no statistically difference in answers.

A base for proving H3 hypothesis was assured accentuating the fact that tourists are satisfied with the quality and price of typical food products. The next argument to test the posed hypothesis was assured by showing their accordance with the statement that typical food products could be the motive to return to tourist destination. A great number of tourists answered that they will certainly make a positive recommendation by word of

mouth about typical Istrian food products to their family and friends, while a very small number of them will spread negative recommendations. This means tourists are in great extent satisfied with the quality and price of tourist products which implicate their repeated consumption of tourist products. With the purpose to define tourist satisfaction as consumers of typical food products, the following question was asked: "How do you grade the price and quality of the following typical Istrian food products?" Using the Likert 7 point scale the aim of the research was to find out how tourists perceive each of the following ten typical food products: Istrian Prosciutto, Truffles (Mushroom), Istrian Virgin Olive Oil, Istrian Wine, Istrian Grappa, Istrian Soup, Istrian Minestra, "Fuži" Folded Pasta, Istrian Fritule (Doughnuts) and "Kroštule". Tourists show moderate satisfaction with the price of all typical Istrian food products. The highest satisfaction can be seen with the price of Istrian Grappa (mean 5.27) and Istrian Wine (5.24), while tourists are least satisfied with the price of Truffles (4.22). According to the country of visit there isn't a statistically significant difference in respondent's answers. However, it is possible to see that Austrian tourist are least satisfied with the price of typical Istrian food products in relation to British tourist and those from Eastern European countries who show a higher level of satisfaction. In relation with frequency of visit, statistically significant difference in respondents answers can be seen with the price of Istrian Wine ($F=2.754$; $p=0.065$) and Istrian Grappa ($F=2.922$; $p=0.055$), although Pearson coefficient shows a low intensity correlation. Tourists who repeat their visit to Istrian County show in some extent greater level of satisfaction with the price of typical food products in relation to those who visit Istria for the first time. Tourist's gender has no implications on the level of tourist satisfaction with the price of typical food products. Only the price of Istrian Minestra is in some way dependable on tourist gender ($F=4.008$; $p=0.046$). A correlation is of slow intensity ($r=0.097$; $p=0.05$). Female respondents are more satisfied with the price of Istrian Minestra (mean 4.96; standard deviation 1.9109) then male respondents. By analyzing tourist satisfaction in relation to the age group, statistically significant difference in respondents answers is visible with Istrian Prosciutto ($F=3.916$; $p=0.009$) and Istrian Virgin Olive Oil ($F=2.807$; $p=0.039$). The research results also show the correlation between tourist satisfaction with the price of Istrian Prosciutto and respondent's income level. The highest tourist level of income the highest is their satisfaction with the price of Istrian Prosciutto.

The survey results show how tourists perceive the quality of typical Istrian food products. Tourists are in the highest percentage (73.9%) satisfied with the quality of Istrian Prosciutto and Istrian Virgin Olive Oil (69.0%), while they are in least percentage satisfied with Istrian Minestra (53.1%) and Istrian Soup (54.2%). By analyzing

tourist satisfaction with the quality of typical Istrian food products according to the country of visit, statistically significant difference can be observed with Istrian Soup ($F = 2.476$; $p = 0.017$). The most satisfied with the quality of Istrian Soup are tourists from Great Britain (81.3%) and Eastern European Countries (63.6%), while least satisfied those from Holland (33.3%). By analyzing tourist satisfaction with the quality of typical Istrian food products in relation with respondents gender a statistically significant difference can be observed. Older tourists show more satisfaction with the quality of Istrian Minestra then younger tourists.

A significant number of respondents (39.8%) show their accordance with the statement: "Typical food products could be the motive for my return to Istria". From this answers it can be concluded that for great number of tourists who came to Istria food could be the motive to return to tourist destination (on a Likert 7 point scale, mean of all respondents is 4.68). The given results show that German, Slovenian and Austrian tourists think in higher percent then other tourists that typical food products could be the motive to return to Istria, while tourists from Great Britain are in least number in accordance with this statement. According to frequency of visit it is possible to see statistically significance between answers ($F=3.963$, $p=0.001$). Almost half of respondents (45.9%) who visited Istria three or more times think that food could be the motive of their return to a destination. Statistically significant difference ($F=3.540$; $p=0.002$) could be seen regarding the age groups. Elderly tourist (50 years and more) are more in accordance with the statement that typical food products could be the motive of their visit to Istria (47.1%). Male and female population has very similar opinion. A kind of occupation and average monthly income also doesn't influence the answers. Nevertheless, pensioners (mean 5.32) and housewives (mean 5,08) more then others think that typical food products could be the motive of their return to Istrian County. The variable "level of education" show statistically significant but negative and weak correlation ($r = -0.165$; $p= 0.000$). Based on this cognition another argument for confirming the H2 hypothesis has been added.

4 Conclusion

Food represents an unavoidable and essential element of integral tourist destination product, wherefore Croatia has the chance to enrich and improve its quality through better valorization of its potentials. Due to specific features of typical food products they can be treated as important tourism resources. By adding new value to tourist destination offer they influence tourist satisfaction and consequently participate in creating higher level of tourism development.

The results from a survey confirmed the hypothesis of the big significance of food as a factor influencing the quality of tourist destination offer and its high impact as a motive to choose a tourist destination. This cognition emphasizes the need to devote a proper attention to food as a partial element of tourist destination product, and factor that can significantly contribute to satisfy the increased needs and wishes of modern tourists. Tourists are searching for authentic traveling experiences, thus every tourist destination must develop its personality and differentiate itself in consumer's eyes.

A field research conducted on Istrian food market showed the trend toward increased consumption of typical food products. Typical Istrian food products contain elements of cultural and local heritage of the area and therefore they can be used for tourist purposes. Tourist experts need to become conscious of the possibilities to use these products and emphasize their peculiar characteristics that add value to tourist destination supply. In that way they can play a decisive role in increasing the level of tourism development.

In new market conditions faced with globalization process, strong competition, and increased consumers requests, the consumer satisfaction must be evaluated not only in a process of product consumption, but also before and after this process. After consuming tourist products tourists develop positive or negative attitudes about them. Satisfied tourists will probably spread positive recommendations by word of mouth, thus marketers are suggested to form such tourist products that cause satisfaction. Satisfied consumer will probably buy the same tourist product again, i.e. if tourists are satisfied with tourist destination product it is a big possibility they will decide to repeat their visit.

Positive recommendations by word of mouth suggest high tourist's satisfaction with the quality and price of typical food products, forming the base to undertake proper marketing activities for creating recognizable tourist destination image. Regarding the unclosed potential of typical food products which is not utilized in the proper way, something has to be done in order to utilize the big potential of these products for achieving qualitative tourism development. As the survey revealed, Istria has the potential to become recognizable food destination and differentiate itself and compete with other tourist destinations in the global context.

In order to compete with other tourist destinations, Istrian County has to find the way to distinguish itself and create a recognizable identity. Typical food products could be the key elements that can be used to add new value to destination offer and create distinctive image on marketplace.

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