Culinary Tourists: Should we even bother with the term?

Dr. Jakša Kivela
Ah, the delights of travel!

Two men went to Spain to see a bull fight. At dinner that night, they ordered “El Toro Cajones” and were so impressed by the very large ‘rissoles’ they complimented the waiter and asked what they were. “Bull's testicles” said the waiter.

Next night, they ordered the same meal. This time the rissoles were very small so they complained to the waiter and asked why the rissoles were so little.

The waiter replied, “Ah señors, today, the bull won.”
......in the United States, foods that were recently touristic but have become standard fare in many American diets include Japanese sushi; Thai noodles with peanut sauce; Chinese chop suey, chow mein, and egg rolls; Mexican tacos and burritos; and Middle Eastern pita. These and other foods range in the extent of their adaptation to American tastes and resources. As these foods become more familiar, those eaters seeking more touristic experiences tend to seek more authenticity and depth of understanding of a foreign cuisine....

Since when was sushi a touristic food? What is touristic food, does anyone know?
One joy of travel is sampling the variety of foods available in different regions of the world. While one wouldn’t want to discourage this, in regions where hygiene standards differ from home, it’s worth being cautious initially, to ensure one doesn’t get sick. Your travel insurance might cover your medical bills should you eat the wrong thing, but it’s best to try and avoid unfamiliar foods to start with.

Wow!
Hofbräuhaus: Worst food of my life

I should have known better. I don't blame anyone but myself. I knew this was a tourist place, but every travel book recommended it, and it got me at a weak moment. This is ... the worst food I've ever tasted. Go if you must. But don't say I didn't warn you... The meat was bland and salty, with a texture like wood. The salad consisted of a few sad strips of lettuce. The Knoedel... I think I tasted the chef's hands.
Local food is fresher than food trucked in from other countries (Hm,,,er… EU?). The worst fresh mango in Belize is going to be better than the best grocery store mango in the U.S., 99% of the time. Even if it’s a food that you may not normally eat, like grasshoppers, it’s probably going to be better tasting than the hamburger from the McDonald’s up the road (Bring it on…!).
Sampling local dishes will give you an insight into the culture and history of the area. Do they eat a lot of garlic? Meat? Weird things? You don’t need to read-up on the history about the place, you can learn all that just by trying local foods.
Culinary tourism is the hottest niche to emerge within the travel industry in years because dining is one of the best ways visitors can get to know a new and exotic locale. Is it though!

Guide Michelin from 1926 onwards
Although it might not have been called culinary tourism then, nor was travel affordable to the masses, but it would seem that the pursuit of fine foods and dining, different taste sensations, and cultural experiences, emerged with the advent of luxury travel – by private car (Guide Michelin from 1926 onwards), train and trans-oceanic liners – at least that is the imagery which is plainly seen in the travel brochures.
Island Feast

Ancient Hawaiians were lusty trenchermen. All events of importance called for a feast. Births, marriages, weanings, even tax-gathering... every high point in their life was signaled by a luau. The celebrations were marked by obiect attention to every whim of the king or chief who might be present, by music and dancing, by idols to keep the gods in mind, and above all, by a plentitude of food.

A luau such as the artist has depicted had to begin long before the feast was actually served. The main dish was generally roast pig barbecued in a pit or imu by the heat from lava rocks which had been pre-heated in a fire.

Fish, yams, breadfruit and other delicacies had to be wrapped in leaves and also cooked in the imu. Taro had to be pounded into gourdsful of poi. Flower leis had to be woven and baskets of various fruits gathered. The preparations took hours. But they were regarded as part of the fun which ran on merrily from beginning to end.

Food was served without stint. Whether the host was king or commoner, no one was ever known to leave a luau still hungry.
Aloha... Universal Word

Hawaiians have a word of many meanings, yet the whole world seems to understand them all. It is easy to pronounce, easy to remember. By constant, heartfelt use, those who coined it have given it wide and lasting currency.

The word is “Aloha”... theme of a famous song, idiom of an ancient, warm-hearted people. It signifies “friendship,” “affection,” “esteem,” “love.” As a salutation it expresses welcome. At parting it means farewell... not with finality, but with the hope implied “...we shall meet again.”

In his scene of an island queen greeting a neighboring chief and his consort, the artist has dramatized the meaning of “aloha” in one gesture... the presentation of its age-old symbol, the flower lei. Flowers for the princely visitors, flowers for their retinue, even a huge lei to garland their canoe.

But the thought was expressed in many ways... in dancing and entertainment, in feasting, in gifts of food for the return trip... “Aloha” said in welcome implied unbounded hospitality in the language of old Hawaii.
Menu cover front page Matson Lines 1930’s
First class dining – SS France
First class dining – SS Lurline  1935
Matson Line
First class dining w/ private butler – SS Himalaya ca. 1951
Prosper Montagné – *Larousse Gastronomique* 1938

(First English Edition 1961)

Among ‘other’ information, provided a comprehensive Gastronomic map of every region in France, something that no other author has attempted to do since. (Sadly, these are no longer produced in subsequent editions)

**What a guide for the hungry and/or inquisitive traveller!**

Gastronomic map of Auvergne

Principal growths:
- S. Fourcain
No doubt, good food and good dining was a big part of the travel experience then as is now, but like then, good food and good dining is not on the “menu” of every traveller.

And what do travellers say about their food experiences?

Sampling new foods is one my favorite parts of travelling. I love everything from the petit cafes to haute-cuisine restaurants to bazaar stands.

English traveller on the Orient Express (Paris 1931)
And what do the travellers say about their food experiences?


M. - age 54.
Well, we used to travel to France and Italy a lot…. mainly for the food you know…. But it’s been a real disappointment the last few trips… I don’t know what they’re thinking over there but it seems to me that lot of the food they sell is unauthentic and plain banal.
Interviewer: Who are “they”?
Respondent: Well… chefs, and property owners. I think success is gone to their head and they think they can do what they like. Maybe we’ve gone past the romance of Italy and France and want a different experience now….and Orient is kind of ancient and exotic… a culture which I think holds on to its traditions… but which I don’t know much about…

F. - age 49.
I like the anticipation of trying new foods you know… it kind of makes a special trip for me …. Reading about it first….then getting here. What the place is going to be like … because you've never been there before… what the food is going to taste like …the whole anticipation of a special trip you know…
Before I go on holidays... to another country that is... I try to read up about the people, culture, and their customs... and about their food. I actually pay attention to the food... because I think food is a big part of the holiday experience... but I'm not an expert.

Interviewer: Oh?

Respondent: Well... you know... it's all becoming pretentious... don't you think?

Interviewer: For instance?

Respondent: You must have seen some of these gourmet and travel shows... people come on and they talk about things that they don't know much about... all bit of fluff if you ask me... I just enjoy doing it... I don't really talk about it too much... not to my friends back home because you know... they might get jealous or think you're just showing off...
Interviewer: Any examples?

Respondent: Examples? Yeah…. few years ago when we visited Russia [St. Petersburg] it was during the Easter period…. [F] and very cold…. [M] freezing it was…. and the big part of the Easter festivities was food like kulich [a nut- and fruit-filled yeast cake], paskha [sweet cheese spread] and krashenki [painted boiled eggs]….sure I’ve read about these before… but it’s nothing like the real thing with real people…

Interviewer: Real thing, real people?

Respondent: Yes, Russians and their food and culture. I guess this is the kind of food experience I want to have when I’m on holidays.
F. - age 49.

Remember how curious we were in the 50’s and 60’s [to M] when new immigrants started arriving from Europe…all that strange new food? I guess for both of us, this was when curiosity… and adventure…yes adventure…about different cultures and foods started…you know [to Interviewer] Australians were very conservative in their eating habits then…of course this has all changed now.

But going back to your question; would I describe myself as a gastronomy or culinary tourist? No, I don’t think so; I just know and enjoy nice food when I’m on holidays. But wait a minute… M and I often go for weekend holidays…and actually most are wine and food places. Maybe we are gastronomy travellers….and we didn’t even know! [to M]
Gastronomy tourist…Am I? [to Interviewer] Oh…you got me now! I don’t want to go that far otherwise I’ll come across like one of those travel shows experts! Nah… I am simply interested in people and their culture when I travel to different countries…and yes… food plays a big part in all this…when we travelled to Italy and France we did join cooking classes… if that makes me a gastronomy tourist…so be it.

But to answer your question seriously…food is such an integral part of your holiday… it can’t be separated.. I mean, when you are on holidays, what do you say to your wife or husband every day? Where are we going to have lunch… or dinner…today? Or, what are we going to eat… or where are we going to eat? Sure you can go to McDonald’s, but then, what’s the point of travelling?

Look, we don’t travel for food per se… I don’t know who does! But, I think… every traveller, tourist if you like, can be a gastronomy tourist.... What I mean is…there are times when you have such a great food experience, that it then becomes a highlight of your trip… It becomes the trip… and next time… next trip … you want to have similar experiences… Why wouldn’t you? You know what I mean? I think we’re all gastronomy tourists from time to time… but gastronomy or culinary travel is not something absolute, … it is relative, and … our ideas and understanding about it may only go as far as our travelling experience allows.
There is something in this respondent’s narrative (in yellow) which strikes a chord.

*I think we’re all gastronomy tourists from time to time… but gastronomy or culinary travel is not something absolute, … it is relative, and … our ideas and understanding about it may only go as far as our travelling experience allows.*

I am therefore, no longer so sure in rigid definitions of culinary or gastronomy tourism.

However, I do agree with Wolfe (2006), who said that “…food and drink are the most overlooked components of the travel experience”…
Could it be that culinary tourism is more of an accompaniment to one’s travel, maybe an important one? Or maybe it is an important component for the destination, but not the main component? Perhaps food (what kind of food) is the deciding factor when choosing between two different locations at a destination – grilled fish by the sea or lamb on the spit in the countryside [Croatia]?

Importantly, this challenges our conceptions of what or who culinary tourists are, and I think that this is the main contributory factor which causes confusion as to how to call this touristic activity -

Gastronomy tourism; Food Travel; Culinary tourism; Food and wine tourism; Cuisine tourism; Culinary and Oenology tourism; Wining and dining holidays; Gourmet travel; Food travellers; Food and wine explorers; Foodie tourism; Culinary treks; Eating holidays

… Does it have to be an intentional (planned?) activity? Because if Culinary Tourism is to be defined as a premeditated activity, then the definition of what is a culinary tourist is a little myopic – it castrates discovery – which is the whole essence of travel. I think the respondent in one of my studies sums it up nicely, “I think we’re all gastronomy tourists from time to time … but gastronomy or culinary travel is not something absolute, … it is relative, and … our ideas and understanding about it may only go as far as our travelling experience allows”.

So, what do we want to call this touristic activity?

These activities –

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- vary from destination to destination - some destinations give more importance to Wine Tourism and less on food  e.g. Bordeaux up until just recently, whereas Tuscany gives Culinary and Wine Tourism equal billing. On the other hand Melbourne pays importance to outdoor dining and its café culture.

What this means is that various components that make up the destination’s food and beverage sector and related activities, drive the nomenclature according to destination’s offerings, needs, and plans. I think this is what makes destinations exciting and different.
Hence, I am not so eager to agree that if we do not standardise the nomenclature, terms and definitions, we run the risk of having these activities misunderstood, or that the traveller is going to be misinformed, or that destinations are going to target inappropriate markets.

By and large, at destinations where Wine and Culinary tourism feature as an important component of the visit, this has not been the case, quite the contrary.
Finally, Culinary Tourists, should we even bother with the term?

Absolutely we should – and together with nomenclature such as

Gastronomy tourism, Food Travel; Culinary tourism; Food and wine tourism; Cuisine tourism; Culinary and Oenology tourism; Wining and dining holidays; Gourmet travel; Food and wine explorers; Culinary treks; Eating holidays… and….and

and

whatever else suits the destination's needs

This is what makes destinations exciting, interesting, and unusual and whether it’s Gastronomy tourism, Food Travel; Culinary tourism; Food and wine tourism; Cuisine tourism …. , who cares, we all know what it means
Thank you