

Innovations

Reconnoitering the major challenges of food tourism in developing destinations: an empirical evidence from Amhara National Regional State, Northwestern Ethiopia

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Abstract

Food tourism is unique types of tourism that seeks to meet the needs of a market segment pertaining to food products. Providing diversified local foods would reflect the natural and cultural offerings of tourist sites. The current study employed exploratory research design and qualitative approach. The researcher used interview, focus group discussion and field observation to collect data from purposefully selected key informants. The result of this study reveal that poor hygiene, limited menu item in the restaurant and underprivileged stakeholder attention remain critical challenges for the development of gastronomy tourism. It is expedient that the identification of new attractions, health conditions of service areas and timely promotion of local cuisine offerings are vital to uphold gastronomy tourism in the study area.

Key words: 1.Amhara, 2.challenges, 3.food tourism, 4.gastronomy, 5.hygiene, 6.stakeholder

Introduction

The consumption of traditional food items in tourism destinations is often considered as an important part of tourists' cultural experiences (Ahmed & Jahan, 2013; Folgado-Fernández et al., 2017). Each community's cultural group consists of a unique feature on the beliefs, attitude, values, and practices that they share each other (Amin, 2014). Food habits as a socio-cultural practice are also indicative of world views (Amin & Roy, 2016). Cultural tourists are generally interested in the local gastronomic products and authentic culture of tourist destinations in order to enhance their experience (Chen & Huang, 2016). The cuisine of a country could also have an impact on its economic; socio-cultural and environmental treasures (Chuang, 2009).

The contribution of gastronomic tourism is now viewed as one of the most significant driving forces in the global economy (Du Rand & Heath, 2006). The role of culinary tourism in rural destinations has twofold. In one hand, it sheds light on local agricultural activities through increasing the value and demand of local raw materials (Dutta & Naumov, 2020). On the other hand, it steps up tourism activities in potential tourist

sites through providing unique and organic food products to the tourists staying at a destination (Ellis et al., 2018).

By and large, agricultural products produced in the study area are nourished with multiple minerals and vitamins. Thus, communities in the study area perceived that edible plant and animal species are also crucial for medical purposes. To that end, some local culinary products offered in the study area would make people to be cured from different transmitted and non-transmitted diseases (Everett, 2008; Everett, 2019). However, studies with respect to gastronomy tourism in most emerging destination are still limited. Hence, the present study seeks to probe the fundamental challenges of food tourism in the context of a developing region.

Methods and materials

As the current study was conducted through taking data from key informants with critical perspectives in the field of food tourism, the researcher followed qualitative research approach. After defining the research problem, the researcher disclosed to each respondents to further enabling them to understand the purpose of the study. The face-to-face nature of communication between the researcher and the key informants allows for in-depth probing and clarification of concepts and data.

Since collecting large amount of qualitative data does not necessary add to the quality of the overall study, the researcher purposefully selected 13 experts for interview and 9 experts for focus group discussion. Because qualitative studies typically focus on phenomena and issues that are specific to a particular population, sampling is not so much concerned with the selection of participants whose experiences will generalize to populations at large (Garibaldi & Pozzi, 2018) In qualitative studies, the researcher is concerned with recruiting participants, who should maximize the potential for collecting rich data on a specific topic of interest (Getz et al., 2014). Hence, for the present study, the researcher selected participants who are most knowledgeable about gastronomy tourism. Besides, qualitative data often reaches a point of saturation, that is, when no new information is obtained from additional data (Hassan & Kokkranikal, 2018).

Table 1 Profile of research participants

Participant No.	Participant category and codes assigned	Sex	Age	Work experience	sample selected
1	Academician- AD ₁	M	25-30	7years	4
2	Academician-AD ₂	M	31-40	7 years	
3	Academician-AD ₃	M	41-50	10 years	
4	Academician-AD ₄	F	25-30	4 years	
5	Chef in restaurant -CH ₁	F	50+	10 years	4
6	Chef in restaurant-CH ₂	F	25-30	5 years	
7	Chef in restaurant-CH ₃	M	25-30	4 years	
	Chefs in restaurants-CH ₄	M	41-50	11 years	
8	Tourism business operator-TO ₁	M	31-40	8 years	2
9	Tourism business operator-TO ₂	M	31-40	4 years	
10	Tourism experts at government office-TE ₁	M	31-40	7 years	3
11	Tourism expert at government office-TE ₂	M	25-30	4Years	
12	Tourism expert at government office-TE ₃	F	31-40	10 years	

13	Focus group participant- FGP ₁	F	31-40	7 years	
14	Focus group participant- FGP ₂	F	31-40	8 years	
15	Focus group participant- FGP ₃	M	25-30	5 years	
16	Focus group participant –FGP ₄	M	31-40	7 years	
17	Focus group participant- FGP ₅	F	31-40	9 years	
18	Focus group participant- FGP ₆	M	41- 50	6 years	
19	Focus group participant- FGP ₇	F	31-40	7 years	
20	Focus group participant- FGP ₈	M	31-40	10 years	
21	Focus group participant- FGP ₉	M	31-40	7 years	9
		Total participants			21

Data analysis

Thematic analysis looks at patterns obtained from a set of interviews or focus group transcripts (Hassan & Kokkranikal, 2018). Hence, the researcher took bodies of data (which were quite large) and grouped them according to similarities in other words, themes. These themes helped the researcher to make sense of the content and derive meaning from it. As a result of this, thematic analysis were the preferred data analysis technique to find out more about respondents’ experiences, views, and opinions with respect to the opportunities and challenges of gastronomy tourism in the study area. Therefore, as long as the aim of the current study involves understanding people’s experience or view of gastronomy tourism in the context of Amhara National Regional State, thematic analysis would be a great choice.

Results and discussion

It was also mentioned that food and beverage service providing institutions working in the study area struggled to offer some selected dishes to the visitors (FGD, May 2019). But, what was a dilemma here is that tourism service operators like tour operators, travel agents and tour guides proscribed to promote and provide local culinary interwoven with other tourism products (Liu et al., 2017). Hence, most visitors were not able to have adequate clue regarding local foods. Due to this reason, tourists were not in a position to taste local dishes and stay longer in the study area (Lunchaprasith & Macleod, 2018). By far, it was common to see visitors using packed food items than local foods during visitation in Amhara Region (FGD, May 2019). On the other hand, a chef (HC₃, June 2019) working in one of cultural restaurants purported that consuming canned and packed MacDonal products by visitors ruin the practice of culinary tourism in the study area. To that end, when tourism destinations prefer MacDonal products to local dishes, the contribution of local culinary to the economy becomes minimal (Mookherjee, 2008). The current tourism activities executed in the study area did not consider culinary tourism practice and its role in improving the local economic activities (FGD, May 2019). Such practices deprived the movement of visitors having an interest in food tourism other than other forms of tourism (Timothy & Ron, 2013). On the other hand, food service providing institutions lack many things to offer quality gastronomy products to the visitors in the study area. Even though they played an indispensable role in enriching visitor experiences in the study area, local food and beverage providers frequently face certain limitations as evinced in Table 3.

Table 2 weaknesses of restaurants providing local cuisines in Amhara National Regional State

<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limitations in scaling-up best practices. • Lack of well-planned expansion strategies. • Lack of local knowledge. • No clear organizational structure.

- No clear role for corporate social responsibility practices.
- Inadequate linkage with tour operators and travel agents arranging tours in the study area.
- Poor food storage and handling practices.
- Inability to develop marketing and promotion strategies.
- Poor linkage with local farmers and local government tourism offices.
- Lack of recipe to prepare most of the local foods.
- Poor menu pricing strategies.
- Impoverished waste management practices.

Generated from interview results

The main weakness in the development of culinary tourism is the lack of clear community organizational structure. That is indeed becoming an obstacle in the process of optimizing the role of foodies' community in the development of culinary tourism in Amhara National Regional State. The strategy offered for the development of culinary tourism in the study area is strengthening of Amhara Foodies institution with a regular program of members. Therefore, community empowerment is an effort to empower the powerless community, usually for those marginal communities. One of community participation which can be optimized to develop culinary tourism is Foodies community (Zhang et al., 2019). Nowadays, this community is essential to promote and establish culinary tourism. So its existence needs support by the stakeholders in developing culinary tourism; thus, the analysis of foodies community strategy support is necessary for Amhara National Regional State to develop the Balikpapan culinary tourism.

Table 4.1 select qualitative responses from interviews concerning barriers to development of culinary tourism

Key barrier	Voices of interviewees
Unable to obtain consistent supplies	“As I see, suppliers have bundle of products for certain days but they haven’t for other consecutive days”. ‘For instance, our restaurant has ordered 30kg mango, 15 kg pineapple and 15kg roll cabbage for today and we have got all of them from the supplier. However, for tomorrow as we have 600 customers to be attended at lunch period, we need to deliver first class buffet service to them according to their order. But, the supplier is not able to provide 25kg watermelon, 20 kg papaya, 45kg onion, 5kg garlic, 3kg ginger, 5kg parsley, 15kg lettuce, 20kg cabbage and 15kg tomato together for tomorrow morning. Thus, I would like to assure you that individual fruit and vegetable suppliers cannot provide adequate amount of their products to hotels and restaurants serving local dishes to their customers. That retards the development of food tourism in the region.”
Local farmers’ inability in supplying their products directly to food providing institutions	“We do not have a room to directly order some raw materials like vegetables, egg and dairy products from the local farmers. Whenever we meet them at the local market and order them to bring some of their products to our hotel, they say that we will be late or we can’t make it. Of course, people living in rural areas of Amhara region are tied up with many tasks such as ploughing, looking after their cows and babies, planting their trees and so on. As the infrastructure is poor there, women and their children carry same water for bathing and everything. So you understand my point why food service providing institutions in the region would

	not buy food ingredients directly from local farmers.”
Lack of skills	‘Food ingredient suppliers and final local dish suppliers need training to scale up their performances. Learning and teaching institutions, especially universities found in the region did not give training regarding how to prepare and provide local cuisines without losing their original qualities. Besides, “I don’t believe local farmers are with enough skills in producing, harvesting, storing and transporting food raw materials.”
Unable to get investment capital	“For me that is a critical problem. Those who need to engage in culinary business need frequent back up in the form of funds to start and sustain their business. However, as far as I know, governmental financial institutions and other private saving and credit institutions are not that much interested to offer credit to those who need to engage in culinary service provisions due to lack of awareness regarding the return on investment in food tourism in the region.”
Inadequate transportation facilities	‘Frankly speaking, farmers do use local mode of transportation when they go to the market. Even if food raw materials are abundantly found at local farmers houses, there is almost no comfortable road for vehicles to transport food raw materials and facilitate the raw material market in Amhara region. Therefore, absences of logistics facilities constrain the provision of local cuisine in different star rated hotels and restaurants in the region.”
Lack of awareness of star rated hotels	“No access to local farmers. The problem is that chefs are not aware of local food ingredient suppliers. Even management bodies in different hotels do not aware about the fact that local dishes are vital to elongate foreign visitors’ length of stay.”
Poor linkage between agriculture and tourism	‘As you might also know, in Amhara region there is no procedure that link agriculture with tourism. Despite the region is bestowed with a range of tourism products, the link between agricultural activities and tourism is found to be weak.’

Source: Interview

In areas where agriculture is a dominant economic activity, food raw materials ought to be produced in such a way that environmental qualities are kept (Liu et al., 2017). Culinary tourism being a modality of attaining socio-economic advancement of rural destinations requires the involvement of agrarian societies. Therefore, through designing appropriate strategies for the development of culinary tourism initiatives entail the involvement of local communities in each developmental stage. Culinary tourism also emboldens the cultural, economic and environmental values of agricultural products in emerging tourism destinations (Hassan & Kokkranikal, 2018). The perceived impacts of culinary tourism (see Figure 2) are outlined in the forthcoming sections.

Conclusion and implications

Despite its immense potential, the impact of culinary tourism on the local community’s economy was found to be minimal in Amhara National Regional State. This happened due to lack of tourism stakeholders’ awareness about the value of local authentic cuisines to the economic sustainability of agrarian societies (Garibaldi & Pozzi, 2018). For that matter, tourism and hospitality teaching institutions

should devise training programs related to culinary tourism and give training to all hospitality service providing institutions enabling them to have clear understanding about the significance of local food for the economic, socio-cultural and environmental wellbeing of rural societies. Pertaining to the overall impacts of culinary tourism, a tourism expert (TE₄, June 2019) pointed out that culinary tourism initiative and events in Amhara National Regional State needs a robust work to optimize its economic, socio-cultural and environmental settings. On the other hand, local farmers should extend linkages with local food and beverage suppliers (Williams et al., 2014). As a culinary resource endowed region, in order to be attractive in the eyes of visitors, tourism stakeholders in Amhara National Regional State shall cohabit and create an enabling environment for tourism and must market their culinary products effectively (Garibaldi & Pozzi, 2018).

As a rule of thumb, tourism stakeholders shall devise strategies pertaining to how to tackle challenges in culinary tourism provisions (Williams et al., 2014). Tourism government bodies should enforce tourism business operators to incorporate culinary tourism products on their itinerary as one part of tourism activities. The local tourism government bodies should also initiate the establishment of food museum that exhibits the overall cuisines found in the region. Developing a local culinary tourism promotion program is also substantive to develop culinary tourism in the study area.

No matter how rich in bundle of food raw materials the region is, impoverished management significantly affects the development of food tourism. Especially, there is almost no skilled manpower in food harvesting, processing, preparing and serving to the final users in Amhara National Regional State. Thus, workers in food tourism institutions need to be trained in producing local cuisines and learn more about foreign languages since non-Ethiopian tourists perceived that the language skill of the restaurant staff was poor.

Limitations and future research directions

In spite of substantial critics, the present study provides valuable insights to scholars and practitioners alike. Researchers would like to acknowledge the limitations of the present study as it was purely based on qualitative data received through interview and FGD. The study was also based on the existing food tourism scenario and the information, judgment and predictions of the respondents despite their differences in status and mindset. However, future researchers shall incorporate quantitative data to obtain more solid results. On the other hand, in terms of future avenues for Amhara food tourism scholars, it would be desirable to place sustainability first on the culinary research agenda.

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