

Research Note

Celebrities enhance food tourism: A chef in the city or a city by the chef?

As celebridades potenciam o turismo gastronómico: Um chef na cidade ou uma cidade do chef?

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Abstract

During the past decades, studies have paid a growing attention to the relationships between celebrities and tourism because of their influence on travel behaviours. Based on the literature of celebrity-induced film tourism, chefs have emerged as a source of celebrity-induced food tourism which awards value to food as art. This exploratory research note is focused on the culinary empire of Karlos Arguiñano in Zarautz (Basque Country, Spain) and argues that celebrity chefs are powerful cultural and social agents who have developed their own brands and influence on food consumption. This research innovatively illustrates the potential of celebrity chefs for food tourism management and marketing.

Keywords: Basque country; celebrity chefs; gastronomy; Spain; tourism.

Resumo

Nas últimas décadas, a investigação académica tem prestado, cada vez mais, atenção às relações entre as celebridades e o turismo devido à sua influência nos comportamentos de viagem. Com base na literatura sobre o turismo cinematográfico induzido por celebridades, os chefs de cozinha começaram a ser entendido como uma atração no contexto do turismo gastronómico induzido por celebridades, no qual se valoriza a comida como arte. Esta nota de investigação exploratória centra-se no império culinário de Karlos Arguiñano em Zarautz (País Basco, Espanha) e argumenta que os chefes de cozinha famosos são agentes culturais e sociais poderosos que desenvolveram as suas próprias marcas e influência no consumo alimentar. Esta nota de investigação ilustra de forma inovadora o potencial dos chefes famosos para a gestão e o marketing do turismo gastronómico.

Palavras-chave: País Basco; chefs de cozinha célebres; gastronomia, Espanha; turismo.

1. Introduction

While there is a large body of literature that analyses the relationships between celebrities and tourism, few studies have analysed these linkages from the perspective of food. This exploratory research note contributes to the understanding of the relationships between celebrity and tourism through 'food' in a current post-covid dimension that has challenged these relationships (Leer, 2023). Previous literature shows that food has been analysed as a form of art (Reynolds, 1993) and chefs have been increasingly considered artists

(Karpik, 2000) because “they treat foods as if they were textures of a painting, creating dishes of great plasticity and capricious forms” (Santamarina, 2016: 202). Star chefs, through gastronomy, are often presented in the media as artists (Fusté-Forné, 2017).

In this sense, chefs have progressively emerged as crucial actors in tourism development (Zhang & Yu, 2018), where a chef’s expertise becomes a key driver for food tourism success (Mahfud *et al.*, 2019). A celebrity chef is “someone with a professional background who enjoys a certain element of recognition domestically and possibly globally, unconfined to the world of expensive restaurants” (Henderson, 2011: 617). Celebrities are cultural and social icons with the power to stimulate travel. This study advocates that celebrity-based food tourism is a form of tourism “whose creation is based on the powerful impacts of mass media and popular culture in post-industrial societies” (Lee *et al.*, 2008: 809).

Previous research shows that culinary television shows have largely contributed to the popularization of food (Fusté-Forné, 2017). From an American perspective, popular television chefs are Julia Child, Emeril Lagasse or Rachael Ray (Ray, 2007). From a Spanish perspective, examples of popular television chefs are the Torres Brothers, Alberto Chicote and Karlos Arguiñano, who is the celebrity chef used in this research to expand the understanding of the impact of mass media on food tourism. While celebrity chefs have contributed to the development of food aesthetics (Henderson, 2011), media has contributed to the construction of their brand names (Cooper *et al.*, 2017).

In order to analyse the role of the celebrity chef in tourism development, the author has implemented a qualitative methodology based on a non-participant observation study (see Somekh and Lewin, 2005) where the culinary venues of the chef Karlos Arguiñano were identified as the observation factor. In addition, this method is supplemented with a visual ethnography which allows to contextualise the textual description with visual representations (see Fusté-Forné, 2023). Data collection was conducted by the author in the city of Zarautz to capture the tourism connection to the celebrity chef empire, based on a visit to the venues of the brand, and also secondary data from the official tourism marketing strategies of the city, where food has a relevant role. As this is a preliminary approach to the topic, the empirical research is limited to the lived experience of the researcher as a form of ethnographic study which provides a descriptive and introductory understanding of the role of the celebrity chef in tourism development, which could be used as a basis to expand the implications of this research note, as it is also explained in the conclusion.

After this introduction, the next section analyses the previous literature on celebrity-induced tourism and the author develops a dialogue between the literature and the empirical materials to demonstrate the tourism potential of the culinary empire of Karlos Arguiñano in the city of Zarautz, located in the Basque Country, in the shores of the Cantabrian Sea, northern Spain.

2. The potential of Karlos Arguiñano for the development of tourism in Zarautz (Basque Country, Spain)

2.1. Media make celebrity chefs

The cultural and social role of celebrity chefs has been growing during the past decades, and the influence of celebrity chefs is often compared to rock stars (Huidobro, 2006; Pujol, 2009). The weight of food in media has increased over time and, thanks to television, food has become a mass media phenomenon. This is, for example, manifested in Spain. In this sense, the trend in Spanish culinary programmes refers to a change from traditional recipe programs to avant-garde food shows, with a growing presence of food travel programmes (Hidalgo-Marí & Segarra-Saavedra, 2014), most of them led by celebrity chefs. Aligned with this, Jones and Taylor (2013) stated that food journalism is strongly linked to celebrity. Pujol (2009) adds that the understanding of cooking as leisure has increased because of food-based television. Many examples could be cited regarding television chefs, starting with Arguiñano, and also José Andrés, culinary showmen such as Alberto Chicote and cultural programmes such as *En clau de vi*, with the participation of chef Josep Roca (Fusté-Forné, 2017), from the El Celler de Can Roca restaurant, in Girona (Catalonia, Spain).

In the current globalized media landscape, the interest of consumers towards food is growing, and they love to see what others eat and cook and also share what they eat and cook – people are, more than ever, social eaters (Garcia Jimenez, 2014). The media play a huge role in relation to the popularization of food and have enhanced people to participate in celebrity-based food experiences (Leer & Povlsen, 2016), for example through the television programs but also through a wide range of contents that include their restaurants, the participation in events and the opening of new venues that broaden the target audiences and democratize the understanding of food as art.

With regards to the food experience, television programmes are also a source of inspiration for people to prepare their own starred meal at home (Fusté-Forné, 2020). This is significantly illustrated by Karlos Arguiñano, who has run recipe programs on television for more than three decades, with more than 7000 programmes. In this sense, the relevance of Karlos Arguiñano in Zarautz also shows a luxury restaurant, which is the point of departure of the brand attraction factor. While this may be expensive for many people, this does not mean that his cuisine cannot be experienced, as explained later, because a series of additional experiences and venues have also emerged as part of the chef's brand. A celebrity chef does not only attract media attention, but also seeks media attention (see Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2020), and his/her celebrity provides his/her brand with a competitive differentiation and a strategic positioning.

2.2. Celebrity chefs influence people

According to Rivière (2008), people are celebrities because they appear in the media. The media report on people that societies need to know because they are culturally and socially relevant; they are examples to follow. The media create star systems, as happens with cinema or music. During the past couple of decades, food has fully entered this system of celebrities who play a progressive role in cultural and social influence (Fusté-Forné, 2017).

Previous studies reveal that people's involvement with a celebrity influences their perceptions of destinations, and, specifically, enhances their visitation intentions (Lee *et al.*, 2008). A representation in a film or on television may stimulate tourism demand (see, for example, Kim, 2012). Drawing from the celebrity fan-destination relationship in film-induced tourism, celebrity chefs can also encourage food consumption through tourism (see Busby *et al.*, 2013).

As previous research has noted, the role of chefs in attracting visitors to a destination is not limited to the dining experience itself, but also includes the engagement of chefs with the community through events or the discovery of chefs through marketing materials (Fusté-Forné, 2020). Within the relationships between chefs and business activities, "restaurants usually occupy a central role and a tendency is discernible whereby these proliferate and diversify with the introduction of more casual and less expensive eateries to a portfolio of finer dining establishments" (Henderson, 2011: 617). In the process of transformation of a chef name into a brand, a celebrity chef generates a series of synergies which go beyond diners themselves - the restaurant as a tourism attraction factor, and also encapsulate food (and cultural) tourists - the place as a tourism attraction factor, together with readers and viewers of food contents - the media as a tourism attraction factor.

2.3. Is the city shaped by the chef?

Zarautz is a popular destination located on the shores of the Cantabrian Sea, in the Basque Country, northern Spain. While the sun and beach formula (see Figure 1) has attracted tourists from Spain and abroad, its cultural and social fabric is also a tourism attraction factor. The Arguiñano culinary empire in Zarautz shows that a celebrity, as a human brand, is a marketing instrument to attract food-induced tourists to a specific destination (for film-induced tourists, see Teng & Chen, 2020). Previous research shows that celebrity attachment influences consumer behaviour (Jin, 2018) which drives them to increase the visitation intention (Su *et al.*, 2011; Yen & Teng, 2015) to places which are connected to a celebrity, as observed above. In turn, celebrity involvement increases emotional attachment to places (Chen, 2018; Gitelson & Crompton, 1984). This involvement is observed in Zarautz, where the presence of the chef brand shapes the city skyline, and it is a relevant ingredient of its tourism marketing strategy. According to Yang (2018: 406), "when a celebrity is perceived to be an expert in gastronomy or highly involved in the development and operation of his/her business, consumers may exhibit favourable attitudes and behavioural intentions toward the restaurant. This may partially explain the popularity of celebrity chef restaurants".

Celebrity chefs contribute to the creation of their own restaurant-destinations - we observe here a strong connection between the attraction of the chef, the place and the media. This primarily refers to the most relevant spot, the signature restaurant, which in Zarautz also includes a statue of the chef (Figure 2). In this sense, "dining places themselves create a huge appeal, which is even bigger for those eating places situated in medium and small cities or in remote locations, where they act as economic and tourism drivers" (Fusté-Forné, 2020: 192).

Figure 1. Panoramic view of Zarautz's beach.



Source: The author of the research note.

This is the case of El Celler de Can Roca in Girona or the Karlos Arguiñano restaurant in Zarautz. The culinary empire of Karlos Arguiñano in Zarautz is not limited to his luxury restaurant, and it also includes other venues, such as a pastry shop, that expand the points of contact the customers have with the brand. This is also observed with the Roca Brothers – they own a luxury restaurant in Girona, but also places like a hotel, the Normal restaurant, a chocolate shop and an ice-cream shop.

Figure 2. The Karlos Arguiñano statue in front of his restaurant (own source)



Source: The author of the research note.

2.4. Zarautz by Arguiñano

According to Giousmpasoglou *et al.* (2020: 1), “the celebrity chef is a phenomenon of contemporary popular culture” which through the media has progressively increased the influence of celebrity chefs on people’s food habits and preferences, also from a visitor perspective. What are the drivers of food tourism experiences? This is exemplified in Zarautz by the products created by Karlos Arguiñano. Added to the restaurant, the Arguiñano family has a hotel, a bar and an open-air terrace, located in the same place, a building on the waterfront of Zarautz. Figure 3 shows a view of the terrace and the sea from the bar. While the luxury restaurant has an expensive menu (although its menu costs 50€, so it is less expensive than Michelin-starred menus which may reach 300€), the bar and the terrace allow people with a limited budget to enjoy the Arguiñano brand on the basis of drinks and tapas, and also sweet products. In this sense, they also have a pastry shop in the city (Figure 4) which is signed by Arguiñano’s son, Joseba Arguiñano – and we should also keep in mind that the chef’s sister, Eva Arguiñano, is also a popular pastry chef. All of them regularly appear on the recipe programme fronted by Karlos Arguiñano which enhances the attraction of the Arguiñano brand.

Figure 3. A dessert in the Karlos Arguiñano bar, the terrace and the waterfront



Source: The author of the research note.

Arguiñano creates a memorable food experience in Zarautz which does not only include the food itself, but also the discovery of the city through his brand – for example, the panoramic views while sitting in the bar or the terrace.

Figure 4. The entrance to the Arguiñano's pastry shop



Source: The author of the research note.

In addition, when visitors arrive in Zarautz, the Arguiñano hotel and restaurant are also part of the traffic signs of the city (Figure 5) which confirms its strategic positioning as part of the tourism attraction factor of Zarautz. While all these examples show a celebrity involvement with place, the Arguiñano businesses have also expanded to the capital of the region, Donostia – as other chefs like the Roca Brothers, based in Girona, have done by opening businesses in Barcelona and Madrid. This process of ‘celebritisation’ (Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2020), which also has a globalization ingredient (Henderson, 2011), shows how celebrity chefs have become commodities (Lee, 2014) that portray a specific food narrative which may attract tourists to a destination. Figure 6 shows an example of packaging where this connection between the chef and the city is manifested.

Figure 5. A traffic sign in Zarautz that indicates the Arguiñano venues



Source: The author of the research note.

Figure 6. A bag from the Arguiñano pastry shop



Source: The author of the research note.

3. Conclusion

While previous research has largely analysed the relevance of, for example, celebrity-based film tourism in destination management and marketing, little previous research has studied the role of celebrity in food tourism (Busby *et al.*, 2013). This research note suggests that the star power of celebrity chefs is a source of tourism development and that celebrity involvement in a place may play a vital role in food tourism. This is revealed through the triple attraction factor between chefs, places and media, which is based on luxury restaurants as destination landmarks but enhanced by events and venues headed by the chefs. These food experiences are rooted in place, as observed in Zarautz, and promoted through media and marketing strategies. The role of celebrity chefs in tourism is increasingly investigated (see Fusté-Forné & Masip, 2020) and cities are places where chefs design celebrity-based food tourism experiences. In turn, celebrity involvement may lead to visitor attachment (Yen & Teng, 2015).

This research has revealed the influence of celebrity chefs on food consumption based on the case of Karlos Arguiñano and Zarautz. The restaurant, together with the hotel, the bar, the terrace and the pastry shop have illustrated the potential of celebrity chefs for food tourism development. They create an appeal towards the place which starts from the understanding of the city as a place where a chef is located, along with other artists, and leads to the understanding of a city shaped by the chef, with the implications of this in terms of the city brand. In this sense, celebrity chefs have expanded their points of contact with the audiences - not only diners - through different food experiences that are also directed towards different segments.

However, this research is limited because it relies on a description of the phenomenon based on the researcher's observation who, through the storytelling of his lived experience in Zarautz, builds the relationships between celebrity and tourism through gastronomy. In this sense, the findings provide a preliminary perspective of the topic, which could be used

as a foundation to suggest how empirical research will lend support to the theoretical and practical arguments. For example, through interviews with the chefs and restaurant managers or questionnaires applied to tourists and visitors in relation to their motivations, experiences and levels of satisfaction. This, together with a deeper examination of the tourism marketing strategies of the city, also digital, would provide a more robust understanding of the influence of celebrity chefs on travel behaviours.

Drawing from the case of other celebrity chefs, and artists, both national and international, further studies may also expand the analysis of their impact on visitor satisfaction (Yang, 2018) in celebrity-induced food tourism. Also, the role of celebrity restaurants as contributors to destination attractiveness should be further investigated, both as tourism attraction factors (de Albuquerque-Meneguel, Mundet & Aulet, 2019) and as drivers to develop the media capital of a destination (Batat, 2021). As we have discussed in this paper, this analysis should also include the portfolio of experiences of celebrity chefs. Further research should also investigate the influence of celebrity chefs on the next generation of professionals, which may also challenge the values of the profession. This would expand the implications of the study of food tourism that positions celebrities as a new avenue in tourism research and the potential of celebrity chefs for food tourism management and marketing.

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