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Does culinary tourism represent an opportunity to enhance the agri-food heritage? The case of the historical center of Quito

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Food culture

INTRODUCTION

Most of the emblematic restaurants of the Historic Center of Quito (H.C.Q.) are disconnected from the local agri-food sector, even though many of their traditional dishes are based on local products that make up the region's agri-food heritage. This research aimed to identify how some of the emblematic restaurants are related to the agri-food heritage of Quito, based on their relationship with small local producers.

According to Kivela and Crofts (2006), culinary tourism is anchored in the traditional cuisines of specific territories. This link between tourism and food is a synergy between agriculture, culture, and tourism that produces an environment where it is possible to experience local cuisine, within a socio-historical and appropriate material context (Du Rand & Heath, 2006).

The development of emblematic food tourism must include the products and producers of the region (Alonso & Yiliu, 2011). Therefore, a tourist perspective that truly seeks to value local food should be based on local commerce, as an alternative to acquiring, at a fair price, the inputs from the farmers in the area (Leal Londoño, 2015). In this way, the emblematic food establishments are linked to local agrifood chains. Also, this factor can add value to the culinary offer because it gives confidence, quality, and a sense of identity to the consumer.

This paper aims to know and analyze how the establishments that offer emblematic foods in the H.C.Q., are related to primary production, to value tourism as an activity that gives importance to the role of the farmer in the local gastronomic offer. There is a potential in the case of the city of Quito, which has been declared cultural heritage of humanity.



METHODOLOGY

Based on a case study, descriptive research was carried out that integrated qualitative and quantitative variables, from a sociological approach that had different tourism offerings and rural development linked to agricultural production as articulating axes. The research included two phases: a documentary and a field one. For fieldwork, supply and demand were taken into account, in addition to the government sector and organized civil society. 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the owners or managers of the emblematic food establishments of the H.C.Q., 3 interviews with specialists from the National Institute of Agricultural Research (INIAP), 3 interviews with producers of corn, potatoes, and wheat, an interview with an official of the Ministry of Tourism and an interview with the person in charge of the Municipal and Participative Agriculture Program of the Municipality Quito.

On the other hand, a survey was applied to a sample of 384 national tourists, to identify the identity and traditional foods that for them were representative of the emblematic restaurants of the H.C.Q. The research was framed in the perspectives of the anthropology of food and territorial development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Corn, potatoes, and wheat are the basic products of the traditional Quito food offered at the H.C.Q., through desserts, main courses, entrees, drinks, among others. Both corn and potatoes are ancestral products of America, being important crops in the Sierra region of Ecuador, as is wheat, which has a tradition based on crossbreeding with Spanish culture. On the other hand, the urbanization of cities like Quito has displaced many of these crops to the rural peripheries, reducing the presence of agriculture.

Regarding the attendance of foreign tourists in emblematic establishments of the H.C.Q. it is less than that of national tourists. Some of these establishments display authentic traditional food and culinary tourism at the H.C.Q., which is limited to the small restaurant businesses that have existed for many years, among which family businesses predominate, with a local character and with a strong presence in people's tastes.

Regarding the relationship of emblematic food with local production, only 43.75% of the emblematic food establishments of the H.C.Q. buy, weekly and directly, certain food products from local producers and other provinces. 62.5% of the restaurants stated that they buy supplies from intermediaries and 56.25% in wholesale markets. It is then observed that a part of the emblematic foods offered in the H.C.Q. comes from small local producers, however, a greater presence of local production in Quito cuisine is needed, from concerted and more structured action.

Intermediaries concentrate the majority of food sales with more than 60% of the acquisition of inputs. These intermediaries are the main beneficiaries of the food trade, retaining the value generated by the work of small producers since they are the largest suppliers of food to the emblematic restaurants of the historic center. There is a growing gap between traditional cuisines and local products given the high level of intermediation that is present in distribution chains, which favor profitable exchanges over agri-food quality.

When a food establishment offers traditional or "authentic" food, it would be important that it not only focus on the table and the plate but that its narrative of authenticity extends to the primary production of its ingredients, based on the complementarity between tourism and local agriculture and not in the subordination of the second to the first (Medina, 2017). This relationship becomes difficult given the large number of interests that are present in the agri-food and tourism markets. It is necessary to give value to local products and seek their direct origin from the producer to have a fairer distribution chain (Leal Londoño, 2015).

The hoarding model (of intermediaries) that these small producers have historically faced is no longer economically sustainable, so it is necessary to think about processes of shortening the distribution chain, as well as aggregation and generation of value. Culinary tourism can be an alternative in this regard. It is necessary to rescue the local gastronomy against the massive industrial food; Also, the weakening of the conventional tourist offer requires the development of new products and services related to local culture and resources.



To achieve this, the role of a sensitive and responsible tourist about their food purchase decisions is essential. In this regard, it was detected that 93.33% of the tourists surveyed have an interest in culinary tourism and 88.7% have a specific interest in traditional food. In this regard, it was detected that 93.33% of the tourists surveyed have an interest in culinary tourism and 88.7% have a specific interest in traditional food. However, only 25% declared feeling interested in learning about agricultural production activities and 1.08% expressed interest in knowing the origin of food. This indicates that it is necessary to influence a broader social awareness regarding food culture, as well as the importance of developing tourism products that include a land-to-table perspective.

In the canton of Quito, there are associations of local producers who sell their products at 15 fairs established in the city and its surroundings. Also, other organizations work together with the National Institute for Agricultural Research (INIAP) in short agri-food circuits. These producer associations have expressed their interest in interacting with emblematic food establishments, through a fair trade and heritage value of food strategy.

CONCLUSIONS

The emblematic food establishments of the H.C.Q. buy most of their inputs through intermediaries that facilitate the delivery of varied goods at competitive prices, simultaneously, they buy in markets some products that are more convenient for their price or characteristics and, to a lesser extent, they buy food from local producers that are characterized by the recognized quality of their products.

Given that the participation of local producers in the culinary tourism offer is marginal, there is a need to strengthen the links between these establishments and local producers, through policies that encourage local purchasing and communication strategies that inform consumers.

It is observed that the establishment of commercial relationships between the emblematic culinary offer and local producers could generate better living conditions for the rural population and could improve the quality of the food offered. This transformation requires awareness work at multiple levels, including the own valuation that producers make of their products, of establishments that recognize them as quality inputs that must be well paid, of the government that considers tourism as a strategy of developing; and by consumers who demand quality products, authentic and linked to the territory.

This paper explores the relationship between local agri-food production and culinary tourism in historic centers. Future research should address more specific aspects such as consumer perception of emblematic foods and the role of the State in the design of territorial development policies.