

Getting the Bread Right

...the gap between all things is closed
in our attention to the bread of the day.
I know that
'man cannot live on bread alone'.
I say, let us get the bread right.

David Scott, Selected Poems, 1998

Food & Society

Food matters. It keeps us alive, gives us energy, sustains our health. Its provision is big business, worth over £90bn. We don't just consume it - increasingly we are fascinated by it. Chefs are celebrities, food programmes and books abound; café culture is booming.

But for all our fashionable preoccupation with it, food is often undervalued. About half our grocery expenditure is actually on beverages. Food poverty coexists with oversupply. We allocate 35p per day to the ingredients for a school meal. Junk foods, high in sugar, fat and salt, are promoted unscrupulously. The makers of fizzy drinks and chocolate offer sponsorship deals to schools that fly in the face of healthy eating advice. No wonder obesity is on the increase and diet-related diseases are rampant.

Tourism is a cultural phenomenon, associated with the idea of re-creation: a change of air, clearing the mind, resting the body, understanding new things, engaging with new people and places. Travellers, of course, need sustenance and the nature of the eating experience can influence the character of their interaction with a visited locality.

Even for tourist businesses whose primary concerns lie elsewhere, food is important. Getting it right not only affects their immediate interests: it also contributes to the health of the wider society on which all enterprises depend.

Food & the Tourist Enterprise

The importance of a local food economy

For some enterprises - a cheese maker, a bakery, a flour mill or a smokehouse, for example - the production of food itself constitutes the offering to the visitor. Such concerns are part of a local food culture and their customers can expect to discover products and processes that are distinctive to the area.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that other businesses need do no more than rely on national food brands, centralised suppliers and lowest-common-denominator provision.

‘Giving the public what it wants’ may appear both democratic and sound business. But it may have long-term consequences.

The survival of local communities and their food culture is threatened by massive forces. If the pattern of traditional farming and food production were to give way to ever larger, more intensive units (possibly deploying gene technology), much would change in the countryside that is the indispensable backdrop to tourism. The appearance of the land alters and pubs, shops and other local facilities disappear - and with them the people who welcome and look after visitors. Long before the doomsday scenario of a prairie-type wasteland, vital and attractive features of an area subtly decline - as do the reasons why tourists might want to make a return visit.

In some of the most popular areas for tourism - Cumbria and the Lake District, for example - the countryside is the very element that draws people in. The majority of visitors may be only vaguely aware of the food-producing role of the hills, valleys, rivers and lakes. But if these resources are not tended, if their harvest is no longer gathered in, the whole local economy withers and dies.

Bread and Salt

Food is not simply a daily physical requirement; it is a symbol of hospitality. Food provided by, or shared with, others defines part of the character and quality of social interaction. Eating contributes to a sense of well-being and nurture and the context in which food is consumed can contribute significantly to the experience of being a tourist. How often is a whole holiday remembered for that one superb meal or that surprise discovery of the village produce market?

Encounters with local food increase the visitor’s sense of place. Memory is so much more easily fixed by one delicious and distinctive taste or smell than by platefuls of bland uniformity portion-controlled in tediously familiar surroundings.

Business Rewards

To embrace local food calls for effort on the part of tourist businesses. It takes more time to seek out and engage with a clutch of local suppliers than it does to source all requirements from one cash-and-carry or national distributor. But such effort brings real rewards.

A business serving local specialities immediately stands out from the crowd and provides a reason - perhaps additional to its main purpose - for visitors to remember it, recommend it and come again.

Local food is an easy talking point, linking the visitor with the immediate environment. How much more powerful than mere ‘customer care’ is the conversation in which the chef, manager or waitress can identify the provenance of a meal in fields or fells so near to hand that they themselves can be visited and appreciated?

Tourists often like to feel that they are not so much tourists as travellers visiting friends. Ingredients and dishes that are unique to an area play their part in creating those special feelings of recognition that link the visitor to the host. Furthermore, a community that is seen to be nurturing its own small producers is inherently attractive, demonstrating a belief in the value of the intimate as opposed to the corporate. And if repeat business is the lifeblood of sustainable tourism, the best ‘loyalty card’ is the one played by tourist businesses themselves.

Niche Marketing

Any business aiming at the mass market or the lowest common denominator is engaged in a remorseless struggle with efficient, lower cost operators in a market that expects prices to be low and getting lower. Do you have anything to offer this market? By contrast, if you have a story and are convincingly aiming for high quality and distinctiveness, the market is not as price sensitive; you move from the minefield of cost/efficiency to the greener pastures of food, health and the environment, where more and more people are realising that cost is not the only measure of value.

Case Study: The Village Bakery

The Village Bakery began in 1976 when a young couple moved from London to the North Pennines in search of a simpler life. Their aim was to grow their own food, but they needed an income to pay the mortgage. A chance meeting with people restoring a watermill near Penrith led to the idea of a bakery, turning organically grown English wheat, freshly ground by water power into wholemeal bread.

With help from the Cumbria Tourist Board, they converted a stone barn in Melmerby into a bakery and teashop. A wood-fired brick oven was built because the village had neither 3-phase electricity nor mains gas. For a bakery, it was in an unpromising location: the village was small and delivery rounds to local shops clocked up huge distances in rural Cumbria. But the site had two unforeseen advantages. First, Melmerby was a very attractive village with a large green nestling at the foot of the fells. Second, the road through the village turned out to be a scenic route linking Hexham and Newcastle with the Lake District. Over time, this would provide a growing stream of visitors to the teashop.

The Concept

From the beginning, the bakery had a clear story - wholemeal bread from organic English wheat, hand baked in wood-fired ovens. The only trouble was that there was little apparent demand for the product. No bakers sold wholemeal bread in Penrith in 1976; organic food was a speciality within a niche; and wood-fired ovens sounded like a throwback to the dark ages. However, the enterprise was small in scale and there was no great pressure to grow sales quickly. Indeed, there was an obvious incentive for the baker to hold fast to the vision of 'small is beautiful': making more bread meant getting up ever earlier in the morning!

Growth

The five-acre smallholding behind the bakery was used at first to provide food for the family. But soon, surpluses of vegetables, fruit, milk and meat began to find an outlet in the teashop. Everything was organically grown, even before the European regulation of 1992 codified organic production and processing. Quality was built-in: often the baker would down tools, run out to the garden and cut a lettuce that would be on the customer's plate within moments - with a freshness to which even the most expensive restaurants could hardly aspire. Apart from locally-milled flour, other ingredients were sourced wherever possible from local suppliers.

Gradually word spread of this unusual enterprise serving simple wholesome food in delightful surroundings. By the end of the 1980s, the bakery was supplying a string of local shops and

the restaurant (for that is what it had become) had won Egon Ronay's prestigious Healthy Eating Out Place of the Year award. But growth, however slow and reluctant, brings problems. The bakery was cramped and inefficient and the oven was too small to keep up with demand. When the buyer from Waitrose wanted regular supplies of speciality bread, decisions could no longer be avoided.

Conventional wisdom suggested that the bakery should move to a town industrial estate, where premises could be rented without difficulty. However, the Village Bakery was just that - a village concern, serving and employing people who might not easily be able to cope with a move. So, despite the extra cost and complication, a new bakery was built behind the old, incorporating large new wood-fired ovens - for by this time the artisan cachet of brick ovens and the use of renewable energy had become definite marketing points.

For a small business with a distinctive product and unorthodox roots, it was important to communicate in a professional way. An attractive brand identity was developed with a local design group and significant resources were committed to communicating the Village Bakery story at point of sale. Sales of thousands of items a week through retailers across the country brought increasing (and seasonally well-spread) business to the Melmerby restaurant.

The 1990s brought a roller-coaster of expansion, over-trading and desperate remedies. Supplying Waitrose and later Sainsbury's depots 300 miles away with daily bread was logistically and environmentally daft. So the bakery licensed its recipes, methods and wood-fired oven technology to a bakery in the South. But within a few months, demand grew again, for the organic market was really beginning to take wing. By the middle of the decade, bakery and restaurant were together employing over 60 people - in a village of barely 200!

Costs and Benefits

Having been started on a shoestring, the business was chronically undercapitalised. The bank insisted that outside investors be recruited. In an unhappy period of courtship, almost all potential suitors offered solutions that compromised the integrity of the enterprise: make some non-organic lines to sell at lower prices, get electric ovens (nobody will tell the difference), move to a big town. Fortunately, at the last minute partners were found who supported the original concept. Of course, it wasn't easy selling a perishable product in a competitive market using organic ingredients that often cost twice as much as their conventional counterparts. But the result of sticking to a coherent vision was the development of an attractive brand. And in 1998, the bakery won the Organic Trophy, the highest accolade of the national organic food awards. This, in turn, opened new markets, creating the need for greater capacity. Excited by the prospects for organic baking, local family bakers Bells of Lazony became involved. Volume production was moved a few miles into their well-equipped and spacious premises, where a modern wood-fired oven was installed.

By 2001, the bakery's brand sales were over £3m and the Prince of Wales came to open the refurbished and expanded organic restaurant. Visitor numbers exceeded 50,000 even in the year of foot and mouth disease.

Recipe for Success

More than 25 years on, it is possible to identify certain factors that contributed to the Village Bakery's success. They apply to all tourist businesses:

- develop a clear, coherent concept that you believe in
- communicate your story and your commitment by all available means
- tell people why you are different; remember that if you drive in the middle of the road, you're likely to be hit by oncoming traffic
- forge links with local suppliers and pass on their stories, adding value to your own
- create more than one reason for people to visit
- invest in professional (but appropriate) design - poor presentation means that either you won't be seen or you won't be taken seriously
- project your pride in the area as a whole, not just your own enterprise
- the food you serve is a measure of your involvement with the local economy and your respect for your visitors
- think twice before compromising your vision - even when the going gets tough. Bank managers come and go, but you have to live with yourself for a lifetime

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