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CONSUMING PLACES THROUGH FOOD TOURISM: INSIGHTS ON THE FOOD ARTISAN SECTOR FROM BC

ABSTRACT

Food artisans play a critical role in providing destinations with authentic food products visitors and in growing the food tourism industry. This paper describes a study of BC's food artisan sector including: a definition and description of food artisans, growth in consumer demand and business, distribution mechanisms and markets, contributions to employment, future business plans and challenges to growth. The study found that consumer demand for products has been increasing generated from both resident and visitor markets. Artisans had experienced growth over the past 3 years and the majority had future growth plans. Artisan businesses produced the majority of employment income for owners and employment generated by the businesses was more likely to be full time and permanent, with little fluctuation in the averages by season. Artisans used a diverse distribution strategy and challenges impacting business growth were identified.

INTRODUCTION:

The past decade has seen a re-emergence of artisans as an economic force, a trend that is predicted to continue (Intuit: Institute for the Future, 2008; Pouls, 2013). These artisans “ply their trade outside of the walls of big business, making a living with their craftsmanship and knowledge” (p: 1). Crafts involve the design and small-scale production of quality goods from natural and human-made materials, often locally sourced, such as clay, glass and wood, or from animal and plant substances such as milk, grain and meat. Food artisans play a critical role in providing destinations with authentic food products for residents and the tourism economy and in growing the food tourism industry. Unfortunately, data on the importance of the food artisan sector is lacking thereby delaying a coordinated support system to emerge to aid in its growth.

This paper will describe an initiative taken by a research partnership in BC to create a profile of BC's food artisan sector including: a) a definition and description of food artisans; b) growth in consumer demand and business; c) identification of distribution mechanisms and markets; d) an estimate of the contributions to employment, sales and procurement of ingredients; e) identification of the future business plans and aspirations of BC food artisans and e) identification of challenges to business growth. The study provides those involved in economic development, food tourism, and business development new insights on the relative importance of the food artisan sector and its role in place making.

LITERATURE

Once dominant in society, artisanal goods were replaced in large part due to the industrial revolution and its technological advances when large factories and mass production methods led to large numbers of standardized products. In the early 21st century, the stronghold of mass production was shattered by rapid technological advances that transformed the global economy. Aided with personal computers and access to the internet, increased global competition emerged and markets fragmented allowing for small businesses and specialized products to regain a foothold in the economy (Foote,2015). The re-emergence of artisanal goods is part of this broader global realignment of the marketplace and has been driven by demand among consumers for authentic, locally produced and specialized products. Some, like eminent Harvard economist Larry Katz believe that the new artisan economy of the future will provide a more robust foundation of labour and aid in the restoration of meaningful work and the middle class if workers are provided the skills that have been in decline since industrialization began (Fisman, 2012; ACS, 2011). In Canada, the threat of losing traditional craft trades sector is real, as more entrepreneurs retire or give up their crafts and younger generations lack awareness or opportunities to access training in the sector

In a Canadian knowledge synthesis report in 2013, the re-emergence of the artisan economy within Canada was found to lack adequate study, monitoring or support (Vaugeois, Shore, Knoglinger, Evernden, 2013). Despite the recognized benefits to Canadian society, artisans are often ignored

by government, education institutions and other funding agencies in favour of the industrial trades. At the same time, specific information about artisans is scattered or segregated, which makes it challenging to create a clear picture of the sector and its realities. Data on the sector is limited and fragmented between the craft industry and agriculture and no aggregate data is collected on the sector. The limited understanding of the sector has prevented the development of appropriate supports to enable business success, thereby limiting the viability of the sector.

METHODS

This study was conducted through a mixed methods approach whereby existing secondary data sources from Stats Canada and BC Statistics were examined to determine if artisan businesses could be extracted. Deeming this impossible due to limitations in the way data is currently collected, the study gathered primary data from artisans using an online survey administered via email to a sample of businesses. The sample was gathered using a convenience sampling approach whereby an inventory of existing artisans was developed after a web based search of food artisans based on a typology of consumable craft trades (N=271). Operators were asked to participate in the study for a six week period in February and March of 2016 resulting in a final sample of 92 operators. Data were analysed in SPSS and qualitative analysis of open ended responses was analysed in Nvivo. Due to the small sample size and the use of non-probability sampling, the analysis was limited to descriptive statistics to describe the artisans. Similarly, the results should not be used to generalize about the artisan sector in BC or elsewhere.

FINDINGS

The study validated the notion that consumer demand for artisanal products has been increasing whereby 80% of artisans indicated that demand for their products over the past 3 years had increased. This demand was generated from both resident markets (70%) and visitor markets (30%). This increase aligned with business growth whereby 85% of artisans indicated either significant or moderate growth over the past 3 years. Artisans were interested in seeing this growth continue and 86% indicated that their future plans were to grow their business. Businesses were found to generate 100% of employment income for 48% of the artisans, with another 40% earning at least 50% of their income from their artisan business. Employment generated by the artisan businesses was more likely to be full time and permanent, with little fluctuation in the averages by season. Artisans were using a diverse distribution strategy with the top mechanisms being in local shops, farm markets, local grocery stores and restaurants. The top challenges impacting business growth were difficulties in distributing products, marketing, and in accessing capital for expansion.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study provide important insights about the growth and viability of the artisan food sector which plays a critical role in food tourism. These should be useful to aid in the creation of future supports for the sector, particularly in eliminating barriers to growth in marketing, distribution and access to required capital for business expansion. In terms of research, the definition of food artisans developed and used in the study should allow for additional exploration and description of the sector moving forward. Most importantly, the definition should be used to refine measurement of the agri-food and craft sector in the collection by Statistics Canada. Future research in tourism should investigate the importance of food artisan products in overall visitor experience. Additional insight is also needed on how food artisans are targeting visitors and developing authentic experiences that involve both the consumption of food but also education on the crafts used to produce them. Models such as the Economusee "Artisans at work" might provide researchers with rich contextual case studies to further explore how the agriculture, traditional craft trades and tourism sectors intersect in the consumption of places.

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