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Food Tourism and Branding in Tropical North Queensland

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural producers in Tropical North Queensland (TNQ) have diversified through food tourism. This paper examines how industry and stakeholders see regional cuisine and local agricultural production as fitting into overall destination development and the region’s brand. A focus on local foods, including development of the Taste Paradise food brand, can strengthen TNQ’s ‘tropical paradise’ tourism brand. By moving beyond a reef and rainforest focus, which is increasingly problematic given climate change predictions, expanding the TNQ brand through food can help the region tap into new segments, increase awareness of TNQ as a multi-experience destination, and sustain agricultural producers.

Keywords: branding, agritourism, culinary tourism, Tropical North Queensland, destination marketing

INTRODUCTION

Globally, agricultural producers have been impacted by natural disasters, global competition, cost-price squeezes, and agricultural restructuring. Commodity producers find they have little, if any, pricing power, given the consolidation and concentration in the retail industries. In Australia, the nation’s two largest supermarket chains, Coles and Woolworths, control 80 percent of the market, compared to Wal-Mart’s analogous 13 percent of the grocery market in the US (Carnell 2011). These chains’ expansion of private label/home brand goods and their discounting of branded goods and popular items such as milk, bread, eggs, and oil have squeezed agricultural producers and the food manufacturers. The deregulation of the dairy industry and the ongoing price war between Coles and Woolworths which includes their selling private label milk for $1 a litre has led to losses at Lion, Australia's biggest milk processor, and to a decimation of smaller dairy farmer-suppliers. Executives at Heinz have characterized the Coles and Woolworths-dominated retail environment as “inhospitable” for brand names and their suppliers and Australia as “the worst market” where Heinz has recently shuttered a sauce production facility and downsized other factories (Greenblat 2011). The consolidation in the
supermarket sector and the ongoing loss of food manufacturing facilities in Australia has left farmers as price takers.

Alternatives to the industrial model of the food supply chain that involve such supermarket chains have been developed in order to promote sustainable economic development and local food systems. These models of local network development utilized in food systems include creating 1) direct relationships between peri-urban producers and consumers via direct marketing and community supported agriculture ‘box deliveries’, 2) producer networks that can pool resources to engage in research and in local promotion and branding, and 3) local purchasing relationships by restaurants that act as conduits for presenting local produce to tourists (Hall and Mitchell 2002).

Linking local food production with tourism can help farmers avoid the price-cost squeeze. Peri-urban agriculture which is perceived as of higher quality, fresher, and more sustainable due to the reduction in food miles from producer to consumer largely serves the retail and entertainment market rather than the less profitable wholesale one. In the rapidly urbanizing ‘food bowl’ on the periphery of Sydney, Australia, the Hawkesbury Trail has combined farming, local food production, community health, and sustainable development (Agenda 21) agendas to connect visitors to farms and farm produce. Farmers benefit as they access more profitable retail consumers, thus helping to preserve farming and the valued rural atmosphere (Knowd 2006). Opportunities to link agricultural production to residents of nearby urban centers and to tourists visiting them also exist in other parts of Australia.

LOCAL FOODS AND FOOD TOURISM DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT

Local foods can distinguish destinations. Foods with distinct geographical origins can also foster regional images important in branding and rural tourism development. In Cornwall, a region of England with distinct food traditions, culinary tourism has played an important role in assisting struggling dairy farmers who have problems with milk quotas by generating demand for traditional cheeses, Cornish butter, ice cream and cream (Everett and Aitchison 2008). In England’s Lake District, Sims (2009) found that 60 percent of the tourists interviewed had deliberately chosen to consume and take home as souvenirs foods or drinks that they considered “local” (i.e., traditionally English, home-cooked), in part to get a sense of the region’s culture, place and people. According to Sims (2009), heritage is relevant in that tourists value local foods not only because they are presumed to be local, but because they are seen to be “traditional” products with a long history of being made in that location.

However in New World settler countries, culinary traditions and long-term local food production are not as readily identifiable. In Canada, which aims to incorporate cuisine into its national tourism product, defining what is Canadian cuisine is difficult given the very different regions and settlement patterns in the vast country. In the Niagara Region known initially as Ontario’s fruit belt and for its wines is also recognized for its Niagara regional cuisine which has been invented and reinvented based on local products and on the background and innovation of area chefs (Telfer and Hashimoto 2003). Similarly defining Australian cuisine which has shifted from being heavily derived from the UK to one fusing influences from waves of migration, international travel, and indigenous foods is challenging. Thus in such New World settler
countries, cuisines that have achieved recognition are not so much authentic as innovative, invented, and utilize fresh, local produce (Hall and Mitchell 2002; Che 2010). In Australia, the moniker ‘Modern Australian’ (Mod Oz) has been used to describe a cuisine that infuses global influences into the local, often blends East and West, and is continually being reinvented and improved on (Vaisutis et al. 2009). An example of a new Mod Oz culinary innovation includes a raw food establishment in Cairns drawing on the abundance and variety of produce from nearby Atherton Tablelands farms (Stickley 2012).

BRANDING AND TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN TROPICAL NORTH QUEENSLAND

TNQ has successfully branded to tourists. Tourism Queensland and Tourism Tropical North Queensland have emphasized the tropical in the brand logo, “Tropical North Queensland - Change Your Latitude” and the close proximity of the reef and rainforest in the international logo which has the added emphasis of “Cairns + Great Barrier Reef.” The domestic and international brand positioning stressed that TNQ is “Australia’s tropical destination,” the place where one could change one’s latitude and experience “life-enhancing tropical moments.” TNQ has also been positioned as a safe, secure, exotic tropical destination with world-class marine and rainforest experiences to differentiate it from other tropical holiday destinations (Tourism Tropical North Queensland n.d.a, b).

However the TNQ tourism industry faces serious challenges. Threats include declining direct air access from overseas, the high value of the Australian dollar which has impacted both domestic and international tourist numbers, and the rise of low-cost carriers (LCCs) which provide Australians with new choices of outbound and domestic destinations (Tourism Tropical North Queensland n.d. a, b). However LCCs in the future may be able to bring more international visitors, particularly from the expanding Chinese market, which is increasingly important given the decline and/or flat growth in the number of visitors from Japan, Germany, and the UK (Yeates 2012).

Likewise, regional agricultural producers in far northern Queensland are confronted with challenges. Farmers face the aforementioned retail concentration, the closing of the tobacco industry, the deregulation of the dairy industry, natural disasters such as Cyclone Larry, spiraling production costs, and lower prices. Given bumper crops and oversupply, dominant retailer Coles said the prices of at least a dozen popular fruit and vegetable lines, including tomatoes, peaches, carrots and rockmelon, would be cut by up to 50 percent. While Coles defended the price cuts, saying the low prices could increase sales and provide a “more certain market” for Australian growers with an oversupply of produce, there is no guarantee of such benefits to producers. Last year farmers had to plough almost 7000 tonnes of Tableland potatoes they could not sell back into the ground (Uhr 2012). Thus agricultural producers see alternatives such as value adding and supplying the tourism market with the diversity of TNQ foods as increasingly attractive (Table 1).
### Table 1
*Tasting Paradise: Foods of Tropical North Queensland*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seafood</th>
<th>Herbs and Spices</th>
<th>Tropical Fruits</th>
<th>Asian Vegetables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prawns</td>
<td><em>Asian Style</em></td>
<td>Banana</td>
<td>Bok Choy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moreton Bay Bugs</td>
<td>Lemon Grass</td>
<td>Papaya</td>
<td>Chinese Cabbage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tropical Lobster</td>
<td>Ginger</td>
<td>Mango</td>
<td>Okra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mud Crabs</td>
<td>Galangal</td>
<td>Rambutan</td>
<td>Yams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barramundi</td>
<td>Turmeric</td>
<td>Mangosteen</td>
<td>Taro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coral Trout</td>
<td>Coriander</td>
<td>Lychee</td>
<td>Asian Greens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Emperor</td>
<td>Vanilla</td>
<td>Pineapple</td>
<td>Bamboo Shoots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aquaculture</strong></td>
<td><strong>Chili</strong></td>
<td>Custard Apple</td>
<td>Water Chestnuts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barramundi</td>
<td>European Style</td>
<td>Avocado</td>
<td>Jicama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prawns</td>
<td>Chives</td>
<td>Pomelo</td>
<td>Palm Hearts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eels</td>
<td>Rosemary</td>
<td>Passion fruit</td>
<td><strong>Temperate Vegetables</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jade Perch</td>
<td>Thyme</td>
<td>Grapefruit</td>
<td>Potatoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redclaw</td>
<td>Parsley</td>
<td>Limes</td>
<td>Tomatoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meats</strong></td>
<td><strong>Garlic</strong></td>
<td>Watermelon</td>
<td>Carrots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beef</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jakfruit</td>
<td>Lettuces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pork</td>
<td></td>
<td>Durian</td>
<td>Cucumber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goat</td>
<td><strong>Temperate Fruits</strong></td>
<td>Breadfruit</td>
<td>Pumpkin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicken</td>
<td>Grapes</td>
<td>Jaboticaba</td>
<td>Sweet Potato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crocodile</td>
<td>Peaches</td>
<td>Soursop</td>
<td>Maize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kangaroo</td>
<td>Nectarines</td>
<td>Star Apple</td>
<td>Zucchini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dairy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Strawberries</strong></td>
<td>Pomegranate</td>
<td><strong>Indigenous Products</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tropical Milk</td>
<td>Berries</td>
<td>Persimmons</td>
<td>Abiu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cream</td>
<td>Oranges</td>
<td></td>
<td>Davidson Plum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoghurt</td>
<td>Mandarins</td>
<td></td>
<td>Rosella</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheese</td>
<td>Lemons</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lemon Aspen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice Cream</td>
<td>Eggplant</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pepper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Taste Paradise, 2011

**METHODOLOGY**

Following the decision by Qantas to cease international passenger air services to Cairns, the largest city in the region, the Federal Government responded by granting the Department of Resources, Energy and Tourism (DRET) with $4 million to fund marketing, research and product development projects to support the TNQ tourism industry. Such projects aimed to build demand and boost visitor numbers into the region both in the short and long term. The Southern
Cross University Tourism Extension Unit commenced work on the TNQ Tourism Development Project in January 2009, which had a longer term focus on developing and expanding the range of tourism products. Starting with an initial assessment which found that the broader Cairns region had the potential to further develop food, agritourism and nature-based tourism activity themes or clusters, this project then engaged with industry (agricultural businesses) and stakeholders. At the enterprise level, a series of business development programs were offered to emerging and existing tourism enterprises located in the Mission Beach area and in the Atherton Tablelands (Atherton, Mareeba, Malanda, Milaa Milaa) to assist them in planning, developing, revising and/or enhancing their food or agritourism diversification or value adding enterprises. At the stakeholder level, work focused on creating a supportive business environment. Interviews were conducted with the enterprises and stakeholders to assess the opportunities and challenges in creating a critical mass of products and experiences to enable the region to develop food, nature-based tourism and agritourism themes, and to facilitate overall destination development (Wright 2010).

Industry representatives and stakeholders viewed regional cuisine and local agricultural production fitting into overall destination development and the region’s brand. A focus on local foods, including the development of the Taste Paradise food brand, could strengthen and expand the TNQ tourism brand which emphasizes the region’s current ‘tropical paradise’ image. By moving beyond its focus on the Great Barrier Reef and Daintree Rainforest, TNQ could attract tourists to a regional food destination and sustain agricultural producers.

EXTENDING THE TNQ TOURISM BRAND THROUGH THE TASTE PARADISE FOOD BRAND

A greater concentration on food could move the region away from the reef focus which could be more problematic in the future given climate change (Coghlan and Prideaux 2009). Increased temperatures could impact the reef within the next 10 years. However, developing alternative experiences to the stage they would attract the same volumes of tourists currently attracted to the reef could take that long, if not longer. Destination managers need to consider alternatives that can develop alongside and compliment the core "reef and rainforest" themes. Then regardless of the accuracy of the climate change predictions, an alternative and complimentary attraction would have been sufficiently developed to cushion any impact that the loss of such a core tourism asset might have on the region’s industry and economy. Regional food is a complimentary attraction that should be further developed and integrated into the existing destination experience. As one stakeholder noted, “if people thought of far North Queensland they would think of the reef and rainforest,” but food is a legitimate experience to be marketed as well. Instead of TNQ just being known for the reef and rainforests, the growth in special interest, niche markets and new segments as well as increased awareness of TNQ being a multi-experience tropical destination dovetail with the emphasis on food.

Linking agriculture and tourism via food, agritourism, and the common TNQ regional branding theme provides opportunities for TNQ farmers to capitalize on their diverse production (Table 1) and to reinforce and expand the TNQ tropical paradise brand strategy. One stakeholder noted that TNQ could be the “tropical food capital.” With additional product development and
training in customer service to ensure the quality of the experiences, TNQ had the possibility of being recognized as a regional food tourism destination, as one stakeholder explained:

“We’ve only got to think food now and regions come to mind, whether it’s Margaret River, Barossa Valley, Tasmania – they have been able to very successfully market themselves as significant food regions. Because they have, many people are putting that on their itinerary to visit because food is definitely seen as an experience in terms of tourism.

I went to a conference in Melbourne where they put up all the food tourism destinations and Far North Queensland was not mentioned at all. I happen to think, and so do many others that we have got one of the most diverse regions in terms of product and food experiences given the fact we have highlands and lowlands, and tropical and arid – and every sort of climate you could possibly think of – with the exception of growing wine grapes – we’ve got the opportunity and the possibility to be a recognised food region.”

The diversity and uniqueness of the produce provides opportunities for food tourism development as well as challenges since many Australians outside the region are unfamiliar with many of its tropical fruits as one agricultural producer noted:

“There’s a big strength in promoting our new fruits which are commercial and showing people what it’s about. We’ve got 105 at last count, different species of fruits and triple that number if you count all the varieties. The really big tourism spin off’s for us apart from what people may pay to be shown around is (to hear) what they like and don’t like and the ideas that they give us. The stuff that we think of (as) just common. Stuff we don’t appreciate the value of. We have ridiculous diversity...”

While Tasmania may produce more familiar temperate climate foods, diverse TNQ can learn from the success of Tasmania in branding its foods. Brand Tasmania drew from media coverage on the proposed Franklin Dam hydropower project that portrayed the island as a “pristine wilderness” to be protected. The brand was then built on perceptions of quality given Tasmania’s more reliable precipitation (compared to the rest of Australia) and on the belief it had less agricultural diseases and chemical use. Tasmania thus has been able to shift its brand from the “Apple Isle” to a broader one stressing “Quality, Tasty, Fresh, Healthy” products. As a result, Tasmania as a premium food and food tourism brand sells to high end restaurants on the Australian mainland; to customers in Asia, Europe, and the US; and draws tourists attracted by food and beverage stories and by its web presence such as that on famed chef Tetsuya’s Taste of Tasmania (Heazlewood 2011).

TNQ has developed the Taste Paradise food brand, which in conjunction with a focus on food tourism can advance regional development. Branding can promote travel to the Atherton Tablelands and the use of Tablelands produce in Cairns. Another agricultural producer noted the potential benefits to the region if tourists recognized the destination as a generator of food tourism saying, “The Tablelands has worked really hard to even get people here in the first place. Traditionally people who have come to the region have just gone to Cairns and done the Daintree trip or gone out to the Reef. A lot of people have done that now and are looking for a more in-depth experience. That’s when they venture to the Tablelands.” More visitors could come up on day trips from Cairns. However, there could be those staying overnight or even a couple of nights, which would spur the development of businesses serving tourists such as cafes and
restaurants as well as diversification of existing businesses. For the Tablelands, the Taste Paradise brand could increase the effectiveness of advertising as one stakeholder explained, “If they (producers) all try and advertise individually, it’s probably going to be more effective if they find a brand, that they can advertise the brand, and underneath the brand all these products might sit and there’s trails and routes and all sorts of things…So for the producers, if they can have a recognisable brand that people know about before they come here and then when they get here they seek out the components of that brand.”

The opportunity to taste paradise may bring visitors to Cairns and beachside towns such as Mission Beach for innovative cuisine incorporating regional produce as well as seafood. Attracting gastronomic tourists can help generate demand for TNQ foods since the residents of Cairns, the major city of far north Queensland which contains over half of its population, number just slightly over 150,000. Thus promoting TNQ as a food destination and the Taste Paradise food brand in Australia’s major urban centers can further the food component of this multi-experience destination. TNQ has connected with those from domestic tourist generating areas via events such as the Regional Flavours food and wine event in Brisbane. At the 2011 Regional Flavours, renowned chef Nick Holloway of Nunu Restaurant located in Palm Cove just north of Cairns produced innovative Mod Oz dishes using TNQ fish and tropical produce such as palm hearts. The Taste Paradise brand and distinctive TNQ products were also featured (Figures 1 and 2). To address the unfamiliarity of many indigenous rainforest products, opportunities to sample chutneys and sauces made from unique fruits such as Davidson plums existed. Such cooking demonstrations, tastings, and displays highlighted the diversity of foods produced in TNQ, an attraction for food tourists.

**Figure 1**
Promoting Tropical North Queensland and Taste Paradise

Photo by Deborah Che
CONCLUSION

Food tourism and branding can promote agriculture and help TNQ farmers deal with agricultural restructuring. TNQ can emphasize its multiple experiences and its appeal beyond the Great Barrier Reef and Daintree Rainforest by utilizing its very diverse agricultural production. By addressing concerns regarding climate change, TNQ will not have “all its eggs in one basket.” Extending TNQ’s tropical paradise brand with additional experiences can attract more visitors and extend their stays and expenditures.

However greater state-private sector cooperation is needed to foster a stronger and more profitable connection between TNQ tourism and agriculture, such as that through the increased use of local agricultural foods in tourist hotels and restaurants (Berno 2011). From the experience of similar wine and food tourism initiatives in New South Wales, South Australia, and Victoria where some food producers held negative attitudes towards tourism as separate from their core business activities (Hall and Mitchell 2002), it is necessary to further the development of the TNQ food initiative with the financial backing and policy involvement of the state government and state tourism organizations.

REFERENCES


