The French Cuisine and Café's as a viable market segment of promoting tourism in Puducherry

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Abstract

Puducherry, a seaside town; widely remains with its French influence in culture, architecture, food and the people. Amidst a wide variety of delicacies of the amiable town, the paper seeks to identify the role of French Cuisine and French Café's as a viable element of promoting tourism at the destination. Content analysis is used on selected French Cuisine promotional materials such as brochures and official web information sources to extract relevant data. Results show that, food, is a an integral part of image representation and cultural experiences of the destination. Marketing trends adopted by DMO's, hotels, restaurants, cafés and other tourism sectors help tourists to anticipate, create desires and curiosity in the type of food experience that they can find in visiting Puducherry. The findings of this study can provide useful information for destination marketers in effective marketing of the destination by linking French Cuisine and tourism promotion.

Keywords: Culture, delicacies, marketing trends and tourism promotion.

1. Introduction

In recent years, food plays a major part in the travel plans of holiday makers. The tourists like to combine culinary tourism with other activities like cultural, spiritual and adventurous excursions. Cuisines do have a major impact on traveler's decision in choosing their destination because of its reflection of a region's culture and lifestyle. Puducherry, as a destination of strong influence of French and Tamil Culture, the tourists prefer to experience the mixture of both the culture along with its cuisine. While food is one of the leading hooks in why people travel to a particular destination, many hoteliers and tour operators feel that if appropriately promoted it would add much value in the promotion of the destination. The French cuisine and the gastronomic meal of French being an intangible cultural heritage may be increasingly used in destination marketing and management strategies. It is important for marketers of a culinary destination to know the image currently held by its targeted customers and how to affect their intention to visit through effective marketing strategies.

Tourists visit Puducherry not only to enjoy rich tangible heritage, one of the other major component would also include proverbial cuisine of the destination. Destinations can use food to represent its cultural experience, status, cultural identity and communicating (Silpi Rani Baruah, 2016). According to C. Lau et al., (2019), 'food festivals in urban places are perpetual productions of social relations which have been commonly viewed as a tool to enhance the tourism appeal of a place. French Cuisine is blended in the culture of Puducherry and connected to the lifestyle of its people. But studies on the segment of culinary tourism of Puducherry is limited, no concise report of the French Cuisine and Café's as a viable market

segment of promoting tourism in Puducherry is revealed. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to understand the extent of using French Cuisine and Cafe in marketing Puducherry as a tourist destination and to explore the sources of information of tourists refer in most cases as of hoteliers and café' vendors opinion. In addition, the study also analyzed, food images and the relevant information represented in official websites and brochures as a source of information in decision making of travelers to visit Puducherry.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cuisine as the source of destination attraction and marketing

As a former French colony, the Union Territory of Puducherry is known for French ethnicity. The nostalgic visit by French nationals to Puducherry is a trend that has far reaching impact on tourism and the overall economy of the destination. In recent years, gastronomy has become a major element to know one's culture and the way of life of a region. Gastronomy creates desires for the travelers to visit the destination. "Food tourism is wide ranging, from gourmet experiences to street food, and encompasses many other food-related activities such as cooking classes, food festivals, wine and beer tastings and food purchases. Food tourism has become a main conduit through which tourists can experience the local culture of tourist destinations (Kim et al., 2011). Immersion in local culture is also key to a food-tourism trip so while food tourists are primarily motivated to visit a destination because of the cuisine, they are also likely to be culturally interested in the destination as a whole (Mintel, 2017). Cuisine, which contributes to a destination's identity, is an integral part of the travel experience for many travelers, Mohd Hairi Jalis et al., (2014). According to Mun Yee Lai et al., (2018), many destinations have begun to brand and promote local food as an attraction. It is therefore crucial to define the attributes of local food and cuisine identity in the process of creating a distinctive and attractive food image in destinations.

Nelson (2017), states that, 'the food of a destination is simply one part of the expectations tourists have for their trip. Food is thus seen as an important source of marketable images and experiences for the tourist. Food is considered to be one of the significant aspects that influence visitors' satisfaction with a destination, as it allows for a more fulfilling sensory experience by utilizing all of a tourist's senses (Hall, 2003). Food is inextricably linked to the destination and the destination's image, Kivela and Crotts (2005). Increasingly food, as an element of culture, is being used in many destination marketing strategies as an asset for and means of product differentiation (Richards, 2012). The uniqueness of food items should be effectively integrated into food-related activities or establishments to make a strong and favourable impression on tourists by making a meaningful link between tourists, food and a tourism destination, Lin et al., (2011). Destination food images that turn a place into a culinary hub with specific food attributes that attract tourists, and that signify local identity M.Y. Lai et al., (2018).

2.2. The information sources in travel planning

Consumers commonly seek quality information before purchasing new products. With the Internet's growing popularity, online consumer reviews have become an important resource for consumers seeking information during this purchase planning. Online customer reviews are an important source of product information for consumers (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). The travel and tourism industry is highly influenced by eWOM. With the advancements in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and development of the Internet, potential customers are able to find travel-related information and use it to judge the suitability of the product or services before committing or making a reservation (Lee, et al., 2008).

The Internet is useful for travel planning (Travel Industry Association, 2005). Travelers often rely heavily on the advice of friends, family and other peer groups while planning travel to an unknown destination (Litvin et al., 2008). TripAdvisor assists people for travel planning, searching information and booking their accommodation as well as to share experiences, post reviews of hotels and destinations, post photos and videos of their trips (Chung & Buhalis, 2008). Travellers are empowered in planning and buying processes

of their trips online by the content generated by the Internet users (Schegg et al., 2008). Online user-generated reviews about travel destinations, hotels, and tourism services have become important sources of information for travelers Pan et al., (2007).

Tourists' prior knowledge with a specific destination can be gained from several sources such as their own and others experiences, through multiple channels like advertisements, newspapers, magazines, TV programs, etc, and/or through an on-going information search (Baloglu, 2001).
The rise of the Internet and social media in particular has created a new environment in which consumers can discuss brands' actions among each other, with such debate often taking place in conjunction with coverage by traditional mass media, Hewett et al., (2016).

Jalis et al., (2014), report that the textual analysis, on the other hand, stimulates tourists' desire to try the local fare, through the use of words such as delicious, mouth-watering and delectable. WOM has long been considered as an important source of information for consumers for the purchase of travel and tourism related products (Díaz-Martín et al., 2000). Schindler & Bickart, (2005) found that online review sites are the most preferred source of information for the travel and tourism industry. While the overall findings indicate that most travelers utilize online resources for their information needs, findings also suggest that traditional print tour guides is the most important information source for international travelers with high familiarity followed by third party websites. This might be due to the fact that travelers with high familiarity are knowledgeable about the destination and what it has to offer. They may utilize print tour guides to get more detailed information about specific attractions and amenities, D. Gursoy et al., (2018).

2.3. Published materials, induced images and consumer generated content in internet as a motivator of tourist attractions

Both official websites and printed material are important and trusted sources of information for potential tourists (Horng & Tsai, 2012). Okumus and Cetin (2018), points out that, 'the information of local food, local restaurants and eating style should be professionally incorporated into promotional materials including official brochures, VDO clips, websites and social medias in different languages. Visual and written materials used in destination marketing efforts can provide relevant, detailed and timely information about the representation of food and influence travelers' decision-making behavior (Lin et al., 2011). Images of foods and beverages are frequently used in destination marketing and acknowledged to be more effective than words (Neal et al., 2000).

Dieck et al., (2018), states that, 'promotional materials are effective tools in influencing tourists' decisions when choosing a destination.' Food-based tourism is increasingly recognized as a useful tool in destination branding and promotion (Du Rand, Heath and Alberts, 2003). Blichfeldt & Halkie (2013) affirm that, 'previous studies have used tourism marketing materials such as tourism brochures and destination websites as image representatives in food destinations for projected image. Frochot (2003) found that food-related images are extensively used in the representation of local gastronomy in regional brochures of France. Tourism motivation is manipulated by destination image (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002).

Berezina et al., (2016), states that the emergence of customized online information access with the advent of the social media and review sites are revolutionizing the tourism industry. Given the rising popularity of the Internet, official tourism website has become one of the most utilized channels for promoting the gastronomic offerings in a destination Gibson, & Lane (2010). Tseng et al., (2015) argue that, 'travel texts, such as travel advertising and travel articles, are important for promoting tourism. Daniel Paül i Agustí (2018), states that, 'It has traditionally been said that the vision of the tourist is shaped and constructed by

numerous professionals and reinforced by images found in travel guides, on postcards and in other promotional materials. Today, user-generated images must also be considered a relevant element of image creation.'

3. Methodology

Both primary and secondary data were used for this study. The Primary source of information was gathered from French Restaurants and French Cafe's. Secondary data comprised of textual material brochures and contents of official websites of French Restaurants/Café's and Consumer to Consumer platform (Tripadvisor) and Business to Consumer platform (Makemytrip, Cleartrip, Zomato).

An in-depth interview was conducted among optimum stakeholders (Restaurant & Café's Manager) with the help of semi-structured instrument. Content analysis was used to analyze the data collected for this study. Textual material of brochures and firm generated contents was examined in order to track and count the frequency of words used to describe French Cuisine. In qualitative content analysis, Jennings (2001, p. 202) states that the researcher is free to evaluate texts without having to prove or disprove a theory. This means that the re-searcher is more 'open' to a variety of results. Jenkins (1999, p. 8) also recognizes the usefulness of this research tool, stating 'content analysis of written information, such as guidebooks or visual information including photographs in travel brochures, can provide a great deal of information about the images projected of tourist destinations.'

4. Findings and Inferences

4.1. Mr. Rajesh, Manager, LB2 Lounge Pondy

The above respondent stated that he works in French Restaurant over 8 years, in his experience the customers do dine in their restaurant is because of delicious French Cuisine and drinks that are served to their customers. For the question regarding the source of information of customers choosing their restaurant, he stated, 'it's merely through hotel review portals like trip advisor, booking.com, zomato and the word of mouth.' Brochures according him were used in less scale because of technological advancements and major use of social and review websites. He did suggest that the Government and the tourism business sectors in specific should contribute on the promotion of food tourism in Puducherry.

4.2. Ms. Amgele, Manager, La Villa Helena

The French lady pleasingly responded to all the questions that were asked to her in regard of French Cuisine as a viable segment of promoting tourism in Puducherry. For the question of views on French cuisine as a source of destination attraction, without any second thought she stated, 'Off course as a French citizen of myself   I   am   attracted   towards Puducherry for the French connection. The French meal delights our customers and tourists at a large scale visit our restaurant because of variety of French Cuisines and cocktails offered in our restaurant. She replied for further questions that most of the foreign tourist's do dine in their restaurant is through word of mouth in the first stage then hotel review websites, official websites of their restaurant and social media. She added that the quality gastronomic meal of France they offer in their restaurants promotes their restaurant to foreign tourists, especially the French tourists. In her opinion she stated that if tourism authorities promote French Cuisine and Culinary Tourism in appropriate manner, there would be more number of foreign tourist's arrivals in Puducherry.

4.3. Ms. Valerie Mathias, Managing Partner, Rendezvous

The respondent replied delicious cocktails and French Cuisine attracts large number of foreign and domestic tourists to their restaurant. For the question for the source of information about their restaurant, she stated that it is through Instagram, social networking sites and print media advertisement in overseas newspapers they do get more foreign tourists to their restaurants. In addition, she stated that French gastronomy if promoted at overseas travel marts and domestic travel exhibitions, there would be more increase number of foreign tourist's arrivals to Puducherry.

4.4. Mr. Amalan, Executive Director, Atlanda Travels and Tours

The respondent in general said the French Cuisine is a vital source of attraction of European tourists to Puducherry. In his opinion, stated that social websites and hotel review websites like trip advisor, zomato, cleartrip play an important role in decision making of tourists to visit Puducherry. He added that there is inadequate promotion of Culinary Tourism in Puducherry, if
promoted at national and international travel trade fair, the inflow of tourists at Puducherry would be at large scale.

4.5. Mr. Sunil, Manager, Satsanga

The respondent stated that foreign tourist's inflow in Puducherry is less in recent years when compared to a decade back. He added that even though French Cuisines are major source of attraction for tourists to visit Puducherry, the hotel review websites sometimes is used positively and negatively. Further he stated that, contents and images of cuisines in websites and social media adds value in customer's decision making to visit Puducherry. He also added that in recent years, government imposes heavy tax on to the hotels that offer liquors and suggested that the taxes must be reduced to enhance the stakeholders.

4.6. Mr. Murugeyan, Manager, Artika Café Gallery

The respondent stated that most of their customers are European tourists in specific French tourists. For the question of, Is French Cuisine a viable market segment of promoting tourism in Puducherry without second thought he replied, "Yeah, off course." He further stated that the blend and aroma of French cuisine, white baguette; French Croissant, bread and pastries in their Café's are the unique French gastronomy that attracts not only European tourists and also tourists from US and other parts of the world. In his opinion, images of French Cuisines in social media and websites, word of mouth do play a vital role in attracting foreign tourists to Puducherry.

5. Inferences

5.1 French Cuisine/ gastronomic meal of France as a destination attraction

The findings clearly suggest that French gastronomy is of no doubt one of the key drivers of Puducherry's attractiveness and cultural outreach. The destination earlier being the largest French colony, the influence of French can be seen in the very heart of this place that is the architecture, cuisine and the tradition. The respondents in an overall opinion stated that the French style special menu which includes French aperitif, a cold and hot appetizer, dry ham, smoked fish, French Wines, French liquor and the 'Creole Cuisine' is one of the major sources of attraction for both foreign and domestic tourists to visit the destination.

5.2 The Culinary tourism as a viable market segment in promotion of tourism

The French Restaurant and Café Managers at a large scale stated that Cuisine in general is seen as a brand ambassador for the destination. The Food tourism if marketed largely at national and international trade fairs would help in promoting and marketing the destination. In general, it may be inferred that the culinary trends, the influence of social media and the programmes promoted by the French Government such as Gout

de France or Good France and Bonjour India would augment tourist arrival in this destination. Besides the beauty of the destination, the mixture of French and south Indian cuisine would be a major market segment in creating destination brand image and promoting tourism in this destination.

5.3 The sources of information in decision making process to visit a destination

Information and communication Technology (ICT) play an imperative role in this digital age. It is important to highlight that the present study reveals that apart from word of mouth through friends, relatives and other referrals, Consumer to Consumer platform (Tripadvisor) and Business to Consumer platform (Makemytrip, Cleartrip, Zomato) websites play a prominent role in decision making to visit Puducherry. The study also reveals that, the other important criteria in choosing the destination include food images and contents represented in official websites. It is also noticeable that brochures, advertisement in newspapers, guidebooks and local tourist offices are considered as the secondary information sources in decision making process when compared to usage of mobile and other internet sources.

5.4 Promotion of Culinary Tourism in Puducherry

In an overall opinion it can be recapitulated that the destination marketing organizations, hotel associations (HAI, SIHRA, Hotel Association of Pondicherry) hotels, cafés and restaurants if jointly co-ordinate with government and promote food tourism at regional, national and international level it would attract large number of tourists to this destination. The findings also suggest that if the related stakeholders along with government launch several annual culinary activities it would gain more momentum in culinary tourism and increase the inflow of tourists to this destination.

6. Conclusion

Puducherry an erstwhile French Colony is a picture of spectacular French Riviera, with stunning colonial architecture, cuisine, tamil and french culture. Tourism as an essential pillar of the destinations economy, french gastronomy if considered as a key theme in the destinations campaign would expand and diversify its tourism appeal. In recent decades, food has turned cities into destinations, French cuisine as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity by UNESCO would be a lucrative source of livelihood for the people. The results from the study clearly reveal that tourists are extremely interested in French cuisine and related culinary activities. The promotion of culinary tours, foodie competitions, food and wine tasting, food documentaries, food conferences and food festivals in appropriate print media, visual media and social media with the use of recent digital technologies, would further broaden the market base of the destination and enrich the destinations brand image.

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Annex - I

Questions:

1. Views on French Cuisine/ gastronomic meal of France as a destination attraction?

2. How does your organization view the role of food in destination marketing?

3. Do your restaurants/café's gets involved in any food festivals/ marketing strategy/food campaigns?

4. What are the sources of information that tourists share to your organization that created desire to visit the Hotel/Café's?

5. Do the content and images of brochures, websites influence tourists in decision making to visit Puducherry?

6. Is Consumer generated content such as hotel reviews an important source of information for travel plan?

7. Suggestions if any to promote food tourism in Puducherry?