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CUISINE AND LOCAL FOOD IN RURAL DYNAMICS

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Research problem

The main research focus of this paper is the impact of local cuisine and food production to rural tourism dynamics. The changes in rural areas on the periphery of Europe, such as Alentejo (Portugal), are marked by a slowdown in agricultural productivity and the loss of this unique functionality. In this context there was room for new opportunities of development for rural areas (e.g. CCE, 1988; Oliveira Baptista, 2006). The now proclaimed multifunctionality, heavily relies on leisure and tourism activities and rural areas are transformed into consumer spaces (Figueiredo & Rashi, 2013).

Furthermore these activities are often planned, managed and consumed by external actors to the rural area whom discovered potential and charm in idealized rural environments. Tourist units incorporate and promote recreated elements from the rural context, in its various dimensions (landscape, natural resources, agricultural practices, food, health, parties, etc.) (Oliva & Camarero, 2013; Rêgo, 2013).

This new reality is revealing the tensions that occur in rural areas, and translates the different visions that stakeholders have from the rural and its development. Succinctly, this reality shows especially the rural identity crisis. From this precise context emerges the prospect of renewed identity that we want to focus. The debate will seek narrative coherence initiatives

that the agricultural crisis, the economic crisis but also the social crisis have revealed in marginal rural communities in Alentejo.

Main objectives

Rural tourism as a driver of rural development should be grounded in experiences and representations of a real rurality, lived locally with communities living in the countryside (e.g. OECD, 1994; Lane, 1994; Kastenholz & Figueiredo, 2007). In this context, the local cuisine and the food products of local production, increasingly recognized, are the counterpart of the rural tourism accommodations being an interesting component for a renewed and objective representation of rural identity (the history of a culture) that can be shared by locals and tourists. The food is an efficient mean of expression to share on the one hand sensations (gastronomy) and on the other hand hospitality (Buiatti, 2011).

The aim of our paper is to draw attention to the potentiality of the rural areas development resulting from the interaction between the gastronomic tourism and different initiatives to promote locally sourced food as well as healthy food consumption (educational projects for schools) by the local community and outsiders (green consumers). On the one hand this interaction encourages the agricultural entrepreneurship on a local basis, contributing to the flow of production of small farmers through the promotion of local distribution channels, on the other hand it is quite appreciated the traditional cuisine that combines the know-how (cultural identity) to consumption of specific local and healthy products, from a local or regional origin (e.g. organic, geographically protected), becoming increasingly important, in such a proportion that nowadays many specialists consider *cuisine* an art. And the interest in organic farming is central in research in Alentejo region (Seminário “Agricultura Biológica, uma aposta estratégica”, Universidade de Évora, Março de 2015) and in many other places. Likewise the celebration of traditional “forgotten” products in contemporary recreations, reflect the renewed interest in rural culture. The recent symposium "Acorn: the future of a food with past" (Montemor-o-Novo, Março 2015) released the knowledge and current practices around the value of this product very used in the past.

We may think that these aspects end up contributing to the maintenance of rural landscapes, highly prized by tourists, particularly when they contact with the local food culture (Hall et al., 2003). This can be a positive contribution to ensure the life of local people by creating sustainable productive activities and employment.

Methodology

Concerning methodology, the research is based in heuristic case studies (e.g. questioning and getting a valid response) in the Municipality of Montemor-o-Novo (about 100Km of Lisbon), having also as reference some successful regional initiatives e.g. in Alvito and Estremoz. This paper includes documental analysis as well as interviews to local stakeholders and privileged observers, namely those who regulate the touristic activity, spatial planning and local development. In some situations we use also participant observation such as the participation in ateliers and workshops directed to farmers.

The analysis aims to respond to the following questions:

- What are the agricultural activities interesting for tourists and, in the other hand, motivating for local residents?
- What is the tourist development process suitable for this local context? How to identify local needs and resources?
- Who are the driving forces of the initiatives? What is their origin (social and geographic)? What kind of collaboration is developed?
- What kinds of interaction occur in such places between tourism based on cuisine and local food? Can we find here social innovation?
- What is the relation between local initiatives related to agriculture entrepreneurship and the growing interest on traditional cuisine and local products? How are this links founded?

Main findings

The research is not finished yet but we already have some interesting findings.

The experiences concerning tourism development in the diverse case studies, even in different spatial contexts, show a vision shared by the local stakeholders and based on the diversification principles as well as on the complementarity of agro-food activities.

Two comments should be expressed related to those principles: (i) those components are very important for small enterprises sustainability and viability particularly in the adverse contexts we are exploring; (ii) nevertheless touristic demand is irregular and has a small size being extremely difficult to invert this situation.

However, initiatives associated to local communities cultural resources (including landscape) are more likely to generate wide participation and long term initiatives. The explored experiences reveal, as referred by George, Mair & Reid (2009), that successful touristic events in rural communities are those related to local traditions (with some new nuances) now presented as a touristic product. The gastronomic events associated to local cuisine and products are especially important in terms of attractiveness both of tourists and local population. Good examples are: (i) “A cozinha dos Ganhões” (the kitchen of Ganhões – rural workers in the past - in Estremoz and (ii) the “cozido em potes de barro e lume de chão” (meat cooked in clay pots and ground fire) the main touristic menu in the Estate of Freixo do Meio, the biological agriculture flagship farm of Montemor-o-Novo.

We cannot avoid mentioning some problems associated with these recent initiatives. Some related to the lack of skills of some managers, other linked to the complexity of biological agro-food production that asks for deep knowledge in the domain. We should also stress the little cooperation among stakeholders that is reflected in the few joint initiatives, situation that fragmented demand and makes it unviable some actions.

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