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Culinary tourism: does Trinidad and Tobago qualify?

Several stakeholders within the local and international tourism industry say that tourism is an experience. How do we achieve this experience? Among several factors, food has become a key component in making a tourist visit a memorable one. According to World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the cuisine of the destination is an aspect of utmost importance in the quality of the holiday experience. Culinary tourism is becoming a growing phenomenon globally.

What is culinary tourism? According to Ontario Culinary Tourism Association referenced in a 2012 research document entitled *Agro and Culinary Tourism-Getting to the Next Level* by Ena Harvey, Management Coordinator-Caribbean and Agro Tourism Specialist, defines it by saying that Culinary tourism includes any tourism experience in which one learns about, appreciates, and/or consumes food and drink that reflects the local, regional or national cuisine, heritage, culture, tradition or culinary techniques.

As such the document states that 60 percent of American leisure travellers indicate that they are interested in taking a trip to engage in culinary activities. It says travel enthusiasts are even willing to pay big bucks for insider tips, immersive cooking classes, wine and agricultural experiences, as well as authentic cultural exchanges.

UNWTO says in the tourism world there are influential destinations whose brand image is connected, with varying levels of intensity to gastronomic values. Some of these countries are Spain, France, Italy, Portugal, USA, South Africa and Japan. Could Trinidad and Tobago use its unique local cuisine to brand its destination or make a tourist attraction of food? The answer is yes! The table is set!

As a matter of fact one just has to stroll along any major causeway in our urban and rural areas to be exposed to a wide variety of food that indicates the multifaceted nature of "Trini" life. Any Trinbagonian can take a tourist to Arima, one of the main towns, where several people converge to for "liming". Close to and around the Dial vendors are seen selling doubles, bake and shark and local tasty burgers. There are local chicken and chips restaurants flavoured with the "Trini" blend of seasoning and spices that are very competitive with similar type international restaurants. Further down that stretch, corn soup and punches. made with local fruits like barbadine and soursop are available.

Driving further east to the fringes of Valencia is the finger licking bar-b-que pigtail. Leaving east and heading south side, one can enjoy at the Debe junction an array of delicacies that are a legacy of East Indian indentureship.

Express February 19 2014

Heading in a Westerly direction into the main capital of Trinidad, Port-of-Spain, just around by the Queen's Park Savannah on the eastern side, you will be treated to most of the "Trini" flavours and a touch of the Caribbean dishes. Other vendors seek to whet the palates of those who may be craving for the Jamaican jerk. This has become a hot spot where friends and family converge in the evening to night to just sit, eat and chat with a little music in the background.

St James, once called the city that never sleeps has a similar structure, but a longer stretch with bars and clubs where old and young congregate just at the mouth of the bars, on the pavements and along the roadway socializing, eating and listening to music. The "Trini liming" culture has taken on this new look and food has played a major conduit in socializing and entertainment.

As such there is a new emergence of dining and eating out, which has gone beyond just a "Trini" local cuisine, but a reflection of Trinidad and Tobago's cosmopolitan culture. Actually, one may travel around the world simply by traversing the length of Ariapita Avenue, Port-of-Spain for the sheer variety of food available. History bears out the many different paths that has led our forefathers to these lands and their influence is still seen everywhere from district and street names to the racial mixtures and the abundance of tasty dishes.

It is this wide variety of food that throws a delicious twist to the term 'melting pot' as it pertains to T&T's unique blend of foods. There is enough quality to satisfy the palate of the most discriminating taste buds belonging to both local and foreigner alike.

The explosion of Ariapita Avenue as a focal point in the cultural landscape is nothing short of staggering. Now known simply as 'The Avenue', home and foreign based locals, as well as visitors alike are awestruck by the rapid development that has occurred there as the liming crowd has migrated from all over the bustling city to cram themselves into the bars, diners and dance spots that seem to litter that stretch of the city.

In between the many eateries or dining clubs and bars, patrons stand on the pavement or lean on their cars parked at the side of the road with a bottle in hand dancing, chatting and liming from as early as 6pm in the evening to 4 am next morning.

But can this same melting pot culture of food, which can be replicated in other countries, threaten the idea of what is unique to a country's food tourism? Well, Greg Rawlins, IICA Representative in Trinidad and Tobago and Coordinator, Regional Integration, Caribbean Region, believes that once the drag at the Queens' Park Savannah, which is more geared to local offerings, is replicated, promoted and marketed well in other parts of the country, food tourism can be sustained in T&T. He says once the country's local unique food is showcased and marketed more than the new age cosmopolitan dining out experience, there are great opportunities for food tourism.

Express February 19 2014

As Ena Harvey outlined, there are spin offs to food tourism; it includes a tourist visiting farm markets and stands, tours of artisanal farms, wineries and dairies. She says when done properly, culinary tourism tells the story of the heritage, the people and the landscape of a geographic area. It reflects 'place', enriches experiences, and can be a valuable tool to boost economic, social and community development. "The Caribbean has all of the ingredients for success. We now need to package the offer; link the marketing to the products and by working toward better coordination at the regional level and designing incentives locally, each Caribbean country could offer something distinctive."

***(The Chamber thanks Dixie-Ann Dickson for her contribution of this article).***