

THE LEADING COMMUNITY OF CHINA'S TOP TRAVEL BUYERS

13 - 15 May 2020 · Shanghai · itb-china.com



ITB
CHINA

BUYERS
CIRCLE

Furthering Chinese food culture: Chinese food connoisseurs' exploration overseas

For a nation that boasts a thousand-year-old food culture and offers some of the world's most diversified local cuisines, it is perhaps somewhat surprising for Chinese outbound travel agents to learn that many international tourism service providers think Chinese tourists only prefer Chinese meals when traveling overseas. The global management consulting firm McKinsey & Company dispelled this myth in a 2018 report, finding that "34% of those surveyed (Chinese tourists) chose fine dining to be the most important factor when deciding where to travel to".

Mr. Bin Wu, the Vice President of Xinjingjie, an established brand of Shenzhen CITS (China International Travel Service), further substantiated McKinsey's findings in detail. According to Mr. Wu, good quality gastronomy products should appropriately feature local signature dishes and distinguish themselves clearly from competitors' similar offers. At the same time, Mr. Wu believed it is also important to integrate the dining experience with the rest of the products in a harmonious balance, so that the wider experience becomes digestible and affordable for intended Chinese travelers.

So, do Chinese foodies make destination choices by going with their gut feelings or following their noses? Mr. Wu considered destination marketing to be an important source of information, which would only be however, relatively ineffective if marketed through traditional channels. Instead, tourism inspired by popular culture – with locations and cuisines featured in reality TV shows, movies, literature, comics and computer games – can create more awareness. In addition, he also underlined the importance of social media sharing and reviews that serve to increase interest and encourage engagement.

At this stage, "Japan, Greater China, France, Italy, Spain and Thailand are the main gastronomic destinations for the Chinese market," Mr. Wu summarized.

The key to market overseas fine dining experiences in China: digging deeper and spreading out more broadly

Mr. Wu highlighted certain factors that impact Chinese gastronomy tourists' purchase decisions:

- awareness of a destination and its cuisines;
- availability of travel products (often packaged together with flights and accommodation) and discounts;

- attractiveness of a destination beyond its dining experiences;
- the history, culture and even cooking tips that enrich certain dishes and cuisines.

This last point is the particularly important make-or-break factor that, in Mr. Wu's opinion, distinguishes a great product from a mediocre one. Citing a popular six-day Taiwan trip as an example, Mr. Wu explained how Xinjingjie has dug deep to bring up famous historical figures, restaurants and cuisine stories associated with these household names. This product features cuisines both originating from Taiwan as well as those developed under colonial influence and combines the experience of fine dining in a Michelin star restaurant, tasting dishes prepared by award-winning private chefs, and notably the region's signature dish – Taiwan beef noodles. Mr. Wu stressed that it is very important to also pay attention to other elements of the product; for example, whether customers have had ample free time to explore Taiwan's night markets at their own pace, in addition to being able to enjoy general sightseeing.

Mr. Wu further pointed out that gastronomy tourism products require a widely spread sales network in order to make them viable. He remarked that the relatively higher costs and longer time invested in product development in gastronomy tourism, which consequently lead to higher travel prices and require precisely targeting of the relevant market segment. Very often, Mr. Wu explained, “we must promote simultaneously in multiple first-tier cities because there are limited customers who are interested in, and can afford, such themed products. We also promote these products both online and offline in order to acquire enough customers and ensure sustainable growth.”

Food enthusiasts or connoisseurs?

When being asked as to why Xinjingjie's main gastronomy customers belong to the 40 to 60 age group, Mr. Wu considered the company's gastronomy tourists to be more than food enthusiasts, clarifying: “we define our market segment of gastronomy tourism as those food connoisseurs from China. They are not only interested in trying signature local dishes, but also pay great attention to a healthy diet and a balanced trip with dining and sightseeing experiences. In the meanwhile, we also make sure their Chinese stomachs will be satisfied by arranging a few meals in Chinese or Asian restaurants. That's what we keep in mind when we develop gastronomy travel products. We always aim to integrate diversified elements such as local cuisines, culture, history, customs and dining etiquette from certain destinations in well-proportioned way, and price these products to reflect the quality, but also remain affordable.”

Mr. Wu exemplified his point with a 12-day itinerary, in which their customers travel to France, can dine in two world-famous Michelin star restaurants, participate in French cuisine cooking classes, taste French wines and hunt truffles with Labrador Retrievers. Beyond such highly sought-after gastronomic experiences, their customers can also enjoy sightseeing activities in small French small and coastal regions, as well as visiting museums, galleries, mountains and lakes.

Mr. Wu summarized by outlining that the current market volume of overseas gastronomy tourism from China is around four million, among which 70% undertake travel with customized services. He anticipated that increasing number of younger customers will join this market segment, contributing to an annual growth rate of between 20% to 40% in the following years.

“We plan to reach an annual revenue of RMB 50 million (ca. USD 6.7 million) and establish a national member network within three years. We will broaden our partner network to all first-tier cities and work closely with large OTAs (online travel agencies) so that we can further strengthen our brand in gastronomy tourism in China”, concluded Mr. Wu enthusiastically.