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Gastronomy tourism: Chinese travelers' search for the known and unknown

In less than half a century, China has transformed itself from an underdeveloped country to the world's second largest economy with a booming consumer market. Increasingly, Chinese middle-class consumers have enjoyed greater opportunities to experience new things, including the tasting of diverse international cuisines. Millions of international restaurants, cafes and eateries offer foods and beverages that originated from places beyond China, ranging from countries and regions as varied as Nepal, Lebanon, Italy and Peru, to name just a few. Furthermore, imported foods and beverages are becoming increasingly popular and are even preferred by many Chinese consumers in the wake of several food-safety related scandals that have racked their confidence in domestic produces.

Outbound gastronomic tourism is thus considered by many Chinese travelers to be a gateway to authentic cuisines they have tried at restaurants or purchased from food importers in their hometowns, thereby bridging the known and unknown. Gastronomic outbound travel offers, therefore, seek to provide overseas food and drink-focused experiences that can also incorporate relevant cultural elements relevant to the dish.

International destination marketing organizations (DMOs) may accordingly find it challenging to strike the balance between the known and unknown when selling these products to intended Chinese visitors. They can of course continue to build upon "signature dishes" that are already well-received in China (regardless of stereotypes and other misunderstandings), yet there are challenges surrounding when and how they can promote "new" and unknown gastronomic experiences to the same cohort of Chinese customers.

Ms. Iris Cai, the co-founder of UniqueWay Customized Travel, gave examples of these promotions, explaining: "many DMOs specifically promote itineraries featuring local wines and cuisines. A considerable number of European and Australian DMOs feature regional wineries and culinary festivals, guiding Chinese visitors to certain gastronomic experience in a local context".

"Some destinations," she continued, "have craftily promoted their local cuisines and produces along with tourism. Spain, for example, is well known in China for its paella. Chinese visitors particularly consider Spanish seafood paella to be a must-try signature dish which perfectly combines rice and seafood during a trip to Spain. In addition, Iberian ham, a pork delicacy made from black Iberian breed pigs, is gaining increased recognition among Chinese food connoisseurs. It is thus promoted as another reason to visit Spain – not only to taste the

product itself, but also as something to bring back as a gift from the country where it is produced.”

Precisely targeting Chinese gastronomic travelers

The challenge of how to precisely identify the market segment of outbound gastronomic travelers leads not only to better return on marketing spending, but also to better targeted product development and more satisfied Chinese visitors. Ms. Cai shared her experience in serving Chinese outbound gastronomic travelers:

“I believe that the cohort of Chinese travelers who are motivated to travel to destinations for foods is concentrated between 20 and 40 years old,” Ms. Cai explained, “because those who are older may be more used to Chinese goods and tend to be more conservative in what they eat and drink. They will definitely try famous local foods at overseas destinations, but only sparsely. They need to have many Chinese meals during outbound trips in between sampling local dishes. Younger travelers,” she continued, “in my view are more curious and tolerant with non-Chinese cuisines. They may even immerse themselves in local foods without falling back to Chinese meals during a whole journey overseas.”

In terms of source markets, Ms. Cai indicated that the majority of Chinese gastronomic travelers come from first and second tier Chinese cities, which have more developed economies and more sophisticated travelers. “Travelers from these regions have mostly reached the level that they want to experience and can afford personalized services. They are chasing something that is individual and special”. “Notably,” she added, “we also see our Chinese guests from southern parts of China, such as Guangdong, Chengdu and Chongqing, that are paying particular attention to culinary elements in purchasing travel products – maybe it is because they come from places where culinary choices are abundant.”

“Chinese gastronomic travelers show stronger preference in traveling as FITs or taking up customized travel services when compared to ordinary package group tours. They often know what they want and tend to choose trips with clear themes, while ordinary package tours often only offer a very shallow taste of the destination, literally.” Ms. Cai added: “this is what distinguishes UniqueWay from others – while some other travel agents do ‘customization-lite’ and give their customers only with limited choices, we truly offer very flexible and detailed customization to either turn their very brief thoughts into detailed and executable travel plans, or satisfy whatever wishes they have.”

Expecting linear growth

Ms. Cai anticipated that the market volume of outbound gastronomic tourism from China will continue to increase; however, she also stressed that it will only be a linear type of expansion featuring a steady growth but no leaping development. “Exemptions may exist; for example, some single destinations can embrace a surge of Chinese arrivals following some very popular reality shows. Destination awareness has increased suddenly in such cases, and mostly younger

travelers are among those following such a trend thanks to their flexibility and tendency to imitate their peers.”

Other destinations that have strong potential, in Ms. Cai’s view, are those that can capably promote connections between their culinary resources and Chinese customers’ knowledge and expectations. “Japanese cuisines are very desirable among Chinese visitors,” Ms. Cai commented, “besides benefiting from its close geographic proximity, Japan also attract Chinese people for its diverse and yet very refined culinary offers.”