Beyond the visual gaze?: The pursuit of an embodied experience through food tourism

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Beyond the visual gaze?
The pursuit of an embodied experience through food tourism

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Abstract

Food tourism provides a conceptual vehicle for pursuing a more culturally aware tourism agenda. Findings from participant observation and in-depth tourist interviews visiting sites affiliated to two Scottish food tourism initiatives illustrate how analysis of such places can contribute to work on postmodern touristic consumptive activity and embodied experience. Food tourism research writes the body into tourism, thereby moving discourses away from dominant concepts of visualism towards non-representable forms of knowledge. However, the research also found that in order to meet an increasing demand for experiences that bring producer and consumer together, viewing windows are being installed at sites that sanitize the experience. Therefore, the concept of ‘new’ postmodern forms of tourism activity is problematized by addressing the implications surrounding this paradoxical situation of ‘post/modernity’; where a (post) tourist is encouraged to internalise a place through its food, yet is simultaneously subject to a form of regulated ‘tourist gaze’ reminiscent of more ‘Fordist’ and modernist modes of tourism experience.

Keywords

Embodied experience; food tourism; multisensory; postmodern consumption; Scotland; tourist gaze

Introduction

This article, first, aims to contextualize the concept of food tourism, not only as an interesting field of research in its own right (Boniface, 2003; Everett and Atchison, 2008; Hall et al., 2003; Hjalager and Richards, 2002; Long, 2004), but also arguing that it can be employed as a wider conceptual lens. It offers insight into those discourses currently underpinning the recent move towards a more culturally-aware and critically-orientated tourism research agenda, particularly in regard to postmodern consumptive patterns (Franklin, 2003; Shaw et al., 2000). It is suggested that food represents more than purely an economic commodity, it is a multidimensional cultural artefact capable of linking issues regarding...
the relationships between place and identity, and the material and symbolic. Moreover, the study of food tourism can address the lament that tourism is too often seen as a set of economic activities, where ‘questions of taste, fashion and identity would thus be viewed as exogenous’ (Rojek and Urry, 1997: 2).

Second, data from fieldwork in the West of Scotland are used to examine one particular aspect of this theoretical redirection in contemporary research examining postmodern forms of tourism; the shift away from the ‘visual repertoires of consumption’ (Franklin and Crang, 2001: 12). In seeking to contribute an empirical dimension to the sustained wave of work repositioning Urry’s (1990) seminal ‘tourist gaze’ metaphor beyond the visual, food tourism is employed as a conceptual vehicle with which to explore issues of multisensory experience, embodied engagement and non-representable knowledge generation, thus problematizing the dominance of the visual sense in tourism studies.

The final part of the article draws on the empirical data to discuss the implications of installing transparent viewing windows at food tourism locations. Although installed with the intention of enhancing the experience, the construction of a separate viewing area often dilutes the multisensory engagement, replacing it with an artificially controlled and regulated tourism bubble. These windows act as ironic metaphors for the complex nature of postmodern consumptive activity where ‘new’ post-Fordist experiences become intertwined and blurred with more regulated (neo)Fordist tourism experiences (see Shaw and Williams [2004] for a useful overview of these concepts). Consequently, I highlight the way that these kinds of managed postmodern tourist spaces are experienced; examining how some (post)tourists (Urry, 1990) negotiate this seemingly sanitized tourist gaze alongside a growing exteroceptive desire to encounter spaces of food production through sensory engagement.

### Food tourism within the tourism studies agenda

To avoid ambiguity, I adopt a broad definition of ‘food tourism’ cognisant with Hall and Sharples’ (2003: 10) definition as the ‘visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations … it is the desire to experience a particular type of food or the produce of a specific region …’. My work relates to tourists who make a conscious effort to visit specific food/drink tourism sites, rather than an exploration of the more generic hospitality sector in tourism (for example see Lashley, 2007). The recent marketing campaign by Enjoy England entitled ‘Taste England’ (2006) is dedicated to promoting regional specialities, traditional treats, taste trails and England’s ‘natural larder’, highlighting how a destination’s food offer has become a significant ‘pull’ factor (Okumus et al., 2007), rather than just an inconsequential holiday necessity. It seems that within the last 10 years there has been an explosion of marketing activity promoting new restaurants, food-related attractions, food-centred holidays, cookery schools and gourmet festivals (Boniface, 2003). We are being invited to discard the desire for a dirty weekend and replace it with a nourishing, clean
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break of good food and company (Benson, 2006). The emphasis is not on high-expense dining experiences, but the enjoyment of 'the most alluring places that offer a unique experience', whether it be a tray of cockles whilst 'breathing in the wonderful fresh iodine aromas' of the sea (Benson, 2006: 2), a taste of fresh fish, or an attendance at a culinary school which encourages tactile engagement with fresh ingredients. Clearly, food-related tourism offers a plethora of indulgent multisensory experiences.

It is time for the tourism academy to move food tourism out of the 'grey zone' of cultural and heritage tourism and acknowledge its conceptual opportunities (Scarpato, 2002). Despite an increasing role as a catalyst in enhancing the tourism experience in certain places (Van Westering, 1999), the academic community has been surprisingly slow to acknowledge the theoretical potential in examining this phenomenon. Although some work has appeared in the last few years looking at the overall experience and the way it has manifested itself in destinations (Boniface, 2003; Hall et al., 2003; Hjalager and Richards, 2002), this article is premised on the concern that few have harnessed it as a wider theoretical lens in order to pursue more critically-orientated tourism knowledge generation, (although notable exceptions include Oakes [1999] on the construction of symbolic landscapes, and Franklin’s [2003] discussion of food within the new mobilities theorization). Notably, it has been suggested that the wider body of research on relationships between food, society, culture and the economy is 'tainted by a missing gastronomic perspective' (Scarpato, 2002: 60). In particular, Scarpato argues that the contribution of gastronomy studies to tourism discourses remains surprisingly untapped as it offers an innovative conceptual framework that can contribute significant new dimensions to tourism research. Consequently, this article embraces food tourism as a multidimensional vehicle that can highlight the richness and diversity characterizing the way tourism studies is evolving into a more critical social science open to cultural interpretation. In particular, it can contribute to further understandings of the dimensions and complexity of postmodern forms of consumptive activity. After all, 'the notion that food and drink might serve as a central organizing theme for anyone studying the world of humankind seems to have eluded virtually all social scientists; but, after a bit of reflection, it does make abundant good sense' (Zelinsky, 1985: 51).

It has been said that 'all social practices can be assessed from a cultural point of view' (Johnson, 1986: 282) and in today’s Western world it is possible to make culturally orientated choices that are not purely driven by rudimentary biological needs (Van Westering, 1999). In post-industrial societies food represents more than basic sustenance, and pleasure is placed above need (Finkelstein, 1989), offering an object to grasp greater understandings of wider systems of culture and shifting patterns of cultural engagement (Griswold, 2004). It has been suggested that following the postwar upheavals of the 1940s there has been a rising complexity in the nature of consumption away from homogenized, regulated and standardized producer-dominated Fordist modes (Jamal and Kim, 2005)
towards an increased density of signs, images and non-material forms of pro-
duction and consumption (Featherstone, 1991). Consequently, this cultural
transformation has had a direct impact on the character and nature of tourism,
heralding the emergence of niche and segmented markets (for more on this
see Sharpley, 1994). Rather than a high degree of standardization, the age of
post-Fordist and postmodern tourism has been associated with the creation and
development of specialized and alternative markers characterized by flexibility,
plurality, individualism and choice (Shaw and Williams, 2004).

As the tourism academy continues to reflect on the ramifications and conse-
quences of the ‘cultural turn’ and move towards a ‘mobilities’ theorization
that seeks to tackle these societal and cultural shifts (Sheller and Urry, 2004),
food is increasingly regarded as a multidimensional, everyday artefact which
encompasses the very identity of a place or individual. Eating exotic and global
foodstuffs has become part of a new postmodern culture characterized by plural-
ized and aestheticized experiences that have fostered new patterns of tourism
consumption and the development of new individualized identities. Food
tourism characterized these ‘new’ tourism experiences (Armesto López and
Martin, 2006; Poon, 1993), symptomatic of a move from large-scale packaging
of standardized leisure to new consumer imperatives that have lead to the de-
velopment of new patterns and a rise in the number of consumers actively
engaged in new forms of tourism experience beyond purely visual engagement
(Munt, 1994) in an age of ‘hypermobility’ (Urry, 2002).

Food is being accepted as a long-established communicator of meaning and
can be used as an illuminating focus of theoretical exploration in order to pursue
work that recognizes that landscapes are increasingly understood as subjectively
experienced and culturally encoded. Like tourism, food consumption should be
treated as an encounter that flirts with space and contributes to a postmodern
landscape saturated with meaning and diversity (Crouch, 1999); demanding a
place in the rapidly shifting nature of tourism studies.

‘The tourist gaze’
By acknowledging the existence of multisensual encounters in tourism there is
an opportunity to employ food as a conceptual lens in order to contribute to
work problematizing the dominance of the visual in the touristic experience.
Since the publication of Urry’s *The Tourist Gaze* (1990), it has become increas-
ingly popular to critique its central theoretical concept of the ‘visual’, and even
Urry himself latterly accepted that the work has often been taken too literally,
suggesting that by using the visual sense as a central organizing sense (Urry,
1992, 2001) he ultimately favoured the dominance of visualism, over other
sensory methods of engagement.

Urry’s (1990) ‘gaze’ privileges the eye; locating other senses in a distinctive
visual environment. In claiming the visual has long been understood as the most
discriming and reliable sensual mediator between humans and their environment
Urry (1992) suggested practices of tourism can be approached with an emphasis
on vision. Although the ‘gaze’ continues to provide a seminal concept for contemporary tourism discussions (Franklin, 2001), particularly those that pursue visual-centric approaches that focus on representations, tangible semiotics and the visual consumption of landscape, it has become apparent thatocular-centric approaches are limited in their ability to tackle the complex dimension of more embodied postmodern activity (Edensor, 2001). The approach may provide insight into how sights and markers are socially and culturally constructed but offers little in explaining how place is also constituted through non-representable forms (Crouch et al., 2001). The increasing growth of complex tourism practices and experiences means a visual approach is inadequate to address how space is experienced multi-dimensionally.

It is being increasingly acknowledged that there is a need to embrace wider and more active bodily involvement (physical, intellectual, cognitive and the gaze) (Franklin, 2001). This is perhaps where Urry’s gaze remains too passive, so much so that Urry in Franklin (2001: 121) remarked, ‘so I suppose I would now argue for a kind of sensuous analysis of tourism and look at the relationship between the normally dominant visualism and the other senses.’ The recently theorized concept of ‘performance’ (as opposed to a gaze) notably proposed by Edensor (2000, 2001) and Perkins and Thorns (2001), has become an attractive alternative approach that widens the concept to embrace the more multifaceted, multisensory experiences that make up tourism such as adventure (Cloke and Perkins, 1998) and sex tourism (Ryan and Kinder, 1996). Although Urry had never denied the existence of multiple gazes in his earlier work, he was keen to state a decade later that ‘I think there is a multiplicity, and the way to approach the analysis of these multiplicities of tourist gaze is, among other things, to think about the taste-scapes, smell-scapes, sound-scapes, touch-scapes’ (Franklin, 2001: 123). I suggest that food- and drink-focused tourism studies offers a fascinating lens through which to examine these more heterogeneous sensory landscapes and theorize whether they offer different ‘kinds’ of non-representable knowledge (Crouch et al., 2001). There is a need to address the ontological blind spot where ‘little so far has been understood about how the metabolic, material and fleshy connections consumers make with foodstuff inform their embodied knowledges’ (Roe, 2006: 107).

Clearly food tourism should be regarded as an embodied form of tourism, a phenomenon whereby the ‘process of experiencing, making sense, knowing through practise as a sensual human subject in the world’ is particularly pronounced (Crouch, 2000: 68). Far too few food tourism texts have adequately examined and recognized this concept, overlooking its potential as a marker of identity (regional and individual), capable of providing an embodied experience of place, perhaps more powerfully than many other commodities. It provides a useful avenue in which to undergo a significant shift from tourism as a visual practice towards something which engages all the senses in a kind of sensuous geography (Rodaway, 1994), involving the literal and physical internalizing of a culture, as
opposed to a non-immersive gaze. Not restricted to a visual consumptive engagement, food tourism locations offer ideal conceptual foci with which to examine evolving postmodern dimensions of tourism consumption that engage with individualized heterogeneous experiences and the non-representable. These sites provide arenas of total sensual and bodily immersion, where cultural objects are physically internalized and tourists are submerged in waves of smells, sounds, taste and touch. It is within these embodied sites where taste, the closest of all senses (Skurnik and George 1967), widens the sensual spatial range traditionally employed in touristic experiences and opens up the possibility to engage with somatic forms of knowledge.

However, it is acknowledged that many experiences are carried out in contrived touristic spaces and on particular stages, open to regulation and ‘stage management’ (Edensor, 2001). Experiences are often socially and spatially managed, where touristic things can be taken and used as active agents in the production of regulated tourism landscapes and social imaginaries (Mansvelt, 2005). By taking Chaney’s (1993: 64) arguments for the existence of ‘physically and symbolically bounded space’, Edensor (2000) claims that tourism is ultimately framed and informed by discourses of difference and power relations. Although food tourism sites are promoted as places offering authentic and embodied, multisensual experiences of local food, they are increasingly becoming ‘themed’ spaces undergoing perpetual re-imagining and manipulation (Gotttdiener, 1997).

Therefore, the way postmodern tourism consumption experiences are organized and regulated in certain settings must be considered. Thus, it is particularly pertinent to explore Urry’s (1990) theory that some tourists are ‘post tourists’; tourists that are aware of the artificiality and inauthenticity of postmodern touristic spaces (such as Disneyworld) yet seem content to gaze nostalgically and playfully upon the lives of others (Chhabra et al., 2003; Feifer, 1985). Associated with contrived tourist attractions, the ‘post-tourist’ is apparently happy with a multitude of choices characteristic of an eclectic mix of the visual, material, hyperreal and symbolic as long as it constitutes an ‘experience’. If a ‘post-tourist’ who seems to enjoy the inauthentic exists, this must be considered a key dimension of how postmodern consumptive activities are played out in practice. The concept goes some way in reconciling the apparent paradox where tourists are apparently searching for a ‘natural’ experience in an overly processed world, yet their self-ironic attitude means they are content to pursue activities within overtly constructed and inauthentic settings (Rojek, 1995).

Methodology

Hjalager and Richards (2002: 228, 229) suggest that, ‘a case study can identity relevant issues and the various driving forces that are important for the development of tourism or gastronomy in a particular area’ as well as provide a ‘vital basis for a link between theory and practice’. Consequently, a case study strategy was pursued in order to examine how place and postmodern touristic activity are
shaped by food tourism consumption and production in the West of Scotland. Although food tourism has become increasingly popular across Scotland (Boyne et al., 2002; Hughes, 1995), the research concentrated on two specific locations: the Isle of Arran and the Outer Hebrides. Warde (1997) has suggested that the national food tourism marketing initiative ‘Taste of Scotland’ is one striking example of the way in which tourism, food and invented ‘Celtic’ tradition have been successfully unified, but does not provide evidence of where this is actually occurring. Thus, in order to explore this notion, case study locations were chosen that identified themselves with a distinctive ‘Celtic’ history and cultural heritage in their marketing literature. Bessière (1998, 2001) has also suggested that food tourism development is most pronounced in peripheral locations; therefore the criteria for the case study choices also included sites with a peripheral location. The islands also attract high tourist numbers as a result of their widely-publicized growing reputation as food tourism locations and this reputation was deemed important to ensure a significant wealth of data could be generated. Additionally, both locations have developed food and drink initiatives within the last few years and, because they are at different stages in their marketing and physical development, offer avenues of contrast and comparison. For the purposes of this article, the findings, theoretical discussion and associated illustrations are drawn from those sites affiliated to the ‘Isle of Arran Taste Trail’ and the ‘Outer Hebrides Speciality Food Trail’.

The ‘Isle of Arran Taste Trail’ was developed in 1998 by the Argyll and the Islands Enterprise in conjunction with the LEADER II1 European Community regional development initiative. It focused on ‘promoting those who make, sell and prepare good food on the Isle of Arran’ (Brown, 1998) while encouraging an enhanced tourism spend throughout the year. The trail includes two cheese shops/factories, a brewery, distillery, smokehouse, chocolate shop and a preserves outlet. Each micro-site within the trail boasts an organized and tourist-focused infrastructure, (already the focus of research by Boyne et al., 2002). The latest branding initiative, ‘Taste of Arran’, which emerged from this earlier trail project in 2005 has already established itself as a successful marketing vehicle in which to sell Arran products online and throughout the UK. In contrast, the ‘Outer Hebrides Speciality Food Trail’ (a LEADER+ initiative launched in 2004) is in its infancy, consisting of food production sites at very different stages of development; ranging from inaccessible warehouses to those boasting large viewing areas and souvenirs. This trail includes several smokehouses, butchers, bakeries, a brewery and several niche product producers making confectionery and preserves.

The research sought to explore and understand the intricacies of the issues involved in identity construction and the experience of place while adhering to the belief that tourism research should actively seek to vigorously reject the ‘dominant constellation of objectivity and truth we describe as positivism’ (Barnes and Gregory, 1997: 2). Consequently, a flexible and qualitative approach was undertaken which employed topic-based interviews and participant observation.
The interview questions were grouped under five main topic headings taken from du Gay’s ‘Circuit of Culture’ (1997): ‘production’, ‘consumption’, ‘identity’, ‘representation’ and ‘regulation’. Interview questions focused on their reasons for visiting the sites (e.g. why did you decide to visit this region? Have you been here before?); their activities (e.g. what food-related activities have you engaged in during the trip? Why?); the nature of their interaction with producers (e.g. have you spoken to producers? What about?); their purchasing rationale and whether they felt they could experience a place’s identity through its food offer. This approach generated a pragmatic, yet systematic accumulation of thoughts, attitudes, feelings, motivations and experiences in situ.

In addition, the participant observation was also structured by the five key ‘Circuit of Culture’ moments in a simple schedule. In order to capture the researcher’s inner and outer dialogues, brief field notes were made as issues arose or when informal conversations took place and a more comprehensive reflective narrative was completed at the end of each day. In all, 34 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with tourists from 10 different countries and with an age range between 28–82 years were conducted while they were actively engaged in food-related activities, thus forming a purposive sample group. Informed consent was obtained with a signed form and information sheet; all the interviewees agreed that I could use their real first names in the final transcripts. Additionally, over 300 photographs were taken during two fieldwork periods (September 2006 and May 2007).

Findings and discussion

Beyond the visual gaze?

A multi-layered touristic ‘food-scape’ is being developed in Arran and the Hebrides, where place is experienced through all the senses. Lofgren (2004: 106 in Sheller and Urry, 2004) suggests that, ‘the grammar of landscape experiences includes all the different tourist forms of taking in a landscape, to traverse it, pass through it or past it, to dwell in it, sense it, be part of it … landscapes are produced by movement, both of the sense and of the body’. Interviewees particularly commented on the importance of smell in their appreciation of place, ‘sometimes you can walk into a shop and walk past fruit, and you won’t smell fruit, it’s like, next! I think everything here is local produce, you can smell everything, you know’ (Lindsay), thus supporting Dann and Jacobsen (2003) who insist that the senses must be considered in the appreciation of the landscape, and use ‘smellsapes’ as a way of experiencing the city and countryside. Another female tourist on holiday from South Africa stated:

I think it’s the whole, the eating part of us isn’t about just getting food in, it’s more about all the senses, that’s how we say the ‘smelling part’. Like we walked down here and said, ‘something smells good, let’s go there’ and that’s more of an attraction than just that you have to eat because you have to eat … (Mandy)
In addition to a ‘smellscape’, the research found the existence of a tangible ‘tastescape’ which is closely linked to this process of olfactory perception, whereby place is enjoyed through taste. Specific examples include the milk, the whisky and cheese; one interviewee suggested the very taste of milk characterizes the land’s identity, ‘milk tastes different … there is a subtle difference, when you drink it all the time there is a subtle difference here … it has got more body to it …’ (Linda). I suggest that there can be no stronger connection between the land and bodily senses, which supports Game’s (1991) concern regarding the limitations of the gaze and the need to emphasize taste and eating foods that are rooted in culture and place. An American interviewee who used to be a chef exclaimed, ‘So we are looking for those experiences that sort of, identify memories with them. I guess if you want to put it into context, it’s one of the senses isn’t it? Tasting, tasting the area’ (Mark). It was clear that many used food to experience place, ‘I think it is part of experiencing the area that you are in’ (Glennis), and, ‘… it’s a way of experiencing a place’ (Ed), ‘yes I think it is easier to experience a place through food’ (Nicola). Responses clearly indicated the existence of a ‘practical ontology’ (Crouch and Desforges, 2003), where places were ‘experienced’ rather than merely visually apprehended and individualized memories were resurrected through different foodstuffs.

It was found that food tourism is pursued as a multisensual and embodied aestheticized experience in line with work on postmodern consumptive activity that highlights the rise of ‘new’ pluralized and tourism experiences (Poon, 1993). Tourists’ comments included: ‘eating that was an experience!’ (Mandy); and ‘it’s the experience … there is something nice about experiencing place, like here by eating the fish or whatever’ (Tim), ‘I like to get my whole body involved’ (Barry), thus illustrating what Harre calls a ‘feeling of doing’ (1993: 68). The research indicates that space is intimately encountered through immersive physical engagement. These encounters represent moments of bodily expression, in order to activate and understand places (Crouch, 2000), where some tourist spaces offer a symbolic and invisible content that can only be experienced through an emotive corporeal encounter (Veijola and Jokinen, 1994). Food may be mediated materially, but the multidimensional experience and sense of place, in its totality, can only be apprehended imaginatively and multisensually, thus offering a means of generating ‘lay knowledge’ about place and cultural forms through non-visual means (Crouch et al., 2001).

Food tourism provides an interesting embodied dimension to the way that the ‘gaze’ is conceptualized; it is an experience that can only be pursued if one goes beyond visualism. The body, both in the physical and emotional sense is employed in the encounter of space. Food tourism sites represent arenas which encourage a full immersion of the body, ‘there is a kind of feeling … you can’t describe it in words, it’s just, you can feel the land!’,(Nadine) and simply eating food is not enough, the body must be situated in a place which enhances the experience, ‘oh, I hope there is a little seafood place … so I can eat it overlooking the sea as it tastes the best when you are overlooking the coast’ (Mark).
The tourist is submerged in images, signs, costumes, people and entertainment (Zelinsky, 1985) and the full experience of these multidimensional places are only fully grasped multisensually.

At Arran’s whisky distillery, I joined a guided tour and noted, ‘stirring music is used to accompany close shots of water and mountains scenes, and the slight smell of malted barley all contribute to a creation of The Spirit of Arran’ (Field notes: 5 May 2006). Tourists are invited into a recreated crofter’s house to watch a film of the process, enhanced by the sounds of mountain water trickling through rocks, before moving into the processing area in which they can sift the barley grains through their hands in large oak barrels, accompanied by an olfactory encounter with the distinctive aroma of fermentation and alcohol in the air. The polysensual experience is completed by a taste of the whisky, with an ingestion of the intense flavours causing a powerful physical reaction (particularly to the uninitiated)! It is this intimate encounter with places where sensory engagement provides the tourist with a more complete knowledge of place; intimacy with the surroundings is fostered through ‘embodied semiotics’ (Crouch et al., 2001) not through merely gazing upon the process.

Franklin and Crang (2001: 14) suggest that traditional tourism research has ‘too readily colluded in writing the body out of tourism’ and it is only when we research those experiences that involve our own skin that tourism research can shift beyond this rather one dimensional situation. It is perhaps through the conceptual lens of food tourism that it is possible to recognize space as a blend of the material and metaphorical (Crouch, 2002), where food-themed tourism sites allow connections with the material (food), but also encourage space to be apprehended imaginatively and emotively through the body, reminiscent of the exhibition that employs audio (invisible) sound-scapes of farmers’ voices (Cook, 2006) to instil life into displays of dried banana skins. It is this theorization of ‘imagined’ space, where food sites provide arenas in which invisible knowledge is generated about people and places (Game, 1991: 184). It is the intangible and unquantifiable connection to place that is possible with food, compromising of those experiences which you are unable to capture with a photographic image. This kind of non-representable knowledge is subjectively experienced (as illustrated in Thrift, 1997), and although the physical and emotional response is tangible, it is immeasurable and elusive within the conventional structures of positivistic enquiry.

A desire to imaginatively connect with something lost in the past clearly provided the motivation for many of the tourist visits to food sites; where the exposure to certain smells, tastes and the touch of certain foodstuffs drew out associations from a reservoir of past experiences and feelings, ‘well again, it was all home made, all home grown, that I had anyway. It was like stepping back in time … escape from it all, how food should be! I don’t like the way we live now’ (Sheena); ‘it’s how life used to be’ (Daphne); and ‘Scottish food is old fashioned’ (Douglas). Some simple experiences such as holding a carrot and rubbing the dirt, made Shirley recall:
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... that’s just how I remember them, and carrots you see. When I was younger, because, we had no sweets and things, I mean there was no sweet shop, because of the war you see, and they used to sell carrots, and your mouth was all orange, you don’t get that now either.

Such memories are not aroused through viewing alone, but the body must be sensually immersed in order to act as an instrument of recollection and medium of developing meaning. Recent psychological studies have found the relationship between recollection and olfactory identification to be particularly acute (Larsson et al., 2006). After a visit to the back rooms of the Stornoway smokehouse I sat on the wall outside with 82-year-old Audrey, listening as she reminisced about how the smell of kippers and the smokehouse ambience had emotionally transported her back to childhood:

But here, it was wonderful to see and smell the fish, it really brings me back about 60 or so years, you so rarely see that kind of smoking now, with the big dark smoke house and that smell, ooh, it’s that smell of childhood, the smoked fish I was told to eat, it was a treat for me.

Nostalgic yearnings for the past have long been associated with the ‘new’ tourist (Sharpley, 1994) and postmodern tourist activity (Munt, 1994), however I suggest these concepts can only be truly grasped if examined in the context of wider sensory engagement. Experiences are mediated individually and the body is engaged multisensorially in a complex matrix of visual and non-visual practice. The embodied practices of tourists and their corporeal capacity to generate meaning provide a valuable dimension to the analysis of new consumptive patterns in tourism.

A sanitized tourist gaze?

Although it is argued that food tourism research has a role in extending tourism discourses beyond the visual, representing a multidimensional experience that transcends ocular engagement through a process of embodiment, my research discovered a seemingly paradoxical situation where the promotion of this sensuous experience was being constrained with viewing windows. There was an increasing tendency at some of the sites to dilute a postmodern, individualized experience through the controlled physical separation of the tourist from the producer; despite compensatory attempts to address this loss with tasting bowls and audio visuals. So although some food tourism activities being clothed in discourses of a ‘new’ postmodern tourism experience, elements of control and regulation reminiscent of more ‘Fordist’ modes of consumption were present. Ed seemed to refer to this at the Arran brewery when he said:

In big creameries and big factories, according to the little video, it’s all done by machines. Here they hand bottle the beer as well. It’s quite nice to see that, tasted a bit of cheese. Er, at the brewery you can see it all happen through glass panels, I guess
if lots of people go in it ruins the beer I suppose, all that clever fermentation going on, but thankfully at the end of the walkway you do get to taste it!

In stark contrast to my visit to the Stornoway smokehouse, my trip to the ‘Hebridean Smokehouse’ was distinctly characterless (Figure 1). Information was gleaned from a series of interpretation panels, in an atmosphere that lacked the rich personal knowledge that I enjoyed in Stornoway and at other sites without viewing windows.

During an informal conversation, Andy, the owner of the Hebridean Brewing Company told me that he wanted to install a window and explained that the introduction of viewing windows is partly a result of intensified business pressure and the need to balance continued production which must meet health and safety requirements with the ongoing management of visiting tourists. However, what is created is a regulated form of embodiment, offering a strange hybrid of the visual and internalized, and a curious space of ‘inbetweenness’ separating consumer and producer; a postmodern experience that highlights the persistence and sustained influence of Fordist forms of consumption.

I found a trip to Arran’s Torrylinn Creamery an extremely impersonal experience, devoid of any character; almost a direct opposite to the friendliness of people that tourists said characterized the identity of these rural regions. The site was empty and overly sanitized, and as I looked through the glass towards

**Figure 1.** Tourist in the Hebridean Smokehouse (South Uist, Hebrides). Photograph by author.
two men rolling cheese, they seemed oblivious to my presence outside. The producer–consumer interface is becoming crucial in fully experiencing the socio-cultural identity of a place, particularly in regions seeking to develop an identity linked to food and drink, as is the case with Arran (Taste of Arran, 2005). As one tourist, Nicola, claimed:

It’s quite nice just watching them do the same thing over and over, you find yourself just staring at them through the glass and watching what they are doing. Although, it would be nice to talk to them about it perhaps, you don’t really get the chance.

In the current wave to break down barriers between producers and consumers so prevalent in tourism research (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2003), the glass represented physical disconnection. Despite being engaged in an activity that connects consumers more closely with food than would ordinarily be experienced, where tourists are seeking ‘up-close and personal’ interaction, this intimate relationship is denied when it is most desired. As alluded to by Shaw and Williams (2004) the distinction between postmodern embodied forms of post-Fordist experience and more rigid, regulated (neo)Fordist consumption is blurred; the viewing window acts as a tangible metaphor for this situation. Despite arguing food tourism is a postmodern experience characterized by escalating choices and multisensual heterogeneity, there is a need to accept that old forms of consumption characterized by standardization and regulation remain in co-existence with new forms of consumption.

Viewing windows physically separate the producer from the consumer, making social interaction almost impossible. Food tourism is a growing policy sector in which governments and agencies seek to try and reconnect the consumer to the producer, yet some sites are at the forefront of utilising mechanisms that prevent this. Thus the irony of policy attempts to encourage consumers to ‘Eat the View’ (Countryside Agency, 2001) are particularly pertinent here as some food tourism engagement fails to go beyond the ‘view’ and visual ‘gaze’; the consumer-producer interface involves little more staring through glass and watching producers like animals in a zoo.

The viewing window shares a remarkable similarity to the experience described by Urry (1990: 100) and his notion of ‘seeing named scenes through a frame, such as the hotel window, the car windscreen or the window of the coach’, this ‘framed view’ excludes anything which is not visual (Urry, 1992: 183). When I stood in front of these windows there was a disconcerting absence of smell which would traditionally be associated with the food item, (although at the cheese shop the final product lies in cubes on the counter). While it is understandable why sites have installed viewing areas, they have created a sanitized, hygienic bubble (Bauman, 1993) devoid of smell and sound. James (a butcher) particularly appreciated the importance of smell in relation to food when he exclaimed, ‘it’s not the same really. You want to go into the room and smell, and the room smells really good, really strong. And you think “oh my god” and it’s the whole process of the thing.’ As the photograph from
the Isle of Arran’s ‘Cheese Experience’ shows (Figure 2), the concept of an ‘experience’ is perhaps over-stated, particularly when it involves this barrier of sensory separation in a kind of overly managed ‘purified’ space (Sibley, 1988).

Reminiscent of an old children’s television programme in the UK called Play School, in the comfort of a spatially detached environment, the viewer is invited to look through the ‘square window’ to glimpse at how food is made and is presented with an ordered and regulated view. It was said, ‘I think it’s good to have the demonstration side of things which I think is good about the distillery and breweries where you can see, but also where you can get a tour of the local cheese factory as well’ (Mark). It has been suggested that:

... close-up there is a surrounding space that is touched, perhaps with both feet, a sense of smell, a space where people can be met. Far off, there may be a distance view, maybe through a window, spaces reached only in vision and sound. However, of course, the space grasped immediately around the body and the one reached only in vision are not separate. (Crouch, 2000: 65)

When sites provide food samples to accompany the view through a window, it seems to encapsulate this concept of near and distant spaces and blurred spatial dimensions; a space in which the consumer is not completely cut off from the entire sensory experience.
The ‘post-tourist’
This blurring of ‘new’ tourism with regulated modes of physical separation and regulated spaces seemed to suit some interviewees. Several preferred to construct their own interpretations and connections between the local cultural identity and food produce; imagining an idealized past without wishing to step into the authentic ‘backstage’ and clothe themselves in the modern-day appendages of plastic caps and shoe protectors as they walk around stainless steel vats adorned with warning labels, lists and hygiene regulations. This would hardly be the escape from the clutter and mass-packaged character of modern day living that tourists sought in their trip to the Scottish periphery. An illustration of this was offered by Paul, who used an example from Ireland:

But they discovered it was actually putting people off, the smell of the hops, the yeast, was actually putting people off Guinness. So they stopped the tour of the factory and they gave you a kind of packaged audio tour and they gave you the Guinness where you feel comfortable and warm. I’ve heard of loads of ideas to visit where people make fruit juices, thinking, yeah, but when they actually saw the production line, it put them off.

Several tourists displayed the characteristics of Urry’s (1990) ‘post tourist’, apparently revelling in the artificiality of the site, recognizing that they were being offered a seemingly constructed, rather than fully ‘authentic’ view, ‘it can be much more presentable than seeing and harsh smells you know’ (Moira) and:

For a tourism product, you have to have a kind of tourism set up, what we call the ‘yellow brick road’, you bring them through and they see what you want them to see, you know. That’s really the secret. You don’t bring them into a place where smell is … that smell will linger in someone’s nostrils for a while! (Paul)

Although the window view from the tourist-occupied ‘front stage’ into the productive ‘back stage’ may be falsely ‘dripping with sincerity’ (MacCannell, 1976), interviewees were clearly undertaking food-related activities in the hope of feeling something that could be personally interpreted as real and ‘authentic’ to them, regardless of what was really happening; a bodily engagement which characterizes Wang’s (1999) concept of existential authenticity that theorizes authenticity as occurring at a more personal level. Just after a visit to the cheese shop, a tourist exclaimed, ‘Romantic image isn’t it! We like to think that!’ (Sheena) and ‘can see it made and like to think it is pure and real’ (Donald); almost as if it did not really matter if it was, it was the belief. Although there was some awareness that ‘it does make you wonder to what extent the local people change their offer’ (John) there was also a desire to believe that something authentic within the ‘experience’ remained and the region’s identity was not being misleadingly projected. This situation highlights what Oakes and Minca (2004) allude to as tourists embodying the paradox of ‘post/modernity’ where individual postmodern experiences are celebrated and embraced, but simultaneously modernist aspects of regulation and structure form an intrinsic part of the experience.
Interestingly, several tourists recognized sites as a kind of ‘Alton towers with food’ (Will), with an acute awareness that their view of the backstage is regulated and performed as part of the overall postmodern experience. Thus, authenticity is not located in the toured static objects of cheese, beer, biscuits or smoked fish, but through an individualized and emotive engagement:

I mean you know with the chocolate place, and the cheese place that you can actually go down there and watch them with the wax wrapping them and everything, it adds, that’s the sort of thing that makes you think, well, I ought to go back. (Brenda)

I suppose in a way I like to think that there is more taste to it and more flavour when I see them make it in front of me with local ingredients, more, it’s not just going to be a run of the mill kind of food that you can just get anywhere, I think that’s what I’m after – something personal, where you can see some care has gone into it. (Jill)

Although viewing windows were presented as an opportunity to gaze into the back stage areas of food production, it was accepted that much of the experience was constructed to meet certain objectives and promote regional food myths, ‘it’s about a whole package, we are all performing here’ (Robin, visitor manager at the Arran Distillery). Perkins and Thorns’ (2001) discussion of the ‘gaze’ as a kind of ‘performance’ incorporates many aspects of this regulated bodily involvement, helping to theorize the actions each side of the window as a kind of interactive performance. Even when staff were genuinely working on food production, equipment was strategically placed to entertain the public, such as the wax vats framed by interpretation panels which make for interesting viewing as cheeses were dipped in coloured dyes. The sense of ‘performance’ was enhanced by placed notices in the window jokingly requesting that you ‘do not tap on the glass as it upsets the animals’ (James’ Chocolates, Isle of Arran); emphasizing the disconnection created by the glass (Figure 3). The ‘performance’ on the visitor’s side of the window harnesses the pre-conceived beliefs of tourists by combining the visual performance with the multisensory engagement of tasting small samples of smoked fish or cheese.

Conclusion

This article suggests that there is a place for food tourism within a critical tourism research agenda. The small-scale study of food tourism sites was undertaken with the intention of shifting this research area from its own peripheral location within the social sciences into an academic arena in which it is recognized as a powerful conceptual lens and tool of knowledge generation. Food is a polysemic artefact that is able to characterize place and identity; consequently it can be utilized to theorize the complex nature of postmodern production and consumption. It can be harnessed in the cultural examination of place; thereby shifting the focus from the economic-dominated theorizations that have previously characterized food-related tourism research.
In particular, I have employed food tourism as a lens with which to contribute knowledge to the growing body of work examining embodiment and the poly-sensual nature of ‘new’ forms of tourism. I have utilized the concept of the ‘tastescape’ of food tourism to fuel recent efforts that are broadening tourism discourses beyond the ocular-centrism of the tourist ‘gaze’ discourse. In making an empirical contribution to the analysis of one aspect of postmodern tourism activity this article has brought attention to the value in engaging with non-representable forms of this ‘new’ tourism. More sensuous tourism geographies are promoted as a way in which new knowledges may be obtained about the tourism experience. The research has found that places are only fully activated and apprehended through immersive bodily expression, for example personal memories were resurrected through direct olfactory encounters; tourists only felt they had experienced the place when they undertook multisensory activities such as eating fish by the sea; and a sense of temporal escape was only truly realized once the body was sensorally immersed.

However, what the research also revealed was a paradoxical situation where some food tourism experiences are being managed and diluted through a ‘sanitized gaze’ and manufactured tourist space. Rather than fully immersing oneself in a myriad of sensory experiences, viewing windows have created encapsulated
arenas devoid of olfactory sensation and emptied of social interaction. I have suggested that the viewing window is symbolic of the persistence of Fordist modes in tourism consumption, offering an interesting physical metaphor for the ‘post/modern’ blurring of new postmodern forms of embodied tourism experience within neo-Fordist structures. The findings offer a new dimension to examine and problematize the ‘new’ tourism landscape, responding to Jamal and Kim’s (2005: 60) plea that ‘new perspectives, new understandings and new definitions are needed to address the heightened cultural consumption and mobility of populations and tourists’. The viewing window may only be a sheet of glass, but in the context of this article, it provides a metaphorical and physical focus with which to understand the nature of these blurred postmodern tourism experiences, examining the ‘complexity of the spatial forms of contemporary consumption and the ways in which individuals mesh these forms together in their own consumptive activities’ (Gregson, 1995: 136).

The research found that these hybrid forms of consumption consisting of postmodern activity in tandem with more Fordist structures were being embraced by some tourists. In considering Urry’s concept of the ‘post-tourist’ the complex and sometimes paradoxical hybrid nature of multisensory and multidimensional postmodern touristic experiences has been highlighted. The research found that some post-tourists were seemingly content with the ‘inauthenticity’ and the performed nature of the experience. Although personal identification did arise from some embodied engagement with food, it was possible to engage in emotive and individualized experiences within a sanitized bubble, thereby placing a different emphasis on the tourist ‘gaze’. Clearly, there is much research still to do, but it is hoped that this has ‘whetted the appetites’ of those interested in examining critical tourism discourses with the ultimate embodied, internalized ‘post/modern’ tourism experience: food tourism.

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NOTE

1. LEADER (a French acronym for ‘Links between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy’) is the EU Community Initiative for Rural Development that provides approved Local Action Groups with public funding (EU and National) to implement multisectoral business plans for the development of their own areas. LEADER+ is the third and latest LEADER Programme (2000–2006) which was preceded by LEADER I and II. Its aim is to encourage the emergence and testing of new approaches to integrated and sustainable development in rural communities.
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