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The Foodie - Identity, Involvement and Social Worlds

Learning objectives

Readers are expected to learn the following from this chapter:

- What it means to be a foodie in terms of behaviour, personal and social identity
- The concept of ego-involvement and its usefulness in understanding foodies and food tourism.
- The meaning and importance of authenticity and novelty seeking for foodies.
- Social world theory, and how foodie behaviour and travel preferences can be influenced.
- Neophobia and neophilia as personality traits, and how they shape food tourism.
- Food as both a hygiene factor and travel motivator.

Who and what are foodies?

In Chapter 1 we provided a simple definition of a foodie as a ‘food lover’ and “one who incorporates food, its preparation and enjoyment into their lifestyle”. This chapter is an elaboration of the concept of foodie, drawing from multiple authors and our own research in Australia and other countries.

A good starting point is to hear the voices of foodies and food tourists (see Figure 3.1). Many people travel for food and love to share their experiences. Anonymous quotes from various blogs, websites, and our own research tell a story of love, desire, passion and fulfilment! Foodies know they are involved in something special pertaining to their leisure and lifestyle, that it involves their personal and social identity, and that food tourism exists and has significance for them. If there are key words to look for, they are ‘passion’, ‘lover’, and ‘experience’.

Little research has been conducted on the voices of foodies and food tourists. One example is by Natilli, Pavone and Romano (2012) who did a text analysis of an Italian wine and food blog to determine what topics were being discussed, the language used, and the importance of travelling among those engaging in their on-going discussions. This is passive netnography, similar to the work of Getz and Patterson (2013) on social worlds that included food lovers (which is discussed at the end of this chapter). The Italian researchers found the main themes to be 'food and wine tourism' (34.53% of words), 'gourmet vocabulary in the kitchen' (25.46%), 'recipes' (12.88%), 'critics' food and wine' (11.77%) and 'gastronomic culture' (10.72%). Although the discourse was influenced by the blogger, the analysis shows the prominence of tourism in foodie and wine-lover communities.

A selection of direct but anonymous quotes from websites and research reports

"I am a travelling food lover and I am so excited to be a part of this group. Food makes everything great from travelling to networking and especially during the holidays".

"I am passionate about cooking and travelling but most importantly eating"

"In my searches, I stumbled across an interesting term...Food Tourism (aka Culinary Tourism). Essentially it means experiencing a city's culture through memorable food experiences. I guess I've always known in my heart that I did this, but now I know it has a name. In fact, it even has its own Wikipedia page so it's pretty much a thing now."

"Local food is one of the things I am most interested in when I'm travelling. My journal from my round the world trip mentions what I ate every single day! It's funny how I can remember many of those meals so clearly."

"There are some excellent restaurants delivering the potential of the produce in Tasmania. Others are not so produce-driven. So don't travel around Tasmania expecting every restaurant to deliver beautifully cooked local produce - just like everywhere else in the world you have to know where to eat."

"I prefer going on a wine trail and tasting locally made wine, and my boyfriend is more interested in attending food festivals or shopping gourmet food but we both love cooking classes and dining out for a unique and memorable experience."

"I travel a lot with my wife and we have preferences and enjoy the same things. We always like to eat the local food. We have travelled to destinations for food purposes only. We were in Barcelona last year; just for a city break, and Barcelona is the only city that we would actually go back to for food purposes, and we have been in many destinations in Europe for food. You have Gaudi and other cultural attractions to add on to the food experiences."

Figure 3.1: The voices of foodies and food tourists

Let us now look at some definitions and investigations of what it is to be a foodie.

Watson et al. (2008) said: "The term foodie was coined by Harpers and Queen magazine... but came to prominence in the humorous paperback *The Official Foodie Handbook* by Barr and Levy (1984) who defined foodies this way (p.6):

A Foodie is a person who is very very very interested in food. Foodies are the ones talking about food in any gathering – salivating over restaurants, recipes, radicchio. They don't think they are being trivial – Foodies consider food to be an art, on a level with painting or drama.

According to Watson et al. (2008: 290):

Barr and Levy's (1984) definition pointed out the then presumed differences between a gourmet and a foodie: a gourmet was seen typically as an older, upper-class gentleman; foodies were described as 'children of the consumer boom' (p. 7), usually younger couples 'from the ambitious classes' (p. 6), who pronounced judgement on food they had eaten in a restaurant, and attempted to replicate at home. Foodies 'collect' food experiences and visits to celebrated restaurants, much as tourists collect souvenirs.

Johnston and Baumann (2007; 2009) make an important distinction between two discourses on 'foodies', one reflecting democracy and the other connected to distinction and money. There are advocates who believe foodies are democratic, enjoying all kinds of food, and not snobbish. This is associated with the movement toward healthy eating, favouring local produce, fair trade programmes, and a preference for ecological or organic foods. In other words, being a foodie is part of a major trend that everyone can participate in.

On the other hand, some critics think it is a snobbish, elitist trend - that foodies are privileged, spoiled, up-market gourmets who engage in conspicuous consumption. This resonates with earlier definitions of gastronomy, that were highlighted in Chapter 2. These foodies might be accumulating cultural capital through food consumption, or in other words they are trying to fit into a lifestyle or social group that requires a lot of knowledge and talk about great food experiences that only the educated and rich can afford.

Both of these discourses have some merit, and you can probably find foodies who seem to fit into one or the other categories. But behaviour, whether it be conspicuous consumption at a five-star restaurant or weekly trips to the farmers' market, does not define the foodie. Being a foodie is a matter of personal identity, or how one feels about oneself. This self-identification theme is important, and it leads to our employment of ego-involvement theory to help segment and understand foodies and food tourism. The next discussion highlights this critical point.

Foodies as omnivores

An omnivore is a creature who eats just about anything, but in the discourses on culture, food and social status, and on elitism versus democratization, it means something else. The basic argument is in contrast to Bourdieu's (1979) contention that social status, and habitus (that is the place in which one is acculturated), determines taste and utilizes judgements of good taste in exercising power. The elite might eat better, or more, or different from the rest of us, but is their understanding of what is good food or good taste necessarily relevant to the rest of us? The 'omnivore' thesis claims that you can no longer be identified by what you do, whether it is the music you listen to or what you eat. According to the critic Shamus Khan (2010, pp 731–32), in reviewing the Johnston and Baumann (2009) book,

Whereas Pierre Bourdieu's distinction was an exclusionary one, wherein different classes had distinct tastes, today's distinction is more democratic, wherein different groups have overlapping tastes, yet wherein the particular conglomeration and articulation of tastes can reveal distinctions nonetheless. These overlaps can create the appearance of democracy while the particular conglomeration of the elite omnivore helps maintain a reality of inequality.

To extend this reasoning, consider the recent phenomenon of selling 'gourmet' hamburgers and hot dogs - what does it mean? And why have certain food styles, like TexMex caught on around the world? Will foodies eat anything? Does consumption of a hot dog, however gourmet, indicate that foodies are being democratic (because, presumably, this is a food associated with the 'working class' or 'rednecks') or that they are seeking distinction (a kind of snobbery) because the lowly hot dog has now been elevated to gourmet status? In short, observing behaviours alone can be deceptive and does not give a full account of what it constitutes to be a foodie.

Identity and involvement

Foodies cannot be solely identified by looking at them, nor by studying their behaviour - although important clues will be presented. Foodies identify themselves, and anyone can claim to be one. We need to examine that proposition in detail, through theory and research findings, and see exactly how it leads to food tourism.

Even if a person feels they are a foodie, just how involved are they? Are they beginners, just looking for other foodies to connect with? Or are they highly-involved sophisticates with plenty of experience under their belts? Most people who are involved with any leisure or lifestyle pursuit can easily determine