Italian culinary tourism on the Internet

Magda Antonioli Corigliano, Rodolfo Baggio

Master in Tourism and Economics – Bocconi University, Milan, Italy

Abstract

The relationship between gastronomy, typical products and tourism is a strong one. Promoting food and wines of a specific destination is one of the possible ways to set up a differentiation that can be recognized and appreciated by tourists. Recently Internet has established itself as a widespread and commonly used communication medium, with special interest for tourism related matters.

The present conditions of the Italian websites promoting and commercializing food specialties and wines are assessed. The results in terms of end-users evaluations and contents and services offered to the visitors are discussed, with a special consideration for the interaction with the core tourism business.

Introduction

Food has always been a powerful motivation for almost all human activities and sitting at a richly decked table is a gratification common to people of any social condition. Probably the best way to describe this, is the one used by Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin at the beginning of 19th century in his *The Physiology of Taste*:

> "The pleasure of the table belongs to all ages, to all conditions, to all countries, and to all areas; it mingles with all other pleasures, and remains at last to console us for their departure. […] At a later day when the human species was more widely extended, the weary traveller used to sit at such boards and tell what he had seen in foreign lands. Thus hospitality was produced, and its rights were recognized everywhere. There was never any one so ferocious as not to respect him who had partaken of his bread and salt."

The understanding of the importance of food as a significant component in tourism is nowadays well accepted. The tourist pursue of striking experiences is a basic driving force,

and the attempt of developing features that can be recognized as distinguishing characteristics that could make it more appealing for visitors is a common effort of every tourism destination.

This effort is very worthwhile; as Haukeland and Jacobsen (2001:1) notice:

> "Typical food and beverages are often the first associations that come to peoples' minds when they think about tourism destinations. The appearance, smell and flavour of raw materials and local cooking are appealing to a variety of human senses, and their varying manifestations in different geographical areas contribute to a perception of local distinctiveness. Food products regularly include key elements of the local heritage where great amounts of traditional knowledge and specialized skills, often acquired through generations, are embedded."

Most parts of the world are densely populated and characterised by the anonymity of intake of standardised food without peculiar identity; on the contrary, the local gastronomy with its traditions may be perceived as an integral part of the local identity (Bessière, 1998).

In a time of globalization and internationalisation, when goods and products move with extreme ease across the countries and the traditional borders between states tend to lose their significance, other boundaries become more important. The real divisions that preserve their importance are the cultural ones and the regional patterns are particularly relevant for food products.

As Harris (1985) has clearly shown, major differences in world cuisines can be traced to ecological restraints and opportunities that differ from one region to another.

The tourists of the third millennium travelling to a destination are more educated and better informed than their predecessors and are more willing to have a direct experience of the cultural and natural differences. When anything visible can be seen on television or explored in front of a computer connected to the Internet, eating the food of another culture could, as extreme case, be the only experience motivating the physical move to a different location (Game, 1991).

The cultural connection of the gastronomy is not new: the famous chef Antonin Câreme, almost 200 years ago, was writing:

> "Dining has much in common with painting and music. The painter, by richness of colours produces works that seduce the eye and the imagination; the musician, by the combination of his notes, produces harmony and the sense of hearing receives the sweetest sensations that melody can produce. Our culinary combinations are of the same nature. The gourmet's palate and sense of smell receive sensations similar to those of the connoisseurs of painting and music."

The increasing attractiveness of gastronomy and typical food in tourism is due, to a good extent, to the increasing interests in food quality, in ecological concerns, in health aspects and to a more sophisticated knowledge of food and beverages and the greater easiness with which information about these subjects may be collected.

Tourists enjoy native food, particularly the products of local or ethnic nature (McIntosh and Goelder, 1990). The knowledge of the local, regional and national cuisine is of great interest for every tourist and is an important part of the tourist experience; palate satisfaction is at the first places among the pleasures of a travelling experience.

The impression (good or bad) that the traveller retains strongly influences the value and memory of the trip, not only from the restaurants visited, but also from everything experienced during the trip. The aftertaste of a vacation period is strongly individual, affected mostly by immaterial factors where the boundary between the *self* and the enjoyment of the vacation is almost invisible. It is very difficult to find the right level to reach the tourist demand and, more, to satisfy it.

This relationship is dynamical: the kind of food defines the culture and at the same time the culture defines the food. And because culture evolves, so do the list of food defining a cultural existence; the recovery of sound culinary traditions is therefore of paramount importance in preserving cultural identities that can make the difference and produce a competitive advantage for a destination.

Gastronomy as tourists' motivation

The importance of gastronomy for the tourism industry is testified by a number of surveys, although dedicated research in this field is not very thoroughly developed.

According to a National Restaurant Association research, more than two-thirds of restaurant operators reported that tourists are important to their business (NRA, 2002).

More than 67 million travellers (48%) said that they dine out when travelling, and that dining out was the most popular activity planned after tourists arrive at a destination (Travel Industry Association of America, 1998).

Italy, obviously, shares the same considerations.

In 1997 the average evaluation of foreign tourists after a trip to Italy put food quality at the third place (with a score of 8.6 on a 0-10 scale) just after the artistic and cultural aspects and the environment and landscape (Biagioli, 1998).

More recently these data have been confirmed to a large extent. Foreigners think that the quality of restoration comes second in the ranking of Italian tourism offering and motivation for a travel (FIPE, 2001; MTV, 2002). 70,000 visitors' global evaluation put Italian cuisine at the third place after landscape and cultural attractions, but considers it at the first place (together with art and monuments) from a "satisfaction" point of view.

Food and wine, culture and fashion are the most appreciated characteristics by the international press when describing Italy. Even Italian tourists agree with these evaluations.

A survey conducted by the Italian first market research company SWG shows the priorities that influence Italian choices of destinations: natural attractions (44%), cultural attractions (29%), cuisine (14%) and recreations (12%) (Weber, 2001).

After the vacation, Italians think that the main satisfactions came from: ease of travel (77,6%), natural attractions (75,5%), good food (71,7%), quietness (68,4%) and typical products (67%) (Unioncamere, 2001).

A sample of international tourist operators surveyed by Confartigianato (the Italian Crafts Association) claims that 82% of tourists buy or intend to buy local craft products with a strong preference (68%) for foodstuffs (Confartigianato, 2002). Genuineness, typicality, souvenir of the vacation, impossibility to find them elsewhere are the main motivations for the purchase of gastronomy products.

Several associations have been created in Italy in the last years to satisfy these strong and important desires. They involve hundreds of public and private organizations, all devoted to build a network putting the "gastronomy system" at the centre of the tourist reception, aiming at enhancing the value of the destination.

Important fact, because (Antonioli Corigliano, 1999):

> "… the culinary tourism affirms the peculiarity of a tourist offering that entrusts to the senses the presentation of a territory. Being a taste traveller stimulates the sincere meeting with the territory, its inhabitants; enriches the trip with feelings and pleasures concrete and satisfactory."

The results of the above mentioned surveys, mainly those referred to the satisfaction of individual tourists, acquire a deeper importance for the well-known importance of other tourists' experiences and suggestions in the tourist decision to visit a holiday's destination. In

fact, 30,3% of the Italian travellers are influenced by "word of mouth" while planning a vacation, while only 22,3% declares to be influenced by communication media (Unioncamere, 2001).

Gastronomy, tourism and Internet

The rise of Internet as a new sale and promotional channel is of great impact on tourist services.

An effective Internet strategy is considered nowadays a key element to achieve a competitive advantage on the market. The full integration of the Internet distribution and communication channel with traditional ones allows to better satisfy customers' information demand and plays an important role in attracting new clients.

Recent demographic data show that the top 15 tourism-spending countries (WTO, 2001) also exhibit (with the exception of Chine) the highest percentages of Internet users among the population (Table 1).

Rank	Country	Internet users (% of popul.)
1	United States	59.10
2	Germany	38.91
3	United Kingdom	57.24
4	Japan	44.10
5	France	28.39
6	Italy	33.37
7	China	3.58
8	Netherlands	60.83
9	Canada	52.79
10	Belgium/Luxembourg	36.62
11	Austria	45.20
12	Republic of Korea	53.80
13	Sweden	67.81
14	Switzerland	52.70
15	Taiwan	51.85

Table 1 Top tourism spending countries and Internet users data

Furthermore, it is well known that the tourist sites are at the first places in the interests of world's cybernauts; just to give an example about 47% of European Internet users browse the Web while planning a trip and almost 23% of them actually buy tourist products online (ETC, 2002).

In any case, the introduction of e-commerce in tourism is guided by the demand and any possible development in this field depends on the consumers' attitude. On one hand they require travel packages, including transportation, overnight stay and other services (this would imply the integration of all actors of the supply chain). On the other hand the so-called "do-it-yourself" customers are looking for the highest personalization and/or the most convenient price. This last tendency, in particular, may promote the creation of specialised portals, which allow price comparisons and, at the same time, the offer of extra services.

Food and beverages online market is still one of the lowest, but it is increasing at a high speed. In 2002, 7% of online shoppers have ordered or bought food related products or services online (TNS, 2002) and, according to the estimates by Forrester Research, the market is expected to triple by 2006.

Italian culinary tourism on the Internet

Renown for its culinary traditions, Italy seems to support this image also on the web space, at least numerically. A survey of the major Italian search engines[1] show hat about 3% of the websites listed has food, gastronomy or typical products as major topic.

This percentage, compared with the 8%-10% figure stating the consistency of the general tourism category on the Italian web (Antonioli and Baggio, 2002b) gives a clear idea of the importance of this sector.

An analysis of these websites has been carried out to assess the end users acceptance and to map the typical services and contents offered online.

The ideas and the studies from a number of practitioners and researchers may be summarized in a list of elements that are essential to the development of a successful web site. These elements can then be further grouped into six general categories:

1. *first impact*: the general feeling during a first scan, before an accurate visit of the site;

2. *design and graphics*: the quality of graphical elements (pictures, symbols, photographs, etc.) and the balance between texts and images;

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[1] Sites surveyed are: www.virgilio.it, arianna.libero.it, www.google.it, www.yahoo.it; the survey was performed at the end of 2002.

3. *information contents*: the thoroughness and usefulness of information, the clarity of language;

4. *interactivity and services*: the number and the quality of the interactive services and the tested user-friendliness of the functions;

5. *structure and navigation*: the rationality of website structure and navigation aids;

6. *technical management*: the updating of the contents, the response times and the absence of errors or missing links.

A sample of 50 websites, representative of the Italian gastronomy sector (specialty food, wine, etc.) has been evaluated by a group of evaluators[2] with different backgrounds of Web navigation experience. The group consists of ten persons, this grants sufficient reliability (Nielsen and Landauer, 1993). The evaluation is qualitative, visitors express their appreciation of various website features scoring from 0 (minimum) to 3 (maximum) (Baggio and Covini, 2001).

The sample was then checked against a list containing the most important types of information and services generally offered on a website. The items used in the survey in four areas:

-   *informational contents* (INFO): information and documentation contents;

-   *interactive services* (SERV): general interactive functions and services;

-   *customer relationship* (CUST.REL): contents which make relationships with clients and visitors easier and stronger;

-   *e-commerce* (ECOMM): commercial and e-business functions.

The results of the investigation are presented in the following figures.

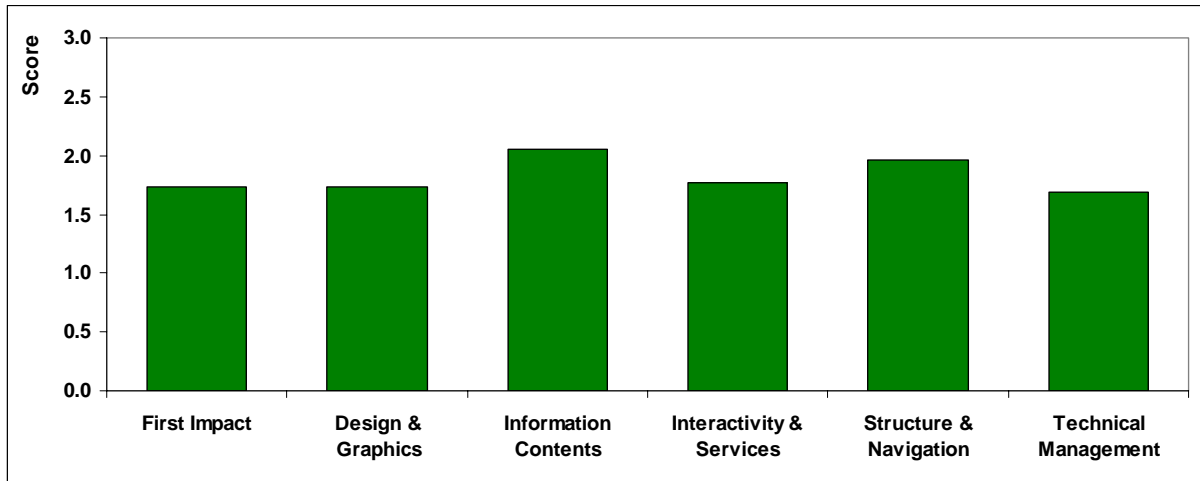Figure 1 shows the average scores assigned to the features groups by the users.

Figure 1 User evaluation of Italian gastronomy websites

The general average is 1.82; this value is consistent, although a little lower, with the general average mark of 1.97[3] obtained by the Italian tourism websites in a similar investigation (Antonioli and Baggio, 2002b) and it is a hardly sufficient evaluation.

The distribution of overall average scores obtained (Figure 2) shows that while the vast majority (66%) of the websites evaluated have just a *sufficient* level of acceptance by visitors (score 1.5 to 2.0), a consistent number (34%) obtain a *very good* evaluation. These are the sites that probably exhibit the highest number of visitors.
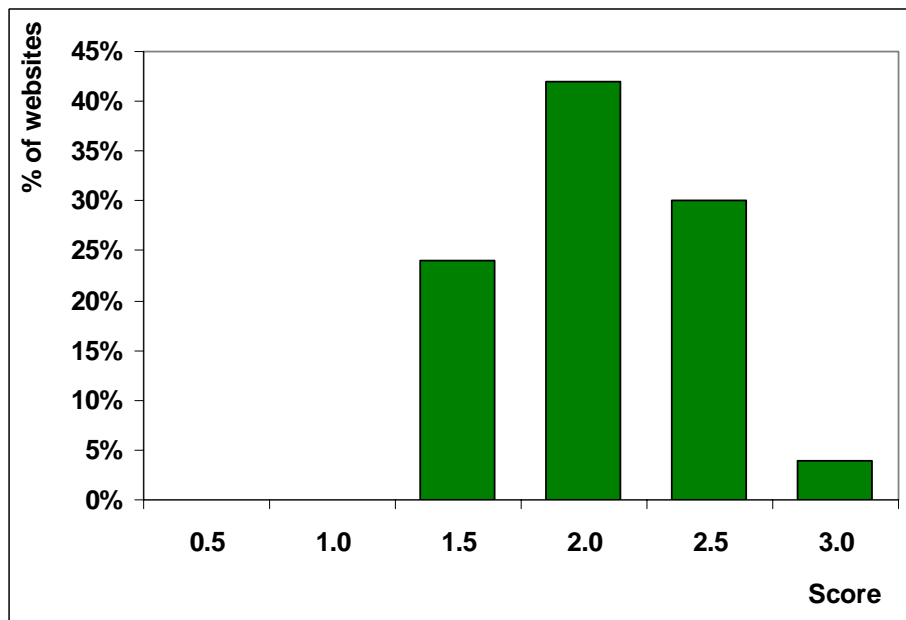

Figure 2 Distribution of average evaluation scores

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[3] The original value of 6.58 has been rescaled for consistency with the 0-3 scale used in this work.

The general map of the contents and services is depicted in Figure 3, which reports the percentage of sites offering online the contents belonging to the four classes described above.
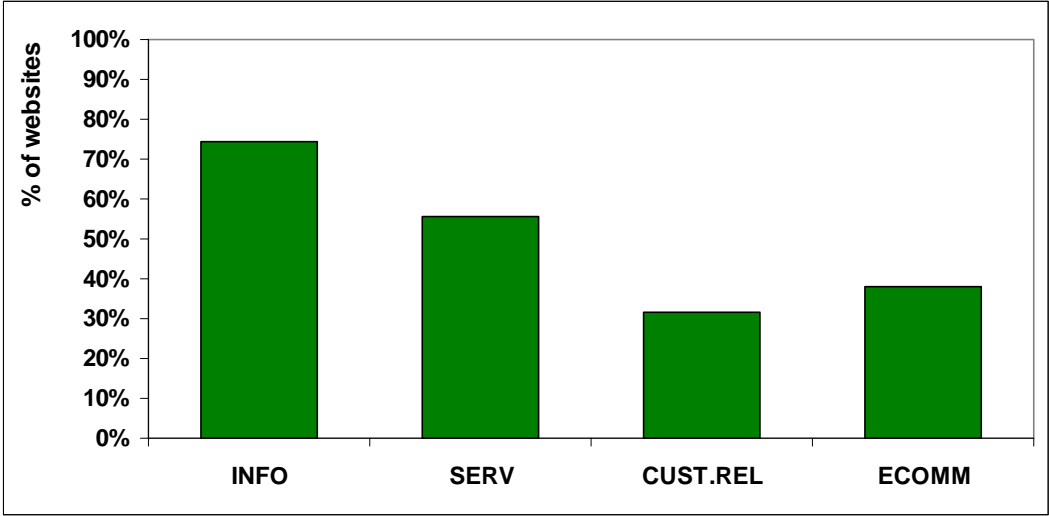

Figure 3 Contents and services of Italian gastronomy websites

There is a general good presence of informational contents and services, but a low occurrence of e-commerce functionalities and even lower customer relationships services. This is a general tendency in Italian tourism websites (see Figure 4 for a comparison), although the gastronomy sites show generally a higher level of contents, mainly in the commercial sector, since many of them are actually a sort of online specialties store.
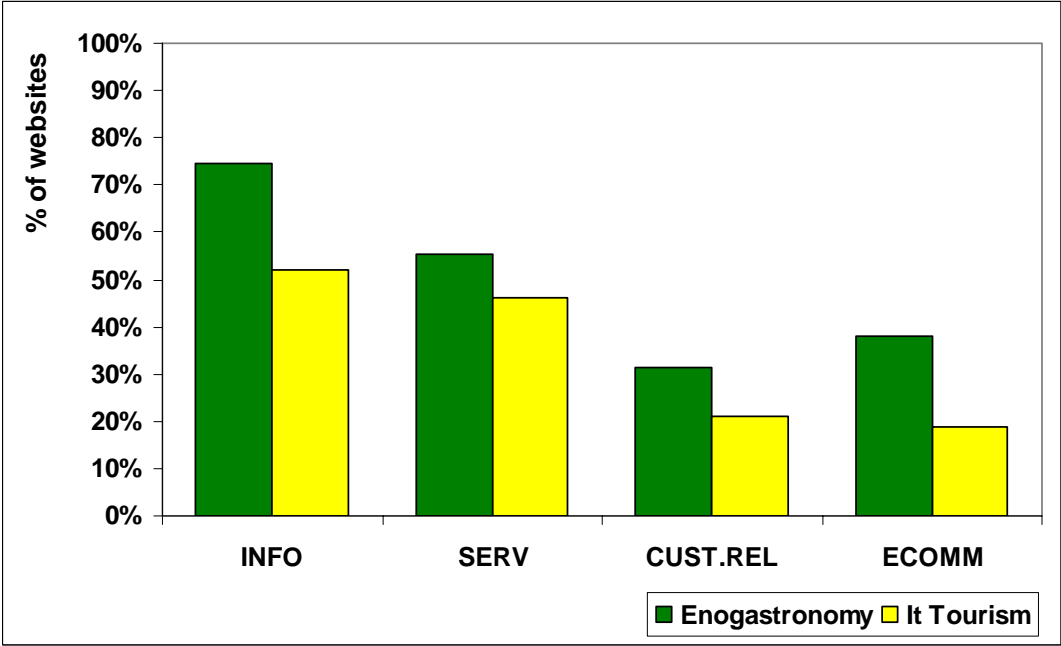

Figure 4 Contents and services of gastronomy and tourism websites

The close relationship between gastronomy and tourism described in the preceding paragraphs is exploited only partially across the Italian Web space.

On average, only 58.3% of Italian Tourism websites have informational contents related to culinary matters (typical food, wines, recipes, etc.), and hardly any direct possibilities to buy such products. For example only 10% of the websites belonging to agritourism organizations have this function (Antonioli and Baggio 2002b).

While 56% of gastronomy related websites have tourist information on the area in which they are located, only 38% of these have received a good or excellent score (2 to 3 in our scale) by the users.

Conclusions

The everlasting close relationship between food and tourism has been recently "formalized" in the new concept of "culinary tourism". Gastronomy is a fundamental component of a society's way of life, and it represents not only a direct expression of the natural assets of a territory, but it is an authentic expression of the culture of its people. For this reason gastronomy is a powerful attraction for visitors from countries with different customs, lifestyle and traditions.

One more close relationship has been established in recent times: the one between tourism (and tourism related fields) and the new information and communications technologies. The Internet has proved to be a fertile ground for all the tourism organizations providing them with powerful tools to promote their products and to better inform the tourist about places, features, events, resources.

These relationships hold true for a country like Italy, one of the major world tourism destinations, celebrated for its cuisine and at the first places in Europe and in the World as for information technology diffusion and usage.

The survey conducted on the Italian Internet confirms the existence of these relationships: about 3% of the Italian websites deal with food related matters. This number, compared with the 10% penetration of general tourism websites gives a clear idea of the importance of this sector.

The general end-users evaluation of these websites is just sufficient. The average score obtained of 1.82 (on a 0 to 3 scale) cannot be interpreted as an enthusiastic acceptance, even if a consistent percentage (34%) of the sample show very good results scoring more than 2.5.

The average map of contents and services offered online is a partial explanation of these evaluations. The presence of informational contents is rather good, but interactive services, commercial features and customer relationship functionalities are definitely not at an adequate level for sites on these topics. Even if the levels shown are better that the ones of the general Italian tourism websites, an improvement is needed in order to increase the satisfaction by the Internet surfers.

Culinary tourism does not seem to be a widely diffused concept online. Good proportions of tourism websites (58.3%) show information about culinary products and websites of gastronomy (56%) show tourist information, but these percentages, however, may be considered just above the *quorum*.

They do not represent fully the close relationship that is established in a country like Italy. This fact looks rather surprising, since this kind of contents could be easily implemented and can be of great satisfaction for the users, always seeking for high quality proposals by the visited website. This can greatly improve the website evaluation and, as a consequence, the image of the proposing organization among the visitors.

In a framework of generally poor quantity and quality of online offering, the Italian tourism sector could greatly benefit by gastronomical contents, and, conversely, gastronomy websites could be much better appreciated, and attain better results, by increasing their tourist informational contents.

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