

Local is *lekker*! The Search for an Appropriate Food Identity for the Free State Province, South Africa

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Abstract

The objective of this paper was to establish a food identity for one of South Africa's least visited provinces, the Free State Province. Twenty-nine qualitative responses were obtained via structured interviews from tourism government and tourism association employees, local restaurateurs, local food and drink producers, local residents and a local historian. Key findings indicate that the Free State's food identity can be described as hearty, comfort food cooked from ingredients typically found in the Free State, using recipes and preparation techniques passed on from generation to generation in Basotho and Afrikaner families. Meat and beer emerged as fundamental local items to be focussed on and promoted. Implications of the study include local tourism stakeholders gaining knowledge of which food items to promote as Free State food. The study shows that food tourism can assist in growing the tourism sector in the Free State, the development of a food tourism route and lead to the creation of a new tourism brand focussing on typical Free State food. Key literature contributions of this study include closing a literature gap by further studying food tourism in South Africa and establishing a determination process of authentic food identities for any destination.

Keywords: Food tourism, South Africa, food identity, local food.

Introduction

Food and beverages are an essential part of the total tourist experience (Ferreira & Perks, 2020; Richards, 2015; Torres, 2002) and it is estimated that tourists' expenditure on these items is growing daily (Sánchez-Cañizares & López-Guzmán, 2012). Food tourism is expected to increase as more providers and tourists are becoming aware of it and its benefits for destinations (Long, 2014). Food tourism has been defined as tourism trips during which a significant motivation is the consumption of local food (Ahlawat, Sharma & Gautam, 2019; Ignatov & Smith, 2006; Jiménez Beltrán, López-Guzmán & Santa-Cruz, 2016).



Previous literature has demonstrated the value of authentic local food in a destination's food identity for the sustainable tourism industry and for host communities in destinations (Coughlan & Saayman, 2018; Kim & Iwashita, 2016; Lin, Pearson & Cai, 2011; Sims, 2009; Su, 2015). Whilst South Africa was marketed primarily for its natural attractions in the past, adventure and cultural activities are recently equally used to attract a wider range of tourists (National Department of Tourism, 2017; South African Tourism, 2019d). Food is a pivotal supportive tourism attraction in South Africa, but in the past, limited tour operators and destinations promoted local food, its cultural heritage and food tourism (Du Rand & Heath, 2006; South African Tourism, 2019d). With this being said, food tourism is slowly on the rise in South Africa as a niche tourism market. This growth can be ascribed to the expansion in authentic experiences for tourists who are part of this niche market and who are seeking more significant cultural involvements through food (Correia, 2019). Local food tourism tour operators are latching onto food tourism and presenting it as alternative tour packages to prospective tourists (Du Rand & Heath, 2006; Du Rand, Heath & Alberts, 2003; South African Tourism, 2019c; Wine & Food Tours, 2020). In South Africa, food tourism has gained momentum mainly in the Western Cape Winelands and the town of Franschhoek (South African Tourism, 2019c). South African Tourism, the official Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) of South Africa, hails and markets Franschhoek as the culinary capital of the country.

Cape Malay food is iconic in the Western Cape Province and Indian curries in the KwaZulu-Natal Province (Singh & Bhoola, 2016). Du Rand and Heath (2006) state that research is needed to determine the culinary heritage of each area in South Africa in terms of its local food. This leaves another seven of South Africa's nine provinces with the task of developing food identities. The World Food Travel Association (WFTA) (2019a) encourages governments and food and drink business owners to work together and align plans to ensure that local and authentic experiences are offered sustainably to maintain local heritage and educate locals. Local food can be considered as food based on domestic produce (Torres, 2002), or as food and beverages that are produced in the area being visited, and are promoted as such (Smith & Xiao, 2008). According to Martinez et al. (2010) and Sims (2009), there is little consensus on a definition of local food in terms of the distance between the production and consumption of the items. What happens if no one knows what the local food of a destination is? Literature is lacking on methods for determining local food in destinations (Yurtseven & Kaya, 2011). A destination cannot reap the benefits of promoting local food if its local food is not identifiable. It is thus imperative that local food be identified and made part of tourism marketing programmes to aid tourism development and growth (Ellis, Park, Kim & Yeoman, 2018; Fox, 2007). The role of DMO's, like South African Tourism, is important in assisting the marketing of food tourism. Through the company Jurni (2020), local tourism stakeholders have access to a marketing platform on South African Tourism's website and thus have direct access to prospective tourists interested in food tourism.

For the purposes of this paper, the Free State Province, South Africa, was selected, because it has no widely known and marketed local food and is the least visited province in terms of visitor arrivals (Statistics South Africa, 2017). This paper ascertains multiple stakeholders' perspectives (tourism government and tourism association employees, local restaurateurs, local food and drink producers, local residents and a local historian) on establishing an authentic local food identity for the Free State Province. The goal is to empower local small food businesses, draw more tourists to the province and ultimately create more jobs in the tourism sector in the Free State. These jobs could include permanent jobs in guest houses, bed-and-breakfasts, restaurants, breweries, distilleries, farms offering local food experiences to visitors etc. Besides the economic impact of food tourism, it can create cross-cultural



connections, preserve traditions and heritage and contribute to the sustainability of destinations (World Food Travel Association, 2019a).

Literature review

Local food in tourism

The WFTA has summarised the evolution of the term used to describe food tourism as “the act of travelling for a taste of place in order to get a sense of place” (World Food Travel Association, 2018). They have moved from using the term ‘culinary tourism’ (also known as gastronomic tourism, gastro tourism, gourmet tourism, tasting tourism or cuisine tourism) to the term *food tourism*, as the perception among English speakers was that culinary tourism sounds too elitist (Williams, Williams & Omar, 2014; World Food Travel Association, 2018). The WFTA states that travel within regions, cities and neighbourhoods to experience a range of food and drink experiences can be classified as food tourism (World Food Travel Association, 2018). Food and beverages are the only products that 100% of visitors to a destination will consume. Visitors will either return home with forgettable memories of chain coffee and multinational sandwiches or with colourful food memories which they have photographed or videoed and shared on social media (World Food Travel Association, 2019b). This aligns with the trendy Slow Food movement of avoiding fast foods and rather embracing local and traditional foods (Lowry & Lee, 2016; Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity, 2018). These local and traditional foods enhance and sustain various levels of identity, including self-identity for communities and tourists and destination brand identity (Kim & Iwashita, 2016; Lin et al., 2011) and are indispensable assets to any tourist destination (Ellis et al., 2018; Fox, 2007).

Some countries, including Taiwan, Thailand, France and Italy have illustrated the potential of food tourism. These countries have purposefully promoted their local food. This resulted in local food becoming a point of differentiation from other countries, complementing other tourist attractions and becoming a distinct market segment in its own right (Abraham & Kannan, 2015). Destinations that lack natural or historical resources or that cannot benefit from sun, sea and sand can use food to entice tourists and this strategy has been used in destinations such as Croatia, Cambodia and Vietnam to revitalise tourism (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). Tourists may want to eat local food but cannot do so if they cannot identify local dishes or are not afforded opportunities to try them (Coughlan & Saayman, 2018; Feldmann & Hamm, 2015; Torres, 2002).

The situation becomes even more complex if one considers the varying interpretations of the term ‘local food’ (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015; Yurtseven & Kaya, 2011). Sims (2009) agrees that interpretations of both the words ‘local’ and ‘authentic’ vary greatly. It is therefore important for destination stakeholders to determine their definition of authenticity in food to recognise the culinary culture worth promoting (Ellis et al., 2018; World Food Travel Association, 2019). In the Lake District and Exmoor (England), tourists associate the term ‘local food’ with particular speciality products, whereas food producers and restaurant owners favour a definition where local refers to products from within a defined geographical area. The importance of local ingredients and local manufacture is also debated (Sims, 2009). Du Rand et al. (2016) advocate the use of recipe books to collect information on culinary heritage of destinations and Yurtseven and Kaya (2011) turned to local people born and raised in an area to determine and list the local food traditionally cooked in the area. Feldmann and Hamm (2015) conducted a literature review of 73 local food articles and found the most frequently used definition of local food to refer to distance. Other definitions based on emotions and ethics (for example food that is homegrown), brand names associated with an area (for example, Parma ham) and political boundaries (for example, provincial borders) are also used. Fox

(2007) states that the success of a food identity will depend on the attractiveness, uniqueness and quality of local food and thereafter a destination's food identity should be institutionalised, legitimised and promotionalised. Lin et al. (2011) compare tourism brochures and destination websites to the perspectives of destination stakeholders in Taiwan and find an inconsistent and confused food identity. This is likely the case in many destinations.

Based on the literature, the authors postulate a theoretical framework (Figure 1) for the determination of an authentic local food identity. Although media may influence the perception of what is considered local, in order to determine an accurate local food identity for a destination lacking one, the authors' proposed focus is on three main elements, namely **local history, culture and food heritage** (this can be determined through history books, recipe books or interviews with historians), **food and drink presently produced in the area** (see Feldmann and Hamm, 2015, for different options to define the area) and **multiple local stakeholders' perspectives** (for example, tourism government and tourism association employees, food and drink business owners, and local residents). This framework takes into account that the local food identity of destinations is likely to be in a state of continuous transformation due to factors such as global warming, migration and trends in food and drink production and consumption (Kim & Iwashita, 2016).

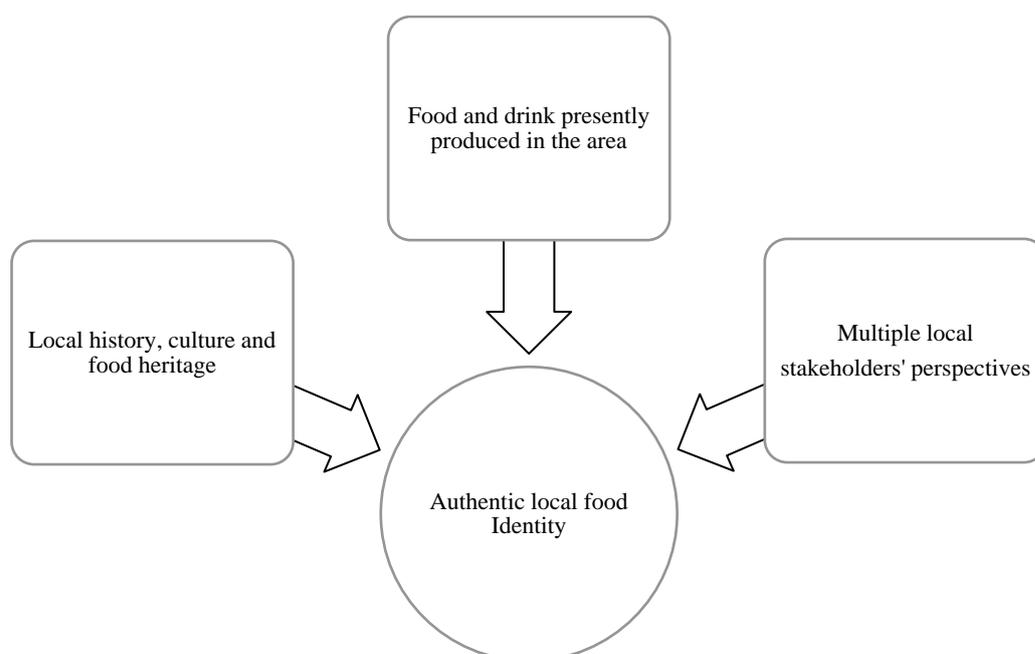


Figure 1: Theoretical framework for determining an authentic local food identity (Source: Author's own)

Only once a local food identity has been thoroughly defined and agreed upon by destination stakeholders, can it be promoted (Lin et al., 2011). Word of mouth or 'gastrospeak' has been stated as the best way to promote food and hearing compelling food stories (verbal or written) may convince visitors to eat local and share the word with friends and family (Ellis et al., 2018; Fox, 2007; Kim & Iwashita, 2016; World Food Travel Association, 2019b). Food tourism requires further analysis in South Africa (Martin et al., 2019) and it is imperative to identify the local food produced in each province in South Africa, as most remain unknown and undefined (Du Rand et al., 2003). The following section of the paper serves to provide an overview of the study area, namely the political boundaries of the Free State Province, South Africa.

Free State Province, South Africa

Archbishop Desmond Tutu coined the term ‘Rainbow Nation’ to describe South Africa as a multicultural nation (George, 2018). With its 11 official languages, it remains a culturally very diverse country (Government of South Africa, 2019). The South African tourism industry gained momentum after the country became a democratic republic in 1994. The implementation of the White Paper on the Development and Promotion of Tourism in South Africa (Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, 1996) was the impetus for tourism to take its rightful place in the economic sector of the country. The tourism industry has grown exponentially since then, outperforming many sectors of the economy and stimulating business development. Post-apartheid South Africa peaked tourists’ interest and a favourable currency exchange rate makes the country appealing for tourists. Furthermore, icons such as Nelson Mandela, Cape Town and Table Mountain are well known worldwide.

However, risks such as COVID 19 (coronavirus) can play a major role in negating the positive strides made in the growth of tourism arrivals to South Africa. With countries implementing travel bans, tourism is negatively affected the world over. The minister of tourism in South Africa, Minister Mmamoloko Kubayi-Ngubane, stated that “The outbreak of the coronavirus in December 2019 has already affected the tourism industry very negatively and this will continue until the world finds a way of containing this virus.” She added that it is estimated that the virus could cause losses of between \$63-billion and \$113-billion in worldwide airline revenues in 2020 (Retief, 2020). Many hospitality businesses such as restaurants and bars are temporarily closing, and food related markets and events cancelled to limit transmission during the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, South Africa received 10 million international tourists per annum (National Department of Tourism, 2017; Statistics South Africa, 2019).

South Africa consists of nine provinces. Each province has unique cultural, natural and heritage assets that attract tourists to that particular province (South African Tourism, 2019a). The Free State Province is situated in the middle of South Africa and are surrounded by the Eastern and Northern Cape, North-West, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng Provinces, whilst most of the eastern border is shared with Lesotho as can be seen in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Map of South African provinces (World of Maps, 2020)



The Free State is the least visited province in the country with respect to day trips and the second-least visited in terms of overnight trips, with the primary reason for visiting the Free State being to visit friends and family (Statistics South Africa, 2017; 2019). Although the tourist arrival figures of the Free State are low in comparison to other provinces, they do not portray the real picture. The lack of marketing and tourism development has played a role in the low growth rate of tourism arrivals in the province (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2017; Visser & Hoogendoorn, 2012). There are three main tourist destination areas in the Free State. In order of most tourists received, the Eastern Free State with Clarens and Golden Gate is the main drawing card. Second is the northern part of the province with the eclectic town of Parys at the centre of the Vredefort Dome, a World Heritage Site. The dome was formed when a meteorite the size of Table Mountain hit the earth 2 023 million years ago. The Vredefort Dome is the central area of the impact crater. It is referred to as a dome due to the impact causing the rock layers to be bent into the shape of an upside-down bowl 90 km across (Vredefort Dome.org, 2019). The third-most visited region is the area around the Gariep Dam – the largest dam in South Africa. Waterborne activities attract tourists, whilst it is also a popular and convenient stop for en route tourists between Gauteng and the Western and Eastern Cape. The capital of the province, Bloemfontein, is a business and conference tourist destination due to its central location and ease of access (South African Tourism, 2019c; Visser & Kotze, 2004). Du Rand (2006) researched the food attractions per region in South Africa. For the Free State Province, the south was found to have an excellent presence of food attractions, while the remainder of the province had a good presence of food attractions. Although this information is somewhat dated, it still indicates the potential of the province to be a food tourism destination.

The Free State's cultural identity and heritage are centred around traditional African cultures (first the San and later the Basotho or Southern Sotho people) and built on the influence of early European settlers, especially the Dutch (South African History Online, 2018). Accordingly, South African Tourism (2019b) states that visitors should eat local *boerekos* (Afrikaans for farmers' food) and traditional Basotho cuisine when visiting the province. Agriculture is one of the main economic activities of the Free State and farming in the area is mainly comprised of livestock (sheep and cattle), wildlife (game), maize and sunflowers, while 24% of the country's potatoes are grown in the province (Free State Agriculture, 2019; Hofmeyr, 2018). Salt is produced from salt pans in the Western Free State (South African History Online, 2018) and cherries are cultivated in the mountainous Eastern Free State (Crawford, 2015).

The Eastern Free State is also home to the province's only Slow Food Community, which is comprised of a diverse community of producers (Slow Food South Africa, 2019). Traditional African beer can be tasted and women grinding maize in decorated huts can be observed at the Basotho Cultural Village, situated close to Clarens in the Eastern Free State. Here the Basotho still practise their traditional ways today (South African History Online, 2018). Annual food and drink festivals in the province include the Ficksburg Cherry Festival, De Oude Kraal Wildskosfees and Clarens Craft Beer Festival (Clarens Craft Beer Festival, 2019; De Oude Kraal, 2019; South African History Online, 2018). Very few restaurants in the province claim to serve local or traditional food. Of the establishments that do, most serve food likely to be found in local restaurants across the country. This is not surprising, as has been stated, Free State food is mostly undifferentiated from that of other South African provinces.

In the National Development Plan 2030, of South Africa, as well as the National Tourism Sector Strategy, tourism is considered as one of the most important potential drivers of job creation (National Department of Tourism, 2017; Statistics South Africa, 2017). The Free State is also the province with the highest unemployment rate (36.3%) in South Africa



(Statistics South Africa, 2018), affirming the dire need to further develop and market tourism attractions and create more job opportunities. As has been discussed, food tourism has the potential to do just that. The following section of the paper will describe the methods used to determine multiple stakeholders' perspectives on establishing an authentic local food identity in the Free State Province, South Africa.

Methods

The lack of previous research on food tourism in the Free State provided the opportunity to undertake ground-breaking research on this topic. This qualitative study followed a descriptive research design as it is used to obtain information concerning the current status and describes the current situation. Interviews following a set of structured qualitative questions was the preferred method of data collection, but the option of email completion of the same structured questions was also offered to the targeted respondents. The structured questions approach was useful, because there was a pre-existing agenda (Morgan, 1997) – in this case determining a Free State food identity. Questions were based on previous research conducted and participants were requested to substantiate their responses to the open-ended questions.

A food and beverage asset inventory (local food and beverage businesses), step 3 of the WFTA 10-step guide to food tourism destination development (World Food Travel Association, 2019b) for the Free State was created by the authors. Literature alludes to different methods to create an asset inventory. Yurtseven and Kaya (2011) built an inventory of local foods of the Gokceada region in Turkey through a list of restaurants provided by the local municipalities that were consulted on the Gokceada tourism website. Lin, Pearson and Cai (2009) assessed tourism brochures and destination websites to identify their population. Kim and Iwashita (2015) did interviews with 12 tourists and asked each respondent a number of questions regarding local food and where to find it, thus enabling them to identify the population to be used for their research. Sims (2009) selected pub, cafe and restaurant owners according to price and apparent policy on local sourcing as part of their population. Food producers were also selected to represent the major types of products available in the study area. The main aim for Sims (2009) was to reflect the range of businesses encountered in the regions and not to produce a statistically representative sample. These case studies assisted the researchers in coming up with their own methodology regarding identifying local food producers and relevant tourism role players able to assist in identifying a typical food identity for the Free State. Purposive sampling was used in the study, as the researchers identified and contacted the participants who were readily available in the Free State, and who are, according to the researchers, experts in the topic of food in the province.

To assist in the identification of the population of the study, information was firstly gathered from five tourism route managers. The Free State has five tourism routes (the Springbok, Cheetah, Flamingo, Lion and Eagle routes). Each route has a route tourism manager responsible for tourism development and marketing of the respective routes. They were thus the ideal target to obtain information on the relevant subject at hand. Secondly, 11 local restaurateurs who were either identified by the tourism route managers or market themselves as serving local cuisine were contacted. The seven local distillers in the Free State were also targeted, namely Karoo Craft Brewery, Brew & Still, Stellar Brewery, Whistlers Rum, Clarens Brewery, Hanzet Distillery and Helden Distillery. The distillers provide food as part of the experience when visiting them. Additionally, three other local food and drink producers were interviewed. Thirdly, one expert on Free State history and local cultures at the National Museum was interviewed as well as a representative of the Free State Gambling, Liquor and Tourism Authority (FSGLTA). The chairpersons of SATSA (Southern Africa Tourism Services Association) Free State and FEDHASA (Federated Hospitality Association of



Southern Africa) Free State were also interviewed. Lastly, the official Free State Tourism website was consulted. The researchers also invited a representative of the Free State Heritage Resource agency, a representative of Free State Agriculture, the Eastern Highlands Region Slow Food Community and a local tourism cultural village to participate, but received no feedback in time for publication.

Participants were recruited until the point of data saturation had been reached. Data saturation is reached when it is unlikely that any new information would be obtained from subsequent interviews (Allender, Cavill, Parker & Foster, 2009). The sample size is thus not predetermined, but rather emerges as a consequence of data saturation and the research process. In a qualitative study, it is the quality and not the quantity of the data that determines the sample size. In total, three local historians, 10 tourism government and tourism association employees, 11 food and drink producers and 11 restaurateurs were contacted. Of these, responses were obtained from one historian, seven tourism government and tourism association employees, five food and drink producers and six restaurateurs. This resulted in a sample of 19 and a response rate of 54.29%. Additionally, 10 Bloemfontein residents dining in restaurants serving ‘local food’ were interviewed. The total number of responses received was thus 29. Thematic analysis was used to decode the responses of the participants. Thematic analysis is a process of encoding qualitative information (Boyatzis, 1998), where the researcher develops codes, words or phrases that serve as markers for segments of collected data. This type of analysis is very useful when trying to find a central viewpoint when analysing many responses to the same research question.

Results and discussions

Most of the respondents believed that it is important for the Free State Province to have a defined local food identity. Table 1 presents a succinct breakdown of the themes that emerged from the responses obtained. Similar to Kim and Iwashita (2016) and Lin et al. (2011), respondents felt that a local food identity for the Free State would enhance self-identity for communities and destination brand identity. One respondent stated, “Local is *lekker!*” This is a popular slogan in South Africa promoting South African culture and products. *Lekker* is an Afrikaans word meaning nice or pleasant. Respondents further agreed with the literature by indicating that a local food identity would promote much-needed tourism to the province (Abraham & Kannan, 2015).

Table 1. Thematic analysis of responses

	Question	Themes identified
1	What do you think is the importance of having a local food identity for the Free State?	Differentiate from other provinces; Unique selling point; Increase cultural inclusivity; Promote tourism; and Preservation of local cultures.
2	State your definition of authentic Free State food without using examples of food.	Ingredients used should be typically found in the Free State; Food passed on from generation to generation in the Free State; Food traditionally eaten by Basotho and Afrikaner people; and Hearty, comfort food.



3	Name the top food you would consider typical to the Free State.	Meat (<i>biltong</i> , <i>boerewors</i> , <i>potjie</i> , <i>braaivleis/chesa nyama</i> , tripe, steak, game/venison, oxtail, mutton); <i>Pap</i> (maize meal porridge); samp; <i>Morog</i> /spinach; and Steamed bread.
4	What beverages would you consider ‘must-haves’ for visitors to the Free State?	Craft beer; African traditional beer; <i>Moerkoffie</i> (coffee made in a pot on the stove); and <i>Mampoer</i> (a distilled spirit).
5	Is your perception that the Free State could attract domestic and/or international tourists with local food and drink? Please motivate your answer.	Yes: Value for money; Unique way of preparing food; Hospitable residents; No: The Free State is run-down; and Tourists will eat anything available.
6	Do you think more people would visit the Free State if the province had a defined local food identity? Please motivate your answer.	Food is a good supportive attraction.
7	Do you think a Free State food tourism route will attract tourists? Please motivate your answer	Trying new things are fun; It could be educational; It works elsewhere in the world; For food and scenery; and Innovation is needed.

As recommended by the World Food Travel Association (2019a), the stakeholders were asked to define authentic Free State food. The themes that emerged for this question were that ingredients should be typical to the Free State; food passed on from generation to generation; food traditionally eaten by Basotho and Afrikaner people; and hearty, comfort food. However, it should be noted that most of the respondents could not answer this question, again alluding to the fact that a local food identity is missing for the province. It was also noted by one respondent that at first glance Free State food might seem to be the same as food found in any of the other provinces in the country. At closer inspection, however, one will find that Free Staters have given a unique twist on South African food classics.

This study, like Yurtseven and Kaya's (2011), determined and listed the local food traditionally cooked in the area through asking local residents. The predominant item mentioned was red meat. The meat items included *biltong* (dried and spiced meat), *boerewors* (beef mince sausage), *potjie* (meat cooked in a traditional cast-iron pot), *braaivleis* or *chesa nyama* (local terms used for cooking meat on a fire – typically a wood or charcoal fire), tripe, steak, oxtail, mutton, and game or venison. This is in line with the local meaty agriculture of the province (Free State Agriculture, 2019). Other non-meat items mentioned were *pap* (maize meal porridge that can be eaten savoury or sweet), *marog* or spinach and steamed bread. Numerous other items were also mentioned, but they were only mentioned by one or two respondents each. Concerning beverages, respondents would encourage visitors to the Free State to try the province's craft beers, traditional African beer, *moerkoffie* (brewed coffee) and *mampoer* (moonshine). Interestingly, both food and drink items were often mentioned by a variety of names. This can be explained by the multiple cultural groups residing in the area.

When asked about their perception that the Free State could attract domestic and/or international tourists with local food and drink, the majority of respondents answered



positively. Respondents who said ‘yes’, motivated their answer by stating food in the Free State is value for money. They also stated that Free State food is unique. One respondent stated that even though one might find the ‘same’ food all over South Africa, different areas and groups prepare it differently and eat it in different combinations. Another stated that in the Free State, one would find a myriad of versions of the ‘same’ food. Another predominant theme in the responses was the hospitability of Free State residents with food forming part of this hospitality. Respondents who answered in the negative said that tourists would eat anything available and that the Free State was too rundown to increase tourism arrivals. Most of the respondents thought that more people would visit the Free State if the province had a defined local food identity. The predominant theme emerging from this question was that a defined food identity would be a good supportive tourism attraction to the Free State that could be used in marketing. Lastly, respondents were asked if they thought a Free State food tourism route would attract tourists. This question was specifically posed because there are currently only a few small localised food tourism routes in South Africa. The majority of respondents answered positively. Themes identified included that people enjoy novel experiences; that a food route could be educational; that people would enjoy both the food and scenery on such a route; that food routes have worked elsewhere in the world; and that innovation is needed to ensure the success of such a route.

One respondent stated that a food route would enhance the story value of the Free State. As recommended in the literature (Fox, 2007; Kim & Iwashita, 2016; World Food Travel Association, 2019a), knowing the stories behind these food and drink items may be the best way to convince tourists to explore Free State offerings. This could be done by local residents, food and drink producers and the relevant government marketing agency.

Overview from tourism route managers

To provide more detailed information for the study, the five route tourism managers were asked to present extra information by answering additional questions. When asked if they were aware of any regional branding, i.e. Karoo lamb or locally produced food or beverage products in their areas, two interesting answers were obtained. It emanated that a local winery, Landzicht wines were still producing wine connected to the Free State whilst the Eastern Free State were associated with cherries from the town of Ficksburg. When asked to indicate locally produced food or beverage products that they were aware of in their areas, their answers indicated Whistler rum (locally distilled rum producers), Kabenja beer, soya, sorghum, sunflowers, wheat and asparagus also in the Eastern Free State. To ascertain if food was included in any media or marketing coverage in their areas, it was clear that food were not included in their marketing efforts. Only one route manager indicated that they used food as part of their marketing efforts. The marketing platform used the most was social media. It is therefore interesting to note the extremely limited promotion of food in the province.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to ascertain multiple stakeholders’ perspectives (tourism government and tourism association employees, local restaurateurs, local food and drink producers, local residents and a local historian) on establishing an authentic local food identity for the Free State Province. It was the majority of stakeholders’ view that a local food identity for the Free State is important. The Free State food identity determined via this paper is: Hearty, comfort food cooked from ingredients typically found in the Free State, using recipes and preparation techniques passed on from generation to generation in Basotho and Afrikaner families. Food forming part of this identity is meat prepared using typical Free State methods, *pap*, *marog* and



steamed bread. This should be accompanied by local craft or traditional beers, *mampoer* and perhaps afterwards *moerkoffie* to regain one's senses.

Through participating in this research project, stakeholders (especially the government), were reminded to include local food and drink in the marketing of the province. The results of this paper were sent to the tourism government and tourism association employees who participated in the study with a request to notify the researchers if any further research or assistance was required in including the newly established Free State food identity in marketing campaigns and future tourism strategies. Emanating from this, the local tourism government and tourism association employees' awareness of the role food tourism can play in attracting tourists were suitably noted and added to the topics for further discussion at the recently formed Provincial Tourism Forum (PTF). As recommended by Fox (2007), a destination's food identity should be institutionalised, legitimised and promotionalised. It is therefore important that the provincial government buy into and support the notion of a food tourism route for the province.

The paper addressed gaps in the literature identified by Du Rand et al. (2003) and Martin et al. (2019) by analysing food tourism further in South Africa and identifying local food in one of the nine provinces, namely the Free State. Furthermore, this paper contributes to food tourism literature through the proposed theoretical framework and the development of a questionnaire for determining an authentic local food identity to be used to identify in any region. The food identity classified in the paper may form part of a sustainable Free State food tourism strategy.

Ultimately, this research can assist in growing the tourism sector in the Free State. First and foremost it can assist in the development of a food tourism route. Government buy-in for this will however be necessary. This can lead to the creation of a new tourism brand which will focus on typical Free State food. By creating a successful brand, more tourist arrivals are anticipated with the resultant growth in sales of rooms, restaurant meals, wine, beer and car rentals. The unique selling proposition (i.e. unique food and drink) will provide a competitive advantage for the Free State Province. With the resultant growth in visitor arrivals, increased awareness of the area's food and drink resources can be expected (World Food Travel Association, 2018). Growth in visitor numbers can lead to job creation and increased community awareness about tourism in general (Tuan, 2020).

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