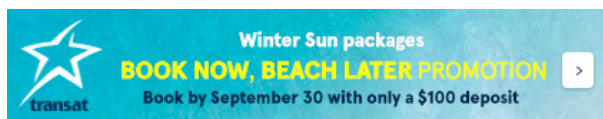




Travel Industry TODAY



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EAT OUT

Culinary Travel Profiling

Steve Gillick

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16 AUG 2010: Let's face it. Returning from a wonderful holiday is the biggest argument for travelling again. But even more so for those who indulge in what has been referred to as 'gastronomic' or 'culinary' or 'digestive' or just plain 'food' tourism. Food TV has pushed food tourism

out of its 'niche' status and now it resides as a mainstream reason for travel.



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Television cooking shows, once the preserve of homemakers, are now hot items in prime time, and what do they showcase? Food. Canadian cuisine, international cuisine, upscale chefs preparing downscale dishes, happy chefs, angry chefs, singing chefs, diners, drive-ins, dives, makeovers, cakes, competitions, hellish kitchens, grills, woks, steamers, campfires, and they all compete for the attention of your travelling clients. And let's not forget those travellers who are thirsty to see where beer is brewed, scotch is revered, wine is nurtured and sake is sacred.

Just a spoonful of chicken soup◆

When you review the evaluations of your clients after they return (you do follow up on their travels, I presume), chances are that food plays a significant role in their love or displeasure with a destination. In my own case I have Tov Mason, the

former president of Passages and current president of Footprints to thank.

It was on a Passages tour of Borneo in 1991. The morning after our arrival in Kuching, Tov, who was escorting the trip, uttered those fateful words. “Steve, do you want to join me for breakfast”? I tentatively said ‘yes’. Up to then I had actually avoided eating most foods when I travelled as I was sure something would cramp my vacation (get it?)

We walked around the corner to (how do you say this nicely?) a very basic restaurant with cracked plastic chairs, dirty plastic tables, naked kids and dogs running in and out of the kitchen and a menu whose dog-eared covers carried the remnants of many meals gone by.

Tov happily ordered a bowl of chicken soup with shrimp, noodles, bean sprouts, mushrooms and vegetables, and then looked at me. I reluctantly muttered “me too” and immediately started to think of where I had stored the Imodium and Pepto Bismal, and how I was pretty well ignoring my travel doctor’s advise to ‘peel it, boil it, cook it or forget it’. How would something soaking in questionably sanitary and presumably warm water, affect my dream trip to Borneo?

First spoonful ♦ hmmm..nice and hot. Second spoonful ♦ hmm ♦ kind of tasty. Third spoonful ♦ delicious with fresh, crunchy vegetables. Fourth Spoonful ♦ I know where I ‘m coming for breakfast tomorrow.

And why did I spend, literally, the next decade exploring Asia? Simply because the food was great ♦ and safe to eat and I never became ill and ♦ oh yeah ♦ the people and the attractions were

wonderful too!

My experience is not atypical of travellers. Food is a big factor in deciding where to go, and where to return. But it does not even have to be local food. I know of one person who prides himself on being a travel expert; gives travel seminars and has appeared on television to talk travel. He once asked me if Western food was available in Thailand. I replied that in Bangkok it was fairly easy to find western dishes, especially in the big hotels but outside the city, depending on where you travelled, western food may not be that easy to find. I asked why the concern, thinking that perhaps the man was worried about dishes that were too spicy. He replied that when he travelled around the world, he expected to eat the food to which he was accustomed—western food, and if a country was unable to provide that kind of food, he was not interested in travelling there or promoting travel to that destination. I almost fell off my chair when I heard that one. But, if anything, it goes to show how important food is.

Culinary Travel Profiling

When you qualify a client to travel, chances are you do not talk about food unless specifically asked to do so. It is a given that people will sample the food at a destination or find their own food comfort level, such as the gentleman described above or the “I’ll have the fried eggs but put some chile tofu on the side, because I’m in Taiwan and lots of other people are doing it”. But think again about painting a picture in the mind of your client, or better still, enticing their pallet by catering to their foody thoughts. You have heard of police profiling (ever watch the TV show ‘Criminal Minds’?) Now try travel profiling. Listen for the key

words in your client's 'needs' statements and then decide what thoughts and ideas can be enhanced. If you can get them salivating for a destination based on activities, attractions, accommodations AND the food, then you have concocted a winning sales recipe.

In your home town

Become a travel restaurant authority in your home town, based on your international travels. Play the role of restaurant reviewer. First decide under which category the food falls:

1. Authentic (you may as well be in the home country, the food is so good)
2. Almost authentic but a tad Canadianized (could mean less spicy, or sugar has been added)
3. Stylized (the food resembles what you ate in the home country but the taste sure is different)
4. Fraudulent (the food bares no resemblance to the authentic cuisine)
5. Just Bad (the country should be outraged to have this restaurant claim to serve their food)

Carry your rating chart into the restaurant and take notes just as you would during a site inspection on a Fam trip. If the food is passable then you may consider recommending it to your clients to prepare them for the big trip. If not, then represent yourself as a travel food authority and give clients the names of restaurants and rank them (using the criteria above) so your client knows that you have invested some time in finding out where the better meals can be had, as well as

those restaurants to avoid. Trust me. It enhances your reputation and if you are choosy enough, it enhances your credibility as a travel expert.

Internationally

Travel guide books include reviews of restaurants, but these reviews are only the opinion of the author. Once you find a guide book with which you are comfortable, try out the recommended restaurants but take your notepad with you. You can enhance your expertise by critiquing the popular restaurants and, then in conversation with your clients, better understanding their needs and suggesting the best places to eat.

Remember that just because a restaurant is famous due to the fact that Ernest Hemmingway drank cognac at the bar in 1939, does not necessarily mean that the restaurant has decent food or acceptable service in the year 2010. (The same holds true at your home town. Just because a restaurant calls itself “Ichiban”, which in Japanese means ‘number one’, does not mean that this place, or the 25 other independently owned Ichibans in the city, serve anything resembling real Japanese sushi)

And sometimes, that great restaurant is not even in the guidebooks. So ask the hotel concierge, the tour guide, the taxi driver or even locals that you meet, and you may discover something new.

Case in point? When we were in Guatemala City, everyone said that we should eat dinner at a well known restaurant that featured ‘authentic’ Guatemalan food. Our tour guide said that the restaurant in question was quite touristy and that he took his family to a place called Casa

Chapina right around the corner from our hotel. We took his advice and had a wonderful meal with friendly service and the bill was under \$30.00 for two, including beer.

If travel be the food of love

In Canada we are delightfully spoiled by having such an amazing variety of restaurants from which to choose, based on the multicultural nature of our society. Whether it is Vancouver, Saskatoon, Toronto or St. John's, the variety of cuisine can be staggering. Therefore a travel expert has a lot of potential to work with, in matching clients to restaurants, as well as in cross marketing opportunities.

Culinary travel plays on the emotions, the taste buds and the imagination of travellers, but not too many travel agents play up this angle.

- Provide your clients with advice on some of the good restaurants and in turn, involve them. Have them become part of your travel food evaluation team which you can then feature in your agency newsletter, or website, or in a press release to the community paper.
- From a marketing point of view, establish yourself as a food authority. You can start to do some cross promoting with restaurants that meet your standard. Consumers can enjoy an ethnic meal, then receive some promotional information about the destination that you are selling. Get some sponsorship from a tourist board or supplier to help in the promotion.
- Have a short cooking demonstration at a neighbourhood event again tied in with a

destination promotion. Have someone explain the food ♦ provide people with insider tips on the origin of a dish or where they will find it at the destination

- Consider wine pairing evenings during the year ♦ some of the travel colleges can assist with this ♦ where sample dishes are matched with the appropriate wine. A great themed introduction to your trips to France, Italy, German, Chile, Argentina, Niagara, Pelee Island or the Okanagan Valley, and lots of other places.

- Make friends with your local liquor store and ask about doing special travel evenings. They get the business from people buying bottles; you get the business from people wanting to taste the real thing.

Next time, you watch a food television show and you get the urge to run to the fridge for a nosh to tide you over until the next meal ♦ think about your reaction and then capitalize on it. Your clients will travel for food, and to visit markets selling food, and to attend classes preparing food, and to tour distilleries and breweries and wineries.

The Shakespearean play Twelfth Night begins with the line, “If music be the food of love, play on”. We might paraphrase to say, “If travel be the food of love, pack up your bags and go!”

Bon Appetite. Bon Voyage.



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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