Tourism Management 36 (2013) 200–209

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Tourism Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tourman

Case Study

What makes a gastronomic destination attractive? Evidence from the Israeli Negev

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ► The paper examines the conditions that prevent the Negev from becoming gastronomically attractive.
- ► The study analyzes the extent to which local stakeholders link together food, place and community.
- ► The Negev gastronomic discourse echoes the social fragmentation of the region's population.
- ► The failure of residents to share a regional awareness impedes the gastronomic image of the region.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 8 August 2012
Accepted 7 December 2012

Keywords:
Foodscape
Regional development
Discourse analysis
Authenticity

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the gastronomic discourse surrounding the Israeli Negev and examines why gastronomy is far from being an attractive pull factor in this region. The study incorporates examples which illustrate its theoretical proposition regarding the need to substantiate authenticity by offering gastronomic products and experiences that faithfully communicate an intimate link between food, place and the local community. The analysis suggests that the failure of residents to present convincing gastronomic evidence of their sense of community and territorial attachment poses a barrier to the emergence of a gastronomically attractive food image of the region. This case can provide planners with a better understanding of the conditions required for the promotion of an appealing gastronomic image and regional developers with a deeper understanding of how to harness gastronomy for the purpose of tourism development.

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1. Introduction

As authenticity becomes rare for tourists to experience, food at destinations "is perhaps one of the last areas of authenticity that is affordable on a regular basis" (Reynolds, 1994, p. 191). However, not all destinations seem capable of providing authentic gastronomic experiences. Hjalager and Corigliano (2000), who offer a comparative model for evaluating a destination's potential to become gastronomically attractive, consider existence of cuisine – a term they avoid defining, yet vaguely describe as a product of historical processes and on-destination natural and cultural resources – to be a prerequisite for success. In practice, this is not always the case. First, as the evolution of Belizean cuisine illustrates, cuisines can emerge out of their allegedly indigenous environment, away from and regardless of local constraints of natural and cultural resources (Wilk, 2002). Second, cuisines, such as New Asia Cuisine, can be invented by marketing professionals rather than emerge from long, ongoing historical processes, and still be touristically appealing (Scarpato, 2002). Lastly, contrary to the argument made by Hjalager and Corigliano (2000), the growing success of the rationally constructed Stockton Asparagus Festival indicates that even a single, until then locally meaningless foodstuff, when properly mystified to appeal to locals and outsiders alike, may be enough to evoke the curiosity of gastronomic tourists (Lewis, 1997). Next to and no less important than its economic value, the festival stimulated a communal regional awareness within the disconnected, multi-ethnic local population, fostering – to use Etzioni's term – "a community of communities" (Etzioni, 1996). By comparing the Negev region in Israel with successful gastronomic destinations elsewhere, this paper provides a unique opportunity to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions for successful development of gastronomic tourism in general.

Having identified tourism as a primary economic engine, the Negev 2015 plan enumerates five meta-themes for tourism

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0261-5177/$ – see front matter © 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2012.12.006

development based on what planners define as preexisting local assets (Israeli Government & Daroma, 2005). Although all meta-themes may be argued to diversify the region's touristic product, the planners focus exclusively on nature, history, religion and acquaintance with ancient cultures – an array of themes that, unfortunately, have thus far proven inadequate in sustaining the Negev socially and economically (Lerner & Haber, 2000; Mintz, Halperin, Ullmann, & Israeli, 2009). Strikingly absent from this array is a cultural theme that would encourage a sense of regional pride among the Negev residents by basing tourism development on their present-day cultural life. Inspired by the growing body of literature that recognizes the benefits of using food tourism as an anchor for regional development (e.g., Bessière, 1998; Fox, 2007; Hall, Sharples, Mitchell, Macionis, & Cambourne, 2003; Hjalager & Richards, 2002; Sims, 2009), we set out to determine whether the local culinary culture could serve as such a theme. After suggesting that rudimentary to the gastronomic attractiveness of a destination is the ability to satiate tourist appetites for authentic products and experiences, which convincingly communicate a link between food, place and community, we explore the potential of the Negev gastronomic scene to boost tourism and serve as a cohesive force that can bind the fragmented communities that make up the local population. More specifically, we hunt for a link between the food, place and community in the language and practice of three host-side groups: agriculturists, local residents and tourism providers. Directly involved in tourism or not, all three groups play a key role in the construction and maintenance of an attractive gastronomic discourse.

2. Theoretical framework

Food is a powerful marker of cultural identity (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2008; Fischler, 1980, 1988). By possessing a unique culinary order, members of a cultural group externalize their shared being and exclude everyone else. It is arguably this symbolic power of food as a cultural identity marker that stands at the core of gastronomic tourism. Drawing on Long (1998), gastronomic tourists are those who define their own selves by engaging in "intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of the Other" (p. 181). For a successful exploration to occur, many quality determinants undoubtedly come into play (e.g., service, accessibility and hygiene), but in the cultural, and specifically, gastronomic journey of knowing oneself by knowing others, much depends on the perception of the local food as authentic.

Referring to authenticity mostly as an evaluation that stems from the relationships between tourists and cultural objects on tour, the conceptualization of the term in tourism studies has focused on the influence of tourists' profiles on their perception of authenticity, and on the qualities cultural objects should possess to be perceived as authentic. These two research directions have also inspired discussions about authenticity in gastronomic tourism (e.g., Cohen & Avieli, 2004). In relation to food-related experiences, Beer (2008) criticizes the research focus on tourist-object relations for being sterile and narrow, as it overlooks the important role society plays in authenticity production. In line with Beer (2008), the more refined view employed in this study is that authenticity of gastronomic products and experiences is a subjective evaluation which emanates from direct and indirect negotiations between hosts and guests. What is authentic is what both actors have come to agree upon as such, even outside their mutual contact zone. In these negotiations, products and experiences merely act as means of communication, grammatical units, the structure of which holds the power to authenticate negotiators themselves.

Another aspect of authenticity of the food is related to its model of origin. Any presumable historical prototype of food would always be yet another link in an endless chain of cultural hybridizations. What establish a hybrid as a point of reference for food reproduction within living memory are processes of appropriation and creolization. Appropriation refers herein to the integration of a hybrid into the cultural system of one of the hybrid's progenitors. Creolization refers to the integration of the hybrid into a new ensemble of meaningful objects of a hitherto nonexistent cultural identity. Appropriation and creolization go hand-in-hand with materialization, through which members of a cultural group embody their abstract identity in material structures. In resonance with the social representation theory, materialization helps a cultural community objectify the social representations of its own self. Once the objectified self-representations come to constitute the reality of everyday life "by the social influences of communication," (Moscovici, 2000, p. 2) they provide insiders and outsiders alike with the criteria to which any reproduction must adhere. The French AOC system is the quintessential example of materialization of cultural identity through construction of strictly modeled culinary heritage assets. The legislative guidelines of a traditional "Camembert de Normandie" for example, specify in detail the aesthetic traits of the cheese, geographical area and method of production. Adherence to these specifications, rather than a verisimilitude to any specific piece of cheese, underlies the originality of Camembert from Normandy. More important than historical veraciousness or the food itself then, is the constructed concept of what food should be like – a present interpretation of the past – that holds food's model of origin.

It should be noted that both insiders (e.g. hosts) and outsiders (e.g. tourists) participate in the construction of such a model, hence in the production of authenticity. The AOC system, for example, derives much of its strengths (and sometimes weaknesses) from the codification done by the French, but not least from its appreciation and acknowledgment by non-French. Furthermore, authenticity negotiations involve tourists and hosts alike and may benefit both. Cultural tourists engage in authenticity negotiations in order to ensure the authenticity of the touristic experiences they consume. Hosts get to nurture their sense of community: an evaluation of products and experiences as authentic by an external Other – herein cultural tourists – actually acknowledges the being of the hosts' own Self. So is the case in Bergamo, Italy, where an initiative to grant local salami protected geographical status in order to appeal to foreign consumers, tourists included, engaged a myriad of local actors in a lively ideological debate on what authentic salami is in practical terms, but, first and foremost, on what being Bergamasco socially is (Cavanaugh, 2007). By the same token, touristic demand for authentic experiences of living culture evoked local awareness, strengthened social cohesion and integrity, and even constructed the identity of the hitherto marginalized and ill-connected community of Ngadha villagers on Flores Island, Indonesia (Cole, 2007). To wit, by successfully selling their own living cultural identity, hosting communities actually engage in producing it.

A constitutive element of the cultural identity of hosts is place. As members of a territorial community, hosts zealously cherish their locality as one of the most valued components of their shared identity. The symbiotic relationships between territorial community and place, where members shape their locality while being shaped by it, transform a simple landscape into an elaborate cultural-scape. Since territorial rights can be put into question, community members feel obliged to materialistically substantiate the claims they make regarding the territory they consider their own: Appadurai (2005) asserts that local communities "seem to assume that locality is ephemeral unless hard and regular work is undertaken to produce and maintain its materiality" (pp. 180–181). Food is an ultimate means for that purpose: it allows a cultural community to legitimize its being by translating its (allegedly) historical alliance to its geographical territory into an avowedly inherited culinary order in which the fruit of the soil and the wisdom of culture have long been alloyed into an inseparable entity. Accordingly, the criteria that hosting community members formulate to claim the authenticity of their food – food's model of origin – must include both a geographical and cultural component. The geographical component blends into the food the unique natural conditions of the territory (which also result from cultural considerations). The cultural component blends the cultural values shared by the members of the local community, territoriality included, into the food. Interrelated, the two components transform food into a material heritage asset that validates a cultural identity, ensures its continuity and attests to its historical attachment to the land. The elaborate definition of terroir by French legislators, for example, best grasps the interrelation between the geographical and the cultural components in the culinary heritage of a community. In this paper, we suggest that food, territory and culture are the essential constituents of a destination's food image. Successful gastronomic destinations are therefore those that satiate the appetite of gastronomic tourists for authenticity by offering products and experiences that faithfully communicate an intimate link between food, place and community.

The gastronomic discourse, which is the focus of our analysis in this research, is the social apparatus through which the link between food, place and community is constructed, sustained and communicated. According to Hajer (1995), discourse is a "specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorization that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities […]" (p. 44). Scholars emphasize the paramount role of discourse in the making of culinary identities in general. Ferguson (1998), for example, ascribes the emergence of the lauded culinary identity of the French to a textual discourse thanks to which "the food, the people and places, the attitudes and ideas" (p. 601) were united under a complex, semiotic, food-related system of thought and action. Similarly, Appadurai (1988) argues that in India, these were English-written food publications that actually reproduced "regional and ethnic specialization" next to an "overarching, crosscutting national cuisine […]" (p. 22).

Referring to the production of authenticity in tourism, certain studies highlight the importance of the gastronomic discourse to the attractiveness of a destination. Fox (2007), for instance, calls for a discursive, verbal, "gastrospeak." Having tourists in mind, Fox's gastrospeak serves as a "rhetorical strategy" (p. 552) of commoditization and spectacularization of a destination's gastronomic identity. Nevertheless, the production of authenticity via discourse relies on profound social processes, rather than simply on a collection of textual publications, or marketing-oriented rhetorical strategy at the service of a destination's tourism managers (see for example, Santos, Belhassen, & Caton, 2008). The gastronomic discourse of a destination refers herein to both the language and practice that surround the food at that destination, and which simultaneously reflect and frame the reality of, and as seen by, the locals. By deciphering the gastronomic discourse, tourists can either accept or refute the existence of an organic link between food, place and community. In such decipherment, even the uniqueness of the produce at a local market or locals' attendance at a local food event becomes crucial. This means that the attractiveness of a gastronomic destination – one that should offer an authentic bite of local terroir – predominantly hinges on direct and indirect local participation, in other words, on how locals think, talk and act around their food.

The following analysis examines the potential of the Negev gastronomic scene to boost tourism to the region. The analysis focuses on the extent to which three groups of host-side stakeholders, who play a key role in fulfilling gastronomic tourists' quest for authenticity, express a gastronomically attractive link between food, place and community through language and practice. The groups examined are, first, the agriculturists who, besides food and fiber, are also able to produce collective goods, including culinary heritage (Daugstad, Rønningen, & Skar, 2006); second, the gastronomic tourism providers who actually stand at the forefront of host–guest interaction; and third, the locals themselves whose involvement and participation holds the power to legitimize gastronomic products and experiences as authentic. Findings draw on several visits to the area during the off-peak and on-peak seasons of 2011, and on a wide variety of primary sources – from government documents and official publications, through journal articles and food blogs, to product marketing and food packaging.

3. The Negev gastronomic discourse

The Negev, Israel's southern region, is an exceptional mélange of semi-arid to hyper-arid climates, wedded to mountainous landscapes, fascinating flora and fauna, and a rich human history (Evenari, Shanan, & Tadmor, 1982). Located on the northern frontier of the Saharo-Arabian desert belt and bordering on the south-eastern coast of the Mediterranean, the region has been a strategic crossroads between Asia, Africa and Europe throughout the ages. Since demarcation of the desert's natural borders is subject to variations, this paper draws on Israel's administrative divisions to define the Negev as the area that covers the Beer-Sheva subdistrict and the Sha'ar Hanegev Regional Council (Fig. 1).

While the Negev extends over approximately 60% of Israel's territory, it is home to only 8% of the entire Israeli population (Nuriel & Levinson, 2008). Two major groups comprise the Negev population: Jews and Bedouin-Arabs. Jewish settlement in the Negev began soon after pioneering Jewish immigrants first arrived in the region at the end of the nineteenth century (Naor, 1986; Tal, 2007). During the 1950s and 1960s, the two decades that followed the Declaration of Independence in 1948, early settlers were joined by Jewish immigrants from Europe and, to a greater extent, by Jewish refugees from the Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Considered culturally inferior by the Israeli veterans and lacking resources or adequate social and political networks, these Jewish refugees were settled in disadvantaged areas, including the Negev, sometimes deceitfully or against their will. In retrospect, the absorption policies of the time, which favored population dispersion over social integration, gave rise to one of the deepest, most painful ethnic cleavages in Jewish–Israeli society, one that is still felt today (Gerbi, Levi, & Gabizon, 2000). Two subsequent substantial waves of immigration to Israel, one from the former Soviet Union countries and the other from Ethiopia, further diversified the Negev population in the last two decades of the twentieth century.

The Bedouin arrived in the Negev as early as the seventh century from the Arabian Desert (Abu-Rabia, 2002). Since the second half of the twentieth century, these historically nomadic Arab tribes have been undergoing a gradual transition to a sedentary lifestyle throughout the Middle East (Meir, 1993). In Israel, State-initiated sedentarization, accelerated and coerced, has restricted the area of Bedouin settlement to a small number of urbanized townships. These townships have failed to supply appropriate infrastructure, services or alternative employment opportunities. Today, only about half of the Bedouin population have acceded to government demands to move to the planned townships; the other half live in spontaneous villages, many illegal and unrecognized and, consequently, not entitled to municipal services and susceptible to demolition. With a growth rate among the highest in the world, the

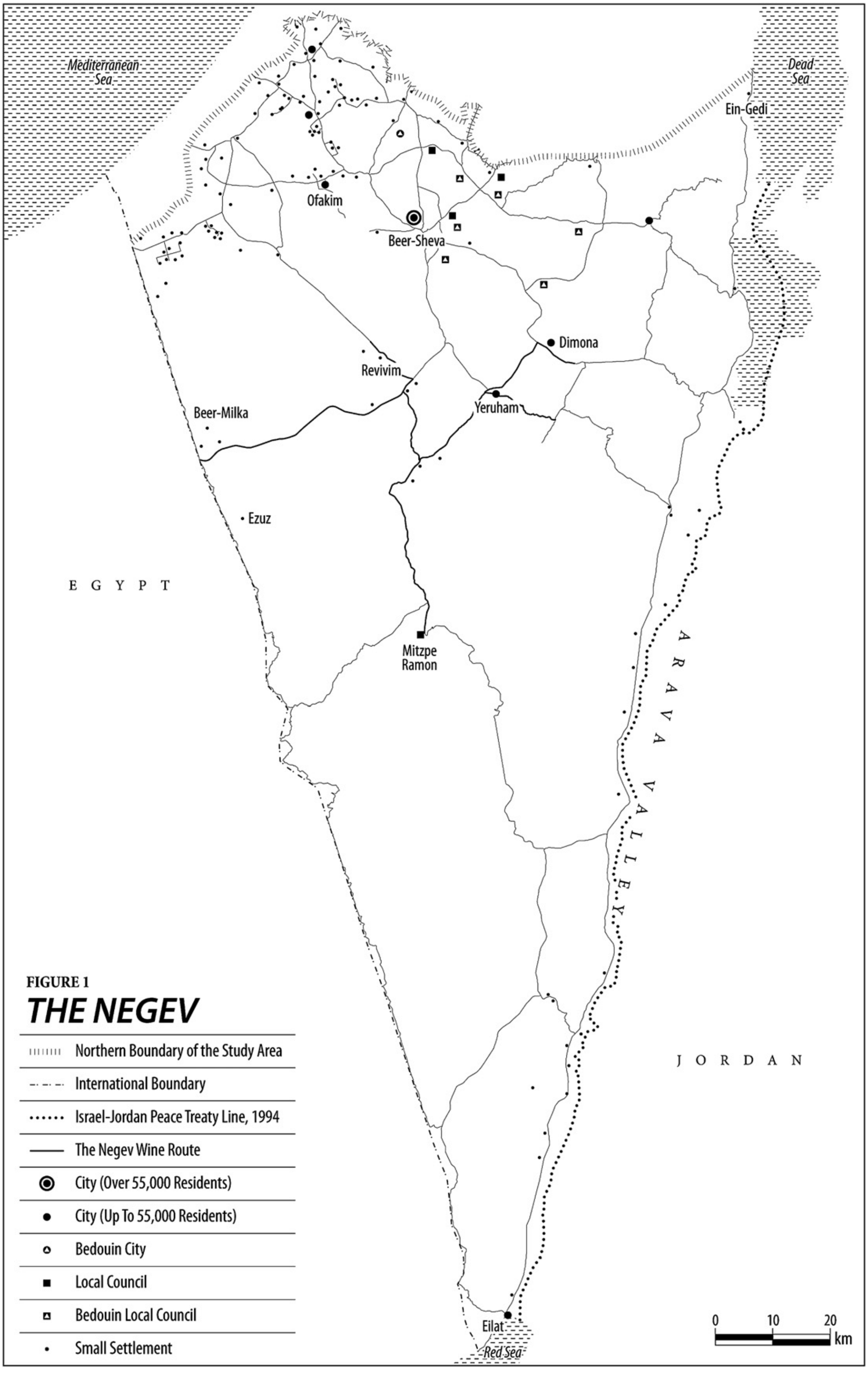
Mediterranean Sea
Dead Sea
Ein-Gedi
Ofakim
Beer-Sheva
Dimona
Revivim
Yeruham
Beer-Milka
Ezuz
EGYPT
Mitzpe Ramon
ARAVA VALLEY
JORDAN
Eilat
Red Sea
FIGURE 1
THE NEGEV
Northern Boundary of the Study Area
International Boundary
Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty Line, 1994
The Negev Wine Route
City (Over 55,000 Residents)
City (Up To 55,000 Residents)
Bedouin City
Local Council
Bedouin Local Council
Small Settlement
0
10
20
km

Fig. 1. The map of the Israeli Negev.

Bedouin population, which represents about 25% of the current population in the Negev, is expected to double every thirteen years (Goldberg Committee, 2009.).

Apart from the residents of three affluent local councils, the majority of the Negev population that lives in a geographically noncontiguous structure of seven cities, nearly a dozen local councils and more than one hundred small localities, occupies the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder (CBS, 2011; Swirski, 2007). Next to the largest city – Beer-Sheva – with a population of nearly 200,000, the small localities accommodate a population that does not exceed a thousand people each. The Negev not only lags behind the center of the country, but is also internally polarized. The inner circle of the Beer-Sheva metropolis for example, is a residential junction of both extremities of the socio-economic ladder, where the only privileged upper-middle-class Jewish population of the Negev lives in proximity to the most disadvantaged population in Israel – the Bedouin.

The Negev offers many of the attributes that are thought to be essential for the creation of a gastronomic tourist destination, such as local food production and a willingness to share what residents consider to be their culinary culture. Nevertheless, the Negev has failed to become gastronomically attractive. In what follows, we seek out a link between the food, place and community in the language and practice of three host-side groups that play a crucial part in the making of a gastronomic destination: agriculturists, tourism providers and local residents.

3.1. Agricultural producers

> "…*But the Israeli consumer loses out, because these fruits and vegetables, grown according to the exacting standards of Europe and the United States, rarely reach the local market. We can only envy their quality and taste.*" – Vered (2009), food journalist, reporting on agriculture in the Negev

Modern agricultural development in the Negev is rooted in the renewal of the Jewish settlement in pre-State Israel, then under Ottoman rule, at the end of the nineteenth century. It was only a decade prior to the establishment of Israel, however, that institutionalized efforts to establish agricultural settlements in the Negev took over the disorganized and mostly private initiatives. The implementation of agricultural activities in the region was mainly driven by Zionist ideology, according to which working the land is a sacred cultural value, and by the geopolitical necessity to manifest Jewish sovereignty over broad frontier areas. The Zionist vision of 'making the desert bloom' turned into a reality, positioning Israel as a world leader in the field of arid-land agricultures. Dispersed around much of the Negev desert, but mostly in the wide region of the Northern Negev as well as the Arava Valley, Negev farmers today grow approximately 30% of Israel's total agricultural crops, thanks to efficient water use, continuous agricultural advancements and dedicated agricultural research. While these farmers have managed to defy and even exploit the arid conditions to their own benefit, impressively creating high-quality local produce that carries the distinctive signature of its underlying landscape, the association of this produce with the Negev region itself, and even more so with the local community, is practically nonexistent.

The agricultural produce of the Negev and that of the Arava Valley in particular – a seemingly endless array of varieties and subspecies of fruits and vegetables such as peppers, melons, tomatoes and dates that are grown under saline and arid conditions and consequently manifest high levels of sugar and organic acids – have gained an international reputation for high quality and outstanding taste. The discovery of a large brackish geothermal water reservoir provides excellent conditions for growing an impressive variety of fish and crustaceans, such as barramundi, sea bream and white leg shrimp. Aquaculture also includes red claw crayfish farming. Nevertheless, as Negev producers prioritize foreign markets over domestic ones for profitability reasons, hardly any of this produce is available for local consumption, whether raw or cooked; therefore, it has not yet been integrated into the culinary cultures of the Negev communities. Inaccessibility and export-orientation are recurrent themes in articles of Israeli food writers and gastronomers, as well as in the language of Negev farmers themselves, who regard their land as part of 'Europe's winter garden' – not of Israel, and certainly not of the Negev (e.g., AgriSupportOnline, 2008; Felter, 2007). To a great extent, agriculturists disinterest in the local market stems from Israel's agricultural policies in recent decades, which keenly promote economies of scale, increasing thus the capital investment required from technology-based farms to remain competent, and obstructing any local, small-scale agricultural initiatives from emerging (Tal, 2007).

Linking the locally grown seafood to local communities is even more doubtful. First of all, the chances of seafood to be integrated into the culinary cultures of Negev residents are fairly limited, given the adherence of about two-thirds of Israeli consumers to the laws of kashrut, Jewish dietary laws that exclude crustaceans from the edible kingdom. Local ostrich farming has fared no better in this respect, despite the fact that the ostrich is representative of an intimate link between a local foodstuff and the Negev habitat – once the home of several subspecies of the biblical bird until they were hunted to extinction – as ostrich meat is also not kosher. Secondly, fish farming in the Negev is still too young to break the intimate link in the international and Israeli gastronomic discourse between the particular seafood and its 'natural' habitat abroad, a link which has thus far been a marker of cultural identity and of high quality: "Our Australian barramundi [in Israel] originates in fishponds, but why be petty?," writes Cohen (2011), a leading Israeli food critic, hinting that real barramundi only grow in Australia.

In addition to a wide range of raw agricultural foodstuff, certain local producers offer processed agricultural products. One of the most prominent products is Halutza extra virgin olive oil, an award-winning label of Kibbutz Revivim. Challenging traditional irrigation methods and taking advantage of the tolerance of olive trees to drought and salinity, the kibbutz is a worldwide pioneer in the use of the subterranean brackish water reservoir discovered in the 1970s as the sole irrigation source for its large olive orchards. The salinity of the water is claimed to enhance the taste and quality of the olive oil. Among the cultivars grown, Barnea – an original Israeli development – is highly appreciated for its yield as well as for its delicate taste and the green, fruity aroma of the oil extracted from it. Although Halutza olive oil clearly deserves a place of honor in a local food–place–community affinity, this opportunity remains unfulfilled, mainly due to a certain duality in the language and practice of the Halutza olive oil producers. On the one hand, the oil is named after the Halutza sand dunes in the vicinity of the kibbutz, and the Negev origins of the oil are repeatedly indicated on packaging labels and in promotional material; on the other hand, worse than tacitly prioritizing Zionist ideals over idiosyncratic terroir-derived attributes, the producers choose to lure international and domestic consumers alike by speaking of the oil's "great, Tuscany-style taste," (Halutza Ltd., n.d.), thus dulling any flavor of locality the oil might have had: no less than a Negev product, the Halutza olive oil is an Italian wannabe. Data regarding the popularity of the Halutza olive oil among Negev residents is unfortunately lacking, yet other olive-derivative products made in Revivim further illustrate the weak association of local agricultural produce with the local community. Recently launched under the brand name of "LiveO" – a name that is neither Hebrew nor Arabic – and meticulously designed with a luxurious made-abroad look and feel, the ultra-premium label of the kibbutz is sold exclusively at two prestigious commercial centers outside the Negev periphery.

Ironically, aridity has granted the Negev a distinctive footprint to leave on its local agricultural produce. (Parenthetically, those who accuse this footprint of being 'induced' by human mastery rather than being 'natural' fail to notice that Italy's footprint on Italian tomatoes, for example, is 'induced' to the same degree.) Indeed, much of the extant agricultural produce of the Negev, both raw and processed, is unique enough to serve as a basis for an attractive gastronomic image. Nevertheless, the lack of an intimate link between that produce and the local community is arguably the paramount barrier blocking the development of an attractively authentic gastronomic image. Local produce is practically absent from the shelves of local grocery stores and minds of local residents. It is only by removing this barrier – for instance through the provision of financial incentives to Negev producers to distribute their produce locally, or by supporting local small-scale producers – that the Negev community could benefit, first, from an opportunity to integrate local agricultural production into its culinary culture, and second, from an opportunity to build and to reinforce its gastronomic image.

3.2. *Gastronomic tourism providers*

> "*If you get to travel to the Negev, do yourself a favour: [… visit] Kornmehl Farm and its excellent restaurant, and dive into a compelling dream coming true, surrounded by scents of Alpine cheeses from the Negev.*" – Waxman (2011), food writer, reporting on her visit to Kornmehl Goat Cheese Farm

Under the pretext of revitalizing the food image of the Negev, but in fact in order to fight fire with fire and halt what officials considered to be the Bedouins' illegal squatting on State land, the Israeli government circumvented legal planning policies and launched, in the mid-1990s, an ex post facto-approved wine route project that would secure a Jewish continuum of familial agri-tourism farms – 'individual farmsteads.' Today, close to thirty families invite tourists to visit small-scale agricultural sites, where wine, olive oil, goat cheese and camel milk are produced in resonance with the agriculture that flourished in ancient times in the region, and traces of which are still evident in the form of archaeological remains of oil and wine presses, water harvesting implements and agricultural terraces. In some cases, archaeological remains and ancient methods have been integrated into current agricultural production. Theoretically, and contrary to the agricultural export industry, agri-tourism providers along the Negev wine route – whose locally produced foodstuffs are also locally available for consumption – are better positioned to enhance an intimate link between food, place and community. Moreover, this link is fundamental to their existence, as much of their subsistence relies on providing authentic wine-centered gastronomic experiences for tourists. In practical terms, however, an analysis of brochures, websites, food packaging and journal articles reveals that the authenticating link is highly deficient.

Whether due to a lack of interest, limited knowledge or insufficient efforts, individual farmsteads along the Negev wine route cannot be said to operate as a synergic ensemble whose produce and produce-related experiences fuse into a single culinary culture that reputably reflects the local cultural-scape. Farmsteads, for example, do not have any common Protected Geographical Status framework that could brand wine and cheese, both locally produced, as the ne plus ultra of the local terroir. Going from bad to worse, not only do cheesemakers brand the same type of cheese under a variety of shapes and a myriad names, all chosen according to their heart's desire, they also adopt a 'gastrospeak' that explicitly associates the cheese with the certainly prestigious, yet regrettably foreign, French terroir (using descriptive terms such Brie, chèvre, Camembert-style, and so on). For gastronomic tourists, the message is quite disenchanting: local cheeses are not authentic Negev, but rather fake French. In addition, collaborations that integrate complementary local foodstuffs into a regional gastronomic whole are practically nonexistent. The most evident example is that of wine and cheese: the Rota winery prefers serving Bedouin food to pairing its wines with local cheeses (see Rota winery, n.d.). Similarly, not only is the dinner menu at the Naot Farm, a farm that specializes in goat-cheese production, mainly based on meat dishes, while the cheeses it offers are not exclusively produced on the farm and are essentially geared toward vegetarians; it offers no local wine, or any wine at all, to pair with the meal (see Naot Farm, n.d.). Lastly, the discourse remains relatively silent as far as wider regional partnerships are concerned. Noteworthy here is the effort of Chez Eugène, a luxurious restaurant-hotel in the heart of the Negev, to take a step forward (albeit hesitant) toward establishing sustainable local food networks through language and practice alike: "Relais gastronomique situated on the ancient spice and perfumes route," owners write, "Chez Eugène invites you to taste the products of our partners of the Negev and Israel, accompanied by the best Israeli wines, some of them from our own vineyards" (see Chez Eugène Restaurant-Hotel, n.d.). Unfortunately, such partnerships are currently too incidental to penetrate into the culinary identity of Negev communities. Thus, operating as independent parts of a practically nonexistent whole, wine route providers detach the produce from the local cultural-scape, limit the appearance of the produce on regional tables and impede the integration of the produce into a single, representative culinary complex. Recurrent and consistent manifestations of a culinary complex in the public sphere, where locals and tourists – Self and Other – could regularly meet would increase the prospects for wine route produce to infiltrate into the culinary culture of Negev residents and be acknowledged by the outside world as integral to that culinary culture.

Wine route providers could take advantage of the gastronomic tourists' quest for existential authenticity by offering leisure activities that correspond to the on-farm agricultural food production. Yet providers seldom invite tourists to immerse themselves in hands-on on-farm food production. Existential involvement is restricted to tasting, superficial gazing at the farm or prosaic lectures about the farm's agricultural production. In contrast, farmsteads prioritize recreational activities that do not relate to local agricultural production such as horseback riding, astronomy observations or adventurous lodging in none other than traditional Native American tents. As much as these experiential activities enrich the experience of gastronomic tourists, they cannot conceal the wine route's meager opportunities to gastronomically explore the local agriculture from deep within.

If cheeses are French and tents are Native American, it is also because individual farmsteads cater primarily to domestic tourists instead of aiming at international ones: a substantial amount of the written tourist information that these farmsteads provide is available in Hebrew only. Insufficient on its own to secure the economic sustainability of the farmsteads, the niche of gastronomic tourism within the already relatively small domestic tourism market forces farmsteads to cater to a wider audience, while compromising the gastronomic character of the wine route. Moreover, it is plausible that the small size of the target audience fuels competitiveness between farmsteads; a bigger market could encourage complementarities and mutual support. Either way, what is currently offered as part of the Negev wine route experience implies that what domestic tourists look for, or what farmsteads believe domestic tourists look for, is none other than exotic experiences of faraway lands at their doorstep. Consequently, in the hands of individual farmsteads, even the identity of a prickly pear cactus, for decades the emblematic symbol of a Jewish–Israeli native (sabra) in popular culture, is 'foreignized' in order to appeal to domestic tourists: "Being [a] sabra is being Israeli," declare the agricultural growers of the cactus, simultaneously enticing potential tourists with Mexican-inspired dishes (Orly Cactus Pear Farm, n.d.). Whether reflecting a demand or creating it, certain food journalists and foodies further enfeeble the link between food, place and community or hinder the emergence of this authenticating link, as they enthusiastically stress the non-Negev scent of their own gastronomic experiences: a visit to a strikingly mid-desert French-style chocolaterie (TickTack, 2008), a dining experience of authentic Dutch specialties (Rosenblum, 2006) or a Moroccan aura evoked by an overnight stay at a local winery (Aloush, 2002).

Overall, then, the lack of partnerships and the focus on domestic tourism prevent the wine route farmsteads – which might otherwise enjoy the highest potential for attracting tourists – from promoting an intimate link between food, place and community. Yet even had the efforts of these farmsteads to actively promote the authenticating link been flawless, it is questionable whether the Negev communities would have granted them the credentials necessary to authenticate the gastronomic experiences they provide due to their controversial status in the Israeli public discourse. In the eyes of too many, individual farmsteads tame publicly-owned idyllic wilderness, turning it into privately-owned inhabited land free of acquisition costs under suspiciously keen governmental patronage. Opponents protest not only against the environmental impacts, but also against the social ones, claiming that from its very beginning the wine route project has constantly violated distributive justice principles and the equal rights of all Negev communities, Jewish and Arab alike (e.g., Bar-On, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2008; Orenstein et al., 2009; SPNI, 2004). As a result, rather than being accredited representatives of an authentic Negev culinary culture, wine route providers at present are merely ambassadors of themselves – all the more so, given the disparity between the culinary experiences they provide and the culinary identities the Negev communities view as being their own.

3.3. Jewish residents

> "*Grinberg, despite the gefilte fish [Eastern-European] scent of her family name, is a daughter to a Djerban mother (an island off the Tunisian coast) and a Tripolitanian father, which guaranteed the hungry diners a meal rich in tastes, colours, and scents, in accordance with the best [Judeo-] Tunisian–Tripolitanian tradition.*" – Evron (2009), travel and lifestyle writer, reporting on dinner at one of the Culinary Queens of Yeroham

Since food choice is strongly bound by cultural identity, wide participation of locals in food production and consumption alike helps authenticate touristic gastronomic experiences. In Israel, production-side participation is seriously limited by overly restrictive governmental food regulations which, under the pretext of public health, require exceptional investment of capital and high revenue generation, resources which are rarely available to small-scale food initiatives, particularly in a peripheral region like the Negev. Consequently, Israeli food regulations discourage the formation of regional food networks and creation of artisanal specialties, but more importantly, the appearance of concrete, small-scale and proud manifestations of a community's culinary heritage in the public sphere. Nevertheless, when Negev locals, Jewish and Arab alike, do obtain permits to practice their culinary heritage in public, what story do they tell?

'Culinary Queens of Yeruham,' a unique initiative that empowers local women in the lagging town of Yeruham by enabling them to host traditional meals in a tourist's ultimate back region – the home kitchen – provides rare and privileged insight deep into the culinary heritage of local Jewish residents in the Negev. Accompanying the project is a cookbook that seasons recipes with personal stories of the Culinary Queens themselves, most of whom are first generation settlers who arrived in the Negev during the first waves of immigration from North Africa or their immediate descendants. For its publishers, the cookbook, 'Flavors & Delights of Yeruham', is "a human and culinary journey that arouses a sense of discovery akin to the one we feel when, on our travels abroad, we meet with the locals and taste their dishes in restaurants frequented by the locals themselves, an experience of truly tasting local flavor" (Kantor-Matarasso, 2009, back cover). Readers, however, may find a Negev specialty conspicuously absent: the 'local flavor' is no other than Tunisian couscous, Moroccan cholent, Tripoli-style pickles or blintzes, a widely known Hungarian specialty. Along with personal stories that divulge a sincere sense of local community stemming from a shared history and a common faith rather than from an attachment to the local territory, the food memory of the Culinary Queens, even second-generation Israeli-born, is deeply rooted anywhere but in the Negev. The marginality of the Negev peculiarities to the cuisines of the Culinary Queens comes to light even in the personal commentaries of delighted diners, as Evron's (2009) report demonstrates.

The Culinary Queens of Yeruham are not the only ones to demonstrate the alienation of the Jewish culinary heritage in the Negev from the Negev itself; so do the cooks at the restaurant of Neve Midbar Health Spa Estate – local women who decided to engage in ethnic entrepreneurship due to a strong desire to preserve Jewish family traditions. On the menu, once again, are specialties the cooks themselves associate with Tunisian, Moroccan and Egyptian cuisines (Binder, 2009). Any innovative touch to a dish remains within the realm of individual interpretation; only time will tell whether an alteration has turned an exotic specialty into a more local one. For the time being, the culinary heritage of the Neve Midbar restaurant is non-indigenous to the Negev.

The multi-ethnic character of Jewish culinary heritage in the Negev is not solely a reflection of the local Jewish multi-ethnic social fabric; to a large extent it parallels the multiethnicity of the Jewish–Israeli society as a whole, which may still be too young to develop a distinctive territorial-bound culinary identity(ies). Although all abide by the laws of kashrut, Jewish cuisines in the Diaspora absorbed many characteristics from their non-Jewish environment. Despite major efforts on the part of the first Jewish settlers to force all immigrants into a uniform local mold (or, paradoxically, precisely because of the aggressiveness of these efforts), and also due to globalization, which enables today's immigrants to enjoy transnationalism as they retain connections to their lands of origin, ethnic distinctiveness in Israel still prevails. Accordingly, all Jewish ethnicities adhere to an exilic food memory, to a foreign culinary heritage; "[s]o devoted are many to the food of their origins," writes food critic Rogov, "that there has been little cross-fertilization between these varied styles" (Rogov, 2004). Moreover, in recent years, Israel has witnessed a growing interest of chefs, cooks and foodies in the ethnic roots of their family's culinary identity. Cleaving to an exilic culinary past instead of nurturing a local culinary present will inevitably prevent the country (or its regions) from evolving into a distinctive gastronomic destination. This is not to say that gastronomic tourism development cannot be based on ethnic cuisines; however, the latter would have to be woven together with the geographical place and with the entire community into an attractively idiosyncratic taste – in the broad sense of the term – of the local cultural-scape.

Referring back to the Negev, the gastronomic experiences offered by the local Jewish community celebrate the shared religion, history and fate of the Jewish people wherever they are, but hardly present an attachment to the local territory that could position these experiences as being worth a special journey: domestic tourists can satiate their cultural hunger for Jewish food all around Israel, and international tourists might prefer Tripoli to Yeruham whenever they crave an authentic Tripolitanian couscous. Furthermore, the foreign culinary heritage of the local Jewish community in the Negev may withhold members from endowing current gastronomic tourism initiatives that do promote (at least potentially) an intimate link between food, place and community – be it individual farmstead, local food events or restaurants like Chez Eugène – with the credentials required to authenticate the gastronomic experience on offer.

3.4. Bedouin residents

> "*How do you explain that the authorities supply him [Jewish farmer] with water and electricity yet he only has a few goats or cows? Meanwhile, we, the indigenous people of this area, who depend on herding, grazing, and agriculture as our main source of income, are not allowed to access our own land and practice our livelihoods.*" — al-Ukbi (Human Rights Watch, 2008, p. 37), Bedouin activist

Compared with the Jewish community, the picture presented by the Negev Bedouin reveals a much more organic link between food, place and community. For centuries, the Bedouin subsisted on grazing and herding. The demarcation of tribal boundaries by the Ottoman authorities, impelled largely by strategic interests, initiated a gradual transition from nomadic to semi-nomadic lifestyle, as it provided the Bedouin with enough geopolitical stability to add dry farming agriculture to their pastoral activity. Nomadic or semi-nomadic life and the desert environment dictated Bedouin foodways, shaping many food-related aspects such as choice of ingredients, cooking and preservation methods, and traditional consumption habits. Flocks and herds, for example, supplied the Bedouin with milk that was either consumed fresh or preserved for later use, resulting in an assortment of dairy products, among which are *afik*, sun-dried balls of salty white cheese, or *samneh*, clarified butter. Meat consumption required the slaughtering of an animal and was therefore reserved for special occasions. One of the most lavish meat specialties is *mansaf*, a layered dish of unleavened flat *rarif* bread, rice with samneh, and yogurt-simmered chunks of lamb or goat, topped with dried yogurt or sour milk, almond, nuts and parsley. Mansaf is eaten from a common central platter; eating utensils are either one's hand or pieces of rarif. Although vegetation was sparse, the Bedouin were impressively able to find a source of nutrition in dozens of wild desert plants: stems, leaves, flowers and seeds, tubers, mushrooms, truffles and fruit, were all consumed raw or cooked, fresh or dry, alone or as condiments, as food or in beverages. Fire was used as a heating source for more than simply stewing and grilling: meat, for example, was also cooked for several hours under the fire coals or in small charcoal fire pits built out of stone and sealed with mud; bread, a staple food, was freshly baked over a hot stone or on a convex griddle placed over hot coals. The dangers of the desert underlie traditional Bedouin hospitality: considering any stranger to be a guest of God, a Bedouin would graciously guarantee a stranger's needs for food and shelter for more than three days, as if he were a close family member. The emblem of this hospitality is *kahwa*, coffee, not simply as a drink, but as a complete ritual of social drinking. Prepared from fresh roasted beans by the master of the tent, the making of the unsweetened cardamom-spiced drink involved special paraphernalia and measured meaningful gestures of both host and guest. The centrality of the desert land to Bedouin thought and action, in general, and to their culinary heritage and food traditions, in particular, positions the Bedouin community as an important participant in the development of gastronomic tourism in the Negev. Nevertheless, there are still serious obstacles to overcome prior to acknowledging Bedouin foodways as representative of the Negev.

The term 'Bedouin' derives from the Arabic word badiyah, 'desert.' By definition, then, the Bedouin are desert dwellers rather than Negev dwellers. Warfare in the Islamic armies of the seventh century, blood feuds, the search for land and water resources, and eventually political distress, dispersed these desert dwellers over broad expanses of the Middle East and North Africa. Contemporary Bedouin communities, heterogeneous or not, share much in common, including attachment to the desert and to a culinary culture. Consequently, the Bedouin in Israel, Egypt and Jordan can all claim with equal justice that the touristic mansaf experience they offer is authentic (e.g., Nyazi Tours, n.d.; Regional Council of Unrecognized Villages, n.d.; Travel Souk, n.d.). From this perspective, it appears that the authenticity of the Bedouin gastronomic experience in the Negev is rooted in a food–desert–Bedouin link – not in any food–Negev-Bedouin connection. This makes it difficult to speak of mansaf as a folkway of the Negev Bedouin, and even more so given that this culinary specialty has become discursively metonymic with Jordanian nationhood (e.g., Freij, 2011; Howell, 2003).

However, the major obstacle to turning the Bedouin foodways into the food culture of the Negev stems from the ongoing dispute between the Bedouin community and the State of Israel over land ownership. While the Bedouin argue that their title to parts of the Negev was acknowledged by local authorities prior to the arrival of the Israelis on the scene, they are unable to present any legal proof to confirm their ownership of this land, or, in other words, to contradict Israeli juridical registration of all non-privately held land as state-owned. Ever since the establishment of Israel, national policy has tended to confine the Bedouin to an extremely limited geographical area, which many of them do not even consider their own. Coerced sedentarization has further precluded the Bedouin from adhering to their nomadic way of life. For the Israeli government, this has been a matter of modernization and judicious land use (Yahel, 2006); for the Bedouin – non-Jewish, Arab and Muslim – this policy has been part of a Zionist scheme to Judaize and de-Arabize the region (Abu-Saad, 2008). Adding insult to injury, a substantive part of the Bedouin 'story' in the Negev is now being told by non-Bedouin 'authors' claiming to be authoritative, be they official tourism bodies or private entrepreneurs, for whom Bedouin culture and hospitality has become a matter of profit (e.g., Dinero, 2002; Noam Bamidbar Farm, n.d.; Yagna, 2011): "We are the real face of the Bedouin community," Bedouin protest as they present a hospitality initiative of their own, "[i]t upsets us that most of the knowledge about Bedouin traditions and lifestyle, people acquire in museums and from people who do not come from within the tradition and whose only intention is financial gains" (Salamat, n.d.). In the current situation, then, two significant barriers hamper successful development of gastronomic tourism based on local Bedouin culinary culture: first of all, the Bedouin themselves deny any attachment to their present territory and therefore cannot defend an intimate food–place–community link of the gastronomic experiences they provide; second, out of perceived nationalistic interests, both the Israeli government and the local Jewish community may be reluctant to legitimize the Bedouin gastronomic discourse, either in and of itself or as a leading gastronomic discourse of the Negev, particularly as long as the Jewish community persists in its failure to gastronomically validate its own attachment to the Negev.

4. Conclusions

Gastronomic tourism extends beyond a collection of food specialties or quality food facilities to include products and experiences that encapsulate the unique human and geographical factors of a destination and that, upon consumption, authentically communicate the idiosyncrasies of the local cultural-scape. Fulfilling the needs of gastronomic tourists entails provision of consumption opportunities that convincingly embody a link between the food, the place and the community at a destination. Such provision relies on more than the stockholders who are directly involved in gastronomic tourism. As for the Israeli Negev, although it possesses foodstuffs that reflect the attributes of the soil and local enthusiasm to celebrate culinary traditions, it currently lacks a link between food, place and community that could have positioned the region as an attractive gastronomic destination. Three important players on the host side of gastronomic tourism whose culinary narratives and food-related practices are critical for the emergence of such a link actually preclude local food from becoming an emblematic incarnation of the region's socio-spatial identity: agriculturists deny locals' access to local produce; gastronomic tourism providers vend exoticness instead of localness; the local Jewish community devotedly celebrates the exilic origins of its culinary heritage, and the Bedouin own a culinary culture which is prone to a certain territorial vagueness.

Our analysis of the gastronomic discourse in the Negev suggests that the failure of the local residents to present convincing gastronomic evidence of their sense of community and territorial attachment poses a major barrier to the emergence of a gastronomically attractive food image of the region. More importantly, the alienated, fragmented and incoherent character of the gastronomic discourse is highly correlated with the fragmentation of the social fabric itself – the Negev population behaves more like a society split by rivalries than a collaborative, tolerant community of communities, one that could enjoy the benefits of what Lithwick, Gradus, and Lithwick (1996) term "regional consciousness" (p. 8). Claiming that ongoing governmental policies, which have largely neglected indigenous development, have rendered the Negev peripheral and its population fragmented, these writers assert that "without regional machinery, it is proving to be extremely difficult to build regional consciousness, and without the latter, defining regional interests, needs and priorities remains a top-down bureaucratic rather than a bottom-up community-driven exercise" (p. 160). Gastronomic tourism is proposed herein as a type of 'regional machinery.' Viable plans for gastronomic tourism could foster social networks based on tolerance, trust and reciprocity, and could provide a powerful tool for developing the community and improving the quality of life.

Planning gastronomic tourism in the Negev (or elsewhere) should not entail abrupt replacement of all existing culinary identities with a new identity that supersedes or negates all others. Diversity is an important pull factor of attractive cultural tourism destinations, and as Israeli history proves, not only are attempts to impose an identity arrogant and authoritarian, they also produce the opposite effect of what was intended (Rozin, 2006). The challenge is to create favorable empowering conditions with a threefold goal: first of all, to enable the coexistence of all culinary identities side by side in a complementary manner; secondly, to encourage assimilation of human and geographic factors into the local gastronomy, so that each culinary identity can authentically represent the local cultural-scape; thirdly, to supplement the local culinary identities with a common, regional identity for which the localness of its foodways is a distinct source of pride. Gastronomic tourism, being a subset of cultural tourism, naturally possesses all the qualities that make the latter a particularly favorable form of tourism from the standpoint of fostering community development.

This paper presents a preliminary conceptualization of the interrelations between gastronomic tourism and community development. Empirical validation of this conceptualization requires the development of reliable and acceptable measurement tools to isolate, assess and compare the food–place–community affinity in successful and less successful gastronomic destinations. Extended research into the social networks linking local residents in the context of gastronomic tourism is also recommended. Once substantiated, the theoretical conceptualization could serve a twofold purpose: to broaden the knowledge base of gastronomic tourism planners regarding ways to harness the local community to work for the success of gastronomic tourism development; and to broaden the knowledge base of regional developers regarding ways to harness local gastronomy in the service of community development.

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