

Culinary Tourism — Part I

Add This to Your Menu of Tourism Marketing Programs

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Culinary travel is an important niche travel segment, and this month we'll focus on ways the shopping center industry can capitalize on it. Although the industry has recognized the importance of food courts, restaurants and cafes to extend the length of visit in our centers, only recently have we realized how powerful the food component can be for visitor marketing programs.

There are plenty of tools out there to help you understand this industry. It truly is more than just eating out. An entire niche travels just for culinary purposes, which presents us with opportunity to offer unique shopping and dining experiences to this growing group of "foodies."

According to the International Culinary Tourism Association (ICTA — www.culinarytourism.org), culinary tourism in the broadest sense is the pursuit of unique and memorable culinary experiences of all kinds, often while traveling, though one can also be a culinary tourist at home. "While many people will think of culinary tourism as five-star restaurant experiences or a day of wine tasting, it truly has evolved into so much more," explains Erik Wolf, founder and president of ICTA.

"It is not just for gourmet-oriented folks, but really more for those looking for a unique and memorable food experience. That could include a favorite local pastry chef, a sidewalk vendor in New York City or an interesting bar experience." Subsets of culinary tourism include gourmet tourism, wine tourism and spa

cuisine. And now, to capitalize on this trend, savvy shopping center marketing professionals are developing shop/dine programs for the "foodies" traveling to their destination.

Culinary tourism has exploded in the last couple of years. Prior to 2001, academics had been researching culinary and wine tourism. However, that body of research rarely found its way into the business world. In fact, it wasn't until 1998 that a researcher from the University of Ohio coined the term. In 2001, Wolf wrote and distributed the first white paper on culinary tourism and subsequently formed the ICTA in 2003.

Our visitor marketing programs talk about making shopping and dining an "experience" for this market. How is dining an experience? Kathy Anderson, president of AZTM in Phoenix, AZ, and tourism manager of GGP's America's Premier Shopping Places tourism brand, explains, "Culinary tourism is experiential and interactive because it truly covers the five senses: You see the colorful food, you smell the spices and aromas, you feel the textures and temperatures, you hear the steaks sizzling and

you taste the flavors."

Still not convinced? Research indicates that culinary tourism is in its infancy, about where ecotourism was 20 years ago and adventure tourism was 10 years ago. So it is a new niche worth capitalizing on to drive more visitors to your center.

While we take eating for granted, it has tremendous potential to make a lasting impression. Just think about your last fabulous dining experience. How many people did you tell about it?

Even though hotels have mini bars, coffee pots and kitchennettes, nearly 100% of tourists dine out while traveling. Cuisine is the only attraction that is available year-round and is not hindered by weather. Dining is consistently in the top three favorite activities of the tourist market, and it certainly is not exclusive to any particular age, sex or ethnic group. The higher the dining bill, the more likely the patrons are tourists. And finally, culinary tourism is a

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The ICTA website.

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tool for economic and community development.

Take a look at the number of destination websites that feature food. Google “food destinations” and you will find over 2 million. You’ll find a section on dining at almost any destination or CVB website. Some, such as New Orleans (neworleanscvb.com), are more extensive than others. Besides listing restaurants the New Orleans CVB offers an entire section on food events.

Hotels market to the culinary tourist by packaging their own food experiences with the hotel stay. So do cruise lines, travel magazines with features on food and, of course, shopping centers!

Create Your Own Culinary Tourism Destination

Everything begins with education, and an extremely valuable tool is the ICTA website (see page 13.). Wolf gives excellent examples of programs and provides a great deal of information. “Travelers today seek ‘bragging rights,’ the ability to experience the unique and memorable, and will go home and talk about it. We all know the power of word-of-mouth advertising!” he explains.

“I recently met colleagues who took me to (an un-named national chain restaurant) and I went kicking and screaming,” laughs Wolf. I could relate. Years ago I had a similar experience in Buenos Aires when the locals thought I wanted an American dining experience.

Nothing could be further from the truth!

Even though so many shopping centers have national chains, you can dig deeper to offer a culinary experience at just about any type of center. Second, developers are better at understanding the desire for local cuisine served by a local restaurant or café. These local hang-outs lure visitors. The more people traveling to a destination, the more the chains will benefit as well.

Next, educate your restaurants, cafes and food outlets. Anderson suggests holding category meetings to explore opportunities, tourism training on what the visitor is seeking, offering assistance in product development and meeting with your CVB to further define opportunities. “Product development means helping the restaurants promote their group dining opportunities to our tour operators, encouraging them to offer *prix fixe* menus for groups, and offering food demonstrations and celebrity chef appearances,” explains Anderson. The ICTA offers a series of training programs to help shopping center management get the most out of culinary tourism.

Defining opportunities with your destination can really be an eye-opener. For example, California’s Santa Barbara County offers an extensive program through its CVB and Film Commission called “Capturing the Foodies: A Recipe for Marketing Success.” This launched several years ago as they recognized how people travel to enjoy food and drink. Their culinary attractions

include food festivals and events, cooking schools, farmers’ and fishermen’s markets, agricultural tours, food shops, wine and beer tastings, and of course, restaurant dining.

Their research found that culinary tourists are most likely to be affluent mature couples or affluent young singles. Furthermore, segments most likely to be interested in culinary tourism represent 27.3% of the US adult population. This comprehensive campaign included the development of a culinary guide, website, PR and advertising campaigns, trade show and convention participation, and promotions. A summary of their case study is available online as a PDF at www.rancassocciates.com/pdfs/foodie.pdf.

Their website is www.santabarbaraca.com/culinary.

What Centers Are Doing

Our first culinary experience begins in Florida’s Panhandle. Intrawest, a world renowned resorts developer, manages the Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort in Sandestin, FL. The Sandestin experience includes two shopping venues, the Village at Baytowne Wharf and The Market Shops. Both understand the power of marketing to the culinary traveler and both offer food festivals throughout the year. The Village is a collection of 50+ merchants, the majority local with about half in the food category. Initial leasing efforts were directed toward finding the best of the best operator in each food category; therefore, it is a culinary experience in itself. The Market Shops, a more traditional specialty center, offers

more retail than food, but still capitalizes on this market with unique food and wine festivals, one of which I had the pleasure of experiencing when the Beaujolais Nouveau wines were introduced last fall.

The Market Shops has understood the importance of dining for nearly 20 years. The Annual Great Southern Gumbo Cook-Off at The Market Shops, a ticketed event, takes place in the courtyards and outside the stores on a Saturday in January. This year, in addition to the 15+ area restaurants who participated with their best gumbo recipe, they added a new twist by allowing area businesses to put their best gumbo forward right along with the restaurants. Besides sampling delicious gumbos, guests enjoyed live Cajun music and door prizes. Regional celebrity judges “blind” tasted the gumbos and awarded the top three critics choice awards. There was also public voting for the people’s choice award. Proceeds went to Covenant Hospice and Okaloosa-Walton Child Care Service, Inc.

The Village recently held its annual Sandestin Wine Festival, one of the events that has set the area apart as a “wine country” all its own. Sandestin transformed itself into the South of France with the four-day event designed to showcase the best wines in the world through a series of tastings of more than 600 fine wines. Each year, thousands of wine enthusiasts flock to the event. And, of course, The Village merchants benefit tremendously because most people eat a meal after tasting wines, and shop as well.

Nothing like a bit of wine to pry open the pocketbook!

Next month we will take a deeper look at this explosion in culinary tourism. Also, we will cover additional programs at Sandestin as well as examples from other parts of the country such as The Pier Shops in Atlantic City, Las Vegas APSP shopping centers, Shop America Shop & Dine Packages and more!

We will conclude with the latest in foodie websites, “Foodtrekker,” where Wolf explains terms such as ‘psycho-culinary profiling’ and ‘localvore.’

We are continuing this series on tourism every other month and would like to focus on some of the more innovative tourism programs. Please submit yours to me, either via e-mail, fax 732/545-3138 or mail. If possible, include samples of your graphics via e-mail. Full credit will be given to the person or team responsible for the program. ■

CJF Marketing International offers a range of services for creating and implementing strategic tourism, economic development and marketing programs for shopping centers, urban entertainment projects, downtown retail districts, communities and commercial properties globally. The firm also offers educational programs and seminars for corporate meeting planners, shopping center developers, communities and re-development agencies. Feimster can be reached by phone at 732/249-6080 or by fax at 732/545-3138. Visit her website at cjfmarketinginternational.com.

Ad Review

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says Stephanie Shriver-Engdahl, director of advertising, Forest City Commercial Management. “The responders are like the cream of the crop. They are the people who are actually moved by our offer. They’re happy to get it and they go back to the shopping center because of it.”

She said the tax rebate offer was intended to remind their responders of the role they play in keeping the economy going. “We’re not asking people to go into debt, but just to think about taking the family out to dinner, getting a pair of shoes or whatever. And we’re not asking them to do it alone. If they do it and do it in our shopping centers, we’re going to give them money, too. We’re trying to give them a reason to come to our shopping center instead of taking their money and sticking it in the bank and hanging at home.”

Shriver-Engdahl says response from Forest City’s “responder” database averages in the double digits. “We like to think that if we don’t have this down to a science, we have it down to a fine art,” she said. “Our first rule is: Make sure the offer’s great. Make sure it is targeted properly. Make sure you’ve done everything you can to ensure that somebody would want to read it.” ■

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