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# A study of place-based food tourism in northeast Iowa communities

**Abstract:** Food tourism festivals have the potential to grow markets and add value to existing place-based food products. The project profiles food tourism and documents the potential in northeast Iowa for benefits to farmers and communities.

## Question & Answer

**Q:** Who are the visitors interested on place-based food, how much more are they willing to pay for place-based food, and what should be done to attract more visitors in the community?

**A:** The study characterized these visitors and suggested ways to increase interest in food tourism in Iowa.

- Festival participants' profiles,
- Festival participants' travel motivations,
- The market area of place-based food tourism,
- Sources of travel information where northeast Iowa communities should spend advertising dollars, and
- The economic impact of place-based food tourism on communities.

## Background

Food and beverage tourism is increasingly being recognized as an important part of the cultural tourism market. This can include gastronomic tourism, culinary tourism, and cuisine tourism. At the same time, special events and festivals have become one of the fastest growing types of tourism attractions and have attracted attention from tourism marketing professionals. The interest in such experiences also has fueled the development of food festivals that rural communities use to promote local products and rural food heritage and differentiate themselves from urban community festivals.

This study included an analysis of travel motivations of visitors and their common interests in place-based foods in northeast Iowa community festivals. For this study, food is considered to be place-based if it is being grown or processed in northeast Iowa. The study identified and described:

## Approach and methods

A four-part survey was developed and visitors were asked about:

- Travel and trip characteristics;
- Spending patterns, especially related to place-based foods;
- Motivations for attending place-based food festivals; and
- Demographic qualities.

Visitors were intercepted at 11 northeast Iowa festivals with place-based food/product themes. The visitors were intercepted while attending the festivals between May and October 2005, and 180 surveys were completed.

## Results and discussion

Based on responses from those individuals who returned the surveys, the project investigators reported these findings:

Most of the visitors who attended the place-based food festivals are repeat visitors, who traveled specifically to

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attend the festival and learned of the event primarily by word of mouth. Generally they are not part of organized tour groups. They are predominantly in the area on a day trip, while most of those who stay overnight lodge with friends or relatives.

The highest spending category for the visitors who responded to the survey is lodging, followed by shopping and restaurants. First-time visitors spent significantly more than repeat visitors for shopping.

Visitors at the place-based food festivals are willing to pay more for the locally produced food: 36 percent of them will pay 1 to 5 percent more for place-based food, and another 36 percent will pay an additional 6 to 10 percent for place-based food products. Based on the survey results, those with higher household incomes were willing to pay a higher premium for place-based foods.

Visitors to place-based food festivals chose to attend because they wanted to support, taste, and purchase place-based foods; to simply attend the festival; and to support and learn more about place-based food in northeast Iowa. They generally were satisfied with both the visiting experience and the food.

The largest number of visitors to the place-based food festivals was in the 26- to 35-year age group. Slightly more women than men who attended these festivals returned their surveys.

### **Conclusions**

The development of food tourism as a generator of income, and enhancement of community pride and identity has emerged as an objective in many places. Communities seeking ways and means to increase the number of visitors need to identify visitor characteristics, their motivations, and means of providing a satisfactory experience. Understanding expenditure patterns and activities of visitors during their visit to a specific destination is the key to successful strategic planning for food tourism ventures.

Visitors to place-based food festivals in northeast Iowa were typically middle-aged, college graduates, and fairly affluent. Their primary motivation was to attend the festivals, closely followed by the desire to support, taste, and purchase place-based food. Findings reveal opportunities for increased marketing efforts aimed at certain participants. More advertising should be done to attract first-time visitors, members of younger and older generations from Iowa and Illinois, particularly from neighboring counties. Since festivals appear to have a positive economic impact, partnerships and collaboration with other tourism and tourism-related businesses is critical to enhance greater and lengthier visitation in the region.

### **Impact of results**

Visitors to place-based food festivals were motivated to support, taste, and purchase place-based foods. They learned about the festivals via word of mouth, so festival planners should make more efforts to advertise in newspapers, radios, and web sites. Coordination with partner sites of Silos and Smokestacks National Heritage Association and visitor and convention bureaus is important.

The total economic impact of visitors (initial spending \$1.6 million) to place-based food festivals in terms of sales is almost \$2.6 million and for every \$1 spent, a new output or sales of \$.61 is created (output multiplier 1.61); in terms of personal income is \$1.4 million, and in terms of employment is 51 jobs. More place-based food festivals should be organized as they clearly indicate a positive economic impact in the communities.

### **Education and outreach**

An article on this study will be submitted to the *Managing Leisure: An International Journal*. More information about the research can be found at the STEP web site, [www.uni.edu.step](http://www.uni.edu.step).

### **Leveraged funds**

The project investigators worked with Candy Streed of Silos and Smokestacks National Heritage Association, which provided an additional \$5,360 in funding for this work.

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