
CONSUMER IMAGERY AND SOUTHERN US FOODS: A PRELIMINARY STUDY.

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the consumer's image of stereotypical Southern foods in the Southern United States (US), as well as their level of consumption, and sheds light on the trade-off that many consumers continue to make favouring taste over health when it comes to consumption. Data were collected in a South-eastern US town via direct questionnaire distribution; 500 questionnaires were distributed and 233 usable responses obtained. The findings indicate that the high calorie content or the 'unhealthy' nature of the foods, but at the same time the 'tasty' element are images consistently identified in respondents' comments. Thus, there appears to be an obvious recognition of the unhealthy aspect of stereotypical Southern cuisine in favour of indulgence, and to fulfil images of tasty 'comfort' foods. However, given the many possible variations of Southern foods and dishes, including healthier alternatives, the findings have very important implications for the region's food and beverage industry. In this regard, enhancing the image of these traditional foods or food cultures for instance could be very beneficial. Consumer education is therefore critical in assisting consumers in making more informed food choices. In this process, the role of different agencies and sectors (hospitality and tourism) in designing and executing food-education related strategies, including the promotion of the local cuisine could be invaluable.

KEYWORDS: *Southern foods, consumers, stereotypical foods, images, comfort foods, South-eastern United States.*

Introduction

Many regions have become icons or symbols for different types of foods throughout decades, centuries and even millennia. The cases of wine- and food-regions in France, Italy, Spain and Portugal have over time contributed to the development of very clear and precise images, feelings and desires in many consumers' minds. The images those regions evoke may in fact create fantasies of a culinary nature, where indulgence and pleasure-seeking (Sassatelli & Davolio, 2010) occur through what some might consider hedonic consumption experiences. The consumers may be local, tourists and travellers who intentionally or unintentionally 'absorb' and become involved with the local food culture when visiting those regions, where food can sometimes represent the "peak experience" (Quan & Wang, 2004). Consumer segments may include those more passionate self-confessed food and beverage 'pilgrims' that invest time and resources to experience and indulge themselves in culinary delights. Thus, the impact of images among consumers can be very powerful and take different forms.

According to (Bone and Ellen, 1992) and (Liang and Cherian, 2010) imagery involves sight, smell, sound, tactile sensations and taste. In essence, imagery relates to sensory information that is represented in working memory (MacInnis & Price, 1987). (Yuille & Catchpole, 1977) in (MacInnis & Price, 1987) explain that imagery "involves

concrete sensory representation of ideas, feelings, and memories, and it permits direct recovery of past experiences.” Regarding food and beverage, imagery plays a key role in bringing consumers’ minds back to pleasant moments of past experiences that in many cases help them connect to a particular place, then to a product. In this food and beverage context, ‘regional imagery’ is a very important tool of commercial value (Henchion & McIntyre, 2000) that serves as a vehicle for showcasing the area’s products.

In the United States, for example, the state of California has been a leading force in the growth, production and promotion / marketing of ‘iconic’ foods and beverages such as wine (Wine Institute, 2008). The wine regions of Napa and Sonoma, the numerous food and beverage festivals held (FoodReference.com, 2010), and the state’s growing reputation for culinary sophistication and fine dining are illustrations of its strong drive for wine, food and culinary excellence. Not surprisingly, today the word ‘California’ evokes images among visitors- and non-visitors- interested in travel, food and similar pleasure-seeking experiences.

In comparison, many other regions still remain unnoticed with regards to their food and beverage products both from an operational (marketing) and consumer perspective. In fact, there is a lack of academic and practitioner information that is also obvious regarding the foods and beverages of regions that may not have the relevance or sophistication of California or other areas/states. Among the many regions that to date have received very little attention from hospitality, tourism and other forms of academic research is that of the Southern United States. The Southern region includes the states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North and South Carolina and Tennessee (Walter, 1971). Books, magazines, newspapers, and increasingly the internet, or different forms of social media are vehicles spreading the word about the strong cultural heritage and the significance that food has for Southern people. However, very few authors and sources report on the consumer perspective and little information exists linking:

- Consumers’ image of stereotypical Southern foods, and
- Their level of consumption of stereotypical Southern foods

A stereotype can be defined as “a standardized mental picture held in common by members of a group and representing an oversimplified opinion, affective attitude or uncritical judgment” (Webster’s Dictionary, in Cardello et. al., 1996).

In this context, this preliminary study investigates images and consumption of Southern foods from Southern consumers’ perspective. Information addressing these areas could be very valuable for several sectors (hospitality / tourism), as well as for government agencies, consumer groups and consumers. For example, new information concerning respondents’ images of Southern food consumption could help identify food preferences and eating patterns. In this context, the hospitality sector could use new information to assist consumers providing different food choices, including fresher and / or healthier food (dishes) alternatives. Information that identifies consumers’ choices could also assist health organisations and restaurateurs in developing strategies and in

providing consumers with proper and clear product information. In turn, these measures could encourage many consumers to monitor their eating patterns, including the volume and content of the foods they consume. These alternatives could also help educate consumers and further assist them in making more 'sensible' food consumption choices as they relate to their health. Thus consumers could minimise the risk of developing and /or aggravating health issues related to excessive or unhealthy food consumption.

Aspects Related to 'Comfort Food' Consumption

In many regions of the United States, local food cultures, traditions and ways of preparing foods (e.g., their taste) have been developed over centuries. According to (Smith et al., 2006) "foods include beliefs and customs about how they should be consumed and who should consume them... and beliefs about their activity in the body" Many of those foods, including have been associated with the term 'comfort food' (Terwilliger, 2008; Grossman, 2004); four different categories have been identified: convenience, indulgence, nostalgic and physical comfort foods (Locher et al., 2005 Both positive and negative aspects related to comfort foods appear to support (Locher et al.'s, 2005) classification. From a more 'positive perspective,' (Wansink et al., 2003) refer to comfort foods as those evoking "a psychologically comfortable and pleasurable state for a person" (Stein, 2008) also takes a positive approach, stating that comfort food preferences "are associated with positive memories" Furthermore, in their study, (Dallman et al., 2005) found that "comfort food" helps reduce the degree of stressor-induced sympathetic responses" alluding to comfort foods' impact in providing psychological relief, if only temporary.

In contrast, several reports and studies identify issues of concern that provide a different perspective at relationships between comfort foods and people's mental and physical well-being. According to (Locher et al., 2005) there is a relationship between comfort food and "the role that mood plays in food selection" particularly in terms of "the relieving of distress" In fact, in the context of certain foods, mental imagery can be "a central feature of food craving ... visual in modality" (Tiggemann & Kemp, 2005) (Kandiah et al., 2006) appear to be in agreement with these aspects, adding: "When stressed, some individuals may be turning to food for psychological comfort rather than physiological need" In stressful situations, comfort foods tend to be preferred (Kandiah et al., 2006) and at the same time fewer 'healthy eating' options are made.

(Dallman et al., 2003) provide another demonstration of the negative aspects related to comfort foods, noting that: "The foods that are overindulged-in typically have high fat and carbohydrate caloric content and may be characterized as comfort food" Along these lines, in their study conducted among consumers in (Montreal, Dubé et al., 2005) found both positive and negative outcomes of comfort food consumption depending on consumers' gender, age and cultural background. For instance, positive emotions appear to motivate men's consumption of comfort foods, but negative among women (Dubé et al., 2005). Similarly, older participants of French cultural background experienced "positive affect" in comfort food consumption, while younger consumers, as well as those of English background had "more intense negative emotions prior to

consuming comfort foods” (Dubé et al., 2005,).

Despite the potential negative impacts of indulgence, in some environments consuming different foods- even ‘unhealthier’ foods- does not appear to be as harmful among consumers. Such a claim has been made among some researchers concerning the so-called ‘French paradox’ (Mudry, 2010; Iijima et al., 2002; Renaud & Lorgeril, 1992). This paradox first relates to ways in which a country’s food culture is essentially unhealthy: “French total consumption of saturated fat is similar to that of other developed countries” (Stanley & Mazier, 1999, The ‘paradox’ is that “French mortality from coronary disease is only one third of the average” (Stanley & Mazier, 1999, Moreover, moderate wine consumption may be a direct contributor to France’s rather low mortality from coronary disease (Iijima et al., 2002; Stanley & Mazier, 1999; Renaud & Lorgeril, 1992). (Stanley & Mazier, 1999) note that wine contains several components such as ethanol, phenols and nitric oxide that may contribute to minimising those health issues.

In reference to the ‘convenience’ aspect of comfort foods that (Locher et al., 2005) mention, (Park, 2004) conducted a study among South Korean fast-food consumers and identified one respondent group composed of individuals that valued the economical and functional aspects of eating out in fast-food restaurants. However, other studies also discuss the negative implications that the ‘convenience’ aspect of comfort foods can have for many consumers. Such a topic is very relevant, as today nations around the world are experiencing an obesity ‘epidemic’ that to a great extent has been associated to fast food consumption (Paeratakul et al., 2003). For millions of people purchasing fast foods in drive-throughs, for instance, there is an element of convenience, with little time, effort and money invested in purchasing and consuming those foods. Obesity related problems are particularly serious in the United States (Reuters, 2009; Tanner, 2010). Moreover, within the United States the Southern region is notorious for featuring the highest percentages of obesity in the entire nation (Neergaard, 2009; Stallcup, 2008).

Southern Food: Cultural and Health-related Aspects

Southern food, while far from being sophisticated or pretentious, encapsulates cultural, traditional and strong sensory elements, as the following excerpt suggests: “Its sights, sounds, tastes, smells... are thought to evoke reminiscences of childhood, stir up emotions from the past, and aid southerners in creating new memories... only one thing could possibly embody such traits and induce such sentiment: southern food” (Latshaw, 2009). Within a similar context, and referring to previous times in the Southern region, (Walter, 1971) points out: “And among the rites and observances, none was more important than those of the table” in a clear reference of the meaning and importance Southern foods have had for Southern people for a very long time. Despite these very powerful descriptions, there are concerns that the changes and pace of time may be affecting the essence of Southern foods as well as their meaning, prompting (Farr, 1995) to ask: “Are the changes good? Is the food as wholesome and pleasing as it was when our grandmothers were young?”. However, there is also an argument that the

strong cultural aspect of Southern foods may be a key element in the ‘survival’ of such culinary tradition: “Even in the current age of declining regional identity, the food of the South is still an important matter- some would say a consuming passion- to millions of people...” (Egerton, 1987,).

Apart from their notoriety and deep-rooted tradition, Southern dishes are also known for their association with fried foods (WBIR.com, 2001). Typical Southern foods comprise a very wide range of choices that in some cases and to some extent fit such association: super crisp country fried chicken, fried or grilled catfish, deep-fried Okra, fried green tomatoes, baked cheese grits, fried turnip greens (Alabama Tourism Department, 2005; Dupree, 2004). In some hospitality environments, the terms ‘comfort’ or ‘soul food’ are often used to refer to some variations of Southern foods. Soul food, for instance, includes consumption of green leafy vegetables and vegetable plates but also of starchy vegetables, grains, whole milk and meats that are commonly breaded and deep fried (Kulkarni, 2004,). Because of many consumers’ high intake of fried and sweet foods, it is not surprising that cholesterol and other health related issues are rife in the Southern region of the United States, particularly in the rural areas (Keyserling et al., 2002) where fewer medical and other essential resources may be available to combat diseases related to high consumption of unhealthy foods. Smith et al. (2006), for instance, refer to the term ‘Stroke Belt’ to underline the higher mortality rates of the South-eastern region due to heart strokes, although diabetes is also prevalent (Lackland & Moore, 1997, in Smith et al. 2006). Smith et al. (2006) also point out that “Salted pork fat and meat are added to vegetables as seasoning...”, and that lard is commonly used to bake traditional items of Southern cuisine such as biscuits or cornbread.

However, there are many other dishes that do not fit the stereotypical image that Southern foods may evoke among many consumers. A few examples of these include Shrimp Creole, Satsuma orange pork chops, marinated Okra, black-eyed peas, collard greens, muscadines, or many desserts: fruit cobbler, corn pudding, apple dumplings and chocolate or sweet potato pecan pie (Alabama Tourism Department, 2005; Dupree, 2004). The case of muscadines grapes is particularly interesting despite the very limited research of this food in business, marketing, hospitality or tourism environments. Muscadines (*Vitis rotundifolia* Michx.) are Southern vines that produce grapes containing higher levels of resveratrol, a phenolic compound, than other grape varieties (e.g., *Vitis Vinifera*) (Ector et al., 1996). Several studies have reported the many healthy properties of muscadine grapes (God et al., 2007; Hudson et al., 2007; Pastrana-Bonilla, 2003). Muscadines are processed into alcoholic and non-alcoholic wines, and are also used in traditional Southern cuisine as sauces or desserts.

In the following sections, this study will investigate consumers’ images and consumption of stereotypical Southern foods. Despite the importance of these dimensions from a health or consumer behaviour perspective, to date these areas have received very limited attention from an academic perspective.

Methodology

Given the overall objectives of the study, the involvement of Southern residents was considered essential. The convenience of seeking- and potentially eliciting hundreds of responses- in environments where large numbers of individuals gather was a determinant factor in the decision to approach individuals attending sports events at a university located in the state of Alabama. A questionnaire was designed for this purpose as opposed to face-to-face or other forms of data collection. A quick response turnaround and the convenience for many potential participants to complete the two-page questionnaire before, during or even after the game were reasons for choosing questionnaires. The structure of the questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative data in the form of demographic and other numerical information from the participants (e.g., frequency of monthly consumption of Southern foods, their knowledge of Southern foods, etc.). At the same time, however, respondents were asked to write the images that Southern foods evoked according to their own words. This component and the addition of space for comments in the questionnaire were also believed to facilitate the collection of qualitative data. Fundamentally, the questionnaire sought to gather data that would answer several research question related to Southern food consumption, including:

- What images do stereotypical Southern foods evoke among consumers? Also,
- What is respondents' level of consumption of stereotypical Southern foods?

Upon receiving ethical clearance from the university in mid-December 2009, the questionnaires were distributed among individuals attending university basketball games between December 2009 and March 2010. As it was noticed during the questionnaire distribution process, attendees were people from different age, gender and walks of life (e.g., students, university staff, local residents). This circumstance was believed to allow for a more 'balanced' questionnaire distribution and collect data from different consumer groups, while at the same time it minimised the possibility of only one dominant group's participation (e.g., mainly college students).

Before questionnaires were distributed, potential participants were briefly introduced to the study's objectives and invited to take part in the study. In order to facilitate their participation, those who agreed to complete the questionnaire were provided an envelope containing the questionnaire, a letter outlining the objectives of the study and the university's ethical approval. The envelope also contained a self-addressed, pre-paid envelope so that those participating could complete the questionnaire at their leisure and mail it to the researchers free of cost. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed and 253 received. While it is recognised that this number is far from sufficient in order to make any findings generalisable of the Southern or other consumer population, given the preliminary nature of the study this number of responses was believed appropriate.

The information respondents provided in the questionnaire was first entered into Microsoft Excel, and then transferred to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Once the data were entered on SPSS and preliminary tests were run it was

noticed that 12 respondents were not from the Southern region of the United States and that eight respondents did not mention their region of residence. Because the study focussed on Southern residents that may be more knowledgeable of Southern foods, only those that indicated living in Southern states were considered. Thus, the 20 responses were excluded from the study, and the total usable number of responses was 233, a 46.6% response rate. Respondents' written comments were coded as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2) and so forth. Content analysis was used in accord with (Weber, 1990) when identifying threads / themes from keywords, short comments and other qualitative information participants provided.

Results

A first area related to the analysis of the collected data refers to participants' demographic information. As Table 1 illustrates, despite females outnumbering males, both genders are well represented. Similarly, the different age groups seem to be balanced for the most part in terms of numerical representation, while Alabama respondents outnumber those from other Southern states. As would be expected, the majority of respondents regularly consume Southern foods. Also, overall, respondents tend to eat out often, suggesting that consumption of Southern foods outside their homes may occur regularly. When asked to rate their knowledge of Southern foods the resulting mean (4.03) confirms that they are knowledgeable. Interestingly, Alabama participants (mean=4.13) appeared to be more knowledgeable than those of other Southern states (mean=3.65); the independent t-test performed between these two groups indicated a statistically significant difference ($p=0.001$).

Table 1: General respondent-related demographic information.

Gender	n	%
Males	96	41.2
Females	137	58.8
Total	233	100.0
Age groups		
21-29	38	16.3
30-39	28	12.0
40-49	48	20.6
50-59	56	24.0
60+	62	26.6
Missing responses	1	0.4
Total	233	100.0

Gender	n	%
Respondents' residence		
Alabama	181	77.7
Other Southern states	52	22.3
Total	233	100.0
Frequency of eating typical Southern dishes (per month)		
1 – 4 times a month	77	33.0
5 – 10 times a month	78	33.5
11+ times a month	73	31.3
Missing responses (3) and 'never' (2)	5	2.2
Total	233	100.0
Knowledge of typical Southern dishes *		Mean
Participants' mean knowledge of typical Southern dishes		.912
Frequency of eating out (times per week)		n
Once	39	16.7
Twice	66	28.3
Three times	56	24.0
Four times	28	12.0
Five and more	40	17.2
Never	4	1.7
Total	233	100.0

* Using a scale, where 1= No knowledge at all, and 5= Very knowledgeable.

Queried about the images that come to their minds when thinking of stereotypical Southern foods (Table 2), almost half (49.8%) of the respondents indicated fried chicken as the predominantly stereotypical foods, followed by cornbread and grits. Black-eyed peas and green vegetables were also associated with stereotypical foods, as were desserts rich in sugar (pies).

Main cooked / fried / baked foods chosen	n	%
Fried chicken	116	49.8
Corn bread	38	16.3
Grits	28	12.0
Fried green tomatoes	25	10.7
Barbeque / barbeque pork	23	9.9
Main produce-related foods chosen		
Black-eyed peas, other peas	32	13.7
Collard greens / collards	22	9.4
Turnip greens	21	9.0
Corn / creamed corn	15	6.4
Main desserts chosen		
Pecan pie	30	12.9
Cobbler (apple, blackberry, peach, pecan, etc.)	26	11.2
Other pies (e.g., key lime, lemon, sweet potato, peach, apple, etc.)	25	10.7

* Using a scale, where 1= No knowledge at all, and 5= Very knowledgeable.

Furthermore (Table 3), there is general agreement regarding foods' high calorie content and of being 'unhealthy' in different ways. The words and phrases respondents used to indicate their images of stereotypical Southern foods also suggest that because of the ways many Southern dishes are prepared (e.g., deep fried), the image of such foods may have been somewhat distorted to directly relate them to unhealthy eating habits. However, Table 3 also shows that many respondents associated local produce (collard greens, black-eyed peas) to stereotypical Southern foods. In a recent study, Vida and Reardon (2008) explain that "Consumers have diverse perceptions about products based on stereotyped national images of the country where the product is produced or is perceived produced; these perceptions affect consumer attitudes, purchase intentions and behaviors".

For example, when images of stereotypical French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese or Japanese foods / cuisine are evoked, arguably many ingredients and elements of those foods (olive oil, raw fish, seaweed, pasta, wine, etc.) may be the focus of the overall 'final' product, and much less so the unhealthy ways of cooking those foods or the dubious quality of the 'final product' in terms of its health benefits. The fact that many respondents associate stereotypical Southern foods to unhealthy eating habits suggest the value of consumer education concerning a) knowledge of regional/local produce used in the preparation of dishes, b) ways to prepare those dishes in ways that may result

in positive (healthier) impacts and eating habits, and c) strengthen a food culture that in the case of Southern states has many variations, uniqueness and a long history.

Inter-group comparisons concerning responses of images of foods and genders did not result in any significant differences; this outcome was similar between respondents from Alabama and other Southern states. However, in comparing frequency of eating stereotypical Southern foods (monthly) and perceptions of high calorie, taste or both, a statistically significant relationships was identified ($\chi^2(4, n=182) = 17.957, (p=0.000)$). Among those respondents that consumed these foods more frequently (11 or more times per month), 16.9% indicated high calorie only, 30.5% taste only and 52.5% both high calorie and taste. In contrast, of those that consumed those foods less frequently (1-4 times per month), 39.7% indicated high calorie, 10.3% taste and 50% both high calorie and taste. Thus, in this study less consumption of stereotypical Southern foods appears to suggest more awareness of high calorie intake and less agreement of the ‘tastiness’ of these same foods. Both groups, however, seem to equally agree on both the high calorie and taste components of stereotypical Southern foods they consume.

Also, a higher percentage of Alabama respondents related to both ‘high calorie’ and taste as compared to respondents from other states, that is, respondents from Alabama directly related to both keywords in their answer. However, given the low number of respondents from other Southern states, no patterns or comments that could explain such difference were identified. Several differences were found between age groups, as well as between different respondent groups in terms of restaurant patronage and monthly consumption of Southern foods. For instance, Table 3 shows that the younger the respondents the higher the percentage of those who acknowledged the high calorie aspect of stereotypical Southern foods.

Table 3: Respondents' images of stereotypical Southern foods.

All respondents - Keywords			n	%
High calorie (HC) only			139	59.7
Taste (T) only			146	62.7
Both (T, HC) together			99	42.5
Genders	Males		Females	
	n	%	n	%
High calorie (HC) only	58	60.4	81	59.1
Taste (T) only	62	64.6	84	61.3
Both (T, HC) together	43	44.8	56	40.9
Alabama – Other Southern respondents	Alabama		Other South.	
		n	%	n%
High calorie (HC) only	112	61.9	27	51.9
Taste (T) only	120	66.3	26	50.0
Both (T, HC) together	83	45.9	16	30.8

Age Groups	21-29		30-39		40-49		50-59		60+	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
High calorie (HC) only	27	71.1	18	64.3	29	60.4	33	58.9	32	51.6
Taste (T) only	20	52.6	12	42.9	29	60.4	41	73.2	44	71.0
Both (T, HC)	18	47.4	10	35.7	19	39.6	26	46.4	26	41.9
Frequency eating out (per week)										
	1	2	3	4	5+					
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
High calorie (HC) only	23	59.0	49	74.2	32	57.1	13	46.4	20	50.0
Taste (T) only	22	56.4	44	66.7	33	58.9	17	60.7	29	72.5
Both (T, HC)	16	41.0	32	48.5	23	41.1	10	35.7	17	42.5

Frequency of eating Southern foods (per month)	1-4		5-10		11+	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
High calorie (HC) only	54	70.1	43	55.1	41	56.2
Taste (T) only	37	48.1	57	73.1	49	67.1
Both (T, HC)	31	40.3	35	44.9	32	43.8

The higher awareness among younger generations of consumers could be justified by more consumer information available nowadays, or the fact that many among the younger respondents may be attending the local university and therefore may receive more education (e.g., on campus) concerning calorie content and (unhealthy) eating patterns. In contrast, the older the respondents, the more they seemed to relate to the tasty component of stereotypical Southern foods, seemingly in preference of the more unpleasant issues of high calories and similar negative images as is the case of younger respondent groups.

Regarding respondents' frequency of eating out and their images of stereotypical Southern foods, no clear patterns were identified; however, percentages are visibly higher among those eating out more frequently and their chosen keyword ('taste') to illustrate their images. This finding illustrates that many among these respondents consume Southern foods outside their home and do so to indulge themselves with tasty foods. Therefore, this group may be less concerned with unhealthy aspects of (Southern) food consumption. Finally, there are some differences between the frequency of eating Southern foods and the keyword chosen. A higher percentage of those eating Southern foods more often mentioned the 'tasty' element while made less

reference to the ‘high calorie’ aspect. Again, the higher tendency to consume such foods appears to be much related to the indulgence factor that may lead to unhealthy eating behaviour, including excessive consumption that previous researchers have discussed (Warshaw, 1993; Middleton, 2000).

Respondents’ Comments on Southern Foods

Overall, participants’ written comments further illustrate the negative elements they tend to associate images of stereotypical Southern food with. In a clear reference to opulence and excess, one respondent recognised such negative image (P143): “Stereo-type is fried and high-fat with nutrients refined out and excessive sugar and excessive portions.” Furthermore, 27 participants used the word ‘fatty,’ 14 mentioned ‘fried,’ three other comments provided the word ‘greasy,’ and individual responses referred to ‘poor nutrition,’ ‘not nutritious,’ ‘salty,’ ‘butter and sugar’ and ‘cholesterol.’ As the following comments illustrate, other cases respondents used a combination of keywords to communicate their own images:

- P4: Fatty, high calorie, taste good, comfort.
- P5: Cooked correctly, nothing is better. Healthy or not!
- P92: Fatty but delicious ... poor healthy decisions [sic].
- P91: Fatty high calorie lots of butter fried tastes amazing.

Overall, as much as 62.7% of all respondents used the word ‘tasty’ to describe their memories of stereotypical Southern foods (Table 3). Also, more than 40% mentioned both the high calorie and the ‘tasty’ aspect of foods, suggesting that despite its unhealthy components, the psychological ‘trade-off’ between negative images and the ‘positive’ sensory element (taste) was stronger for them.

- P13: Fatty high tastes good, when cooked properly and this happens rarely.
- P24: Luscious, tastes great, comforting, fatty, earthy, basic, homey, happy.
- P148F: Best tasting food in the world but is also high in calorie with high fat intake.

A total of 15 comments included the word ‘comfort,’ suggesting that in many cases indulgence was preferred over the unhealthy nature of stereotypical Southern foods. Moreover, the image of ‘comfort’ food evoked in respondents’ minds suggests that the ingredients used (e.g., animal fat, starch, sugar) were of no concern as long as respondents perceived the taste as pleasurable and fulfilling.

- P32: “We love fried foods we know they aren’t good for you but still indulge anyway.”
- P250: “Rich, indulgent, not nutritious, delicious, traditional.”

Despite the overwhelming evidence that most respondents consider negative aspects of Southern cuisine when they think of these foods, many studies, news and reports demonstrate that numerous aspects of Southern cooking are closely related to

fresh, natural, local and healthier eating. For example, much, if not all, the Southern region is composed of states where agriculture, including horticulture, cattle, fish farming and other sub-sectors are very important for their economy and represent a very strong element contributing to people's health well-being. The cases of Alabama (Alabama Tourism Department, 2005), Florida (Olsen & Santos, 2010), and Georgia (Boatright & McKissick, 2010) to name only a few illustrate that much, if not all, of the produce used in the preparation of Southern dishes is locally grown and available at many farmers' markets, farm gates and other selling points. The availability of so much state-grown produce is a proof that Southern food features many ingredients to develop, prepare, promote and market wholesome but also nutritious and healthy dishes. In fact, only the following comments illustrate that there was awareness of healthier aspects of Southern foods, particularly as they refer to the ingredients to prepare meals:

- P118: High calorie but nutritious; I prefer mainly vegetables with very little meat occasionally fried chicken.
- P197: Fried chicken, meat loaf, and lots of veggies, peas, corn, green beans, biscuits and corn bread, turnip greens.
- P215M: Good taste fresh vegetables and meats.
- P217F: ...fast food fatty, not heart friendly; country cooking is fresh veg [sic] and nutritious.

Similarly, very few respondents' comments related to the symbolism of Southern foods, including the opportunity to gather and share foods with significant others. These comments are in line with many previous works (Walter, 1971; Egerton, 1987, 2002; Farr, 1995) that emphasise the cultural, historical and traditional aspect of Southern foods:

- P1: High calorie, fatty, but outstanding taste- grand mamma's Sunday dinner!
- P235: Family, great food.
- P234: Grandma's cookies.
- P243: Grandma's farm; tastes good.
- P189F: Grandma's home cooking!
- P126: Home style cooking family get togethers [sic] and good food
- P232: Friends, family, good food.

That only few respondents' images of stereotypical Southern food relate to family, tradition, gatherings and home cooking to some extent suggests a detachment of culinary tradition in exchange for the more simplistic form of indulgence at local restaurants. At the same time, there appears to be an overall lack of knowledge about the different cultural, traditional and culinary aspects of Southern cuisine.

Conclusions, Implications, Limitations and Future Research

Many regions are revisiting old ways and even using legal tools to protect their food (Bonnet & Simioni, 2001; Loureiro & McCluskey, 2000) and other cultures, desperately clinging to these, while others appear to be establishing a food identity through the recent influence of tourism marketing, globalisation and industrialisation (Blue, 2008). In these scenarios, local food culture can be marketed to many consumers (i.e. food tourism, food festivals) who associate the region to a particular food they have grown with or become accustomed to consume. Other regions, however, despite their tradition and very strong links to food cultures are either still relatively unknown to 'mainstream' consumers, or slowly falling into the plasticity and faceless concept of 'standardisation' of food and other elements intrinsically connected to modern times. In the latter situation, the importance of local foods appears to become 'devalued,' whereby little or no attachment exists between the consumer, the food and food traditions and cultures in a downward spiral towards food-culture mediocrity.

Throughout generations, Southern cuisine has become synonymous for a style of food that encapsulates culture, tradition, rusticity, family gatherings and other aspects of rural life in the Southern United States. While much has been written about Southern food cuisine, traditional menus, or even health issues that are related to the consumption of some Southern and related foods (e.g., comfort foods), little has been discussed with regard to the images that stereotypical Southern foods evoke among consumers.

This preliminary study explored this dimension to identify the different associations that consumers in the Southern region make with their foods. By and large, the findings demonstrate that stereotypical Southern foods evoke negative images regarding the way many dishes are prepared. Moreover, stereotypical Southern foods are directly linked to high calorie, fatty and other unhealthy components of consumers' diet, further demonstrating the negative images Southern foods evoke among respondents. Furthermore, many consumers recognise the strong links between the way certain Southern foods are prepared (e.g., deep fried) and the aspect of indulgence that over time may lead to health related issues (high cholesterol levels, obesity) supports prior arguments in some of the contemporary human health literature, particularly linking indulgence and comfort foods (Kandiah et al., 2006; Locher et al., 2005; Dubé et al., 2005).

The aspect of enjoying a local dish or local cuisine using local ingredients, as is the case in many Mediterranean cultures, and sharing such foods in a family atmosphere is indeed intrinsically part of those cultures, arguably even a stereotypical feature or image of them. In this study, however, given the very few responses that emphasised the traditional social aspect of sharing Southern foods within a group of significant others, where the human contact complemented the richness of the food and vice versa suggest that such food-human aspect may be a tradition or way of life of the past. At the same time, that many respondents only relate to some Southern dishes they specifically consume, even though most of them indicated being knowledgeable of Southern foods illustrates that in fact they may not be aware of many different dishes that are part of this very rich food culture.

Recent trends in food consumption, with the spread of the fast-food industry and its implications (i.e. health issues) for many groups in society (e.g., low income), coupled with changing lifestyles and the ever-present obsession for speed and convenience appears to have a strong impact on people and how they perceive, even prepare and consume foods. Also, in many environments where rural areas are becoming abandoned and where there is increasing detachment between consumers and local foods may further push people from their own food cultures and traditions, with subsequent decreasing knowledge of these. Thus an argument is made regarding the strong and critical role that the hospitality industry- and even the tourism industry- can play in raising the profile of local foods, including healthier food options.

The case of California, where numerous food festivals take place throughout the different seasons (FoodReference.com, 2010) featuring to a great extent freshly harvested produce illustrates the existing potential of local foods, healthy options and the importance of the hospitality and tourism sectors in helping maximise such potential. In addition, the many culinary 'environments' of Southern Europe (Arfini et al., 2002; Bessièrè, 1998; Frochot, 1998) that feature a Mediterranean cuisine rich in fresh, locally grown ingredients and produce demonstrate how regions continue to cling to their culinary traditions by consistently providing local dishes to locals and visitors. That these and other regions are indeed making significant strides in promoting and marketing their food and beverage culture and tradition, often featuring very healthy food options also illustrate that hospitality and tourism can make an enormous contribution in 'spreading the message' about a region or even an entire country. While in the United States some Southern regions and states have been successfully blending the food and beverage aspect into other cultural attractions (e.g., Louisiana), more could be done to further promote the region's rich culinary tradition, particularly as it regards to freshly grown, healthier food options. Concerning this last point, some researchers acknowledge an increasing interest for healthy foods among consumer segments in the United States in recent years (Ottenfeld et al., 2008).

The different threads identified and discussed in this study suggest potential avenues for future research. Regarding this point, this study only included a limited number of consumers that are predominantly residents of one Southern state. Given the many implications for local culture, tradition and also for consumers concerning a healthier diet, future research could investigate larger samples of consumers in different Southern states, not only to validate or extend on the findings of the present study, but also to make comparisons between consumers in different states. The information collected could assist different groups in the Southern region. For example, given the current efforts for developing different forms of tourism in the Southern region, the multiple rich aspects of Southern food culture could be further boosted to market the Southern region as a food destination, thus making this region much more appealing to many individuals who are prepared to invest to travel and make culinary discoveries.

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