

Scary food: Commodifying culinary heritage as meal adventures in tourism

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ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS: *adventure tourism, authenticity, destination marketing, food tourism, gastronomy*

This article portrays the changing status and use of a traditional Norwegian meal, Smalahove, in

designing tourist experiences. Against all odds, this peculiar relic of Nordic gastronomy (salted, smoked and cooked sheep's head) has become a part of the destination brand of Voss, a small West Norwegian township, renowned for its topographic qualities related to extreme sports. In order to understand the recent success of Smalahove, we studied various culinary experience concepts offered to visitors. Based on data from a mixed-method case study approach, we found that entrepreneurs in the Voss region had developed a new commodification approach to a culinary heritage. Smalahove is marketed not only as a nostalgic and authentic rural dish, but also as a challenging culinary trophy appealing to thrill-seeking consumers. The implications of the Sheep's head case are twofold. First, it represents new commercial potentials for marketing 'extreme' culinary specialties. Second, it is an example of innovative rural destination branding, by which local dishes are not mere idyllic expressions of an agricultural past, but an opportunity to open up potential new avenues for the co-branding of rural destinations and regional food products.

INTRODUCTION

As culinary consumption has gained a more prominent place in leisure and tourism, foreign food and cooking has received much attention in recent tourism studies (Cohen and Avieli, 2004; Hall and Sharples, 2003; Hansen et al., 2005; Hjalager and Corigliani, 2000; Hjalager and Richards, 2002). This increased interest may be attributed to the fact that meals, apart



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from whatever interesting nutritional qualities they might have, also serve as tools of the reproduction and/or reinforcement of social relations and social status (Cohen and Avieli, 2004). Indeed, food has become a central element in the new cultural matrix (Miele and Murdoch, 2002). Gastronomy (just like design and fashion) is an expressive form of art, therefore culinary products and dining contexts may be regarded as fashion accessories expressing or enhancing consumer identities. The growing interest in culinary products and traditions implies that food is also becoming a more important factor in influencing tourists' motivations for traveling to a particular destination. Today, food tourism takes many forms, ranging from gourmet tourism to rural tourism (Mitchell and Hall, 2003). These various forms call for diversified approaches when marketing culinary products to different consumer groups.

The transformation of food into a lifestyle commodity has strong strategic implications for destination marketing (Hashimoto and Telfer, 1999). Regional products and dishes feature as unique sales arguments in destination branding, as they function as a 'specific sensory window' (Telfer and Hashimoto, 2003: 158) into the culture, history and people of a place. Traditional meals are thus powerful attractors due to their symbolic value; they bear the potential of being an expression of local cultures, and as such, palpable signifiers of regional identities and values (Hjalager and Richards, 2002; Rusher, 2003). As emblematic expressions of a place, 'typical' local food products may act as differentiators for tertiary rural destinations, destinations otherwise not capable of boasting of flagship attractions. In Europe, rural destination development has gained new momentum, as local or regional food has become a competitive, packaged part of the tourism product (Hall et al., 2003; Miele and Murdoch, 2002). This article investigates traditional and novel commodification approaches of rural culinary heritage, discussing its competitive potential and contribution to place marketing.

COMMODYFYING CULINARY HERITAGE

Communicators in the emerging economy of symbols (Sternberg, 1999), such as destination marketers frequently package rural food products for lifestyle consumption along two rhetorical processes: aestheticization (Miele and Murdoch, 2002) and authentication (Welsch, 1996). Aestheticization refers to the increased role of style and aesthetic concerns emerging in everyday product concepts, including those of food, clothes, home design, and entertainment. Aesthetic food cultures are particularly present in mediated form: there is a proliferation of gastronomic sections in lifestyle magazines and television programs featuring eccentric artistic creations and gourmet products. Culinary heritage objects are aestheticized by prominent chefs, and are typically enshrined in a nostalgic rhetoric promoting slow food and small-scale production.

The visual appeal of meals may also be complemented by other, symbolic values. In the past few years, provenance-labels have become important markers of exclusivity, stressing the importance of typicality and originality. The authentication process involves the selection of certain products or preparation techniques as traditional representatives of a place. Contemporary gastronomic movements (for instance, Slow Food) endorse local specialties in order to mark a unique regional identity, and thus, indirectly turn rural destinations into fashionable places to visit (Slow Food International, 2008). Food product and place narratives are often intertwined in destination advertisements, combining the rhetoric of authenticity and a sense of place into a competitive synergy (Scarpato and Daniele, 2003). Hence, gastronomic consumption in tourism becomes increasingly ruled by culturally embedded symbols, along a stereotyped dichotomy of what is considered to be authentic in a given context and what is not. Rural areas are marketed through terroir-specific agricultural products, to an extent that 'regional identity becomes enshrined in bottles of wine and hunks of cheese' (Bell and Valentine, 1997: 34). Local

food products, in turn, bear provenance labels and geographical earmarks as a token of quality and regional typicality (European Union, 2002). As the postmodern eating experience is beset with symbolic motives, these meals and food traditions are reinvented, transformed and staged to fit tourists' expectations and perceptions of genuineness and aesthetic appeal (Cragg, 1997).

Ironically, the processes by which a local culinary heritage is mobilized and reinvented for lifestyle consumption are strikingly similar in rural areas across Europe. As Frochot (2003) notes, the great variation in regional food ingredients, dishes and styles is not reflected in the way in which food is presented in brochures. The co-branding of agrarian landscapes and food is based on a few romantic culinary stereotypes, with iconic images of countryside idyll, organic farming and rural nostalgia. Life in the countryside is euphemized into an aesthetic *stilleben* of solidity, simplicity, genuineness and timelessness. Researchers have thus hitherto mainly focused on the role of local food as a fascinating attraction to tourist consumption. Meals and culinary traditions are discussed through a MacCannellian perspective of staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1989), illuminating packaging practices (food products with provenance labels, food trails or food festivals) which appeal to sophisticated 'grand tourists'. However, the strong focus on the authenticity theme implies that other symbolic interpretations of local meals remain hidden. We know little about alternative commodification techniques that stress other dimensions of foreign food, for instance, unusual tastes, textures or repulsive visual and olfactory appeal. The next section reviews foreign culinary specialties from this perspective.

SCARY FOOD AND ITS POTENTIAL IN TOURISM CONSUMPTION

Foreign food may be an ambivalent attraction; it may be not only fascinating, but also strangely unfamiliar or even anxiety-triggering (Tuorila et al., 1994). Eating is an intimate act, as something external is inserted into the organism through the mouth. The aversive reactions to unknown food and strange

meals may thus be seen as generalizations of risk perceptions, expectancy vs. fear of unpleasant tastes, and even avoidance of tactile sensations of unknown food. Fischler (1988) proposed a dichotomy spanning two different reactions to unfamiliar food. This dichotomy encompasses the terms *neophilia*, denoting a love of tasting novel and untried dishes, and *neophobia* used to describe abhorrence of the unknown. Paradoxically, human omnivorous behavior exhibits these tendencies simultaneously, resulting in contradictions on different levels (Beardsworth and Keil, 1997). From a nutritional perspective, there is conflict between ensuring a varied and healthy diet and avoiding intoxication. From an experiential perspective, there is also a tension between wishing to try new flavors and avoiding unpleasant tastes.

Hence, the phenomenon of *scary food* can be discussed as a socio-cultural construction. The scariness of foreign food is often defined through its sensory otherness (in taste, smell or bouquet, texture, sound and sight), in the way it contrasts with our everyday fare. As meal preferences are learnt and culturally predetermined, unusual dishes may be appreciated within some vaguely defined ranges. Through experience we have learned to discriminate between flavors and textures that are fresh and otherwise risk-free, and those that are potentially dangerous. The actual tactile sensation of food on the lips, teeth and tongue may be assessed as an indicator of food quality and as to what is an acceptable food for swallowing. This sensation may be complemented with a characteristic sound or swish; for instance, it appears to be a Danish conviction that steamed cod 'must sing on the teeth', while it is chewed. Similarly, the aromatic qualities and visual appearance of a dish may already, at a distance, stimulate our appetite (Johns, 2002). Alternatively, nauseating smells and food images may keep us away from eating certain dishes. Meals prepared from an animal's head may offer a provoking sight, and the fact that this part of the animal is most heavily contaminated with bacteria may repel customers. The objective (but rare) risks of being infected by Scrapie or Creutzfeld-Jacobs disease recently

exposed in the media some years ago are still vivid in some consumers' minds when they order beef on holidays (Grimaldi, 2001). However, objective health risks and sensory stimuli are not the only criteria for defining frightening food. We may consider certain dishes inappropriate for human consumption because of culturally learnt (ethical, religious or emotional) perceptions. For westerners, the consumption of certain domesticated pets is a cultural food taboo, while cats and dogs are considered to be a delicacy in other parts of the world. Eating animal heads – entailing an eye-to-eye contact with the meal, so to speak – reminds us of the fact that the animal has been killed to serve as human food, thus provoking uneasiness in some customers that living creatures must die in order for us to maintain our life (Beardsworth and Keil, 1997).

The enjoyment of exotic meals is also closely entwined with the strangeness discourse, a central characteristic of tourism consumption (Dann, 1996). Eating is a symbolic act: by devouring 'local food' we devour another culture or geographical location in order to incorporate it into our own identity (Bell and Valentine, 1997; May, 1996). The remoteness of Asian cultures is often illustrated by 'exotic' meals like snakes or insects, featuring as thrilling anecdotes in western backpacker folklore, such as Planet Food (2006). These may have been inspired by colonialist representations of the Asian culinary universe in popular culture; for instance, the snake soup in 'Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom' is a recurring reference point in backpacker narratives. Strange food thus functions as a tourist trophy, as in Nik's Saga:

I survived *Dorrablót*. Thorrablót is the traditional Icelandic midwinter festival, where traditional Icelandic dishes are served and traditional Icelanders get very drunk. Warning: Some of these foods are quite gross when described. [...] It's now over two hours since I ate and I can still taste it. Another tick on the checklist of life experiences. (Whitehead, 2005)

When backpackers describe their intake of fried scorpions, sour whale blubber or

ram's testicles, it is a proof of 'being there'; by partaking in local eating habits, they demonstrate the personal courage necessary to cross culinary boundaries. To some extent, the range of emotional reactions in food tourism resembles that of adventure tourism in general, including novelty-seeking, fear and thrill (Cater, 2006; Gyimóthy and Mykletun, 2004; Hallin and Mykletun, 2006). Thus, scary exotic food may not only elicit emotional reactions like fear or disgust, but also thrill and enjoyment, depending upon factors like experience, personality and especially motivation for travel (Bello and Etzel, 1985; Crompton, 1979; Lee and Crompton, 1992). As the backpacker example shows, adventurous tourists are neophilic towards strange food and this behaviour is indicative of challenge-seeking motives. This opens up interesting questions of whether and how culinary tourism may intersect with adventure tourism. What potential does 'scary food' have in new product development and how may it contribute to a rural destination image?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The goal of this article is to illustrate this potential through an in-depth case study of a West Norwegian culinary heritage, *Smalahove*, or the Voss sheep's head meal. The evolution of this traditional fare into a product of modern consumption illustrates an alternative development that deserves attention. Despite being a rather bizarre dish, *Smalahove* has gained a renaissance in the past few years and now as a commercial product, and, owing to increased media attention, it has also contributed to the image creation of Voss as a tourism destination. In order to explore different facets and connections between *Smalahove* production, tourism consumption and destination marketing, we chose a case study methodology. Such an approach allows for an 'in-depth examination of many features of few units (be it individuals, groups, organizations, movements, events or geographical units) over duration of time' (Neuman, 2003: 33) and results in detailed, rich and extensive data. This flexibility

opens up for multidisciplinary analytical techniques and interpretations revealing insights of complex phenomena (Flyvbjerg, 2004; Neuman, 2003; Robson, 1997; Yin, 2003). There is no single definition of what constitutes a case study, and many researchers present their case-based investigation without explicitly calling it a case study approach (Stake, 1995). According to Yin (2003: 13) a case study is ‘an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.’ This was especially relevant for the present study.

Consequently, we chose a mixed or multiple method approach (see for example Creswell, 2003), combining information gained through qualitative in-depth interviews, printed media documents and ethnographic fieldwork. A snow-balling approach (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003) was applied in the sense that new sources of information were traced during the process. The document studies started with our searching the archives of the regional and national newspapers as well as travel sections in the international press featuring the sheep’s head meal or actors central to the production or distribution of *Smalahove*. This search enabled us to identify informants on the topic, who were approached to take part in the research. We conducted qualitative interviews with the main commercial producer of sheep’s heads, Ivar Løne, who gave us a guided tour around the production site and his restaurant in Voss. Another informant was the chef Nils Overå, who has been in charge of commercial sheep parties at the Voss’ Fleischer’s Hotel for several decades. We also talked to the project manager of Vossameny (Voss Menu), Torunn Løne-Vinje and the head of The Cultural Academy of Western Norway, Eldbjørg Fossgard. The fieldwork included observations of traditional ways of preparing and consuming the sheep’s head, including commercial *Smalahove* meals at Ivar Løne’s restaurant, at Fleischer’s Hotel and at local festivals. Furthermore, we also participated in several private sheep’s head parties [*Smalahovelag*] between 2003 and 2005.

In the remainder, we provide a background introduction to the Voss sheep’s head meal,

or an ‘eatimology’ (term coined by Grimes, 2004), presenting the origins and evolution of this product, as well as its commercial spread, cultural colonization and expansion (Scarpato and Daniele, 2003). Through a study of contemporary commodification techniques of *Smalahove*, an analysis of the entire consumption ritual around exotic scary foods is presented. We will highlight innovative approaches by identifying the tools that elevate it to an entire meal for tourists; such as invented ceremonies, accessories and merchandise, as well as narratives dominating the commercial servicescape, brochures and websites. Finally, we discuss the innovative potential of combining rural culinary heritage with cosmopolitan consumer trends as a way forward to in order to develop ‘local food experiences’ in tourism.

AN EATIMOLOGY OF THE SHEEP’S HEAD MEAL

Mutton has always occupied a central position on the Norwegian staple menu – the sheep was one of the first animals to be domesticated by post-glacial settlers of the Scandinavian region. Owing to extreme weather conditions, and limited resources, every eatable part of the lamb (including the head) was used for human nutrition; however, preparation methods varied from region to region. Farmers in Voss (a small township situated in the county of Hordaland, in Western Norway) developed a special sheep breed named *Vossesau* around 1860, characterized by a proportionally large head and high quality wool. The Voss Sheep was renamed *Dalasau* in 1923, and is today the sheep breed most frequently kept in Norway.

The Voss way of preparing *Smalahove* for eating differs from techniques used in other parts of the country; in this region, the sheep’s head is not skinned as a part of the process. Instead, the fur is removed by rolling a burning hot iron stick over the skin in an ‘*eldhus*’ or ‘*årestove*’, (a separate building with an open fireplace). This procedure leaves the sheep’s head with a light brown color on its surface as opposed to the other technique, which results in a grayish and pale product.

Figure 1 *Smalahove*: Salted, dried, smoked and cooked sheep head (Author's photo)



The head is then split into two halves by means of an axe, and the inner organs except the eye and the tongue are removed. It is carefully cleaned, salted and dried for some days before it is smoldered on a cold smoke of fresh juniper, dry oak or alder. Having been both salted and smoked, the head could be preserved in an airy place for some months.

The preparation of the dish is simple. The half head is first watered and steamed for three hours, then served with potatoes boiled in the skin and with stewed Swedish turnips. Traditionally, no cutlery is used. Potatoes were peeled by means of the right thumb fingernail and the head was cut apart employing a sharp sheath knife – everybody always carried one – and using one's fingers. The consumption started from the firm muscles in the cheek and continued to the nose and lips, then to the ear and eye until the outside was all scraped away. The half head was then turned, the lower jaw removed and the rest of the tender chewing muscles were consumed. The flavor of the dish is unique and aromatic, both strong and juicy, owing to the elaborate preservation and drying processes.

Sheep's head was everyday fare for farmers in Voss, but was not considered as food for the poor. All sheep's heads should be consumed by the last Sunday of Advent, named *Skoltasondag* (Sheep's head Sunday), or *Skitnesondag* (Dirty Sunday) in Voss. The reason was partly that the meat would turn rancid after a while, but at the same time, consuming the last of the heads was a part of a tidying ritual in preparing for Christmas. People wore their weekday clothes up on that Sunday, and then had their major bath as everything was supposed to be cleaned before Christmas. The last sheep's heads were eaten at the kitchen table, which was thereafter covered with a spotless tablecloth.

During the past decades, increase in general welfare, rural restructuring and a change in meal habits have led to the abandoning of several traditional dishes in Norway. *Smalahove* has disappeared from the everyday menu in Norway except at Voss, contributing to the perception that the sheep's head is unique to this area. As we know it today, this dish has changed from being an everyday fare to constituting the heart of diversified culinary tourism experiences. However, the contemporary

preparation, distribution and consumption of *Smalahove* is quite different from the one described above.

Smalahove was an important part of nutrition, already in the years around 1300. Today it is associated with Voss, but it has become an exclusive party dish for the whole nation, one that must be celebrated in style. People put on their dinner jackets and replace the sour milk, which traditionally accompanied the meal by aquavit. (Fusche, 1994: 17, our translation)

Today sheep's heads are mass-produced by Ivar Løne, a Voss-based farmer and entrepreneur, who owns the world's only industrial plant that effectively handles the entire burning, cleaning, salting, drying and smoking process of *Smalahove* preparation. Selling more than 60,000 heads a year, he enjoys a monopoly position, facing no competition from either the large abattoirs or small scale producers. 90% of the half-split sheep's heads are sold in vacuum plastic packages for wholesale distribution (supermarket chains) and foodservice companies, while the remaining 10% is made available for private customers in Norway and abroad. Løne is now officially endorsed to sell his products as *Gardsmat* (a Norwegian quality certification system for farm food) at retail prices.

REINVENTING THE SHEEP'S HEAD MEAL

Our analytical focus will now be shifted to the adaptation process and reinterpretations of culinary rituals pertaining to the eating of *Smalahove*. In private households, the status of the meal has shifted from being everyday fare to a dish served on special occasions (celebrations and anniversaries) among friends and family. Most families in Voss would arrange or themselves be guests at at least one sheep's head meal party (*Smalahovelag*) during the autumn. There are also diasporas of *Smalahovelag* held all over Norway and abroad, mainly organized by natives of Voss. It is prestigious to attend such a party, especially for first time guests, who sometimes need some extra encouragement to take the first bite. Journalists describe the

encounter with the hideous sheep's head as a 'visual challenge' (Anonymous, 2005: 20) or as a shocking experience:

The cheek is just fine but what is repulsive about it is the look of it. By just lifting some meat, the row of teeth 'shines' towards me... (Anonymous, 2001: 11, our translation)

Oh My God! Oh no! It's got eyelashes. It is looking at me! (Deshayes, 2005: 5)

For centuries, *Smalahove* was served with sour milk, fruit juice or water. The contemporary, celebratory consumption context calls for alcoholic beverages as accompanying drinks. In recent years, a special, sweet and thick microbrewery beer (*Smalahove øl*) as well as a Sheep's head Aquavit have been developed in order to facilitate the intake of this dish. The mood of the party is further elevated by a convivial social context and frivolous rituals. As in the case of the Scandinavian Midsummer and Christmas feasts, *Smalahovelag* are also accompanied by light-hearted (or even obscene) songs, although in modern times people sing about the sheep's sound and peaceful life in the mountains, which is abruptly ended in order to please the culinary desires of the guests around the table. Books are published containing sheep's head songs, cartoons and eccentric codes of conduct for these parties (Aske, 1998; Tveit and Kvåle, 1991). One of the rituals concern the consumption of the sheep's eye: it should be kept for it to be the last mouthful, placed in the aquavit glass and to be drunk directly like tequila worms.

Recognizing the business potential of the sheep's head meal, local entrepreneurs in Voss have developed various commercial products and services, inspired by private *Smalahovelag*. Among these innovations are Fleischer's Hotel's exclusive sheep's head galas, Ivar Løne's farm restaurant and the Sheep's head Release Event (*Smalahovesleppet*). A number of accessories and much merchandise were developed in the wake of the increasing popularity of these events, such as locally produced silver or pewter souvenir articles (e.g. sheep's head tie-pin, sleeve-links and earrings formed as sheep's heads, depicted on Figure 2). The

Figure 2 Merchandise and memorabilia featuring sheep heads (Author's photo)



Figure 3 Folksy atmosphere at the annual Sheep Head Release (Courtesy of dform.no)



traditional, more primitive utensils have been replaced by silver cutlery and silver-handled glasses. A complete Smalahovelag gift set, including tableware, glasses and jewellery, is sold in elegant wooden parcels. These memorabilia are designed to commemorate Smalahove consumption as something out-of-the ordinary and thus, contribute to the ceremonial atmosphere of *Smalahovelag*. However, the commercial sheep's head meals are designed along quite different narrative and visual techniques: stressing not only nostalgic and exclusive aspects of local culinary heritage, but also its cosmopolitan and ironic sides. In the next section we present each commodification approach in detail.

LØNE'S FARM RESTAURANT: PACKAGING RURAL NOSTALGIA

In 1995, the sheep's head producer entrepreneur and farmer, Ivar Løne was contacted by the general manager of a retail company, requesting him to prepare a traditional sheep's head meal for 15 of his important business partners from Germany. The manager explicitly asked for the meal to be staged in the farm's 400-year-old store-house, overlooking the Løne Lake, stating that: 'that is the ideal setting for a meal like that.' Within 10 years, a second dining room opened, giving place for 140 guests at a time. Løne's farm restaurant is booked for almost every day, 50 weeks a year, with an annual registered sale of between 6000 and 7000 meals. The farm restaurant is often visited by domestic and foreign journalists, eager to write a story of an appalling-looking delicatessen, iconic of Norway. Nowadays, the dish often appears as a sensational 'freak of the week' feature in different media (Atkinson, 2003):

To eat Smalahove is to give a new meaning to the expression 'an eye for an eye' [...] The trick is to get the whole lamb onboard, with skin and fur, eyeball and earwax, and smack one's lips on the tooth flesh for dessert: a sort of a deep kiss of a dead animal. [...] The test of one's manhood is about to begin. [...] With a wrinkle on my nose, I get a 'Tyson' grip of my dish and tear off my

rival's ear. I bite my lips before I open the jaws and look my dinner into the eye. It is him or me. There is only one winner. (Stallvik, 2003: 56, our translation)

It takes guts to stare your food in the eyes and then swallow it, but once Norwegians are let loose on a smoked sheep's head, they let nothing go to waste, except the bare bones of the skull. (Anonymous, 2005: 20)

On arrival, the guests are served home-brewed traditional beer from an *ølkjengje* (a wooden beer bowl) that is passed around to everybody in the party. A visit to the restaurant also includes storytelling, singing and a guided tour of the farm by Mr Løne himself, with him demonstrating the sheep's head production facility. The guest is invited to eat the meal using modern cutlery (eating in the traditional way with sheath knife only is optional). The meat comes accompanied by 'Vossapoto' (Voss potato, a recent local development), thus making the claim of providing the authentic *Smalahove* experience – although the modern menu includes aquavit and home-brewed beer, which were rarely offered in the olden days. Mr Løne explains the renaissance of Smalahove as a part of the general nostalgia trend:

Isn't it also about the time we live in, we are trying to relate back to the past and sheep's head meals are part of the old traditions. Here they [sheep's head meals] are served in this old storehouse, and guests are coming back year after year, some have been here 15 times over the past eight years, and every time is a great event they say... it is a clear demonstration of the attractiveness of my concept. (Interview with sheep's head entrepreneur, Ivar Løne, September 2005)

It is interesting that the farm restaurant concept is regarded as being the most genuine interpretation of Smalahove meals. Licensing authorities allowed home brewing at this location alone, acknowledging the 'deep relations between his meal concept and the cultural heritage to which beer brewing belonged'. A liberal politician, Carl Ivar Hagen endorsed Ivar Løne's enterprise as 'the

prototype of what we want to achieve with our Norwegian farming ... a holistic product including delicious food as well as a historic building, not to mention the host' (Geitle, 2005). Arguably, the popularity of Mr Løne's restaurant is attributable to a combination of factors: a charismatic entrepreneur, a consumer trend favoring slow food and 'traditional' farming products as well as contemporary agricultural subvention strategies in the European Union.

FLEISCHER'S HOTEL: SHEEP'S HEAD AS FINE GASTRONOMY

Fleischer's Hotel is the oldest hotel in Voss with a long tradition of accommodating exclusive guests belonging to the top of the social hierarchy: members of royalty and aristocracy, statesmen, and more recently, influential corporate travelers. Fleischer's *Smalahovelag* was developed during the 1960s, when ten business travelers one year requested a sheep's head dinner to celebrate the closing of their autumn season. Despite the absence of paid publicity, these meals became widely known, and today, four meals are organized from mid-October and into December; catering to about 300 participants at a time. In addition to these gala meals, the hotel also offers similar *Smalahove*-packages to smaller groups (including the freestyle skiing club, and corporate guests from the oil industry or incentive travelers). Probably owing to its extraordinary visual appeal and scariness, the sheep's head meal as a commercial product has been promoted mainly by word of mouth, and media attention:

We have not marketed this product; it has just grown by itself. Smalahove is really very simple, no big culinary art at all. [...] We had the hotel filled with media people during the Free Style World Cup. When they identify the sheep's head on the menu among the steak and fish dishes, they just zoom in their cameras. ... Many tourists pass through this hotel too, and of course they carry with them the tales about the dish. ... It is popular. (Interview with chef at Fleischer's Hotel, Nils Overå, September 2005)

Fleischer's *Smalahovelag* are also built around a diversity of rituals and celebrations, but these follow the rhetoric of gourmet meals. Exclusivity is maintained by personal invitations and insistence on a dress code: dinner jacket or gala attire is *de rigueur*. Every year some guests are knighted in a special ceremony, formal speeches are made, and a special collection of sheep's head meal songs is in use on these occasions only. The jaw of the sheep's head is cleaned after the meal and the name of the guest is burned into it, the jaw thus serving afterwards as evidence (together with a diploma) that s/he has shown the courage and tenacity of 'having mastered something extraordinary and dangerous' for this special meal. The full meal offer (running up to 1200 NOK not including beverages) includes the gift parcel described above, which entitles the consumer to a symbolic membership:

You may adorn yourself with sheep's head earrings, or pep up your tie or your sleeves with sheep's head-links or put a fancy little sheep's head pin on your jacket – as a discreet reminder for others that you are one of a select group – those who have eaten this special meal. (Gjeraker, 2002: 15, our translation)

Indeed, Fleischer's *Smalahovelag* is a commercialized *rite de passage* (van Gennep, 2004), an incorporation ritual into a bold *connoisseur* community, where the dish itself, as well as various accessories, function as social markers of inclusion (Fossgard, 2002). The exclusive setting, the silver cutlery, the dress code, gift sets and diplomas add a fine dining aura to the sheep's head meal, turning it into a commodity that attracts consumers looking for something both fashionable and original, and at the same time allowing the guests to sample genuine Norwegian food culture.

FOLKSY FESTIVALS AND MEAL ADVENTURES OF SMALAHOVE

In 1998, Voss launched a two-day festival, *Smalahovesleppet* [Sheep's Head Release], reminiscent of the Beaujolet Release in France. Developed from a traditional *Smalaauksjon*

[Sheep Auction and Exhibition], the festival today celebrates local rural food: sheep's head meals as well as other small-scale quality products within the 'Vossamenyen' culinary heritage project. The festival offers games like 'Lamb Run' for children or contests in wool cutting of live sheep. The climax of the festival is the great public sheep's head meal, which is quite different from Fleischer's elegant societas. *Smalahovesleppet* is based on the idea of a rustic community feast: there are 850 guests seated at long tables in a festival tent, and live *Schrammelmusik* provides entertainment during the meal. There is a sheep's head eating contest, assessing the competitors' aptitude with regard to style as well as speed. The virtual community *Smalahoveportalen* (2006) keeps the *Smalahovesleppet*s tradition alive by regularly posting new songs, pictures and stories on their web page. The photographic footage contains images that are provocative and ironic at the same time: infernal bulks of torch blown sheep's heads or half-naked men posing with sheep's heads, reminiscent of Baudrillard's *Homo Sacer* (see for instance Diken and Laustsen, 2004). The deliberately primitive and brutally noir songs and excessive consumption of alcoholic beverages creates a liminal consumption space, with an absence of established social norms of gourmet dining.

Also the internationally renowned Voss Extreme Sports Festival includes a public sheep's head meal in its program. Liminal and adrenaline maximizing activities match perfectly Voss' newly established brand image as 'the adventure capital of Norway'. As a sports journalist suggests, this is a destination at which to 'go berserker', offering not only extreme sports and physical challenges, but also extreme food consumption.

Nothing is too wild for the adventure pilgrims who converge on Voss, Norway, for summer thrills. [...]The truly intrepid should inquire about the local delicacy: *Smalahove*, a sheep's head served eyes and all. Clearly, the berserker spirit is alive and well. (Wieners, 2004: 2)

The focus is no longer on the peculiar dish alone, but on the entire adventurous experience, where boldness and courage are demonstrated by participants' sampling both extreme sports and 'crazy' local eating habits. *Smalahove* functions here as borderlining food, and its grotesque and barbaric features are emphasized in order to distinguish between the ones who dare and those who do not (Fossgard, 2002). Thus, *Smalahove* has been included as a culinary thrill in the festival's Try-It package, offering amateur customers the chance to test 10 different adventure sports disciplines within five days. Scary food, in its extremeness has become emblematic of Voss as a harsh and challenging place. As the regional promotion material claims:

Extreme escapes: In Voss, you'll find a wonderful diversity, a unique mix of urban modernity and wholehearted farming tradition. The common denominator is to be found in the extreme: materialized in the fact that your food is looking you in the eye, and people fall down from heaven – among other things. (Hordaland Reiseliv, 2004: 8; our translation)

The cultural practices regarding the consumption of traditional food often take place as staged celebrations of common cultural values (Rusher, 2003: 198), and dining-out events often take the form of a carnivalized performance (Getz, 2007: 50). The various commercial concepts based on the sheep's head meal are similar in the sense that they stage ceremonial rituals of conspicuous consumption. Apart from being a traditional cyclical ritual held in the autumn to celebrate a rich harvest, these meals are also rites of incorporation (van Gennep, 2004). In this sense, *Smalahove* is not a mere simple traditional dish any more, but a culinary quest, to be pursued in differently constructed hospitality atmospheres (rural farm, fine dining or folksy feast). There is an element of challenge (who dares to sample the dish, enjoying what is certainly an acquired taste?) as well as a trophy (diploma and numerous proofs) at stake. By stressing scary and eccentric

features, the everyday sheep's head dish is transformed into an extreme food adventure.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings from the case study carry marketing implications for both destination marketers working with food tourism and/or adventure tourism. This section discusses both areas.

Food away from home can be amazing, fun and frightening at the same time. Tourism marketers have long recognized the potential of local food to attract tourists, packaging culinary heritage and meal habits for mobile customers. However, commodification processes in Europe are all too often based on a 'back-to-the-roots' rhetoric based on clichés of countryside living, supposing that orthodox faithfulness to genuine culinary traditions is central to satisfying consumers. The rhetoric of Tuscany, Provence or a number of other 'granary' regions is based on two themes: aestheticization of the rural (Miele and Murdoch, 2002) and an authentication of the traditional and the typical (Welsch, 1996). There is a strong belief that locally embedded symbols and historical accounts conveying the sense of place are key to drawing a cartography of *touristic terroir* (term coined by Hall and Mitchell, 2002), entrenched in agricultural traditions. This results in analogous tertiary destination images, where the rural is reduced to a place of nostalgic lifestyle consumption. Based on ethnocentric consumer traditions, the marketing of culinary specialties around Europe is built on the familiarity of a common farming history, while exoticism and 'sensory otherness' is a marker for dishes and destinations outside of Europe. However, in a global world, such dichotomies are both false and outdated.

As demand for food tourism is becoming more diversified (Mitchell and Hall, 2003), a new competitive momentum can be gained through exploiting more contemporary connotations of local dishes and regional food. Based on our empirical case and analysis it is possible to identify a new type of commodification strategy for rural culinary heritage. This entails a playful reutilization of the entire meal experience, rather than just aesthetically

packaging traditional raw products, production methods and dishes or authenticating them with regional provenance labels. Within this approach, local (cultural and historical) embeddedness is coupled with the invention of meal events, responding to contemporary leisure lifestyle trends. These meal events often take the form of a combination of cyclical rituals (harvest, midsummer or midwinter feasts), rites of passage (rite of incorporation as gourmet connoisseur or extreme sportsmen) or rites of inversion (carnivals).

Hence, aesthetization and authentication processes can be fruitfully combined or exchanged with other rhetoric themes, such as cosmopolitanization. Cosmopolitanization is about transgressing traditional boundaries between urban/rural, local/global, traditional/trendy, authentic/invented and sacred/profane, creating hybrid products embracing both extremes of such dichotomies. Commercial *Smalahovelag* and *Smalahovesleppet* are successful because they are anchored in both Voss' local meal traditions as well as in other European popular cultural commodities well known from media coverage (e.g. the Beaujolais Rally, Oktoberfest in Munich or the Wiener New Year gala). The tourist is being presented with an experience that is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar as well as reassuring and provocative. Voss' *Smalahove* meal providers mix elements of traditional culture with new commercial products and practices in an unorthodox way, without striving for staged authenticity. Authenticity becomes customized (Wang, 2007), and defined in both the tourist's and the provider's terms. By bringing in elements of popular culture in a dormant and retrospectively oriented destination brand (e.g. Slow Places) the marketing of rural areas may be revitalized.

Next, the sheep's head case also represents a new commercial potential for extreme culinary specialties, namely in adventure tourism. Currently, this field is becoming more diversified including not only physically but also psychologically demanding contests. Prevailing over these challenges (preferably with material evidence or eyewitness proofs) provides the tourist with esteem and respect in a given adventure community, and this respect is

a trophy in itself. The commercial innovation practices of *Smalahove* demonstrate that meal adventure products may successfully address different customer segments (both exclusive *societas* and folksy communities). Although varying in form, the heart of Fleischer's, Løne's and the *Smalahovesleppets* concept is show food. Building on this meal's visual appeal, both the producer and the retailers build up a semi-serious thrilling challenge, which appeals to playful consumerism. The adventure perspective may open up new avenues for a tourism use of exotic or bizarre forgotten dishes. The Voss case also illustrates that previously isolated special interest tourism activities may be fruitfully combined in place marketing. Rather than emphasizing particular landscapes, products or environmental conditions, the main theme (in this case) is adventure – elegantly co-branding extreme sports and extreme food. This empirical study of the Voss *Smalahove* concept may be exemplary for future diversified destination image and food marketing techniques in European tourism.

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