Applying the Experience Economy in Denmark

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Abstract

As food production becomes increasingly integrated, globalized and competitive small-scale food-related enterprises in many European countries are struggling to market and monetize their products. Although these struggles have been well documented, few studies have considered the ways in which food-related entrepreneurs in rural contexts are adapting to these challenges and more specifically, how they differentiate and add value to their products. This paper focuses on the development and implementation of new and hybrid commercial strategies by food-related entrepreneurs in rural Danish communities. These strategies add experiential elements to the long-standing practice of commodifying myths associated with rural settings and identities to communicate and exploit rural myths in new ways. Although the use of culture and experience to sell things is nothing new, we demonstrate that Danish entrepreneurs are responding to market competition by tweaking and extending these concepts. Building on Pine and Gilmore (1999) who introduce, but do not empirically test, a typology of experience realms we assert that entrepreneurs use different experiences with varying levels of intensity and consumer engagement for different purposes. Whereas ‘passive’ experiences such as storytelling are used to educate consumers about the specific qualities of products, more active and participatory experiences are sold as add-ons and stand alone products. The findings contribute to our understanding of food-related entrepreneurship in rural contexts and the experience economy more broadly.

Keywords: Experience Economy, Competition, Food Production, Entrepreneurship, Rural, Denmark
Introduction

As traditionally protected markets are liberalized, small-scale and low intensity farming enterprises struggle to compete with capital intensive and vertically integrated global firms (Cawley et al. 2003). In many European countries, the locus of added value has shifted from the farm to the larger food-processing and retail sector. As a result, farmers have experienced a steady decline in their ability to sell their produce (Ilbery et al. 2005). In Denmark, small or micro sized food-related enterprises, including those located in Thisted, Morsø and Bornholm, which have long been key components of their respective local economies, are also struggling due to their size and increased competition. Unlike their global counterparts, these producers do not command the resources to drive research and development or roll-out expensive marketing campaigns. Without access to larger markets, these producers are constrained by the geographic remoteness and low population densities of the municipalities that they are located within (Baker et al. 2007). Indeed, unlike other independent producers, including musicians or authors, who can digitize their goods and services and use online retail platforms to promote and distribute them to consumers around the world, most small food producers sell to local residents and visiting tourists (Hracs 2012). In the wake of these challenges the survival of these rural food producers rests on their ability to compete with local and global competitors. According to Power competing in a saturated and consumer-driven market requires differentiation which he defines as “establishing a unique position and relational status for the product (and the firm)” (2010, 148). Given their limited resources how do local food producers achieve such differentiation? More specifically, how do they attract new customers, add value to their products and convince existing consumers to come back for
Within the European Union, rather than completely abandoning local firms and communities to free-market forces, many countries including Denmark encourage local food-related enterprises to compete by developing high quality and niche rural food-related products. The literature suggests that notions of ‘quality’ can be derived from the details of the raw materials, their history, methods of production, processing and presentation (Cawley et al. 2003). In addition, quality and thus differentiation and price premiums can be generated by linking products to their place of origin or production. In his analysis of Newcastle Brown Ale (NBA), for example, Pike (2011) demonstrates how the product became ‘geographically entangled’ with the place. As he explains:

Facing competition from Nottinghamshire’s Burton upon Trent ales, Colonel James Porter developed a distinctive, full-flavoured ale brand for Newcastle Breweries in 1927. The ‘production of difference’ was sought to create a brand distinct from the commodified, high-volume and low-margin ales and beers available in the late 1920s. The new dark ale was designed to offer consistent quality and taste, higher alcohol by volume, an attractive aesthetic and presentation, and be capable of commanding a premium price. It was bottled to ‘allow the beer to travel’ (Interview B 2008) for wider geographical distribution beyond Tyneside. With relatively rudimentary technology, initially inherent properties of the new brown ale and its brewing process established NBA’s intrinsic material ties to the Tyne Brewery site in Newcastle upon Tyne. This attachment imbued NBA’s origin myth of distinctive ‘waters of the Tyne’ combined with locally particular yeast strains and raw materials (i.e. barley, hops, malt) brewed with locally idiosyncratic and variable brewing equipment and brewers’ skills. (Pike 2011, 210)

Once a product is imbued with placed-based or other symbolic elements of quality these ‘agents of difference’ and value need to be communicated to consumers. As Ilbery et al. (2005) indicate, for those operating at the production end of the food chain, the notion of difference becomes critical to what they call ‘the process of reconnection.’ This process entails “creating a difference in ‘quality’ between specific products and mass-produced products; creating a difference between geographical anonymity in food
provenance and territorial specificity; and creating a difference in the way certain foods are produced” (Ilbery et al. 2005, 118). Once such a difference has been achieved, it needs to be acknowledged, highlighted and marketed through such processes as accreditation and labeling.

Constructing labels and stories that celebrate specific product qualities are important mechanisms through which small-scale producers can market and monetize their products. However, few studies have assessed the extent to which different labels do in fact reconnect producers and consumers, especially in rural contexts (Ilbery et al. 2005). Indeed, Goodman argues that the logic of territorial valorization is producing a “bewildering and counter-productive proliferation of competing quality schemes, labels and logos” which results in “Label fatigue” (2004, 10). Thus, while label-based sources of distinction appear promising they may not be sustainable over time as oversubscription can lead to a loss of prestige and pressure to develop new strategies of product differentiation (Ilbery et al. 2005).

This paper focuses on the development and implementation of new and hybrid commercial strategies. Building on the well-documented practice of commodifying myths associated with rural settings and identities (Hopkins 1998; Mitchell 1998; Ray 1998; Hracs 2005), these strategies add experiential elements to communicate and exploit rural myths in new ways. In recent years the so-called ‘experience economy’ has gained currency (Bille 2011; Freire-Gibb 2011: Jensen 2007; Marling et al. 2009; Lassen et al. 2009), yet little is known about how food-producers in rural contexts compete by developing and selling experience and culturally-infused niche food products and services. This paper attempts to address this gap and contribute to existing studies by
focusing on the experience-based strategies that food-related entrepreneurs in rural Denmark are using to differentiate and add value to their products. Although Sorensen et al. (2010) correctly note that using culture and experience to sell things is nothing new, we argue that Danish entrepreneurs are responding to market competition by tweaking and extending these concepts. In particular, we demonstrate that when traditional ‘passive’ experiences, such as storytelling, prove ineffective our respondents shift to more ‘active’ or experience offerings.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section reviews the relevant literature on rural entrepreneurship from the perspective of food-related enterprises and the experience economy. This is followed by a description of the research design and the three rural communities in Denmark where the research took place. The empirical section is divided into three parts which focus on three specific types of experience-based strategies (active, passive and complementary). The conclusion summarizes the key findings and considers the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of using experience-based strategies as sources of distinction and value.

**Rural Entrepreneurship and Food-Related Producers**

Entrepreneurial activities in urban areas have received significant scholarly attention, yet in recent years empirical and theoretical studies have also considered entrepreneurship in rural areas (Kalantaridis and Bika 2006; Nicholson and Anderson 2005; Alsos et al. 2011). According to Wortman (1990), rural entrepreneurship is defined as the creation of a new organization that introduces new products, creates a new market, or utilizes a new technology in a rural environment. Thus, innovation is an important ingredient in
entrepreneurship in both rural and urban contexts (Henderson 2002). However, rural entrepreneurs are understood to be more locally rooted than their urban counterparts. Indeed, McElwee and Atherton (2011) explain that rural entrepreneurs typically draw on local geographic features and labour market skills to gain a competitive advantage. They also aim to generate social and economic capital for the rural environment in which they operate. Although studies demonstrate that rural entrepreneurs, like their urban counterparts, operate in all industries and that significant heterogeneity exists in the contemporary economic landscape of rural areas (Henderson 2002), activities related to tourism, food production and food processing remain central.

According to Anderson the rural entrepreneurial process is characterized by “the creation and extraction of value from an environment that involves the shift in value from an existing use value to a higher market value” (2000, 103). In other words, rural embedded values including business ideas are transformed into new business forms. Rural food-related enterprises including those involved in food production (Skuras et al. 2006) and gastronomy (Bessière 1998) have embraced this practice. In particular, they attach territorial images or identities to local and niche products (Stathopoulou et al. 2004; Ilbery and Kneafsey 1998). This entrepreneurial activity is also influenced by the desire of sophisticated consumers to experience the rural ideal and for symbolic-laden quality foods - a trend described in the literature as the ‘quality turn’ (Mitchell 1998; Goodman 2004; Ilbery and Kneafsey 2000). As Bessière explains:

The modern consumer tries to be thoroughly aware of the various elements in the food he eats. The ‘unidentified edible object’ must tell the story of its source, preparation and identity by labelling. The consumer demands a closer relationship with the producer of his food, whether it be real (as in buying straight from the farm), or imaginary (through rustic-looking labelling). Adequate labelling allows a certain guarantee and gives the consumer a comfortable feeling about the history,
identity and nature of the product. (1998, 25)

In this sense, the authenticity, security, assurance and learning experiences demanded by consumers shape the quality labels associated with food products. Crucially, these labels also create sources of differentiation and help to establish what Power (2010) calls a unique position and relational status for both the offerings and enterprises in saturated and consumer-driven market places. In effect, quality-laden offerings have the capacity to command a price premium for rural food enterprises, which by characterization have less capacity to compete on the basis of economies of scale (Cawley et al. 2003).

In response, the rural farm sector is becoming more entrepreneurial, niche and diversified with the development of farm shops, food processing and other non-farm enterprises including bed and breakfast and farm-based tourism (Marsden et al. 2002; North and Smallbone 2006). Although these non-farm activities coincide with rural tourism (Skuras et al. 2006), it suggests a new paradigm in rural economies that can be described as a form of ‘pluriactivity’ instituted to enhance growth and the survival of farming-related enterprises (Carter 1998, 18). In addition to increasing scope and generating higher values for goods and services, this practice also reflects the innovativeness of farm businesses, their ability to make use of the new practices and to respond to consumption trends in the rural marketplaces (Marsden et al. 2002). This demonstrates that enterprises shift from models based on economies of scale and vertical integration to more flexible patterns of organization (van der Ploeg et al. 2000). Some of these activities also reflect a “redefinition of local rural identity” taking into consideration the growing symbolic feature of rural areas as “places for entertainment, leisure activities,
second homes and as an alternative to urban residential areas” (Bessière 1998, 21). This typifies a conversion of the rural marketplaces into new “spaces of consumption” (Marsden and Van der Ploeg 2008, 226).

To summarize, entrepreneurial activities in rural areas are associated with a novel regime, characterized by linkages between territorial landscapes and ideals to utilitarian products as well as the diversification of farm-based enterprises into other activities including rural tourism to create value, growth and competitiveness.

The Experience Economy

The recent rise of experiential products stems from shifting consumer behavior and firm-based strategies to add distinction and value to new and traditional goods and services (Poulsson and Kale 2004). For Hirschman and Holbrook, experiences reflect the hedonistic desire of consumers and relate to the “multi-sensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one’s experience with products” (1982, 92). The multi-sensory attributes involve experience through “tastes, sounds, scents, tactile impressions and visual images” (Blythe 2009, 115). As such, they result in the development of historic (remembrance) or fantasy imagery in the individual’s mind, which can stimulate his/her emotions. This means that experiential involvement entails “both cognitive and affective elements, since it acts on both the mind and emotions of a consumer” (Blythe 2009, 115).

From a marketing perspective, experiences are defined as a type of offering that can be added to commodities, goods or services to create a fourth product category that satisfy and extract value from the desire of postmodern consumers (Carù and Cova 2003; Schmitt 1999; Gupta and Vajic 2000; Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Specific examples
include themed events and stories attached to food services for restaurant guests (Pine and Gilmore 1999; Richards 2001; Jensen 1999). Qualitatively, the experience offerings signify an added value imbued into a product or service, which serves as the key differentiating element from other products. They are thus indicative of a “symbolic value” (Sundbo and Darmer 2008, 1), which consumers will buy in addition to the main product, and subsequently pay a higher price for. However, it should be noted that not all experience offerings are add-ons to utilitarian products as argued by Pine and Gilmore (1999), but rather constitute a core product such as leisure events, art, museums, festivals, theatre, opera, cityscapes, sporting and music events (Richards 2001; Lassen et al. 2009; Sundbo 2009; Sundbo and Darmer 2008).

It is commonly acknowledged that experiences are inherently personal (Gentile et. al. 2007; Pine and Gilmore, 1999) and occur particularly when one comes into contact with a given offering (Chang and Horg 2010; Lorentzen 2009). These engagements manifest in different contexts such as sensory, emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual (Gentile et. al. 2007; Pine and Gilmore 1999; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). Accordingly, these experiential effects serve as a vital element to understand consumer behaviour (Addis and Holbrook 2001) and the basis on which enterprises capitalize by bringing experiences to the market. Based on our understanding of the literature, we define the experience economy as the commercialization of goods/services embedded within products that engage individual consumers on some level and exhibit idealistic, aesthetic and symbolic meanings. The experiential embodiments of goods/services represent their added value and basis for warranting higher prices (Pine and Gilmore 1999).
It is important to point out that not all experiences are created or consumed in the same way. For example, Pine and Gilmore (1999) outline a four-part typology of experience realms (entertainment, education, escapism and esthetic) which feature varying levels of intensity and engagement from consumers. Whereas entertainment or esthetic experiences often entail passive participation from consumers, escapist or educational experiences are often more active and participatory in nature. An entertainment experience, for example, may involve listening to a story about a product but an educational or escapist experience may involve taking a tour of a production facility or playing an active role in creating a personalized or entirely new product. By extension, firms intentionally blur the boundaries between production and consumption and charge consumers to co-produce their own distinctive experiences (Prahalad and Ramaswanny 2004; Grabher et al. 2008). Therefore, firms endeavour to create environments, artifacts and contexts that facilitate interaction and allow consumers to co-create their own experiences (Carù and Cova 2003). Such interactions are new sources of competitive advantage because traditionally, firms determined what was to be offered on the market, yet the rise of so-called ‘user-driven’ innovation (von Hippel, 2005) means this has shifted to prioritize consumers (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004).

The commercialization of experiences is geographically ubiquitous (Poulsson and Kale 2004; Allingham 2009; Sundbo and Darmer 2008; Hjorth and Kostera 2007. Focusing on rural areas for instance, Anderson (2000) highlights how rural entrepreneurs in Scotland offered experiences related to themed party events at an ancient semi-derelict castle, and a sailing experience to visitors around the West Highlands and Islands of Scotland on a revitalized cargo steam engine boat. Bill (2007) also studied a Swedish
rural enterprise that creates valuable tourist experiences through its farm estate and 14th Century castle. Both cases demonstrate the innovativeness of rural entrepreneurs in relation to their ability to exploit and convert local cultural-based resources into experience-related offerings.

Interestingly, as experience-based strategies become more widespread, scholars have commented on the need to differentiate and enhance the experiences with authentic content. In The Rise of the Creative Class (2002), for example, Florida argues that members of the so-called ‘creative class’ prefer ‘authentic and participatory experiences’ as opposed to passive and staged experiences such as those provided by Disney. In a recent study Gilmore and Pine (2007) contend that because contemporary consumers search for authenticity where and when they spend, authenticity is a new and crucial business imperative. This implies that for businesses to obtain sustained competitive advantage, they must shift their focus from offering experiences which are usually ‘hyperreal’ to authentic experiences (Firat et al. 1995, 41). To provide an example, the experience of eating seafood outside amid the beautiful landscape of a fiord is more authentic than one that is staged in an artificial tropical forest, such as the one offered by the Rain Forest Cafe restaurant chain (Morgan and Hemmington 2008).

Conceptually, the experience economy represents an index of ‘cultural’ innovation and a specific neoliberal, deregulated and spectacular form of consumer-driven capitalism that preceded the global financial crisis beginning in 2007. It is based on a purposeful approach by consumer service businesses to obtain global competitive advantage by offering differentiated outputs that stimulate the cognitive, sensational and affective elements in the consumer within the luxury segment of the market (Pine and
Gilmore 1999). The concept is thus linked with affluence (Toffler 1970) and spurred by high disposable incomes (Bourdieu, 1984) and individuals who crave self-realisation after the attainment of esteem, social and psychological needs (Maslow 1943). Accordingly, the experience economy suggests a response to the increasingly fetishized consumption excess in society (Harvey 2008) and the ‘modern need for enchantment’ in products (Richards 2001, 165).

**Research Design**

The findings presented in this paper are drawn from semi-structured interviews and observations with 20 food-related entrepreneurs. These enterprises operated in three different rural municipalities in Denmark, Thisted, Morsø and Bornholm. Given the exploratory nature of our research questions and the lack of existing studies on the competitive strategies of food-related entrepreneurs in rural Denmark, the choice of qualitative methods was appropriate and justified. Indeed, the case study produced a detailed understanding of how food-related entrepreneurs use experience elements in the production and sale of their products to generate value and distinction.

The interviews were essentially face-to-face conversations that lasted between 45-90 minutes. Each interview was recorded on a digital recorder, transcribed verbatim and coded according to dominant themes. Throughout this article, we include verbatim quotations as the best way to demonstrate how participants expressed meanings and experiences in their own words. These responses have been supplemented with personal notes from the interviews including impressions about places, products and respondents and observations about the internal and external environments of the businesses
(Davidsen 2008). In some instances we also followed up with respondents via telephone and further contextualized the interview data by analyzing documents such as municipality maps, enterprise brochures, flyers, posters, policy documents and photographs. The selection of enterprises for this study was based on their suitability. This was identified after reading the activities of these enterprises from their websites and the official tourism office websites of the municipalities. As is common with qualitative interviews, our goal was not to establish statistical significance or representativeness but rather analytical plausibility and cogency of reasoning (James 2006).

**The Three Case Communities**

The research was conducted in three Danish municipalities that are characterized as remote rural areas based on the Danish classification system of rurality Thisted, Morsø and Bornholm (MFAF, 2008). This section provides a brief description of each study area:
Figure 1. Map of Denmark indicating study areas (Source: MPI, 2013)

The municipality of Thisted is located in the north western part of Denmark. On its western flank is the North Sea, while its southern and eastern edges are formed by the Limfjord. It covers a total area of 1,093 km² (Thy Turistbureau, 2008). Thisted has a population density of 41.1 inhabitants per square kilometre and a total population of 45,297 inhabitants, representing the fourth largest in the North Jutland Region (Statistics Denmark 2010). The municipality is marked by various natural resources including Denmark’s first national park (National park Thy) and sand beaches. A popular example of the latter is the one at Klitmøller nicknamed Cold Hawaii, which attracts surfers from both Denmark and abroad. This national park contains lakes, a game reserve and a wide
range of plants, animals and important sites of Danish history. These include grave mounds from the Bronze Age and several World War II German bunkers along the coast (http://nationalparker.naturstyrelsen.dk/English/Thy/). Furthermore, the park’s unique scenery and captivating cultural history is considered as a potential source for branding and marketing an array of high quality foods in the area (Landsbygruppen Thy 2008). As we shall see, the national park has been utilized by local food enterprises as part of their experience-based strategies. Hitherto, Thisted can be identified with Billomoria’s (1978, 27) description as “a region at the crossroads. Rural, sparsely populated, an area termed ‘developing’ in its struggle to forge a viable economic and socio-cultural future of its own”.

There are about 1700 enterprises located in the municipality, providing employment for people in various sectors including food (www.thisted.dk). The food sector has a total of 1164 enterprises providing 2493 full-time jobs (Danmarks Statistik 2006). Approximately 3 percent of Denmark’s agricultural products are produced in Thy (Thisted Kommune 2007), thus, making the area’s food sector a good net contributor to the national economy.

Morsø is also located in the north western part of Denmark and lies very close to the eastern part of Thy. It is the largest island on the Limfjord covering an area of 367 km2. The island has a total population of 21,833, indicating one of least populated municipalities in the North Jutland Region. However, its population density of 59.4 inhabitants per km2 signifies the fourth largest in the whole of the North Jutland Region (Statistics Denmark, 2010). Morsø is famous for its distinctive and diverse landscape, with such features as dramatic molar slopes at locations such as Hanklit and Feggeklit in
the north, and agricultural areas in the south. The island’s landscape has been well known by local inhabitants, visitors and several artists. In general the island’s fame extends to its numerous artists and craftsmen. Industries on the island include furniture and mussel fishing and processing, which employs many local inhabitants. However, agriculture is the traditional source of livelihood on the island and farming still remains important (Morsø Turistbureau 2010).

Bornholm is an island covering an area of approximately 588 Km2. It has a coastline of 158 km and is situated in the Baltic Sea, close to the southern Swedish coast. It is one of the municipalities forming the Capital Region of Denmark (Region Hovedstaden). The island’s total population is 42,225 inhabitants - a density of 71.8 inhabitants per square kilometre (Denmark Statistics, 2010). Bornholm is known for its unique natural landscape which is very different from mainland Denmark. This has spurred a tradition in Denmark for school children from the mainland to go on excursions to the island. Bornholm is an area of hills, waterfalls, dramatic rocks, rocky coast, rift valleys, sandy beaches, harbours, lakes, wildlife, and exotic botanical species. It has various cultural heritage sites, including the medieval round church buildings; the iconic herring smokehouses visible in most towns and cities on the island; fortresses and the famous medieval Hammershus castle ruin. The latter serves as the setting for different cultural events and also as one of the tourist hotspots on the island. For centuries Bornholm has featured various craft arts and smoked herring production (TuristBornholm 2010).

The richness of Bornholm’s natural, aesthetic and symbolic landscape forms a basis for its reputation as a tourist destination, attracting approximately 600,000 Danish and
foreign visitors annually. The economic livelihoods in Bornholm include primary sector activities (agriculture, fishing, forestry and mineral extraction), industries and services (ÅSUB 2008). More recently, Bornholm has been building a reputation for its food enterprises through the offerings of culinary, gourmet foods, coupled with the emergence of new enterprises specialized in ‘small scale artisan/industrial processing of specialized food and drinks’ (Manniche 2009, 5). In general, the island is considered to have a robust brand that covers several enterprises with growth potential in smaller niche productions and larger exporting industries, as well as tourism and the experience economy. The latter is perceived as a potential model to revitalize the local economy and innovative competences to kindle growth and development on the island (Bornholm’s Growth Forum, 2007).

‘Listen and Learn’ - Storytelling and Passive Experiences

In a marketplace characterized by oversupply and ubiquitous alternatives, producers use competing ‘agents of difference’ and labels such as ‘quality’, ‘green,’ ‘ethical’ or ‘exclusive’ to attract consumers and convince them to pay a premium (Hracs et al. In Press). Yet regardless of the scheme and the real or imagined properties of the actual product, consumers must somehow learn about what makes a particular commodity, good or service different and thus more valuable. Our research suggests that storytelling is not only an effective way to communicate this information to consumers but that the experience of listening to these stories can also be commodified. As one farmer and guesthouse operator explained, “in an ordinary shop you just buy a product but here you can also buy a story if you are prepared to pay more.” Unlike their mass-market
counterparts who often choose between competing products on the basis of price, sophisticated consumers will pay more for products and experiences imbued with high levels of symbolic value that enhance their own cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Hracs et al. In Press). Rather than simply reading labels in a supermarket or online, these consumers are willing to invest time and energy to ‘see for themselves’ and value the experience of visiting farms and interacting with producers.

However, because these consumers are often knowledgeable and discerning, the stories need to be compelling and effective in accentuating the unique qualities of the products in question. For food producers this means not only talking about specific ingredients and production processes but linking them to unique territorial, cultural and historic features associated with the rural landscape (Hopkins 1998; Callon et al. 2002).

As one liquor producer told us:

Storytelling is still a big thing in business today… Our competitive strength is the story. That is what we can focus on. I think we have a great product… It’s expensive… But mainly we have the story that is about handpicked ingredients from the national park… It is not only because of our ingredients but the main thing is to exploit the name ‘National Park Thy’ in a product as well… And we always push that forward telling that story because that is something that no one else can do.

For some respondents in Thisted using hand picked ingredients from the national park was a prime source of distinction and value. In addition to the liquor producer above, a brewery in Thisted tells a story about hand picking Sweet Gail plants (bog-myrtle) from the Thy National Park and using it as an ingredient in their products. Similarly, in marketing their organic meat products, a sheep farmer in Thisted and a farm shop located in Bornholm also use storytelling. They stress that their sheep graze on local and protected sites including the historic grave mound sites within the Thy National Park and the vegetations surrounding the medieval Hammershus castle ruins. Both respondents
told us that the stories are meant to promote the quality and authenticity of the meat production and how animals are more natural maintainers of the local ecosystem than machines. These aims resonate with the tenets of alternative food discourses related to food production and consumption landscapes in which food safety and environmental consciousness is promoted. Much like the alcoholic beverage producers, by linking their products with the symbolic and aesthetic values of local heritage sites, these meat producers offer customers learning experiences that enhance the attractiveness, distinctiveness and value of their products.

Onsite storytelling is popular and effective but local food-producers also offer learning experiences through themed events where visitors are given lectures about the origins of specific food products and tips about recipes and cooking techniques. In Bornholm, for example, one farm shop organizes a farmers market day once or twice a month which attracts many food producers on the island to sell their products. On these market days the organizer develops themes to sell and promote food products. Some past themes include ‘du må godt vide hvor din mad kommer fra’ (you must know where your food comes from) and ‘hvor din mad kommer fra’ (where does your food comes from?). Although these themes are meant to raise awareness about sustainable food production and consumption, they also provide a learning experience for consumers and source of differentiation for enterprises involved in the events. As one farm shop manager told us:

As part of the promotion we have the animals and we put up these signs about the cattle and sheep... So when people are out in the nature on Bornholm they see these signs and they say ‘OK that is a nice way to treat the nature here.’ We think it is a good way to produce meat because you raise the animals in the nature, then they travel a short distance to where we slaughter them and to the people. If we are talking about… Bornholm’s experience economy this is part of it. This is part of the adventure and what you can experience.
It is clear that local food-related enterprises strategically stage interactions to educate consumers about a range of topics including local history and sustainable food practices while at the same time promoting the distinctiveness of their own products. It is also clear that educational experiences help to attract visitors to shops and events and that attaching territorial identities to local and niche products generates price premiums. However, as more food-producers embrace storytelling and begin to offer passive educational experiences, tourists and local visitors enjoy a greater range of alternatives and it becomes harder to attract the attention and patronage of consumers (Goodman 2004). Concomitantly, food-producers have also realized that some consumers are not satisfied by passive experiences such as merely listening to stories. Indeed, as Florida (2002) argues, many consumers consider immersive and participatory experiences more authentic and valuable. These consumers want to get their hands dirty and learn by trying things out for themselves. Therefore, as the effectiveness of storytelling is undermined by growing supply and its passive nature, some food-related entrepreneurs are offering more immersive, participatory and what we term ‘active’ experiences.

‘Be the Farmer’ - Immersive and Participatory Experiences

Instead of passively listening to a farmer talk about the origins and production of organic sheep, some enterprises are allowing consumers to actively participate by playing the role of the farmer and helping the sheep to graze. In an attempt to stage a more immersive experience, one enterprise offers a picnic where consumers enjoy the experience of taking the sheep outside of their fences to graze on the historic landscape in Steinberg while also eating samples of the meat. In line with Pine and Gilmore (1999), who discuss
the attractiveness of ‘escapist’ experiences, these activities are memorable because they allow consumers to escape their daily lives and pretend to be something else for a few hours. Moreover, grazing sheep on land that forms part of Thy’s Bronze Age history, to use one example, also constitutes a valuable learning opportunity. These kinds of participatory experiences are innovative ways to promote the image of the farms and specific products but other examples demonstrate how the experience itself can generate economic value for the producer.

In Nørhå Ørredbutik, located in Thy there is a small fish farm originally established in 1969. Traditionally, the farm produced fresh and smoked fish which were sold in Denmark and exported to Germany. In early 2000’s the farm began to struggle financially and in 2004 it initiated a strategy to revitalize the business. The strategy took the form of a new farm shop and a ‘put and take’ or active fishing experience where customers pay a fee to fish from the lake for specific durations. Between 2007 and February 2009 the farm received over 5000 visitors, including 4000 German tourists, and the fishing experience quickly became the farm’s main attraction. According to the farmer, the traditional operation of the farm was on the verge of collapsing due to stiff competition in the German export market from low priced Turkish products and dwindling patronage by local residents, but introducing an immersive, active and escapist fishing experience has successfully increased consumer traffic and spending. Interestingly, although similar active fishing experiences exist in Germany, the quality of the fish on this farm in Denmark attracts German tourists. As the farmer explained:

There are lots of put and take fishing places in Germany but on a Saturday six or seven of them will drive here together. When we ask them why they come here. They say ‘because they can catch a fish which will taste good’. In Germany they can catch a fish (makes a gesture to signify big) but it will not taste good. Over here
they can catch a fish (makes a gesture to signify small) but they still like it. They like the quality and taste and will come here for that…Even if they do not catch anything, they will still come because…they want the experience of fishing.

Figure 2: Put and take experience at Nørhå Ørredbutik (Photo source: Author 2009)

This example demonstrates the commercial potential of active experiences and the ways in which other agents of difference, quality in this case, can be layered to generate greater distinctiveness and value. In other words, the form of the experience (passive or active) is important but so too are the ‘qualities’ of the underlying good or service (Callon et al. 2002).

In rural areas, sophisticated consumers (local residents and visitors) also show a propensity to bring their children and thus prefer to patronize establishments that offer family-friendly learning opportunities and memorable experiences. Our research suggests that many rural food producers recognize this important difference and harness this
demand by providing appropriate products and experiences. One farmer in Thisted, for example, opened a guesthouse aimed at attracting tourists and local visitors with children to his existing business. To make staying in the guesthouse interesting, memorable and attractive, he provides recreational facilities for children and participatory experiences for the whole family. While the children engage in collecting eggs and feeding animals, the parents help with harvesting crops on the farm. Crucially, because the children can see some animals for the first time and can learn about when, how and what they eat, parents are willing to pay for this wholesome yet fun experience. The event of making pancakes on the farm is also a very strategic way for the owner to create and commodify a memorable experience while also promoting and selling his marmalades. As he put it:

> Once a week the visitors gather in this hut with the children and they can have pancakes and marmalade… When these tourist are leaving some of them want to buy 10 boxes of marmalade for their homes to make pancakes. Making pancakes in this hut gets people to buy the marmalade from our shop… It is just a place for the people to feel cozy to feel at home and to have a good experience so that when they go back they can always talk about this place. When the kids go home they ask their parents, ‘when are we going to have pancakes again?’

‘What Else Can We Do?’ - Connected and Complimentary Experiences

Although commodifying passive and active experiences is an effective way to extract premiums from consumers, attracting local residents and tourists remains a challenge for many producers. Indeed, our research suggests that small and remotely located farms and shops are searching for ways to generate buzz and consumer traffic. One way to accomplish this is to identify synergies with other complimentary businesses in the community and forge networks. Instead of acting alone, many producers in these small rural communities work together to attract consumers to the area and to make sure that they know about specific products and experiences once they arrive. According to one
restaurant manager, for example, in addition to providing his own storytelling experiences, he promotes an established network of other tourist related attractions. This network includes the Thy National Park, the local golf course, other hotels and the local fitness centre. As he explained:

Well when people come here they don’t come to Hotel Thingard alone they come to experience this area. There are many businesses in this area so we cooperate with the attractions, other restaurants and hotels. It is a new thing that we do in this cooperation… when a customer comes here I tell him you can sleep and eat here and also spend a day at the golf course, the fitness centre or the national park and through that we get people to stay here longer. In the same way when somebody goes to the golf course they tell him there is a hotel in the city where he can lodge. So we have cooperation and we send people around this area in that way. We all make money when they come to each other.

These initiatives enable and encourage cross-promotion between businesses while also allowing consumers to customize and create their own experiences in the area. In other examples, cafes and restaurant in Morsø network with and promote local musicians, authors and artists. Beyond the food itself, additional experiences are produced by serving visitors with antique dining ware and offering special music concerts. Often, a local musician entertains visitors with his music and tell stories about his life and experiences performing around the world. The use of antique wares also allows visitors to learn about local cultural heritage or historic objects linked to a particular community and time period. According to the café owner the antique wares contribute to attracting more visitors to the cafe. As she explained:

I can see it when people come here… They see these old dishes and some of these things (referring to antique plates, tea sets which she reached out for), and they say wow and they talk about it. They like it. There are different things available for them.

While displaying and selling the works of local creative people is not a new phenomenon (Hracs 2005) the practice is important in these cases because it signifies a
conscious effort to provide visitors with additional learning experiences and to extract value from introducing consumers to new products and the people who made them. Similar examples of cross-promotion with local creative people indicate that a range of entrepreneurs work together to attract people and provide consumption opportunities. By extension, they also underscore the important fact that while isolated enterprises struggle establishing an integrated network of complimentary experiences and a collective community ‘pull’ increases their competitiveness (Dawe 2004).

Taken together, these findings suggest that strategically producing and selling experience-related products not only generate value and differentiation, but also constitute a response to growing consumer demand for symbolic-laden and high quality food products with rural associations.

**Conclusion: Do Experiences Have An Expiration Date?**

Against the backdrop of a highly globalized and competitive marketplace, this paper considered the competitive strategies of food-related entrepreneurs in rural Denmark. Following Callon et al. (2002) who assert that ‘a product is a process’ and that specific ‘qualities’ can be added to products at multiple stages of the value chain, it sought to identify the strategies through which these entrepreneurs are marketing and monetizing their products. Whereas most products are positioned based on material properties such as (design, the production process) or immaterial properties (symbolic elements, branding), we focused on the increasingly important role of experiences as ‘agents of difference’ and value. This focus addresses recent research which states that although experiences have often been used to help differentiate and add value to traditional goods
and services they need to be studied as products in their own right (Lorentzen 2009). Thus, this paper nuances our understanding of food-related entrepreneurship in rural contexts and the experience economy more broadly.

After establishing the competitive pressures that rural food producers face in local and global markets, the paper put forward examples of experienced-based strategies. It is argued that local entrepreneurs develop and use specific experiences such as storytelling or self-harvesting to enhance the distinctiveness and value of existing food-related products but also that other experiences such as fishing are being commodified as stand alone products. Building on Pine and Gilmore (1999) who introduce, but do not empirically test, a typology of experience realms comprised of entertainment, education, escapism and esthetic we demonstrate that entrepreneurs use different experiences with varying levels of intensity and consumer engagement for different purposes. For example, whereas ‘passive’ experiences like storytelling are used to educate consumers about the specific qualities of products, more active and participatory experiences can be created and sold as add-ons and even stand alone products. By extension, we argue that food-related entrepreneurs understand and tap into the demand for unique, personalized, memorable and authentic experiences by charging consumers to act out their escapist fantasies about being a farmer or chef in an idyllic rural setting.

The paper also identifies the popularity of family-friendly experiences among rural tourists and local residents and outlines how food-related entrepreneurs are exploiting the demand for wholesome and educational products and activities. Although much of the research dealt with the interactions between entrepreneurs and consumers, the paper did highlight efforts by entrepreneurs to forge crucial strategic networks within local
communities. Indeed, to overcome the challenge of attracting and retaining tourists and local residents many of the remotely located entrepreneurs in our study worked with other local businesses who offered complimentary experiences. In so doing, the entrepreneurs often avoided direct competition, generated synergies and higher levels of consumer traffic and raised the overall profile and attractiveness of their community.

This research suggests that experienced-based strategies can help food-related entrepreneurs in rural contexts to attract consumers and extract more money from them. Moreover, harnessing the experience economy may allow rural communities such as Thisted, Morsø and Bornholm to seize the ‘window of opportunity’ that Lorentzen (2009) argues small cities currently face. However, as with other branding and value creation strategies such as ‘exclusivity’ (Hracs et al. In Press), that rely on establishing a real or imagined position of difference in the marketplace it is important to question the long term sustainability and effectiveness of experience-based strategies for individual entrepreneurs and regions more broadly. For just as Goodman (2004) points to ‘label fatigue’ if every food-related business adds experiential elements consumers may be overwhelmed and the experiences will cease to distinguish specific products from others. Furthermore, it is reasonable to question how many times a tourist or local resident can hear the same story or pick the same berries before the act becomes inauthentic and the value of the experience is diluted. Optimists may concede that this will simply force entrepreneurs to constantly create new and fresh experience offerings and that communities will need to attract new crops of tourists but given their limited economic resources and already precarious position in the global marketplace this may be unrealistic.
To address these open questions, we believe that future research should focus on the long term success of both the enterprises and the specific experience-based strategies. This research might also endeavor to tease out the nature and value of different types of experiences (passive vs. active) in greater detail. Finally, to nuance our understanding even further it would be useful to move beyond interviews with producers and key informants to include consumers and specifically how they find, evaluate and ascribe value to specific food-related goods, services and experiences.

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