

## Original Research Article

# Culinary tourism on Cape Breton Island

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## Abstract

Cape Breton Island is a well-known North American tourism destination with long-standing attractions such as the Cabot Trail and more recently developed world-class offerings such as the Cabot Links Golf Course. Tourism contributes significantly to Cape Breton's economy, particularly since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as traditional resource-based industries have declined. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, culinary tourism has become increasingly important to expand the island's tourism offerings and to provide "authentic" tourism experiences. This study examines local-food tourism in Cape Breton to illuminate its cultural and economic significance. I conducted interviews with food producers, restaurateurs, government representatives, and tourism executives. I also consulted websites and policy documents and compared local stakeholders' experiences and perspectives with official tourism strategies. Promoting culinary tourism raises questions of power, autonomy, inclusion, and accountability. My study accentuates possibilities for aligning economic and ecological goals to create resilient communities, foster equitable social and ecological relations, and establish Cape Breton as a culinary tourism destination.

**Keywords:** culinary tourism, ecological food, Cape Breton, sustainable communities, local economies

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## Introduction

Cape Breton Island is a well-known North American tourism destination with long-standing attractions such as the Cabot Trail (established 1932), Cape Breton Highlands National Park (established 1936), and Fortress Louisbourg National Historic Site<sup>1</sup>; more recently developed world-class offerings include Celtic Colours Music Festival (established 2007) and Cabot Links Golf Course (established 2011). Tourism contributes significantly to Cape Breton's economy, particularly as traditional resource-based industries such as cod fishing, coal mining, forestry, and steel-making have declined since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, exacerbating unemployment and outmigration across the island. Cape Breton's history of economic challenges is an essential factor in the region's reliance on tourism as an income generating and economic development strategy. Regional tourism promotion also is part of broader, national efforts to brand Canada as a world-class tourism destination.<sup>2</sup>

Culinary tourism, in particular, has become a significant focus of efforts to expand Cape Breton's tourism offerings (ICON, 2015, p. 2), a development that reflects global trends to advance ecological food practices and provide “authentic” touristic experiences. Yet, in contrast to regions such as British Columbia, Ontario, and Prince Edward Island that have linked varied food experiences to create a recognizable brand, Cape Breton has been unsuccessful to date in integrating its culinary offerings to promote the island as a culinary destination, and most visitors happen upon local food events rather than choosing the island for its distinctive culinary offerings. Food practices in Cape Breton also have received little scholarly attention.

“Ecological food” refers to foods produced in small-scale operations using traditional practices such as raised bed planting and crop rotation, natural forms of animal feeding such as free range and pasturing, and nonchemical methods of soil enhancement and pest control such as mulching and companion planting (Magdoff, 2007).<sup>3</sup> The term distinguishes fresh, locally produced, and environmentally sustainable foods from those produced through conventional methods within the industrial food system (Seed and Rocha, 2017). Additionally, “ecological”

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<sup>1</sup> The Canadian federal government designated French colonial Louisbourg a national historic site in 1928 and began reconstructing approximately one-quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century town and fortifications in 1961.

<sup>2</sup> The Canadian Tourism Commission (CTC) hosted a series of regional Round Table Discussions from October 1999 to May 2001 in St. John's NL, Charlottetown PEI, Vancouver BC, Niagara Falls ON, Saskatoon SK, Winnipeg MB, Edmonton AB, and Montreal QC. These sessions brought together key individuals from the culinary and tourism sector to explore possibilities for establishing Canada as a tourism destination. In June, 2001, Halifax hosted the “National Tourism and Cuisine Forum” and the CTC released its culinary tourism development strategy, “Acquiring a taste for cuisine tourism” in 2002 (Deneault 2002). In a 2006 study of culinary tourism marketing in Canada, Hashimoto and Telfer suggest that cultural diversity and regional product availability complicate efforts to market Canada as a culinary tourism destination but argue that celebrating diversity, embracing global culinary developments, and supporting local food practices can create an appealing and distinctive national brand (Hashimoto and Telfer 2006: 37).

<sup>3</sup> Greenpeace International (2015) states that ecological farming “respects nature and biodiversity.... ensures healthy farming and food.... protects the soil, the water, and the climate.... [and] places people and farmers—consumers and producers, rather than the corporations who control our food now—at its very heart.”

represents a broader category than “organic” and includes foods produced using ecological methods that do not have organic certification (Magdoff, 2007). “Local” food, however, is not necessarily ecological because foods grown in a given region can be conventionally produced. In Cape Breton, all farms are relatively small-scale and incorporate some traditional techniques such as pasturing but commodity producers also rely on conventional agricultural products such as chemical fertilizers and commercial feed.

Existing research has explored links between food practices, cultural identities, and notions of place and argued that culinary tourism strategies can strengthen local economies and reinvigorate rural communities (Bessiere & Tibere, 2013; Everett and Aitcheson, 2008; deSalvo Hernandez, Clemente, & Calzati, 2013). When sensitively and collaboratively implemented, local food tourism creates employment, diversifies local economies, and validates cultural identities by showcasing distinctive tastes and culinary practices. Renewed interest in locally produced foods and traditional skills can revive regional and ethnic identities and contribute to environmental sustainability (Everett & Aitcheson, 2008; Hashimoto & Tefler, 2006). For tourists, experiencing local food traditions fosters a sense of connection with rural communities and their inhabitants that can encourage resistance to the global industrial food system (Everett, 2012; Schnell, 2011; Schnell, 2013; Sims, 2009).

Yet, importantly, these studies emphasize that benefits of local food tourism are not universally experienced. Assessments of culinary tourism must take into account the impact of economic development on local food producers *and* natural environments (Dougherty, Brown, & Green, 2013; Everett, 2012). Successful local food tourism initiatives typically arise in regions with social and natural capital, such as strong social networks and iconic foods that are closely connected to local history and culture (Dougherty et al, 2013; deSalvo et al). For culinary tourism initiatives to be meaningful, host communities should participate in decisions about how they will be represented and which foods will be promoted as “authentic.” Economic and ecological priorities can conflict as demand for local food experiences increases; therefore understanding divergent perspectives and balancing competing objectives are crucial for responsible and sustainable culinary tourism development (Everett & Slocum, 2013; Sims 2010).

This study focuses on food producers who practice ecological techniques—with or without organic certification—and restaurateurs who serve ecological foods in their establishments.<sup>4</sup> In this context, I ask: How do local food experiences contribute to the island’s appeal as a tourism destination, and how might such initiatives be enhanced to sustain rural communities? Can culinary tourism advance Cape Breton’s ecological food movement and encourage awareness of and appreciation for local cultures and natural environments? What specific challenges and possibilities exist in Cape Breton, and how do these factors relate to circumstances in comparable regions undertaking similar strategies?

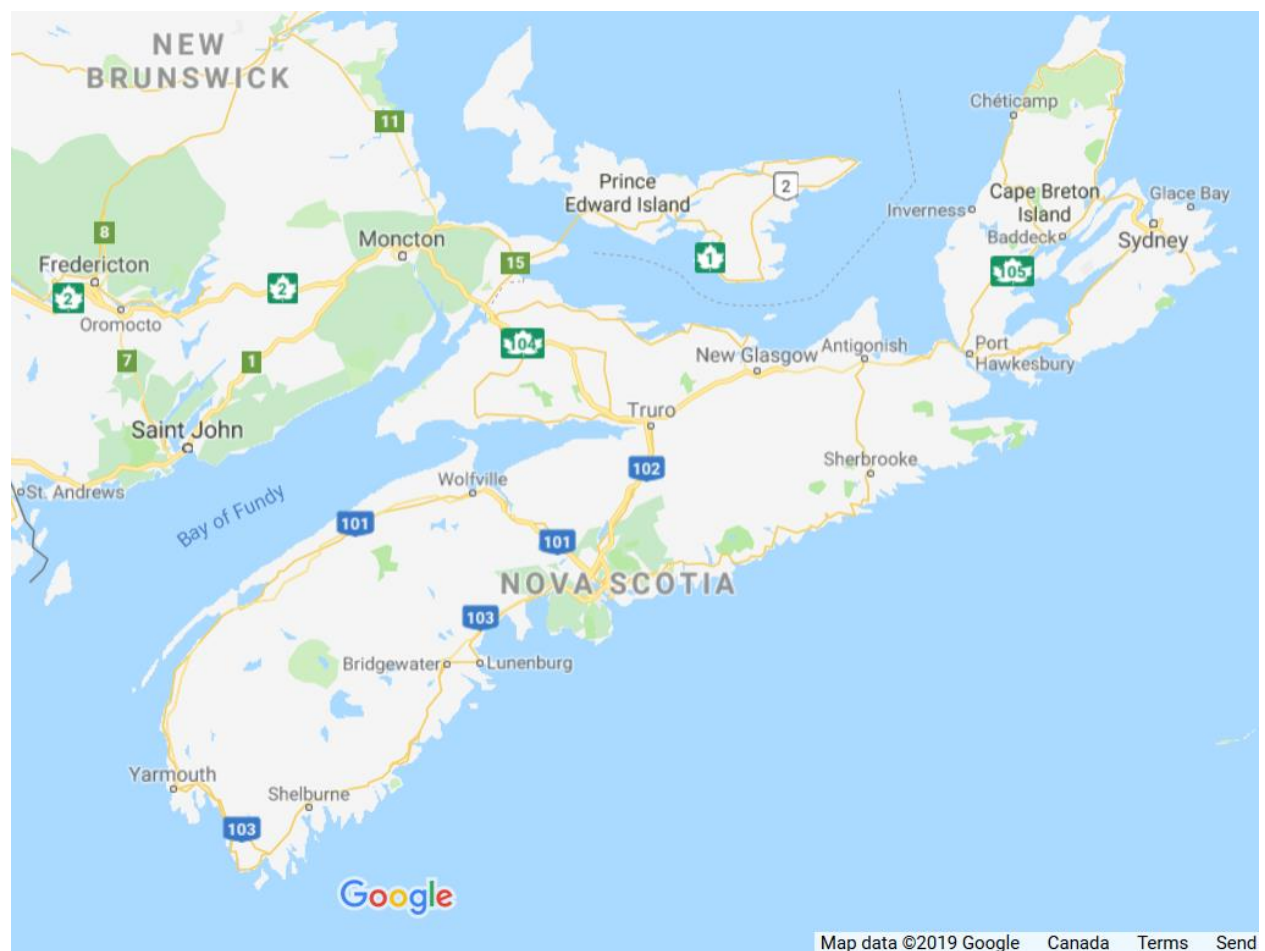
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<sup>4</sup> I use the terms “ecological,” “local,” and “local-ecological” to indicate these foods.

## Methods

To answer these questions, I began by examining websites and policy documents of organizations involved in promoting tourism during 2016 and 2017 on Cape Breton Island and throughout Nova Scotia (see map in Figure 1 for context). I contextualized unfolding culinary tourism events in Cape Breton by exploring developments in comparable regions, and by reviewing the existing literature on local food tourism in rural communities within Atlantic Canada, across North America, and in the United Kingdom. In addition to academic publications, I reviewed recommendations contained in the “Culinary Tourism Roadmap”—

**Figure 1:** Map of Nova Scotia, including Cape Breton Island (upper right). Created using Google Maps.



Cape Breton’s culinary tourism strategy document—in order to compare official strategies with local stakeholders’ experiences and perspectives. This analysis is part of my ongoing research into local-ecological food practices in Cape Breton involving interviews and participant-observation at farmers’ markets, workshops, food festivals and other culinary events, as well as analysis of archival documents and agricultural and tourism policies (MacLeod, 2016, 2017).

In the next phase of my research, I conducted interviews with 15 individuals with diverse occupations, including food producers, restaurateurs, representatives of the Department of Agriculture, and representatives of the tourism industry.<sup>5</sup> Interviews took place at farms, restaurants, farmers' markets and other locations where I could observe and experience the island's expanding local-ecological food offerings. I asked open-ended questions that encouraged interviewees to describe their experiences and to reflect on the possibilities and challenges of expanding local food initiatives and building a sustainable culinary tourism industry in Cape Breton. We also discussed their reasons for working to advance sustainable local-food tourism practices. Participants' experiences and perspectives varied but interviews also revealed shared values and concerns. All interviewees expressed concern for Cape Breton's struggling economy and identified challenges such as limited availability of local-ecological food and a short tourism season, and all emphasized opportunities for establishing Cape Breton Island as a recognized culinary tourism destination. Because each interview was unique in its focus, I coded responses by comparing and contrasting participants' disclosures and carefully noting differing viewpoints, points of agreement, and recurring themes.

## Findings and analysis

This study includes contextual research into tourism and agricultural practices in Cape Breton and interviews with people directly involved in various aspects of local-food tourism on the island. To present my findings, I begin by analyzing contextual factors. I identify key features of Cape Breton's culinary tourism industry and key strategies for marketing these features as tourist experiences. I then examine interview data to understand the divergent experiences and perspectives of food producers, restaurateurs, and tourism promoters and to identify points of agreement and differing opinions. Finally, I integrate contextual and experiential findings to explore key challenges associated with culinary tourism development in Cape Breton and in other destinations. These challenges include questions of power and autonomy, issues of transparency and accountability, and the complexities of transforming food production processes into aesthetic experiences for tourists.

### *Seafood, culture and climate: key features of culinary tourism*

My findings related to context reveal that Cape Breton possesses numerous advantages for developing ecological food practices and local food tourism. The island's coastal location and traditional reliance on the fishery for subsistence and economic survival makes seafood—and

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<sup>5</sup> To respect research participants' privacy, I have omitted names and identifying information throughout most of my analysis. Where participants named are included, the individuals named have agreed to be identified.

particularly shellfish—an important local food offering (ICON, 2015). In addition, many of the island’s rural communities have sustained traditional linguistic and cultural practices that authenticate local foods and appeal to tourists’ desires to connect with the people and places they visit (Farmer 2, April 28, 2015). Finally, Cape Breton has a moderate climate, varied grasses, and uncontaminated soils, along with an abundance of abandoned farms and natural pollinators that creates a favourable environment for practicing traditional farming techniques (Farmer 1, October 25, 2014; Farmer 2, June 25, 2014; Farmer 3, April 28, 2015; Farmer 4, July 21, 2016; Farmer 5, August, 15, 2016; Farmer 6, August 16, 2016).

Agriculture has always contributed to Cape Breton’s economy, but historically farms have been located—for the most part—in regions such as Inverness and Victoria Counties, and near the Bras d’Or Lakes and the Mira River. All existing farms on the island are relatively small scale, and farm start-ups are predominantly ecological and artisan operations (MacLeod, 2016; NS Department of Agriculture Representative, February 19, 2015).

Yet these possibilities coexist with significant challenges, including Cape Breton’s remote location, poor soils, unpredictable weather conditions, and short growing season. Of particular significance to my study, divergent views among various stakeholders, as well as conflicts between economic and ecological values, complicate shared goals of sustaining rural communities and promoting the island’s distinctive culture. It is clear that promoting culinary tourism raises questions of power, autonomy, inclusion, and accountability.

My study acknowledges pitfalls but accentuates potential opportunities for sustaining Cape Breton’s natural environments and distinctive cultures and marketing these qualities to establish the island as a culinary tourism destination. I explore possibilities for aligning economic and ecological goals to create resilient communities, establish equitable social relations, ensure animal welfare, and nurture natural environments.

### *Promoting local food and culinary tourism experiences in Nova Scotia*

Within Nova Scotia, tourism is promoted through several governmental, industry, and nonprofit organizations. Cape Breton’s tourism and culinary offerings are included in these promotions but are positioned as part of an authentic Nova Scotian experience rather than as representative of a distinct island culture with its own heritage and traditions (see Figure 1). Tourism Nova Scotia is a “private sector led Crown corporation” with a mandate to expand the tourism industry and its contributions to the provincial economy (Tourism Nova Scotia 2018). The corporation’s mandate includes a commitment to “strengthening Nova Scotia’s reputation as a place to enjoy authentic, quality food experiences and food culture” (Tourism NS Strategic Plan, 2017-2022; ICON, 2015, p. 10). Nova Scotia Tourism’s strategic plan does not focus specifically on culinary offerings; rather, the document includes food experiences as one way to showcase the province’s cultural

diversity. Culinary experiences are promoted on the agency’s website, through social media, and in the *Doers and Dreamers* Guide to Nova Scotia.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, Taste of Nova Scotia (Taste NS, 2017) is a provincial marketing association established as a combined public-private sector initiative in 1989. It consists of over 180 members from the public and private sectors: restaurateurs, food producers (farmers and fishers), and food processors (chocolatiers, bakers, winemakers, etc.). Seventeen Taste of Nova Scotia members are from Cape Breton (ICON, 2015). The association’s mandate is to “facilitate the growth of our members while promoting the unique quality of our Nova Scotia food and beverage products to consumers both locally and around the world.”<sup>7</sup> To this end, Taste of Nova Scotia promotes culinary tourism experiences, participates in event planning, and assists export market development. Some of its key partners include the Nova Scotia Tourism Agency, Nova Scotia Agriculture, Nova Scotia Fisheries and Aquaculture, the Winery Association of Nova Scotia, The Restaurant Association of Nova Scotia (RANS)<sup>8</sup>, and Slow Food Nova Scotia.<sup>9</sup>

Taste of Nova Scotia initiated the Chowder Trail in 2013 in a joint promotion of 30 participating restaurants, each offering its unique chowder recipe. Within two years, the number of participating restaurants doubled and, as of 2016, eleven participants were located in Cape Breton. People traveling along the trail can purchase chowder at various restaurants and receive stamps at each location entitling them to a prize.<sup>10</sup> In 2017, Taste of Nova Scotia incorporated this initiative into a province-wide “Seafood Trail” that includes a Lobster Trail, Oyster Trail, and Fish and Chips Trail. The agency’s website states that the Seafood Trail consists of “restaurants, retail, and fisheries experiences that highlight our province’s incredible seafood projects” (Taste of Nova Scotia, 2017). In 2015, Taste of Nova Scotia partnered with the Nova Scotia Tourism Association (NSTA) and the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) to promote The Good Cheer Trail, which operates on a similar concept but guides visitors to participating wineries, craft breweries, cideries, and distilleries for tastings of wine, beer, cider, and alcoholic spirits paired with “local cuisine” (Tourism Nova Scotia, 2017). Four tastings are

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<sup>6</sup> In addition, Select Nova Scotia is a provincial government consumer awareness program that promotes local businesses and locally produced food and other goods (Nova Scotia Government, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> See Taste of Nova Scotia’s website (<http://www.tasteofnovascotia.com/about/>).

<sup>8</sup> The Restaurant Association of Nova Scotia (established in 1947) is a nonprofit association that promotes the food and beverage industry through advocacy, marketing and promotion, partnerships, outreach, and consumer education (ICON, 2015: 11). The association has members from across the province, but the majority are Halifax establishments. Three members are from Cape Breton: Cabot Links, Big Spruce Brewing, and Nova Scotia Community College, Marconi Campus (ICON, 2015: 11).

<sup>9</sup> In addition to the partners identified above, the full list of key partners on the website includes the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, the Nova Scotia Economic and Rural Development and Tourism Association, Select Nova Scotia, the Tourism Industry Association of Nova Scotia, the Nova Scotia Association of Chefs and Cooks, the Waterfront Development Corporation Limited, Destination Halifax, the Nova Scotia Community College, and the Canadian Tourism Commission.

<sup>10</sup> In 2017, the website stated that collectors earning ten stamps would receive a Seafood Trail tee-shirt designed by a Nova Scotia artist (<http://www.novascotiaculinarytrails.com/trails/seafood/>).

offered in Cape Breton locations: Big Spruce Brewing, the Glenora Distillery, Breton Brewing, and Fortress Louisbourg National Historic Site.<sup>11</sup> The event’s website invites visitors to tastings from over 50 locations across the province and celebrates the Good Cheer Trail as the first of its kind in Canada.

Culinary experiences such as the Chowder Trail and the Good Cheer Trail have been fairly successful to date, but some Cape Breton restaurateurs have criticized uncertain returns for investment as factors that exclude small businesses from the potential benefits of collaborative promotion (ICON, 2015, p. 9; Restaurateur 5, October 31, 2017). A tourism marketer acknowledged that these events are “good ideas” but suggested that potential tourism revenues from such developments are limited without an integrated marketing strategy to package and promote culinary experiences across Cape Breton Island and throughout Nova Scotia (personal communication, CEO DCBA, May 5, 2017).

### *Cape Breton Island as a culinary tourism destination*

In 2015, Destination Cape Breton Association (DCBA), a not-for-profit tourism marketing organization, was created specifically to promote Cape Breton Island as a distinctive tourism destination. Since 2010, DCBA is funded through a marketing levy<sup>12</sup> (i.e. hotel tax) with matching funds from Enterprise Cape Breton Corporation (ECBC)<sup>13</sup> and additional financial resources from the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) and partnering organizations such as Parks Canada and Tourism Nova Scotia (Tulle, May 5 2017).

A report, the “Culinary Tourism Roadmap” (ICON, December, 2015) surveys culinary experiences across the island and identifies directions for enlarging food related offerings and branding Cape Breton as a culinary destination. Its broad recommendations include developing links with the slow food movement; expanding the range of available themed itineraries; and showcasing the island’s pristine natural environment and artisanal food production and harvesting practices. More specific recommendations include marketing oysters as a traditional food of the Mi’kmaq people and present-day local-ecological food product; and branding Cape Breton as a lobster and seafood destination through the establishment of a shellfish festival and centre for culinary excellence at the Marconi Campus of the Nova Scotia Community College (ICON, 2015, pp. 22-34).

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<sup>11</sup> Big Spruce and Breton Brewing produce craft beer; the Glenora Distillery produces single-malt scotch, and Fortress Louisbourg offers tastings of its branded rum produced by Authentic Seacoast Company.

<sup>12</sup> The marketing levy came into effect in January 2011. In its first year, it generated approximately \$460,000 dollars that was matched by funds from ECBC. The levy has grown annually and has been capped at \$640,000 for the past three years.

<sup>13</sup> ECBC was disbanded in 2014 and its responsibilities were assigned to the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) and Public Works and Government Services Canada ([http://www.ecbc.ca/index\\_intro.php](http://www.ecbc.ca/index_intro.php)). ACOA has continued to support DCBA.



Presently local food tourism offerings are expanding across Cape Breton Island but, since completing the Culinary Tourism Roadmap, DCBA has been unable to find an organization willing to implement its proposals. Consequently, the association's recommendations have not been extensively endorsed or enacted. The challenges of achieving such goals may reflect ineffective communication between government agencies, industry partners, ecological producers, and restaurateurs; but conflicts between ecological and economic values also complicate efforts to develop a unified culinary tourism strategy.

### *Stakeholder involvement in local food tourism*

Contextual factors enable and constrain culinary tourism developments in Cape Breton, but these developments also are fundamentally shaped by the contributions of local food producers and restaurateurs. The discussion that follows focuses on interview data to integrate contextual and experiential findings and illuminate stakeholders' experiences, perspectives, and motivations for participating in local-food tourism.

Several of my respondents emphasized that establishing equitable and sustainable culinary tourism developments requires collaborative efforts among ecological food participants, tourism promoters, policymakers, and funding agencies (Restaurateur 2, June 15, 2017; Restaurateur 5, October 31, 2017). One chef stated that Taste of Nova Scotia's membership fees and other costs are prohibitive for small businesses and thus do not promote ecological culinary tourism. He recommended cooperative association as a potential alternative:

If you did a Taste of Nova Scotia tour right now, I don't think it would reflect what we can potentially offer... I think if there was going to be a local food tour on the island it would have to come from restaurants or people that really cared about the local and not just ones that say they're local and have just a lobster on the menu or something. So it would have to be cooperative or something... (Restaurateur 5, October 31, 2017).

Events created through government-industry partnerships have proven popular with some travelers and reveal that possibilities exist for establishing Cape Breton as a culinary tourism destination. In addition to such initiatives, food producers, restaurateurs, and tourism operators around the island have individually and collaboratively developed various culinary offerings over the past decade and achieved varying levels of success. Numerous inns, restaurants, and food trucks feature local-organic foods—to varying degrees—on their menus, and some have organized special event dining experiences featuring Nova Scotia wines, spirits, or craft beers paired with local food.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Examples of Cape Breton food establishments that feature local-organic ingredients include restaurants such as the Bite House, Governor's Restaurant and Pub, and Flavor on the Water; inns such as the Telegraph House and the Chanterelle Inn; and food trucks such as Cruisin' Cuisine, Lil Rollin Bistro, and the Mermaid Mobile.

Some establishments have limited their involvement to offering specific dishes prepared with local ingredients on their menus, but several restaurateurs have been centrally involved in promoting local-ecological food. For example, Scott Morrison, chef and owner-operator of three restaurants in Sydney, participated for several years in an annual local food challenge that encouraged island residents to become locavores for one month in September. In the event's first year, Morrison hosted the opening-night dinner in one of his establishments and offered daily specials featuring local ingredients for the 30-day challenge. Canadian geographer Lenore Newman (2017), in her book *Speaking in Cod Tongues: A Canadian Culinary Journey*, emphasizes the importance of restaurants and other food vendors in defining distinctive regional foods that comprise Canadian cuisine (Desjardins, 2017). She states that "local cuisines" embody geographical and cultural associations. Recalling her travels across Cape Breton Island, Newman includes Acadian dishes (fricot, chiard, and butterscotch pie)<sup>15</sup> among iconic local foods (p. 171).

Ardon Mofford, owner-operator of Governors Pub and Eatery in Sydney, has played a prominent role in procuring and promoting local food in Cape Breton. Mofford and his sister Pearleen organized the *Right Some Good Festival*, one of Cape Breton's most successful culinary events. *Right Some Good* was a pop-up dining event that paired world renowned and local chefs to create themed dishes using local ingredients at locations chosen to showcase Cape Breton's natural beauty and cultural traditions (ICON, 2015, p. 13). The festival was offered throughout Cape Breton from 2011-2013 and extended to Halifax in 2014. It generated significant revenues and attracted North American-wide media attention, but inadequate infrastructure and unreliable funding led to discontinuation of the event in subsequent years. Reflecting on *Right Some Good's* contributions, Mofford suggested that funding agencies need a broader framework for assessing the value of such events:

Everything on the menu was local except for little things like...caviar and we'd get it out of New Brunswick or something, but 80% of everything that was on a plate was from Cape Breton Island and the staffing was mostly from here. It was just a really cool event and what happened is that the funding dried up.... and again it's how do you equate the value of something like that? You know, there's always the numerical value, like 'hey it cost \$500,000 to execute that; there's only \$250,000 worth of revenue so then it cost \$250,000—it wasn't worth it.' Because that's an accountant's way of looking at if something has any value. But *Huffington Post* wrote their first article ever about Cape Breton Island from a *Right Some Good* Food festival sitting on a dock with scenic beauty.... And then you were exposed to the *New York Times* because we brought in all these travel writers that never came to Cape Breton before, but because they're all foodie fanatics they came to the events...and they wrote stories about the chefs, they wrote stories about the food, they

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<sup>15</sup> Fricot is a hearty meat and vegetable soup and chiard is a dish made of fried onions and potatoes.

wrote stories about the products, they were guests at the events, they spoke at the events, and then they exposed themselves to the whole island, Destination Cape Breton, made partnerships along the way. And those are the things that came from food...

His comments suggest that, viewed in light of their indirect and long-term benefits, events such *Right Some Good* have substantially higher value than can be captured in short-term economic assessments and therefore warrant subsidization. According to DCBA's strategic plan, *Right Some Good* provides justification for hosting future high-profile culinary events in Cape Breton (ICON 2015, p. 13).

Morrison and Mofford own large dining establishments and source both local-organic and conventionally produced ingredients. They identified two challenges for restaurant owners serving larger clienteles: the limited availability of ecological foods in Cape Breton and prevailing customer expectations regarding affordability and consistency. Importantly, however, some smaller establishments in Cape Breton have been successful in building businesses entirely committed to ecological food (Restaurateur 3, July 6 2017; Restaurateur 5, October 31, 2017). These establishments acknowledge that sourcing and preparing local-organic ingredients are time consuming and expensive processes, but they see significant potential for expanding these offerings in Cape Breton. One respondent stated that many visitors to Cape Breton are dissatisfied with the island's franchised and industrially prepared restaurant offerings and longing for fresh, wholesome dishes that represent the island's food traditions (Restaurateur 4, October 31, 2017). Another suggested that cost can be a more important consideration than ecological commitments for many tourists, but nonetheless emphasized that customers' enthusiastic responses consistently reaffirm his exclusive focus on promoting local-organic food (Restaurateur 3, July 6, 2017).

In addition to these relatively high-profile culinary experiences, several communities have organized food festivals and/or incorporated food events into local celebrations (e.g. Whitney Pier Melting Pot Multicultural Festival; Seaside Lobsterfest in St. Peter's; Louisbourg Crabfest). Farmers' markets and events such as strawberry festivals and codfish suppers also have become popular tourism attractions. As stakeholders work to enlarge Cape Breton's range of culinary offerings, the Pan-Cape Breton Food Hub Co-operative is a key development that facilitates networks between producers and consumers. The Food Hub, established in 2015, is a nonprofit organization with a mandate to collect, promote, and distribute locally produced foods (ICON, 2015, p. 21). The association brings together over 30 food producers and harvesters and an increasing number of restaurant owners and household customers (*Cape Breton Post* 3 February 2017). Membership increased substantially in 2016 and organizers are working to attract additional producers and consumers (*Cape Breton Post* 3 March 2017).

The importance of Cape Breton's Food Hub is evidenced in industry reports and scholarly investigations that identify distribution networks as crucial components in the successful establishment of ecological food practices and culinary tourism initiatives (ICON,

2015; Everett and Slocum, 2013; Inwood, Shoshanah, Sharp, Moore, and Stinner, 2008). Overwhelmingly, respondents in this study described the Food Hub as invaluable for connecting food producers, restaurateurs, and household consumers. One farmer stated that the network had enabled him to substantially increase his customer base and, as a result, leave his job to farm full time (Levangie August 15 2016).

All restaurateurs emphasized the challenges of accessing adequate supplies of local-organic ingredients and applauded the Food Hub for facilitating communication between producers and chefs and for reducing the labour required to source ecological food. Only one chef stated that his pre-existing relationships with producers made the Food Hub convenient—rather than essential—for procuring menu ingredients: “I’m a member of the Hub for sure but the hub offers almost the same resources that I’ve already fixed for myself...” (Restaurateur 2, June 15 2017). More typically, restaurateurs credited the Food Hub for making their businesses workable: “it’s now easy to do because of the Food Hub. You know I’ve got a Food Hub order in this morning and we’re checking it off and I’m thinking ‘Holy Moly,’ there’s probably nine different distributors on that order and if we had to order this—imagine calling nine distributors!” (Restaurateur 3, July 6 2017). This respondent also argued that additional services and networks were necessary to facilitate access to local-organic food.

### *Motivating factors for restaurateurs*

When asked about their reasons for promoting local-organic food, restaurateurs expressed commonalities and differences. All respondents in my study identified Cape Breton’s unique cultural and environmental characteristics, and several spoke at length about the many factors that position Cape Breton as an important culinary tourism destination (Restaurateur 2, June 15, 2017; Restaurateur 4, October 31, 2017). Most respondents identified personal rather than political motivations, and health was a predominant concern for many restaurateurs who questioned the nutritional value and potential harms of industrially processed convenience foods (Restaurateur 1, August 5, 2015; Restaurateur 2, June 15, 2017; Restaurateur 3, July 6, 2017).

One respondent described his interest in local-organic food as partly personal—the result of his wife’s health concerns regarding mass produced and processed foods—and partly “good business,” explaining that consumers are increasingly conscious of where their food comes from and how it is produced (Restaurateur 1, August 5, 2015). He also expressed an ethical commitment to supporting local communities and enhancing Cape Breton’s economy: “And beyond that it was most important I think from when I moved back to Cape Breton to try to keep most of our dollars here on the island as much as possible.” This individual did not describe his involvement in promoting local-organic food as a political commitment, yet his concerns about human health and community autonomy embody a critical awareness of the global-industrial food system and its impact on people and localities. Other restaurateurs in this study expressed similar desires to support local farmers and rural communities by offering fresh, wholesome food

to their customers (Restaurateur 2, June 15, 2017; Restaurateur 3, July 6, 2017; Restaurateur 4, October 31, 2017; Restaurateur 5, October 31, 2017).

One restaurant owner and chef identified his family background in tourism and hospitality as an important influence on his local-organic food interests (Restaurateur 2, June 15, 2017). His father is a retired chef and his parents operated a small hotel in Cape Breton while he was growing up. This respondent described procuring local food as the way things were done in Cape Breton at that time—diets were much more seasonally oriented, and farmers and fishers sold farm-gate, at the wharf, or delivered foodstuffs to the hotel. He was not unconcerned about health but emphasized taste and freshness as more important factors in his decision to accentuate local food in his restaurant. Community development was crucial for this local food advocate, who described supportive social networks and sustainable economic practices as fundamental to individual well-being and community survival. Contributing to rural autonomy and resilience has become an ethical commitment that shapes this respondent's decisions and vision:

It's ethical for me now yes, it's definitely an ethical thing now. You know we need our communities to grow, we need people to stay here and the only way we can do that is if we support each other. And people really gotta change their mindset, we've have to re-educate everybody into believing that. I mean for the amount of money you're going to save by going to Walmart and buying a case of certified Angus steaks for 20 dollars—two dollars each a steak—that's been marinated to death and when you put it in your mouth it just kind of minces between your teeth, it just drives me because you know what? You're eating that because you got it for two bucks from God knows wherever it came from.... But if we don't change that, if we don't change the mentality of ordering jewelry from China, or hats, everything coming in mailboxes, then you lose those types of shops, you lose your downtown cores. You lose where people [don't] invest in your communities...

Concerns about health and commitment to the economic stability of their communities were the main motivations of most restaurateurs in this study. For some respondents, these concerns encouraged broader environmental and animal welfare interests that intensified their involvement in local food practices. Yet for others political awareness was the motivating factor that inspired their commitment to promoting ecological food as a pleasurable, wholesome, and sustainable way of life:

Well it's simple I think. Ecological food as in organic food or well taken care of agriculture is just better food, right from the start, right? So we travel extensively around the world and we've seen a lot of those concentration camps of animals in California and those massive fields of carrots, onions, you name it. And it's not the way to go; we got

introduced four or five years ago to the principle called permaculture and it makes a lot more sense that way than what it is now (Farmer 5, October 31 2017).

For these individuals, creating delectable food experiences is a tangible way of enlarging critical awareness and demonstrating that alternatives to the industrial food system exist.

### *Contextualizing challenges for local food tourism in Cape Breton*

Despite the committed efforts of ecological food participants, local food tourism remains a marginal—albeit promising—practice in Cape Breton. Tourism Nova Scotia statistics indicate that in 2017 only one percent of visitors listed culinary experiences as a main reason for vacationing in the province.<sup>16</sup> In the same year, DCBA reported that visitors to Cape Breton identified coastal scenery, sightseeing, outdoor adventures, cultural experiences, and heritage as the island’s main attractions (Jala, *CB Post*, 4 October 2017). Some of these visitors discover interesting food experiences along the way, but my respondents emphasized Cape Breton’s potential to become a recognizable culinary destination comparable to more successful ventures in areas facing similar circumstances. For example, DCBA’s Culinary Tourism Roadmap identifies coastal Maine, Ontario’s Prince Edward County, Vancouver Island, and the province of Prince Edward Island as places modelling “best practices” in local-food tourism (ICON, 2015, p. 14).

Developments in Prince Edward Island invite comparison with Cape Breton’s situation because these regions have many similarities, including climate, culture, geographic proximity, and island status. However, a significant difference with regard to culinary tourism is that, in contrast to Nova Scotia’s emphasis on specific dining experiences and food events, Tourism PEI has introduced a unified marketing campaign to promote the island’s fertile soils, abundant fisheries, and wide-ranging locally produced foods. The agency’s website brands Prince Edward Island as “Canada’s Food Island” and provides links to tourist experiences such as the Culinary Trail, the Fall Flavours Festival, and the International Shellfish Festival.<sup>17</sup>

Commenting on this disparity, Mary Tulle, CEO of Destination Cape Breton, remarked that the absence in Nova Scotia of a coordinated marketing strategy impedes Cape Breton’s—and the province’s—efforts to bring together divergent stakeholders and create a shared vision for advancing local food tourism initiatives (May 5, 2017). Disconnected events do not serve as a principal motivator for potential visitors, so culinary experiences remain at best a secondary

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<sup>16</sup> Tourism Nova Scotia website ([http://tourismns.ca/sites/default/files/2017\\_VES\\_Full\\_Year\\_report.pdf](http://tourismns.ca/sites/default/files/2017_VES_Full_Year_report.pdf)). Twenty-six percent of visitors listed scenery and natural landscapes and 12% listed the seacoast and ocean as the main reasons for visiting Nova Scotia. Six percent identified Nova Scotia’s culture and 5% identified the province’s heritage as the province’s main attraction. The website does not provide specific statistics for Cape Breton Island.

<sup>17</sup> Tourism PEI website (<http://www.tourismpei.com/culinary-pei>).

consideration for travelers, and many visitors learn about local food cultures after arriving in the province (ICON, 2015). Without a clearly defined marketing plan, local food advocates and tourism operators in scattered rural communities have no effective mechanism for integrating their events into a larger and more meaningful experience of place and culture. A more unified strategy could attract more visitors and encourage people to extend their stay in the region in order to participate in linked events at various locales. For example, events combining the island's music and food traditions have potential as meaningful and profitable forms of tourism development (MacLeod, 2016).

Notably, island residents often self-identify as Cape Bretoners rather than as Nova Scotians, and Cape Breton identity is often defined in opposition to local perceptions of mainlanders' indifference and contempt. Critical analysis of culinary tourism initiatives in other regions demonstrates that appreciation for local attachments and cultural distinctions is important for developing meaningful tourism strategies because food practices contribute significantly to cultural identities and understandings of place (Bessiere & Tibere, 2013; deSalvo et al, 2013). When collaboratively and sensitively enacted, local food tourism can revitalize rural communities and validate local identifications by providing employment, increasing economic resilience, and celebrating the divergent tastes and practices of residents (Bessiere & Tibere, 2013; deSalvo et al, 2013; Everett and Aitchison, 2008). Engagement with local food traditions can encourage tourists to identify with the people and places they visit, and these affiliations are not trivial. To the contrary, appreciation of local food cultures can engender critical awareness and subtly challenge the industrial food system (Everett, 2012; Schnell, 2011; Schnell, 2013; Sims, 2009).

### *Questions of power and autonomy in culinary tourism*

Developments in other regions suggest that marketing food traditions can benefit rural communities, but expansion of culinary tourism also raises questions of power and autonomy. Which food practices are valued as “authentic” and appealing? Do local communities have a voice in determining how their traditions are promoted? Local food and culinary experiences are often viewed as responsible and sustainable forms of economic development but increasing demand for local foods can entail significant costs for ecological producers and natural ecosystems (Dougherty et al., 2013; Everett, 2012). Scholarly critiques of culinary tourism in other locales have shown that restaurateurs typically have significant power to influence transactions with their suppliers and demand lower prices for locally produced ingredients (Dougherty et al., 2013, pp. 20, 21). Restaurateurs usually are fewer in number than food producers and generally have more educational capital and higher-class positioning. They may be more concerned with taste, freshness, and appearance than with production methods and therefore may not feel constrained by producers' ecological and social justice values. Restaurateurs also can influence public perceptions of local and “good” foods through

advertising, menu offerings, staff recommendations, and events such as tastings and cooking classes.

Relations between food producers and restaurateurs in Cape Breton illustrated some of these tensions. One respondent criticized restaurateurs for demanding low prices from farmers while charging premium prices and catering to an affluent clientele (Local Food Advocate, August 21, 2013). Yet restaurateurs emphasized that their operations were not lucrative. They identified numerous constraints including competition among dining establishments operating in Atlantic Canada's short tourism season, and limited consumer demand for local-organic foods (Restaurateur 1, August 5, 2015; Restaurateur 2, June 15, 2017; Restaurateur 3, July 6, 2017; Restaurateur 4, October 31, 2017). One respondent explained that local-organic culinary experiences appeal to a niche market; the majority of diners are accustomed to industrially produced foods and value price and convenience above the distinctive qualities of artisan foods:

[W]e realized as we got through the summer that people were less and less concerned with where the food came from. They wanted it to be awesome, delicious and price—that's what people consider first. The minority of people really, really care when it comes down to it if it's local or not. (Restaurateur 1, August 5, 2015).

### *The importance of advertising: Transparency and accountability*

Consumers' expectations thus constrain restaurateurs' decisions about how to position their businesses, but food producers and restaurateurs in this study also recognized the importance of local food tourism in shaping consumers' choices. Both groups agreed that culinary tourism is beneficial to food producers when dining establishments purchase ecological ingredients and promote local suppliers through advertising, menus, and staff recommendations. Owners of small-scale dining establishments were able to source ingredients entirely from ecological producers and took pride in promoting their suppliers to customers (Restaurateur 3, July 6, 2017; Restaurateur 4, October 31, 2017; Restaurateur 5, October 31, 2017). Those operating larger establishments sourced local-organic ingredients as much as possible but also relied on conventionally produced foods to serve their clientele. All respondents emphasized the importance of honesty with food producers and customers about menu sourcing (Restaurateur 1, August 5, 2017; Restaurateur 2, June 15, 2017).

Yet unequal power relations are distressing and injurious when restaurants advertise local-organic menu offerings—in some cases explicitly claiming to support local farmers—but do not purchase ingredients from small-scale, ecological producers (Local Food Advocate, August 21, 2013; Restaurateur 1, August 5, 2015; Restaurateur 2, June 15, 2017). Restaurateurs in this study suggested that some establishments made insincere claims about how they source their ingredients and criticized this dishonesty as detrimental to producer-consumer relationships:



[T]hat's kind of false advertising what they're doing; they're saying that they're local, they're local, they're local, because we've heard it too because we became friends with a lot of the farmers that we get our produce from and some of them do say that [certain restaurateurs] come once a year maybe and buy something and then never come back, and then how is their menu—they might get a quarter of a cow or something and say that they're local beef, but then all summer long? Obviously, they went through that quarter cow and they never came back (Restaurateur 4, October 31, 2017).

One respondent criticized false advertising as entirely unfair to ecological producers but expressed less concern about the impact on his business of competitors' questionable claims to local-organic status. He suggested that many consumers are uninformed—and in some cases undisturbed—about the origins of their food:

You know what, I give that a bit of thought because we tell everybody [that] we buy from the local farmers. I'm sure when they sit down they assume every restaurant...is buying from the local farmers, you know what I mean? I'm sure they do. If I went to—up the Valley—and they said they were buying from the local farmers, I'd think 'yeah I'd expect you to'—you know what I mean? They don't understand that most people are buying it from—and it's being shipped from California or wherever it's coming from, so no I'm not worried... (Restaurateur 3, July 6 2017).

In voicing their unequivocal disapproval regarding dishonest promotional strategies, some restaurateurs acknowledged that slim profit margins and the fluctuating availability of local-organic foods contribute to such behaviour:

I know it's really sexy right now for chefs to [promote the] local, local, local thing and they kind of use it more as a marketing tool than as committed to the local product. And I don't mean to be critical but...a lot of them will buy, like, microgreens and say fresh local salad and you're sprinkling a microgreen or an alfalfa sprout that's grown in a greenhouse; or they'll buy some local spinach but then everything else...is not a local product. Now I'm not being critical because the issue is supply .... in our business, our margins are so small...there's so many more variables that we deal with in the restaurant business and we have to be frugal.... There's so much more to do from a local standpoint but it's a matter of getting all the components together. (Restaurateur 2, June 15, 2017)

Respondents' comments reveal a nuanced understanding of the challenges they and their associates face, and a reluctance to point fingers at business owners who misrepresent their local

commitments to appeal to potential consumers. Importantly, however, these misrepresentations have repercussions for local food producers, and restaurateurs who capitalize on the appeal of ecological foods without supporting artisan producers are accountable for the harms that arise from their insincerity. Their businesses may profit from their beneficent image, but ecological producers do not share this benefit and may experience missed sales opportunities if consumers believe they are supporting local-organic practices and feel less inclined to visit farmers' markets or other venues that actually offer local-organic foods. These missed opportunities are particularly damaging for small-scale producers because many are struggling to make ends meet and maintain their operations. Over the long term, superficial claims to local-organic ingredient sourcing may backfire and contribute to consumer cynicism and apathy as people become aware of duplicitous advertising:

I mean local farmers will probably tell you [false advertising is] a massive thing.... lots of people think 'oh well you're promoting local' but how much are you actually buying local? Nobody knows what anybody else is doing. I could tell you this lettuce is local just like I could tell you this is a Cape Breton grown beet; you don't know. Same with going to the grocery store and 'this is organic, this is not organic'; you have no idea—where did this come from, you know? So there is a trust issue... (Restaurateur 1, August 5, 2015).

On a more hopeful note, enhanced consumer awareness of duplicitous advertising practices could encourage demands for accountability and transparency from restaurant owners that would permit informed and responsible consumption and result in increased markets for ecological producers.

### *Transforming production processes into tourist experiences*

Existing research reveals that questions of power and autonomy also arise when production places become consumption spaces; for example, when tours and product tastings are offered on farm premises (Everett, 2012). Such offerings expand opportunities for marketing ecological food, but they also empower consumers to influence food practices in ways that may conflict with producers' ecological values and work priorities. Some routine and necessary farm activities may not appeal to visitors, and regulations may prohibit public access to food production processes. In a study of culinary tourism in Ireland (Everett, 2012), farmers described the challenges of transforming production processes such as cheesemaking into entertaining consumer experiences and reported feeling pressured to adapt their performances to meet tourists' expectations of quaint rural folk and rustic farming communities (p. 550). These constraints raise questions of authenticity: Do visitors actually gain access to and participate in

the everyday work of ecological food production, or are their experiences altered or sanitized, providing only a simulation of what takes place out of public view?

Significantly, producers also have agency in these situations and can intentionally adapt their performances and practices to balance conflicting needs and expectations, but the pressure to transform production sites into tourist attractions can entail significant economic and environmental costs. As an example, a beekeeper I interviewed explained that offering farm tours would respond to requests from tourists and community members, and potentially provide additional revenue to sustain her operation. Yet domesticating the property to permit visitor access (for example, cutting back tangled and thorny natural pollinators) would destroy natural bee habitats and require financial investment in equipment and labour. Offering tours also would infringe on time devoted to actual beekeeping and might require hiring additional employees that she could not afford (Farmer 4, July 21, 2016). Several farmers raised similar concerns, expressing a desire to develop entertaining and educational culinary tourism experiences that would encourage visitors to embrace ecological food practices but acknowledging that modest revenues and intensive labour made such endeavours practically unachievable—at least in the short term (Farmer 1, June 25, 2015; Farmer 4, August 15, 2016; Farmer 5, August 16, 2016).

## Conclusion

This study explored the questions: How do local food practices contribute to the island's appeal as a tourism destination, and how might such experiences be enhanced to sustain rural communities? Can culinary tourism advance Cape Breton's ecological food movement and encourage awareness of and appreciation for local cultures and natural environments? What specific challenges and possibilities exist in Cape Breton, and how do these factors relate to circumstances in comparable regions undertaking similar strategies? My findings, both contextual and experiential, suggest that effective strategies can build on local environmental and cultural characteristics to market the island as a culinary tourism destination. Qualities such as rural traditionalism and natural landscapes are central in tourism imagery for the entire province of Nova Scotia. As an example, Taste of Nova Scotia accentuates seafood, particularly lobster, as an iconic traditional local food offering.

Turning specifically to Cape Breton, the island abounds with rugged natural beauty, undeveloped fields and forests, small-scale farms, fishing communities, and rural traditions. These features are promoted within the DCBA Culinary Tourism Roadmap as “authentic” and appealing to both tourists and professional chefs. The Roadmap (ICON, 2015) states that interest in culinary tourism is growing and recommends that Cape Breton's brand feature hard shell

lobster as a distinctive local food with national and global appeal.<sup>18</sup> Research into culinary tourism in other regions suggests that these initiatives are most successful when community members have a voice in determining how they will be represented and when tourism offerings align with local food traditions. Consequently, the Roadmap suggests that Cape Breton’s seasonal fishing operations present opportunities for “sustainable shellfish” and “Slow Fish” branding (ICON, 2015, p. 23).

Yet the question of how much culinary tourism can expand in Cape Breton without overwhelming ecological producers—and without threatening fragile ecological resources and environments—remains to be seen. Recommendations put forward in the Culinary Tourism Roadmap have not been implemented and the absence of a unified strategy impedes efforts to coordinate food related events and appeal to visitors’ desires for “authentic” experiences of local cultures. The Roadmap encourages sustainable food practices but, as a tourism marketing agency, DCBA supports all initiatives that have potential tourism appeal and does not distinguish between ecological and conventional food offerings in its promotion of local food establishments and events. Increasing consumer demand for lobster, snow crab, and other types of seafood could position Cape Breton as an appealing culinary tourism destination, but greater demand and the potential for higher profits could place pressure on policy makers to extend fishing seasons and relax regulations that protect marine species and fragile ecosystems.

Several challenges presented themselves as a result of this study. At the provincial level, Taste of Nova Scotia promotes “local food” but does not differentiate between ecological and conventional offerings and, in addition, this agency requires that participating establishments pay membership fees that are often prohibitive for small businesses. Advocacy for ecological practices thus resides with producers and their supporters who often lack the financial resources and social-political power to advance their interests (Local Food Advocate, August 21, 2013; Farmer 2, April 28, 2015; Farmer 3, July 21, 2016). Unequal power relations extend to questions of inclusion: tourism marketing agencies promote touristic culinary experiences but are not mandated to actively support nondominant communities or ensure diverse representations of local food cultures. Cape Breton’s situation is further complicated by the island’s geographic, economic, and cultural marginalization within Nova Scotia and in national and international contexts.

On a more positive note, tourism marketing in rural communities within Canada and in other countries—such as Prince Edward Island’s unified promotion of various food events and branding as “Canada’s Food Island”—suggest that effective promotional strategies can overcome geographic disadvantages. Establishing cooperative relationships between divergent communities and with ecological food participants—producers and restaurateurs—would enhance Cape Breton’s reputation as a distinctive, inclusive, and sustainable culinary tourism

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<sup>18</sup> The Culinary Roadmap (ICON, 2015) also identifies other shellfish, including oysters, as iconic foods and states that oysters represent a traditional Mi’kmaq food and a popular contemporary dish. The document recommends that Cape Breton promote “sustainable seafood” and “Slow Fish” (p. 23).

destination. Ultimately, enthusiasm for culinary tourism development must be tempered with respect for natural ecosystems and local communities, and with awareness of the pitfalls inherent in commodifying cultural groups and their traditions. Developments in other regions indicate that ecological food initiatives, including local food tourism, have the potential to revitalize rural communities and enhance local autonomy by enriching social networks, creating economic opportunities, and nurturing human connections with other species and natural environments. Achieving these goals will demand collaboration, critical awareness, and responsiveness to evolving circumstances from all stakeholders—policy makers, tourism promoters, consumers, and—crucially— restaurateurs and food producers.

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