

The future of food tourism in a post-COVID-19 world: insights from New Zealand

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper considers two sectors critical to New Zealand's economy and identity – food and tourism – and addresses the question: what role will – or could – food and drink play in a more resilient tourism future for the country?

Design/methodology/approach – This is largely a conceptual paper, informed by the academic literature, media commentary and recent market research.

Findings – The paper concludes that there are trends apparent in the food and tourism sectors prior to the COVID-19 pandemic that have intensified during lockdown and which are likely to influence the resetting of tourism on a more resilient and regenerative pathway. Three potential trends in food and drink tourism are identified, labelled “Getting back to basics”, “Valuing local and locals” and “Food for well-being”.

Originality/value – By synthesising recent research and academic, industry and media commentaries, this paper provides a timely assessment of a potential future role of food and drink tourism in a reimagined tourism sector for New Zealand, with this assessment offering a starting point for further discussions about a more regenerative, equitable and inclusive tourism future.

Keywords New Zealand, Food tourism, COVID-19

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities for transformation are being imagined for many aspects of our lives – from the ways we work and shop, to how we relax and socialise. Tourism has been at the forefront of many of these discussions. While crises in tourism are not new, the global reach and complete shutdown of tourist travel caused by this pandemic is unparalleled in a global industry that has experienced almost constant growth for nearly seven decades (Benjamin *et al.*, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). The pandemic has revealed a series of failures in the global tourism system, including the vulnerabilities of workers, tourism businesses, sectors and global supply chains (Cave and Dredge, 2020; Hall *et al.*, 2020a), the tourism impacts on environmental well-being and social licence to operate in many tourism-dependent communities (e.g. Brouder, 2020; Cave and Dredge, 2020) and the over-reliance on tourism, or particular market segments, in some local economies (Benjamin *et al.*, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Rastegar *et al.*, 2021). While some tourism businesses and destinations are keen to return to “business as usual” as soon as possible, for other stakeholders and commentators, the global pandemic provides a “transformational moment opening up possibilities for resetting tourism” on a more resilient and regenerative path (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020, p. 612; see also Hall *et al.*, 2020a; Jamal and Higham, 2021; Prayag, 2020; Prideaux *et al.*, 2020; Rastegar *et al.*, 2021).

In New Zealand, COVID-19 has brought into focus the values that matter to businesses, regions and the country's “team of five million” – a term referring to the size of New Zealand's population

(Roy, 2020a). The initial lockdown restrictions and continuing closure of New Zealand's borders to international tourists has acted as something of a tourism "circuit breaker" (Rastegar *et al.*, 2021) and resulted in a re-evaluation of the role of tourism in New Zealand society. There is recognition that some regions – and perhaps the country as a whole – is over reliant on inbound tourism, illustrated by the devastation experienced in some of the most tourism-dependent communities (Jamieson, 2020), and tourism's social licence to operate has been severely compromised by concerns about overcrowding and environmental damage in some of our most loved and iconic locations (Macdonald, 2021). These realisations have resulted in widespread discussion of how values important to New Zealanders can be protected and enhanced in substantive and meaningful ways in a reimagined and more resilient New Zealand tourism system (e.g. Becken, 2020; Carr, 2020; Cave and Dredge, 2020; Department of Conservation, 2021; Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, 2021; Tourism Futures Taskforce, 2020).

As a food exporter, New Zealand's primary sectors have remained relatively robust during the pandemic, although all sectors face challenges with delays in supply chains, and the horticultural sector and wine industry, in particular, are grappling with labour shortages due to a lack of migrant workers and international travellers on working holiday visas (Flaws, 2020; Wall, 2020). During the country's lockdown, many of the workers and industries deemed "essential" to the country were involved in the food system – growing, processing, transporting and selling food and drink. Media coverage of the economic importance of the primary sector to New Zealand during this time also resulted in greater public recognition and appreciation of the country's food producers (Ministry of Primary Industries, 2020; Sivignon, 2020).

While some parts of the New Zealand food system were relatively unaffected by the lockdown, the hospitality and restaurant sector faced severe restrictions in trading until the country returned to Alert Level 1 (RNZ, 2020). Food and drink producers who relied on these distribution channels also faced uncertain futures. For example, market gardeners servicing fruit and vegetable shops, or wineries selling to restaurants and cafes, were more impacted than producers operating at a scale suitable for supermarket distribution (Gilbertson, 2020). Over-dependence on international tourism in some New Zealand regions left these communities and their residents more susceptible to economic hardship, including food insecurity. In Queenstown, many hospitality and tourism workers needed food parcels in the absence of income (McMenzie-McLean, 2020), and the capacity of food banks throughout the country was stretched (Anderson, 2020).

This paper addresses an issue at the intersection of these two sectors – food and tourism – which are both critical to New Zealand's economy and identity, and asks: what role will, or could, food and drink play in a more resilient tourism future for the country? Drawing on recent academic research, media commentary and insights from ongoing research with food and drink producers throughout the country, the following discussion briefly outlines the characteristics and growing popularity of food tourism globally. With this context established, the paper explores the proposition that there is a growing potential for food tourism experiences, particularly for the domestic market, in post-COVID-19 New Zealand. It is the argument here that a changing perception of "local food" as a tourist experience has been influenced by a number of factors, including the experiences of lockdown, a growing awareness of sustainability and ethical concerns around food production practices witnessed globally, and perhaps, a growing maturity and confidence in what makes New Zealand's food culture unique. The paper concludes with an overview of three food tourism trends that illustrate a potential change in the role of food and drink culture in New Zealand's post-pandemic tourism future.

2. Literature review

Food is a critical component of tourism, encountered in myriad contexts and on many occasions in a tourist's experience. These encounters may occur during a structured and staged food experience in a restaurant, or in less structured, or more mundane, settings while exploring a farmers market or popping into a supermarket for supplies (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019). It is true that all tourists have to eat, but not all tourists are "food tourists". Hall and Sharples (2003, p. 10)

define food tourism as “visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of specialist food production region are the primary motivating factor for travel.” Food tourism can be passive, such as watching a famous chef prepare a meal, or take the active form of pick-your-own fruit or vegetables. It may focus on a cultural experience of local foodways and techniques (often referred to as “culinary tourism”) or integrate more broadly the role of food within the culture, lifestyle and environment of a community, so that one may “taste place” (Hill and Fountain, 2021). These holistic cultural experiences may be referred to as “gastronomy tourism” (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2014). Yet food tourism experiences can be simply about the food – “the physical embodied and sensual experience itself” (Ellis *et al.*, 2018, p. 253; see also Neill *et al.*, 2016) – and the people with whom it is shared. In this way, for some people, enjoying an ice cream in the park with family might constitute a memorable food experience worthy of the description of “food tourism”.

Participation and interest in food tourism is growing globally (Fountain *et al.*, 2020). For food tourists – whether they be international or domestic visitors, on an extended stay in a region or on a shorter excursion – food experiences offer the chance to test and taste new products and learn more about food provenance and historic and contemporary production practices (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019). For food producers, food tourism offers opportunities to diversify income streams and broaden distribution strategies. Engagement with food tourism may involve supplying food and drink to hospitality providers – such as hotels and restaurants – or engaging directly with consumers, through farm gate sales, site visits or more extensive food tourism experiences. There is generally a belief that direct-to-consumer sales offer greater returns to the food or drink producer due to the shorter supply chain (e.g. Andersson *et al.*, 2017; Lee *et al.*, 2015). The food tourism experience also provides the opportunity to “add value” to the food or drink product so that the purchase of food and drink becomes a memento of the experience (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019).

Policy makers and tourism industry stakeholders also recognise the potential of food tourism as an anchor of regional development (Fountain *et al.*, 2020). Food offerings can add diversity to a local economy and a point of difference to regional identity and destination image (Everett and Aitchison, 2008; Sidali *et al.*, 2015; Sims, 2009). Food tourism may provide opportunities to strengthen and sustain local food networks (Everett and Slocum, 2013; Lee *et al.*, 2015; Sims, 2009) and potentially offers reciprocal benefits for both tourism and farming sectors (Boyne *et al.*, 2003), although differing priorities and needs of tourism stakeholders and food producers can result in inequitable outcomes (Andersson *et al.*, 2017; Everett and Slocum, 2013; Fusté-Forné and Berno, 2016; Hall, 2020; Lee *et al.*, 2015).

3. The role of food in New Zealand’s tourism future

3.1 *The role of food during COVID-19 in New Zealand*

The New Zealand Government’s response to the outbreak of COVID-19 in late February 2020 was to “Go hard and go early” with the aim of eliminating the virus (Baker and Wilson, 2020; Radio New Zealand, 2020). Within a month of the country’s first reported case, New Zealand was in lockdown at the strictest restrictions of Alert Level 4. At Alert Level 4, everyone was required to stay at home to break the chain of transmission of the virus, leaving their “bubble” (usually household) only if they were essential workers, to make trips for essential food and medical supplies, or to exercise in the local neighbourhood. This lockdown was stricter than that of many of the country’s closest trading partners, with restaurants, cafes and bars closed even for takeaway, contactless service. Somewhat controversially, the only food retail outlets deemed essential were supermarkets, so that fruit and vegetable shops and butcheries and bakeries were unable to open. With this surge in demand, supermarkets struggled to keep shelves stocked with food (Hall *et al.*, 2020b).

The global pandemic and lockdown had significant impacts on New Zealand consumers’ food behaviour. There was evidence of panic buying in the early days of the COVID-19 lockdown in New Zealand due to consumer demand and at least the perceptions of limited availability through the

supply chain (Hall *et al.*, 2020b); however, food and alcohol sales generally returned to normal levels within a relatively short period of time (see also Gerritsen *et al.*, 2020). For most people, the biggest changes were to the regimented grocery shopping arrangements and alterations to eating habits as home cooking replaced takeaways and restaurant meals. For many others, however, the inability to hunt and fish, gather *kai* (Māori for “food”) or work in community gardens was also a significant disruption (Gerritsen *et al.*, 2020). For hunters, the lockdown corresponded with the annual roar, that is, the breeding season for wild deer, when stags are at their most vocal, and therefore easiest to track for hunting purposes, and missing this was a great disappointment for many (Sparks, 2020).

With the majority of brick and mortar stores closed, there was a marked increase in online shopping; a trend most evident amongst the 50 plus age group, who took their grocery shopping online (Gerritsen *et al.*, 2020). While online shopping on domestic sites increased, purchases made with international online retailers fell during the lockdown. This was in part due to uncertainty about the reliability of international shipping and postal services, but also reflected the desire to support to small businesses in the local community. The “buy local” campaign in New Zealand, supported by the hashtag: #backyourbackyard, occurred on a scale not seen since the 1990s (Kilgallon, 2020). At one level, this is evidence of a degree of patriotism as the “team of five million” rallied to get the nation back on its feet economically (Kilgallon, 2020; Sibley *et al.*, 2020). There was a sense also of wanting to support the small businesses – including food and wine producers – who were unable to operate during lockdown, or who lost their usual distribution channels such as restaurants and hotels. Beyond this, however, a new-found appreciation of what was being produced locally seemed to emerge, with the most public display of this trend being the huge success of a “New Zealand Made Products” Facebook page (now “Chooice”). This site covered jewellery, art and sculpture, but also a lot of food based products, including those grown, cooked, baked and brewed (Taunton, 2020). Over the space of a few weeks, the site had more than 300,000 members, with many sellers overwhelmed by the demand for their products. As evidence of this growth in small enterprises, Foon (2021) reports that 5,000 new businesses registered with the Companies Office in 2020.

While not wanting to downplay the huge stress and uncertainty lockdown brought to many New Zealanders (Gerritsen *et al.*, 2020), at the same time, there was also a sense that this hiatus from normal life provided an opportunity for some to live more simply and slowly (Benjamin *et al.*, 2020; Could food and drink save the tourism industry, 2020). Whether spending time on hobbies, cooking meals from scratch, baking or preserving, people sought to make their home and their loved ones feel safe at an uncertain time. The role of food in this process is not surprising; home cooking has been described as offering an “authentic antidote to mass production and industrialization” (Ramshaw, 2016, p 54). Following grandma’s special recipe also contains an element of nostalgic connection to family, to culinary roots and to personal and cultural identity (Timothy, 2016); something highly valued at a time of social distancing and the absence of loved ones. This trend may be best exemplified by the huge increase in the number of people baking bread, thereby providing sustenance, filling in time and bringing calm and comfort (Easterbrook-Smith, 2020).

At 11:59 p.m. Monday 8 June 2020, New Zealand entered Alert Level 1, and daily life returned to some semblance of “normal” (RNZ, 2020), although international borders remained closed, and escalations of alert levels have occurred, particularly in Auckland, as community outbreaks of COVID-19 emerge. While life remains uncertain and insecure for many, this “new normal” includes a lingering sense of a post lockdown zeitgeist for some New Zealanders, who, while relieved that lockdown was over, acknowledged elements that they would miss and changes they would like to make to their lives based on their experience (Roy, 2020b). The following quotations are representative of such acknowledgement:

After Covid-19, I hope to continue spending greater time on activities that are so much more meaningful to me now, given our gradually less-limited freedom. While I was already a nature-lover and foodie, my passion for these areas of life has grown exponentially.

Working from home can bring so many bonuses – flexibility, pleasant working environment, no early morning alarms, no stressful commuting, enjoying daily lunchtime walks, better home-prepared meals, better quality sleeping and less anxiety. Why would I want to go back into the office?

Many New Zealanders it seems are increasing our veggie patches and our ability to take care of ourselves in the event of another emergency like this one. The world cannot carry on in the exhausting way we have been and that includes exhausting our finite resources and upsetting the Earth's ability to deliver on the renewable ones like clean air and water (Roy, 2020b).

It is noticeable in the above quotations that food – growing it, preparing it and eating it – played an important role in people's experience of lockdown. But as the final quotation suggests, beyond this, there is a growing and profound awareness of the need to exist on this planet in a way that is more sustainable; an awareness perhaps sharpened by COVID-19.

3.2 Prioritising sustainable food systems

Long before the appearance of COVID-19, there was growing awareness of the need for more sustainable food production and culinary systems, and discussions of the role tourism and hospitality could play in supporting these efforts (e.g. Hall and Gössling, 2013; Hall, 2020). Researchers and commentators had also been highlighting concerns about the impact of globalised and homogeneous food systems, arguing that consumers had become disconnected from nature and their food supply, resulting in toxic farming practices, inequities in the food supply chain and a form of tourism and industrial agriculture disconnected from, and exploitative of, nature (Ateljevic, 2020; Bertella, 2020; Hall *et al.*, 2020a).

It seems that lockdown may have intensified recognition of the importance of living in harmony with the natural world in a number of ways. In New Zealand, one of the few activities available to people during lockdown was the daily exercise in the local environment. The opportunity to stop, observe and enjoy our natural environments led to a new appreciation of our place within it (Could food and drink save the tourism industry, 2020; Espiner *et al.*, 2021; Manaaki Whenua Landcare Research, 2020a, b). The absence of traffic also meant birdlife returned to once busy city streets and neighbourhoods (Doyle, 2020). Similar factors – additional time, staying close to home – resulted in many New Zealanders reconnecting with nature in their own garden settings (Benjamin *et al.*, 2020) and an increasing number of New Zealanders looked to grow their own food, creating the most local of local food systems. As evidence of this, lockdown saw a huge interest in home vegetable gardens, with online seed retailers and garden centres undated with people wanting seeds and seedlings to grow; a trend that began with the announcement of lockdown and continued after lockdown lifted (Wilkes, 2020).

“Buying local” or “growing your own” is seen as a way of consuming more sustainably (Schoolman, 2020), and knowing where and how one's food is grown can allay ethical, environmental and health concerns associated with global food systems; a need that can also be met through food tourism (Bessièrè, 1998; Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2019; Everett and Aitchison, 2008). From a producer's perspective, engagement with tourists also allows a sharing of stories as producers outline their visions and production processes with consumers, providing an opportunity to educate and build brand loyalty based on provenance (Bessièrè, 1998; Fusté-Forné and Berno, 2016; Sidali *et al.*, 2015; Sims, 2009).

3.3 A New Zealand food culture?

Food tourism also offers a town or region a point of difference in “strengthening a region's identity, sustaining cultural heritage, contesting fears of global food homogenization and facilitating the regeneration of an area's sociocultural fabric” (Everett and Aitchison, 2008, p. 150; see also Bessièrè, 1998; Sidali *et al.*, 2015; Sims, 2009). This assumes there is a regional food identity to share. A third and final issue providing context for the growth of food tourism in New Zealand relates to the emergence of an identifiable food culture in New Zealand. For too long, New Zealanders have suffered from something of a “cultural cringe” (Pickles, 2011) when it comes to

many aspects of the country's culture, including food. While Italy is known for pasta and pizza, and Japan for sushi, yakitori and sashimi, the quintessential New Zealand cuisine has been less obvious, particularly that of colonial and post-colonial settlers (Bell and Neill, 2014). Traditional Māori culture has a complex food system framed around the concept of *mahinga kai* – literally meaning “to work the food”. This concept highlights that people are connected to the land through food and other resources found there to sustain life, and the tradition of the *hāngī* (a method of steaming food in an earthen oven) is often highlighted in tourism marketing (e.g. Tourism New Zealand, 2021a). Beyond this, undertake a Google search of “New Zealand dishes” and one is likely to find reference to roast lamb, fish and chips, meat pies and cheese rolls (e.g. NZPocketGuide, 2020); hardly fine cuisine (Bell and Neill, 2014; Neill et al., 2016). In fact, what is often presented is a list of ingredients, including many types of seafood (crayfish, paua and kina), wine, cheese and manuka honey but also jaffas and pineapple lumps (types of lollies), hokey pokey ice cream and a local soft drink (e.g. McFadden, 2015; NZPocketGuide, 2020). A similar selection is found on the Tourism New Zealand website listed as “New Zealand's favourite food and drinks” (Tourism New Zealand, 2021b). Angela Clifford, CEO of EatNZ, explains this tendency to focus on ingredients as a hangover of New Zealand's colonial history:

A paddock in the ocean. For the longest time, that's how we saw ourselves. A rugged-yet-bountiful colonial outpost tasked with sending the finest ingredients back to feed the mother country and then the world. . . Our food story is still trapped in that culture of ingredients (Clifford, 2020).

That “culture of ingredients” has begun to change as New Zealanders gain more confidence on the world stage, so that as well as providing a list of the country's favourite foods, Tourism New Zealand is able to report:

While quality food and beverage production has long been the lynchpin of New Zealand's prosperity and a leading export earner, it's the fusion of unique, quality produce and ethnic influences that have allowed the Kiwi food identity to evolve. . . New Zealand's worldwide reputation for award-winning produce and specialist chefs draws tourists to the source and food tourism within New Zealand is developing at a rapid rate (Tourism New Zealand, 2021c).

Rather than one dish, however, it is recognition that the quality of the food and cuisine produced in New Zealand is tied to “people in place” (Clifford, 2020). This may help explain why food stories in New Zealand are often closely tied to specific people and locations, with Fleur's Place in Moeraki a case in point (Delicious.Team, 2019)

4. A reimagined tourism future for New Zealand: the potential of food and drink tourism

The closure of international borders has drawn greater attention to the unsung role of domestic tourism to the New Zealand tourism system. One of the most ubiquitous sights in the latter half of 2020 was campervans full of Kiwi couples and families hitting the roads; taking seriously the exhortations to “Do Something New, New Zealand” (Green, 2020). Many tourism commentators and those in the industry have rightly identified that regions and businesses need to pivot to the domestic market for the coming months and possibly years. While significant amounts have been written about the opportunities this will bring for New Zealand residents to see some of the country's iconic attractions free of the crowds of visitors, recent research exploring what New Zealanders are seeking in domestic tourism experiences has highlighted some key trends (One Picture, 2020). First, for some New Zealanders, supporting smaller communities has taken priority, while others are looking to continue the exploration of their local region begun during lockdown. Domestic travellers are also keen to find “non-touristy” experiences as they (re)discover New Zealand, lingering for deeper experiences the country, but without paying the Earth. New Zealanders have renewed interest in really getting to know the country – to explore the history of different regions – based on a realisation that they do not know as much about New Zealand history as they should. This might also be a perfect time to discover food and drink experiences, offering

significant opportunities for regions to entice domestic visitors and, later, returning international tourists.

The previous discussion has reflected on some trends that have emerged, or been intensified, in New Zealand by the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. This has focused on the role of food and our natural environment in the lockdown experience, an emerging desire for sustainable and localised food systems, and a new, or renewed, confidence about New Zealand's unique food culture(s). Taking into account these consumer trends, and calls for a "reset" to the tourism system (Prayag, 2020), the following section suggests three potential directions for food tourism in post-pandemic New Zealand which have been called "Getting back to basics", "valuing local and locals" and "food for well-being".

4.1 Trend 1: getting back to basics

This first trend could be called "a simple life", and in a tourism context, may manifest itself in higher demand for cooking school experiences, gardening workshops or pick-your-own food opportunities. Its origins are twofold. First, the global pandemic has brought with it financial insecurity at both a personal and societal level. At times of economic uncertainty and slowdown, consumers may pare back unnecessary expenditure. While people still want to enjoy leisure and holiday activities, there might be a trend to stay nearer home and seek value-based holidays, focused on free activities and seeking out bargains (Flatters and Willmott, 2009; Yeoman, 2020). In the case of COVID-19, concerns about further waves of community outbreaks of the virus in other countries also means travelling internationally remains risky as there is a likelihood of getting trapped if borders close or travel restrictions are put in place, meaning staying close to home is appealing.

Getting back to basics is not just about saving money. As outlined above, many people have enjoyed simple elements of the lockdown experience; whether cooking "from scratch" or stripping back the veneer of commercialism to make one's own fun with what's available in the local environment (Roy, 2020b). Getting back to basics also means slowing down, and appreciating each other, and our environments (Espiner et al., 2021). It is about remembering the things – and people – that matter. Reconnecting to families through VFR travel will be a priority for many (Hall et al., 2020a; Yeoman, 2020), while a nostalgic desire, intensified by our lockdown experience, may see parents and grandparents seeking to share with children particular places and experiences reflecting this simple way of life or to re-learn skills lost in the busyness of life.

Pick-your-own fruit and vegetables offer both a way to save money, and an opportunity to spend time with family and friends in a "simple" activity. While berry fruit has long been a staple of the "pick-your-own" experiences, there are opportunities to pick other crops (Seven Sharp, 2021). There have always been opportunities for tourists to "fish-your-own", generally through charter fishing trips; however, a new opportunity allows experienced and inexperienced fishers to catch a fish for lunch. This tourism venture called "Hook Wanaka" (<https://hookwanaka.nz/>) advertises the opportunity to experience fishing "from lake to plate", whereby one gets to catch a Chinook Salmon, and then relax as chefs prepare it for your meal. What is notable about this attraction is the recognition of different needs of domestic visitors compared to international visitors. While a guided fishing lesson is available, at \$35.50 per person, the attraction also offers the "Reel Deal", at \$7 per person, described as "the authentic, low-key, DIY, as-kivi-as-it-gets fishing experience". The image of a man fishing with his grandson captures this nostalgic, family oriented, simple experience.

Taking these experiences further, tourists may be more likely seek out opportunities to learn traditional skills while on holiday, through cooking or gardening workshops. For example The Food Farm (<http://www.thefoodfarm.nz/>) runs a series of grow your own food workshops for all skill levels, from someone just starting out on a home garden and wanting to feed their families, to those thinking of expanding to a commercial operation. These workshops are seasonal; in winter, the Food Farm runs workshops on how to prune, in summer, how to harvest and preserve; in autumn,

how to make compost. While not currently targeted at the tourist market, there is no reason why a series of these types of workshops, clustered in a region, might not be utilised to attract tourists with this learning goal in mind.

4.2 Trend 2: valuing local . . . and locals

A second trend expected to continue is a renewed focus on exploring food as an expression of local places, cultures and identity. As noted above, the local and small scale has taken on a new-found importance globally (eg. [Brouder, 2020](#); [Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020](#); [Tomassini and Cavagnaro, 2020](#)). In New Zealand, the response of the “team of five million” to COVID-19 has resulted in a renewed appreciation of the local, manifested in shopping for food and drink products and experiences, reinforcing an emerging pride in the country’s unique food culture ([Clifford, 2020](#)).

Consuming local food and drink is an important means to get to know what makes places unique ([Bessièrè, 1998](#); [Everett and Aitchison, 2008](#); [Sims, 2009](#)). Food and drink has long been an important avenue to highlight the authenticity of a place – think Toast Martinborough, the Bluff Oyster Festival and the Hokitika Wildfood Festival. The role of food tourism in regional destination strategies in New Zealand has become increasingly prominent in the last decade ([Fountain et al., 2020](#); [MPI Economic Intelligence Unit, 2018](#)), and it is expected that this trend will continue, strengthened by the experience of the pandemic ([Could food and drink save the tourism industry, 2020](#)). Initial indications would suggest that this regional focus on food has increased, with new festivals and regional food strategies emerging since the pandemic emerged. For example, South Canterbury established a 10-days long food festival in 2020 known as SCOFF (South Canterbury Outstanding Food Festival). The festival was launched to reactivate the local hospitality sector after lockdown while acknowledging the importance of the agricultural and food production sector to the region ([Mohanolal, 2020](#)). Similar initiatives are underway in regions throughout the country, including the “Ripe Food and Wine Festival in Wanaka ([Waterworth, 2021](#))” and a “Savour the South” initiative in Southland ([Great South, 2021](#)).

While some suggest that these buy local campaigns may be shortlived ([Killgallon, 2020](#); [Hall et al., 2020b](#)), and financial reality may see a return to old habits, this trend is not limited to a pandemic response. It reflects a broader pre-existing movement towards the slow, the small and the local, with food being central to this trend ([Ateljevic, 2020](#)). There is evidence that eight months on from the initial lockdown, New Zealand consumers continue to support locally made food and wine products. A survey of 500 New Zealanders conducted in December of 2020/21 found that more than half of the respondents reported that as a result of COVID-19 they were purchasing more food and drink made locally (53.2%) and a third (33.8%) reported that they were seeking out food and wine producers on holiday ([Fountain, 2021](#)).

4.3 Trend 3: food for well-being

As noted above, the COVID-19 lockdown gave many New Zealanders a greater appreciation of their environment, and the importance of the primary sector and a robust local food system. Food tourism could offer an opportunity to change our understanding and response to nature and to enhance the well-being of the people and the places that sustain them. The time seems ripe to address this through food tourism practices.

The food tourism experiences likely to meet this need will be those that enable consumers to connect to the food system and to understand better the journey their food takes from “paddock to plate”. One new business offering such experiences is Forage and Feast, established in Central Otago early in 2021 (<https://www.forageandfeast.nz>). The inspiration for the venture came from the operator’s “memories of foraging for apples and making apple pie with her grandmother” ([Fox, 2021](#)) The immersive food tours inform and educate consumers about the skills, effort and love that goes into producing ([Fox, 2021](#)) locally-grown food. On each tour, the participants get to forage, to

harvest and to fish themselves and meet the growers behind the produce – “getting out in the country and getting [their] hands dirty”. The ingredients gathered are then cooked by local chefs and served to the group to share and enjoy around a big table. In essence, food is about people and sharing; offering food and drink to guests has long been a central tenet of hospitality and eating a meal together is first and foremost a social occasion (Hall, 2020; Williamson and Hassanli, 2020).

Focussing on food and well-being means thinking beyond the well-being of the tourists and consumers to consider food producers and the communities and workers who grow, produce and serve our food. The vision for the New Zealand tourism industry outlined by the [Tourism Futures Taskforce \(2020\)](#) is “nourishing people and place: enlivening communities and culture” and situating “community, connection and culture at the heart of tourism” (p. 71). The use of the term “nourishing” conjures up a vision of a tourism system that is sustaining and sustainable for people and the places they live and work; the term is also resonant of our relationship with food. While New Zealand is in the fortunate position to be a net-producer of food, this global pandemic has highlighted the fact that over-dependence on international tourism is to some extent responsible for food security vulnerability at this time (e.g. [Davila and Wilke, 2020](#)). Even with New Zealand’s relatively resilient national food supply chain, over-dependence on international tourism in some New Zealand regions left these communities and their residents susceptible to much greater economic hardship, including food insecurity.

As assessment of the role of food in tourism has focused primarily on how food products and practices can be commodified; that is, packaged and sold as a product to “attract visitors, brand destinations, and satisfy the tourist” (Hall, 2020, p. 284). This focus has largely ignored the value chain relationships between food producers and tourist stakeholders, including hosts and tourists. While tourism providers and food producers may share a goal of creating a regional reputation for local food products, and of sharing food experiences with tourists, their needs and priorities differ considerably from each other ([Everett and Slocum, 2013](#); [Fusté-Forné and Berno, 2016](#)) and from the tourists they serve. In fact, meeting the needs of tourists at times undermines the resilience of the supply chain, and [Hall \(2020\)](#) and others have called for greater attention to the “broader impacts of what [tourists] eat throughout the entire food system; how best to leverage economic and social benefits throughout the system” (p. 286; see also [Ambelu et al., 2018](#); [Hall and Gossling, 2013](#)). There are calls also for a reconsideration of animal-derived food in relation to food tourism (e.g. [Bertella, 2020](#)). While it is beyond the scope of the current paper to explore these issues in any detail, all tourists need to be made aware of the true costs of production of the food they consume on holiday and be prepared to pay what it is worth.

5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has created opportunities to rethink what we value and to reimagine the tourism future for New Zealand and the world. As outlined in the previous section food, and the food value chain, has featured significantly in the pandemic experience of many New Zealanders. Looking forward, there is evidence that food tourism may become more pronounced in New Zealand’s tourism future as a result of these experiences, and broader global trends around sustainability and shortened food supply chains.

Food experiences provide a pathway to connect – to people, to heritage and to places. Food tourism may facilitate our reconnections with friends and families throughout New Zealand, and the world and provide interesting diversions on our road trips as we uncover hidden gems and get to know the country’s special places. Food provides a context to learn – new skills, new flavours, and new cultural understandings – and to pass on those skills to younger generations. Food foraging, and picking and catching our own food, can provide money saving opportunities at a time of financial insecurity but may also offer nostalgic experiences to share with children and grandchildren whilst reconnecting to the source of our food and the people and places producing it. Sharing a meal, or a drink, provides the context to socialise and connect to family, friends and local communities, and all of this can be done in a way that is inclusive. Eating a crayfish

in a high end restaurant, or foraging for food to be cooked by a renounced chef is food tourism, but so too is eating a fish and chip meal on the beach with one's family or foraging for food on the roadside (Fountain, 2020; Hall, 2020). A shift to a regenerative form of tourism, and an emphasis on well-being, equity and sustainability, would mean recognising that the best food experiences in the world do not need to be expensive. As the country becomes increasingly confident in showcasing a unique and innovative food culture, domestic tourists will be the first to explore new food experiences, but it is anticipated that as borders reopen, these experiences will appeal to returning international visitors also. While there will still be opportunities for luxury food experiences at exclusive resorts, if the global pandemic has taught us anything, it is that those things that mean the most to us cannot be measured by monetary value alone.

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