

# Co-creating food tourism experiences in a rural destination

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**Keywords** | Rural tourism, co-creation experiences, food tourism

**Objectives** | This paper suggests the opportunity of improving rural tourism experience through co-creation of food tourism in a Portuguese schist village. Based on a literature review, the tourism co-creation concept is developed and related to rural areas, where rural gastronomy may be a key element to enhance local cuisine and promote unique and attractive experiences (Richards, 2002; Sims, 2009). It is stressed that enhancing sustainable development of rural destinations through co-creative opportunities should be a strategy developed to also allow for unique and memorable experiences, based on local identity, endogenous resources and active involvement of visitors, local residents and supply agents, with the consumer assuming a central role (Griseemann & Stockbuerger-Sauer, 2012; Kastenholtz, Carneiro & Marques, 2012; Mathis, Kim, Uysal, Sirgy & Prebense, 2016).

**Methodology** | The present study analyses a Portuguese hinterland schist village – *Janeiro de Cima* in the context of a research project where the overall rural tourism experience was analysed. An exploratory and qualitative study was conducted in order to get rich and in-depth information on the perspectives of different stakeholders (tourists, population, agents of tourism supply and institutions) on tourism development. Semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed and submitted to content analysis. Eight institutional agents, seven supply agents, eleven residents and twelve visitors (nine tourists and three excursionists) were interviewed in order to understand their perspectives about tourists' experience in this schist village and possibilities to improve co-creation food experiences.

**Main Results and Contributions** | Results confirmed that all stakeholders perceived the village as appealing, unique and holding relevant tourism potential, with residents and those related to local supply understanding reasonably well the main motives attracting tourists to Janeiro de Cima. These motives are linked to the quest of nature, rurality and cultural traditions, a desire to experience a relaxing and peaceful life. Also, community life, with its strong link to nature and (traditional) agriculture is highly

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valued by some visitors. Several cultural features of the village stand out as highly valued, namely those linked to gastronomy and local products (art crafts, linen, and agricultural products, like cherry, olive oil, chestnut), particularly appreciated by tourists but also by the local stakeholders. The visitors' sensorial experience is also very important, with the most remarkable flavours associated to this village being chestnuts, *maranhos* (typical dish) and goat. Flavours from pumpkin jelly and quince jam as well as the homemade bread were also referred to by the tourists.

Food-related resources are, thus, crucial elements for a new paradigm of tourism experiences, where there is fertile terrain to develop unique, personally significant and memorable experience through co-creation between hosts and guests. To involve both customers and locals in the design, production, consumption and sharing of experiences based on agriculture or local traditional culinary may be an opportunity for developing active and involving tourist experiences (Kastenholz, Eusebio, Carneiro & Figueiredo, 2013; Kastenholz & Sparrer, 2009), since tourists "*like to taste the authenticity, uniqueness and novelty of the visited destination*" (Crespi-Vallbona & Dimistrovski, 2016, p. 843). Additionally, local communities' sense of identity and pride in their local heritage and customs may be enhanced, while they should also benefit from a more dynamic, enriching and positively perceived living context in a place marked by depopulation, population ageing and isolation (Kastenholz, et al., 2013).

**Limitations** | This study is only based on a village context, while it would be interesting to increase the geographical scope of the co-created tourist experience, given an evident curiosity from tourists to explore the region's gastronomy. Additionally, a few international tourists were interviewed, whose view may open new insight in a culturally more distant market that may also be catered to.

**Conclusions** | The multifaceted character of the rural tourism experiences calls for integrated co-creative tourism offerings, making use of the most valuable, distinctive and interesting endogenous resources (Kastenholz, Carneiro & Marques, 2012). Local food may thereby represent a way of enhancing local identity, promoting interactions and articulation of visitors, local communities and local resources through articulated co-creative networks developed by local stakeholders (Crespi-Vallbona & Dimitrovski, 2016), which should contribute to deepening the overall tourism experience (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009). The interviews revealed that visitors are interested in tasting local products during their holidays in the village. Culinary workshops and events may represent an opportunity to develop diverse and dynamic activities that promote learning and interaction between tourists and the local community (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009; Carvalho, Lima & Kastenholz, 2014). Tourists want to be more involved with local communities and their culture, with co-created food tourism experiences apparently representing most appropriate opportunities for doing so (Crespi-Vallbona & Dimistrovski, 2016), allowing them to immerse into local culture and lifestyle through tourist experiences perceived as "authentic", unique and meaningful (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Marques & Lima, 2012).

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