Development of food trails- A case study approach in County Donegal

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Introduction

Under the current economic climate it is essential to embrace new opportunities of diversification. One such area that represents an opportunity for product development and sustainability is food tourism. As noted by Fáilte Ireland (McDaid, 2012) the food tourism segment is growing and currently 35% of visitor spend in Ireland is on food and drink.

Fáilte Ireland (2011) has acknowledged the potential that food tourism could present by establishing a National Food Tourism Implementation Framework 2011- 2013. This framework hopes to place Ireland as a leader in providing "*Quality and value of food – related experiences.*" The immediate emphasis will be on enhancing all *"Food in Tourism"* components which will exceed customers' expectations.

This research will establish that food trails are an element of food tourism which has the potential of providing a tourism product that can be used for destination marketing purposes. Trails create an experience that tourists can enjoy and can also showcase high quality regionally produced goods and services on a collective basis in one geographic area. Current research, as discussed in this paper, highlights that the interest in food itself has become a key motivation for travellers to visit a destination.

This study aims to identify and define a business framework for the development of food trails in Ireland. The main concepts which will be addressed include trail management, performance, reviewing and renewing, quality assurance and performance evaluation, branding, promotion and communication.

A descriptive case study methodology is used to identify key factors that contribute to the standardisation of a business framework concept that can be used to help set up food trails in Ireland. Ten food focused pubs in County Donegal are used as a sample for this research. Funding was provided through an Enterprise Ireland innovation voucher initiative to help mentor the newly established food trail in Donegal.

The framework will provide a list of the options open to industry in the areas of trail product, brand development and communication and will include the management of the trails' online presence, i.e., Web page, Social media etc. It will also determine the options for organisational structure, quality assurance and management of the trails.

Recommendations will include a number of industry supports such as the development of a workshop for new and existing food trails, that could enable the growth and success of this sector as well as suggesting areas for future research

Literature Review

Food Tourism

The Tourism industry and food traditionally have had a close relationship and food is a critical tourism resource (Henderson, 2004) (Kivella & Crotts, 2006). As Henderson (2009) notes, "Food is an important tourist attraction in an assortment of forms and enhances or is

central to the visitor experience" and go on to point out that food is an essential element of a tourism destination's development.

In recent research many studies have shown that an ever increasing number of tourists are citing food as a key aspect of their travel experience (Simms, 2009) (Long, 2009). Henderson (2009) points out that it "enhances or is central" to the experience of the visitor and plays an important role in tourist's decision making. Food can act as a primary motivator for some visitors (Tikkanen, 2007) (Kim, et al., 2009).

Food Tourism in Ireland

Food Tourism in Ireland is not a new phenomenon. In 2009 tourist expenditure on food and drink amounted to almost €2 billion, representing the largest single component of individual visitor expenditure (Fáilte Ireland, 2011). Thus, it would be reasonable to envisage Food Tourism as a logical key area of future development within the tourism industry.

Fáilte Ireland's Food Tourism manager states that "from a tourism perspective, how our overseas visitors view and experience Irish food while on holiday here in Ireland is important, not only for tourism, but for the economy" (McDaid, 2012). Ireland's Department of Agriculture is in agreement and states that "The further development of farmers' markets and food tourism will provide opportunities for diversification and added value for smaller enterprises in particular. This potential should be explored by relevant stakeholders" (Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Food, 2010).

The Food Island

Fáilte Ireland has coined the phrase "The Food Island" in relation to Ireland and it's associated global image and is working with other public sector bodies to promote Ireland as a food destination for tourists (Failte Ireland, 2011). Fáilte Ireland recognises that as a market segment internationally "Food Tourism" is expanding and has developed the "National Food Implementation Framework 2011-2013" to support its aim to make Ireland a "leading Food Tourism Destination".

Trails in Ireland

There is no clear definition of a food trail. However, Marsh (2004) states that "A trail may be defined as a narrow linear route primarily intended for recreational travel". Adding food to this definition, a food trail could be defined as "a narrow linear route primarily intended for food related recreational travel".

Ireland has been promoting the food side of the tourism market for over 40 years. However, quite recently a wave of development in the area of food trails has become evident in various parts of the country, both rural and urban. Currently, there is no single central source for information with regard to this tourism product. For example, Table 1 below provides a breakdown of the "Food Tourism" sector activities or experiences such as, Food festivals, Food Markets and Cookery schools. However, there is no information provided on food trails in Ireland.

CATEGORY	ESTABLISHMENTS	EMPLOYEES
Producers *(artisan, speciality and small food firms)*	350	3,000 est. *(Source: Bord Bia)*
Hotels	902	52,300
Guesthouses	303	1,900
Self Catering *Comprises – 95 Caravan and Camping,* *103 Hostels, 196 Group Self catering*	421	3,000
Licensed Restaurants	2,295	32,900
Non Licensed Restaurants	1,337	16,100
Public Houses	7,843	54,000
Food Markets *This includes Farmer and Country Markets, of* *which 34 adhere to the Good Practice Standard for* *Farmers' Markets launched by Bord Bia June 2009*	186	N/A
Food Festivals	47	
Cookery Schools	42	
Total	13,696	163,200

Table 1 Food Tourism Establishments and Employees in Ireland

In the National Food Implementation Framework, Fáilte Ireland presents a food tourism SWOT analysis. This analysis points out the "absence of a comprehensive inventory of food tourism experiences" as a "weakness" in the sector in Ireland. In an effort to address this weakness, this research has completed an online analysis of food trails in Ireland. Table 2 below outlines trails in Ireland with a distinct online presence; however in-depth research into the organisation and success of food trials in Ireland is recommended.

The researchers carried out a review of food trails currently promoted online in the Republic of Ireland. Seventeen different trails were identified. However, some of the information had not been updated in the last year or two and may mean that the trails are no longer actively being marketed. In consultation with McDaid, (2013) from Failte Ireland, some trails that still have information online, but are known to have ceased operating, have been removed from Table 2.

The trails varied in nature from "Lead" to self-paced "DIY" style trails, varying from six to thirty nine points of interest within one trail. Some of the "Lead" trails included the "Cork Tasting Trail" and the Dublin based "Howth Tasting Trail". Fabulous Food Trails (2013) are a company based in Dublin that offer a variety of lead food trails in Dublin city centre, Howth and Cork. These trails include an experienced guide and have a two to three hour itinerary, six to ten stops and an upfront pricing structure (Fabulous Food Trails, 2013). The newly launched "Irish Food Tours" company provides an All-Ireland hosted tour that will include food producers, restaurants, accommodation and food excursions (McDonnell, 2013). On the "DIY" side of the list most trails provided online maps that could be downloaded and printed such as the "Gourmet Greenway" which was set up by the Mulranny Park Hotel in County Mayo. Good Food Ireland have a section on their website called "My Food Trip", where visitors can select particular food producers or retailers that

they wish to visit and then download or get emailed a personalised map based on their selections (Good Food Ireland, 2012). The types of attractions or points of interest on the trails also varied extensively with a selection of trails having a full mix of B&B's, butchers and hotels to other trails exclusively providing access to retail only outlets.

1. Trail Name	Location	Trail Details	Type
2. Dingle Peninsula Food and Drink Trail	Kerry: Dingle Peninsula	B&B, Hotels, Farmers Market, Brewing Company	DIY
3. Donegal Good Food Taverns	Donegal	Pubs with good local food	DIY
4. Meath Food Trail Package	Meath	Hotel organised Artisan Producers, Farm Shops	DIY
5. Gourmet Greenway	Mayo	Hotel, Butcher	DIY
6. Trail Kilkenny	Kilkenny	Artisan food producers	DIY
7. Cork City Food and Drinks Trail	Cork City	Café, Brewery, Bakery	DIY
8. Dublin Tasting Trail	Dublin	Trail by Fabulous Food Trails bread shops, food halls, street markets, cheesemongers, fishmonger, butchers, bakers	Lead
9. Howth Tasting Trail	Dublin	Trail by Fabulous Food Trails 6 stops various	Lead
10. Cork tasting Trail	Cork City	Trail by Fabulous Food Trails markets, cheesemongers, fishmongers, butchers, bakers	Lead
11. East Cork Food Trail	East Cork	Bakery, farm shop, artisan producers, Pub, cookery schools, restaurants	DIY
12. Cork City Food & Drinks Trail	Cork City	Brewery, Bakery, Food Shops, Restaurants, Markets	DIY
13. West Cork Food Trail	West Cork	Restaurants, craft shops, cookery classes, Artisan producers, bars	DIY
14. Bandon Food Trail	Bandon County Cork	Artisan producers, cafes, restaurants, pubs, guesthouses & shops	DIY
15. Good Food Ireland	All Ireland	All types Large selection and you add to your trip Create pdf of your selections	DIY
16. Irish Food Tours	All Ireland	Lead Food tour with accommodation	Lead
17. Specialized Travel Services	All Ireland	Tailor made guided food tour:	Lead

Table 2 Food Trails In Ireland (with an online presence)

McDaid (2013) from Failte Ireland has stated that there are a number of new trails being developed and that some of the existing trails are currently being updated. This further indicates that this is an area of tourism in Ireland that is developing and warrants further research.

Framework

In the original work examining the development of food trails Hardy (2003) developed the "Ten P's". These P's covered the standard marketing Product, Place, Price and Promotion and the services marketing People. In addition , Hardy added Path which includes the route definition and signage, Presentation including the consistency of the services on the trail, Protection of the environment, Paraphernalia which included informative materials to facilitate trip planning and Principles of Interpretation which covered the information provided to help travellers understand and enjoy the sites visited along the trail.

Sparks et al (2005) in the Australian Sustainable Tourism research project looked more closely at the consumer's perspective and established enhancement factors for food and wine related tourism products. Sparks et al supports Hardy in the areas of value for money, service interaction covering all personal interactions, setting-surroundings, product offering and information dissemination. However, Sparks et al expands this further and the factor themes encompassed authenticity where customers felt that they had "a special experience that they could not have had elsewhere", personal growth in terms of learning about the history, food or people and finally indulgence – Lifestyle which covered a "pleasing experience" away from the normal stresses of life (Sparks, et al., 2005). Bringing meaning to the food experience has also been supported by Mason & O'Mahony (2007) who recommend that trail businesses "construct narratives" to enhance the user experience. In later research, Mahony (2010) has further identified "Trail coordination, social capital and trust" as a main performance factor in trail development. This is supported by Anderson & Law, (2012) who emphasises trail management as critical to food trail success. Meyer-Cech, (2005) expands this further by highlighting the need for the successful management of both economic conflicts of members of the trial as well as personal conflicts. Hall's (2005) research has highlighted the need for a "Local Champion" to encourage cooperation and support among members. Carson & Cartan (2011) in their research look at some of the factors that cause failures of trails and have suggested that there is a need to persevere until the investment in the trail pays dividend. In addition they point out that management need to be practical in their objective setting and to have an understanding of the limits of the trail product considering its environment. In order to emphasise the need for a framework to use for the food trail a comparative analysis has been completed of previous research.

(Anderson & Law, 2012)	(Hardy, 2003)	(Sparks, et al., 2005)	Carson and Carton (2011)	(Meyer-Cech, 2005)
Overall Product	Product Place	Value for money setting-surrounding	Positioning Practicality	
Trail Product	Price People Presentation Path Protection Paraphernalia	Service interaction Product offering Personal growth Indulgence - Lifestyle	Practicality Presentation	Quality Standards
Communication	Promotion Paraphernalia Principles of Interpretation	information dissemination	Practicality Presentation	Tangible results for members
Trail Management	People Protection of the environment		Possibility	Social and emotional benefits for members Management of; • Economic conflicts • Personal Conflicts
Economic Viability			Perseverance practicality	Clear Financial Benefits for members Long Term Funding
Future possibilities				
Planning Context			Agency support and regulation	

Table 3 Comparison of Key Success Factors

Iconic Pub Trail

In the recent visitor attitude survey conducted by Fáilte Ireland (2011) an equal number of visitors had eaten in hotels as had eaten in Pubs. This shows the popularity of pubs with visitors in choosing dining options. It is interesting to note that while 31% of respondents

said that they had eaten in a Pub in the last 24 hours only 19% had eaten in a café. In 2009 a group of stakeholders led by Donegal Enterprise board created a Donegal Food Strategy document. One of the recommendations under the study undertaken was the creation of a food trail in the county which would "encompass producers, foodservice operators and retailers" (Donegal Food Strategy, 2012)

Businesses in many different industries have formed alliances in response to changing economic environments. Strategic partnerships can involve horizontal and vertical alliances within the industry (Wargenau & Che, 2006). The case study within this report has examined a horizontal alliance of ten pubs in Donegal, all of which traditionally had a strong emphasis on food as part of their overall product. The pubs selected to participate in this trail were viewed as iconic pubs offering their customers high quality locally produced food as well as all the other elements that make up the flavour of an Irish Pub.

Overview of Innovation Voucher initiative with LYIT

The Innovation Voucher initiative was developed to build links between Ireland's public knowledge providers (i.e. higher education institutes, public research bodies) and small businesses through the vehicle of Enterprise Ireland. The purpose of the vouchers is to assist businesses to explore business opportunities with the assistance of a knowledge provider which in this case is Letterkenny Institute of Technology.

Background

This trail is an innovative concept of food focused publicans working together to create a food trail incorporating different parts of County Donegal. For the pubs, a support system was needed which would foster an environment conducive to knowledge sharing among them. The food trail brand required the creation of a business model covering areas such as entry /exit mechanisms, group quality assurance guidelines, and monitoring mechanisms. The main objectives identified by the trail members and these researchers are outlined below:

- Branded identity for the publicans involved in the trail, to include a code of good governance which would assist them in developing best practices procedures and ethics.
- Provide recommendations on a group quality assurance monitoring system. This quality assurance policy would highlight the following criteria:
  1. Recommendations on quality assurance mechanisms outlining the objectives of the initiative.
  2. Outlining and making recommendations on the operation of the initiative to include acceptance criteria for new entrants and exit requirements for existing participants.
  3. Regulatory and customer requirements.

4. The on-going success of the group brand will be secured through the group quality monitoring mechanism. This will provide a basis for monitoring and evaluating the progress of the brand in keeping with its main objectives of providing good locally sourced food to locals and tourists alike.

5. The continued development of business expertise through working together with other iconic pubs.

6. Group online brand personality created with social media structures and exemplars of how to proceed into the future.

Outline of Study

For the purposes of this research, the descriptive case study method was employed to examine the mechanisms needed to develop and manage a sustainable food trail for ten pubs that had a strong emphasis on food as part of their product in County Donegal in North West Ireland.

They are considered to be an excellent medium through which to conduct research because they place more emphasis on a full contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their inter-relations (Emory and Cooper, 1991). Therefore, it was hoped that the trail, as a case study, would provide a key environment in which to initiate and implement a framework for food trail development. The multiple sources of evidence that was used for this case study were documentary evidence, secondary data analysis and focus groups.

Documentary evidence was sourced from local regional tourism bodies, websites, social media forums and previous research papers that conducted similar concepts in different countries. Secondary data was sourced from Government agencies and local regional tourist bodies.

It was decided to take a qualitative approach to the initial data collection. This was primarily due to the fact that the issues were of a personal nature to each individual food focused pub with regard to how they perceived the food trail would enhance their business. Powell and Single (1996 p.499) define focus groups as '*a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research*'. Focus groups were organized over a six month period from September 2011 to March 2012 on a monthly basis. The meetings took place in different establishments involved in the research. This was to give all participants in the research a chance to show how they could contribute to the trail by showcasing their products and location. The focus group meetings lasted forty five minutes per session lead by one or two of the researchers. The sessions focused on different aspects of trail management and ownership and were grouped under the following headings;

- Trail Management
    - Leadership
    - Responsibilities, legal requirements and obligations
- Performing, reviewing and renewing
    - Product definition procedures
    - Pre- requisite requirements and acceptance criteria for brand.
    - Procedures for admittance, departure, disciplinary and ejection procedures
    - Quality assurance and performance evaluation
    - Customer feedback on trail performance
- Branding & promotion
    - Use of brand logo and social media
    - Communication

The option of setting up the food trail members as a co- operative were discussed and explored by the focus group. This was rejected and the option of a quasi- contract (implied – in – law- contract) was implemented by devising a memorandum of undertaking for the food trail establishments. This document outlined the mission statement of undertaking, agreed on an annual basis, by all establishments that subscribe to the trail. This included the geographical spread of the trail, the organisational structure of how the trail would be managed and included the following:

- Board of directors, structure and members meetings
- Brand Entry requirements
- Procedure for admittance
- Inspection of Brand members' premises
- Use of logo and social media
- Exit mechanisms for members.(included desist from using brand logo)
- Disciplinary and ejection procedures
- Duties and powers of appointed officers of the board

A separate document was designed based on the outcome of the group's discussion for quality assurance and code of practice procedures. This document highlighted in detail what would be compliance criteria for quality assurance purposes. An application form was designed for new entrants. Quality assurance checklists were designed to assist establishments in complying with the memorandum of undertaking. A code of ethics policy was devised to take into account ethical practices and objectives in relation to environmental impacts arising from their operations and labour practices to cover conditions of service of staff.

An evaluation of the results from this study was compared with literature to show how this framework sits within the existing body of knowledge. It will also provide a sound platform for food trail management.

Proposed Framework	(Anderson & Law, 2012)	(Hardy, 2003)	(Sparks, et al., 2005)	Carson and Carton (2011)	(Meyer-Cech, 2005)
Trail Management					
• Leadership	Trail Management			Possibility	Tangible results for members Clear Financial Benefits for members
• Legal Structure				Perseverance Agency support and regulation	
• Responsibilities, Legal Requirements and Obligations	Economic Viability Planning Context Future possibilities	Protection		Agency support and regulation	Social and emotional benefits for members Long term Funding
Performing, Reviewing and Renewing					
• Product Definition	Overall Product Trail Product	Product Place Price People Presentation Path Paraphernalia	value for money setting-surrounding service interaction product offering personal growth Indulgence - Lifestyle	Positioning Practicality	
• Acceptance Criteria					
• Departure and Disciplinary Procedures		Protection of the environment			Management of; • Economic conflicts • Personal Conflicts
• Quality Assurance and Performance Evaluation	Overall Product				Quality Standards
• Customer Feedback		Principles of Interpretation			
Branding Promotion and Communication					
• Use of Logo					
• Procedures and types of communication	Communication	Presentation Promotion	information dissemination	Positioning	
• Online Presence					

Table 4: Proposed framework for Donegal food trail study.

Limitations

This research was limited to a single case study due to time constraints. The attendance of all ten establishments to all six sessions was very good but some establishments found the scheduling and duration of the sessions inconvenient as travel constraints from each establishment varied from 10 km to 50 km depending on the location of the establishment. It was recommended that one central location for all trail meetings should be used to facilitate all members.

Results and Recommendations

The researchers based their findings on a comparative analysis of success factors of food trails documented in literature to date. This was to conceptualise a structure that would be used as a self-assessment mechanism to promote trail management within the food trail establishments. This will encourage good operational practice and compliance in the effective management and sustainably of the food trail for the establishments and customers alike. This study highlighted the issues and questions that must be addressed by any establishment wishing to create or enter into a food trail. This section can be clearly articulated under the following headings:

Trail Management

- **Leadership**

The key principle: Leadership is one of the key roles of any management committee/board. Every voluntary and community organisation should be led and controlled by a management committee/board which ensures delivery of its objects, sets its strategic direction and upholds its values. These should include a Register of members, Travel remit for trail (from where to where) funders, statutory bodies involved and themes of trail if appropriate and governing document.

- **Responsibilities, legal requirements and obligations**

The management committee/board members are collectively responsible and accountable for ensuring that the organisation is performing well, is solvent and complies with all its obligations.

This was incorporated into a memorandum of undertaking under the onus of a quasi – contract. This included procedures at AGM, minutes, special resolutions, organisation plans, budget, approved written financial procedures, segregation of duties, required cheque signatories.

Performing, reviewing and renewing

The management committee/board should periodically review its own and the organisation's effectiveness and take any necessary steps to ensure that both continue to work well and meet legal requirements.

- **Product definition procedures**

This is an assurance procedure that all paraphernalia connected with the brand is clearly defined and all product offerings associated with the brand is uniformly adopted by all members of the trail. This will be assessed under the quality assurance guidelines.

- **Acceptance requirement and procedures**

This is an essential control mechanism for the brand. The criteria were set down by the current members and identified dishes and requirements that were common to these iconic pubs with a strong emphasis on food and local products.

- **Procedure for admittance, departure, disciplinary and ejection procedures.**

The management committee/board has a formal application form that will be accessible through their website for participation on the trail. Memorandum of undertaking lists the entrance and criteria for new members .This includes the timing of recruitment and time scale of how long this procedure should take. Disciplinary, departure and ejection procedures are also listed and time lines given.

- **Quality assurance and performance evaluation**

A code of practice was designed which specifies food safety, quality and provenance requirements for all participating and new members of the trail. All establishments must be recognised by the relevant statutory /regulatory authority for the type of food service activity they are engaged in and comply with waste disposal etc., as applicable.

- **Customer feedback**.

Customer feedback can be channelled through the use of comment cards which are used by all establishments or through the management of multimedia sites such as Tripadvisor Twitter etc.

Branding /Promotion and Communication

- **Use of brand logo and social media.**

The trail members must sign up to a mission statement of undertaking. The purpose of this arrangement is the establishment and maintenance of goodwill under the trail brand and logo for all current and future subscribing parties. In this regard, all current and future subscribing parties must not abuse or compromise the brand name or logo. The members must agree to take all necessary steps to ensure the appropriate utilisation of all social media channels and the maintenance of internal related links. All rights related to the brand logo remain with the committee/board.

- **Procedures and types of communication & online presence**

The committee must ensure that they are responsive and open to its customers, members, funders and partners involved in the trail. Dissemination of information should be through the social media sites approved by the committee.

Government agencies could develop a starter pack for new and existing food trails which would include the framework areas discussed in this study. This could also include options on matters such as legal status, social media channels, quality assurance, product definition and certification.

Recommendations for Further Research

As food trails are an area of growth it is recommended that further in-depth research is carried out on the on-going success and management practices of trails currently available in Ireland.

Previous research in academia emphasise a need for a formal business framework. This could be used as a benchmark for growth and sustainability development for new and existing trails. The study did highlight the need for a very structured approach to development of a trail. A key finding from this study is the development of links with government agencies as a resource for implementation and management of food trails in Ireland. Mason (2010) highlights "the need to consider government agency support in terms of assistance with business development, planning approvals and road development". In order for the trail to grow, it would be recommended that third party intervention from a government agency would be beneficial to oversee the on-going management of the trail.

Conclusion

The literature has shown that tourists have a passion for locally sourced food in a regional context. Food trails is a vehicle that can encapsulate this need and at the same time empowers tourism providers with an interest in food to diversify their product to increase business.

This research study aimed to identify and establish a business framework for the development of food trails in Ireland based on descriptive case study methodology using ten iconic pubs with a shared interest in food. The framework presented could be used for both existing and for the creation of new food trails.

The proposed headings in this framework are "trail leadership", "performing", reviewing and renewing", "quality assurance and performance evaluation" and "branding, promotion and communication". This could work as a bench mark for new trails on what structures they must have in place that will help with their development. Current food trails could use an enhanced version of this framework as a checklist for their governance and performance.

To conclude, this study has shown that food trails can be developed in any region. A structured framework needs to be designed to the specifications of the trail and there must be a passion and drive for increasing business potential in a shared environment.

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