INDIGENOUS TOURISM ONTARIO

POSITION PAPER ON GROWING INDIGENOUS FOOD TOURISM IN NORTHERN ONTARIO

INDIGENOUS FOODWAYS

Foodways reflect the who, what, where, when, why, and how of food. In other words, foodways shed light on the physical, social, cultural, economic, and spiritual factors that inform peoples’ experiences of food. The history, heritage, and culture of Indigenous food in Canada is as varied as the ways in which it is grown, harvested, produced, prepared, shared, and enjoyed. However, Indigenous foodways are connected by a diversity of nation- and community-based food cultures and traditions that share several common roots.

For example, the ancestral and contemporary relationships that Indigenous Peoples, their nations, and their communities maintain with their traditional territories are manifest by the central role that locally sourced foods have in their diets. In fact, many Indigenous food cultures continue to be intrinsically linked to locally-sourced ingredients through traditions and practices that have sustained, and in some cases continue to sustain, Indigenous Peoples today, such as foraging, cultivating, hunting, and gathering. Similarly, many Indigenous Peoples and their communities have cultural, political, economic, and spiritual protocols for harvesting, preparing, and consuming traditional foodstuffs. As such, the sharing of foods, stories, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) are defining characteristics of Indigenous food.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action recognizes Indigenous cultures as a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society, and it is important for Indigenous Tourism Ontario (ITO) to support the strengthening, sharing, and continuation of Indigenous Peoples’ traditions around food and associated foodways. It is ITO’s position that the development of Indigenous food tourism represents a key economic opportunity for communities in Northern Ontario to bring people together in a communal fashion to learn about and experience Indigenous foodways. ITO also believes that as Indigenous food tourism businesses in Northern Ontario share their stories, they will join scholars, community leaders, and members in continuing to shape, celebrate, and strengthen Indigenous food in Canada, and abroad.

STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

To start, there is tremendous potential for Indigenous food tourism to grow as rapidly as Indigenous tourism is growing, and the statistics around Indigenous tourism in Ontario can help us to understand what this growth opportunity may look like for communities in Northern Ontario.

The Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport reported in 2014 that there were 160,000 visits to Indigenous tourism businesses in Ontario, and this represents 0.1% of total visits to Ontario. These same visitors spent $76M, or 0.3% of total visitor spend. This higher percentage of visitor-spend compared to total visits points to the economic value of Indigenous tourism in the province. It signals a key opportunity to grow the number of visitors to Indigenous tourism businesses through strong product offerings that include Indigenous food experiences.

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Data included in ITO’s foundational research study on *Ontario’s Indigenous Tourism Landscape* (2019) makes clear that compared to other provinces and territories in Canada, Ontario is the largest contributor to the Indigenous tourism industry in terms of GDP and employment. The sector brings $622MM of direct GDP and 12,924 jobs to the industry. Importantly, the food and beverage sector contributes around $31MM and 1,843 jobs to this total.

ITO research also found that in 2018, there were a total of 614 Indigenous-owned tourism related businesses in Ontario, up from 479 businesses in 2014. Of the ten Ontario communities with the highest concentration of Indigenous tourism businesses, three of them are in Northern Ontario: Wikwemikong (45 businesses), Moose Factory (15 businesses) and North Bay (14 businesses). The vast majority (71%) of Indigenous tourism visitors were also from Ontario, with 28% of these visitors coming from the Greater Toronto Area. Significantly, 27% of Indigenous tourism experiences occurred in Northern Ontario. With the high concentration of Indigenous tourism businesses in Northern Ontario and almost a third of Indigenous tourism experiences taking place across the region, this presents a significant and exciting opportunity to grow Indigenous food tourism.

As per ITO’s assessment of the landscape, Indigenous tourism businesses are typically run by self-employed individuals or through community-based enterprises. They also tend to be small-scale (with 1-4 employees) and operate on reserve or in small rural communities. These attributes align extremely well with what makes for meaningful food tourism experiences; that is, personal and intimate experiences that are connected to the community in which they are enjoyed. Furthermore, several Indigenous tourism products and services stand out as especially important to future food tourism developments, including accommodations, guided cultural tours, workshops or experiences, and guided outdoor activities and experiences. Many of these products can be enhanced through food and many of the services can complement food tourism experiences.

Most importantly, it can be inferred from *Ontario’s Indigenous Tourism Landscape* (2019) that there is strong community support for food tourism development. “74% of respondents stated that traditional skills, including hunting, fishing, gathering, food preparation, crafts or tool making are their community’s greatest asset.” More specifically, *traditional foods* were called out as a specific cultural aspect that community members would want to share with a visitor. Finally, “94% of respondents stated that *cultural learning experiences or workshops* were best suited for their community. *Outdoor or nature-based experiences and cultural events or performances* were both indicated by 84% of survey respondents.” Food, whether the focal point or not, can no doubt add value to such experiences.

In short, we know that authentic Indigenous food tourism experiences can provide the meaningful connection with place that domestic and international travellers are looking for, and there is a strong case for enhancing existing experiences through the inclusion of food while supporting the development of new Indigenous food tourism businesses and experiences.
FORWARD THINKING

Ontario is home to a wide diversity of Indigenous food products and Indigenous-owned food production businesses. Lake fish, wild berries, wild game, squash, corn, and maple syrup are only a few of the foodstuffs consumed on a daily basis. Indigenous-owned and operated food producers also span across the province, including Birch Bark Coffee Company in Ottawa, which features a compelling Indigenous story on every one of its bags. Northern Ontario Indigenous food producers include Sayers Fishery on Lake Superior, Giizhigat Maple Products on St. Joseph Island, and the Manitoulin Brewing Company, to name only a few.

Indigenous Chefs continue to combine traditional ingredients and medicines with others post-contact food sources, transforming them into innovative and culturally-based recipes. Although many of the well-known Indigenous restaurants in Ontario are located in urban centres, there is an emerging restaurant scene in Northern Ontario. There are also many other places that Indigenous food is featured, such as pow wows, community feasts and events, cultural centres, museums and attractions, lodges and other accommodations.

Efforts to re-establish and preserve traditional food products are important expressions of Indigenous foodways throughout Ontario. Initiatives such as the national Indigenous Agriculture and Food Systems Initiative, the Agricultural Society for Indigenous Food Products, and the resurgence of wild rice cultivation around the Curve Lake First Nation, are examples of the efforts and successes achieved in building awareness around ingredients and foodways.

At the national level, the 2018/19 Guide to Indigenous Tourism in Canada celebrates nine Indigenous Tourism experiences in Ontario. importantly, these experiences focus on sharing the histories of Indigenous Peoples and learning about their traditions and lands through storytelling, guided walks, and workshops. However, only a small number of the businesses, such as the Manitoulin Hotel & Conference Centre, communicate the opportunity to learn about, taste, or interact with Indigenous foods.

In Ontario, Destination Ontario highlights Indigenous tourism in several ways. On their website, they showcase experiences for “Indigenous culture”, “Pow wows”, “History buffs”, and “Indigenous outdoor”. Food experiences are also featured in the Indigenous culture section, through experiences like pow wows, Ottawa-based Aboriginal Experiences, Manitoulin Island’s Great Spirit Circle Trail, and three Toronto restaurants: Pow Wow Café; NishDish; and KuKum Kitchen. The pow wow section, which is divided into Northern and Southern Ontario, explicitly mentions food while highlighting specific pow wows in each area, with reference the Great Lakes Pow Wow Guide.

Significantly, the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada (ITAC) and ITO have carried out extensive research projects around primary tourist segments and the Indigenous tourism landscape in Canada and Ontario, and food is increasingly becoming a focal point. For example, food is a key consideration for the export readiness criteria compiled by ITAC for Indigenous tourism businesses. As such, ITO believes there is incredible potential for Indigenous foodways to become part of Northern Ontario’s diversity of authentic Indigenous tourism experiences.
Food is an essential part of every visitor experience, and it is one of two pillars of the hospitality tradition (the other being accommodation). Considering the strong connection to the land, and rich history that Indigenous foodways carry, there are significant benefits to integrating food into Indigenous tourism experiences. In addition, offering Indigenous food as part of an experience presents an important cultural sharing opportunity for any Indigenous tourism operator. For example, Wendake in Quebec, Metepenagiag Heritage Park in New Brunswick, and Aboriginal Experiences in Ottawa creatively incorporate Indigenous food into their cultural experience offers.

The Huron-Wendat community offers a series of restaurants featuring local game-based dishes and opportunities to learn about Indigenous culture through various activations. The “Taste of Metepenagiag “Ookdotaan” interactive package involves gathering fresh ingredients for tea and preparing local food, such as sand bread. Aboriginal Experiences provides visitors to Ottawa with an experience of a traditional village and opportunity to learn about Indigenous cuisine as part of the larger cultural education and experiential program.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Global interest in food tourism continues to grow and visitors expect food to be part of their experience. At the same time, visitors to Canada, including visitors to Northern Ontario, show a growing interest in Indigenous tourism. In recent research, ITAC found that one in three international visitors to Canada are actively seeking out an Indigenous tourism experience.

Indigenous food tourism can offer visitors cultural and experiential travel experiences, noting that food tourists are a subgroup of the cultural tourism, who are looking for immersive, hands-on travel experiences. As such, there is a real opportunity to combine these growing industries to offer visitors a memorable and authentic interaction with Indigenous Peoples through traditional and contemporary food experiences.

Product development is expected to be a future growth area for Indigenous tourism businesses. ITO believes that food tourism should play an important role, both in enhancing current products and in developing new ones. Food tourism provides an additional opportunity to share an essential component of Ontario’s diverse First Nation, Metis, and Inuit cultures. It also facilitates a tourism environment of communication and connection through cultural, social, and environmental dialogues that create transformational experiences for visitors.

However, there is an immediate opportunity to capitalize on current trends. Canada’s Food Price Report 2019 found that by 2035 households will be spending 50% of their food budget eating out, not at home. The average Indigenous tourism visit is also longer than the Ontario average (3.8 vs. 3.1 nights). Combined, these point to a value proposition to both the local diner and prospective visitor that focusses on enjoying Indigenous foods more often and connecting with Indigenous Peoples through authentic food tourism experiences, respectively.

Combined with a rising interest in learning about food-sourcing, sustainable diets, foodways, and locally sourced products, new research is focussing on Indigenous foodways. One benefit of this is that policies that may restrict the sharing and growth of Indigenous food traditions are being identified. However, this added attention can also lead to increased restrictions on traditional livelihoods; therefore, it is essential that the increased visibility and demand for Indigenous foods
and culinary traditions informs dialogue and potentially policy-change that will provide the necessary flexibility for Indigenous Peoples and their Nations to decide if and how they share traditional foods and food preparation techniques as part of their authentic Indigenous cultural experiences.

The growth of Indigenous food tourism must address the identified supports that Indigenous communities and businesses expressed in Ontario’s Indigenous Tourism Landscape (2019). Similarly, as part of developing a strong business case for Indigenous food tourism, some broad challenges need to be overcome through creative partnerships and collaboration, including the following:

1) Accessing funding and financial support for enhancing and developing experiences;
2) Attracting visitors to remote and isolated locations;
3) Celebrating Indigenous foodways in the face of ongoing food insecurity issues;
4) Ensuring authenticity and respect for diversity, including adequate representation;
5) Managing pre-established notions and visitor perceptions of an “Indigenous” experience;
6) Educating visitors on cultural sensitivities and the reality of cultural evolution of contemporary Indigenous cultures; and
7) Efficiently getting to a marketable number of market-ready products and experiences.

CONCLUSION

When considering the potential to grow Indigenous food tourism in Northern Ontario, it is important to recognize the diversity among Indigenous Peoples and communities. What may be considered an appropriate tourism experience in one community is not always appropriate in another. ITO supports ITAC’s 2018 National Guidelines for developing authentic Indigenous experiences in Canada, which acknowledge “the authority of each community to determine their own cultural protocols and boundaries, and recognizes all of the diverse values and beliefs of our First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples.”

With the variety of Indigenous tourism businesses in Northern Ontario—from retail stores and tour companies to accommodations and attractions—incorporating food is an important strategy for getting visitors to stay longer and spend more. As part of ensuring that Indigenous Peoples are at the centre of developing food tourism, ITO will also work to respect community priorities, cultural values and traditions, as well as acknowledge the land and TEK, and include Elders and youth in community tourism development. This will help to increase the local economic, social, and cultural impacts of the tourism industry on Indigenous Peoples and Northern Ontario communities.

Finally, the development of Northern Ontario’s Indigenous food tourism landscape is contingent upon Indigenous Peoples being the narrators of their own food traditions and protocols, in accordance with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action. While ITO believes that the development of food tourism can allow Indigenous Peoples an opportunity to protect, share, and celebrate their foodways, Indigenous Peoples and communities should follow nation-based and locally established protocols to determine what aspects of their food they can and will share with visitors.