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FOOD AND WINE FESTIVALS AS RURAL HALLMARK EVENTS

Jennifer Laing, Warwick Frost and Melissa Kennedy

Introduction

The small town of Bluff is located at the southern tip of New Zealand’s South Island. Like many rural towns, Bluff decided to theme their annual festival around a distinctive local product. In 1996, they started staging the Bluff Oyster Festival, a hallmark event that involved the local community, attracted tourists and reinforced a strong sense of place. In 2007, the festival organisers Venture Southland – a joint initiative of three local councils – planned to increase its patronage by moving it nearly 30 kilometres north to the regional city of Invercargill. The local people of Bluff were outraged by this attempt to take over what they saw as their festival. A public meeting voted to take the festival away from Venture Southland and its council backers and to organise the 2008 festival at Bluff (NZPA 2007). John Edminstin, the new chairman of the organising committee, proclaimed that they would ‘set about taking the festival ‘back to basics’ and putting the focus on people’. As a result, they found that when ‘the committee scrapped the ‘corporate feel’ introduced by Venture [they] immediately saw an increase of more than 1,000 people through the gates’ (quoted in Foden 2015).

While the expanding literature on hallmark events is primarily focussed on large cities, many rural towns are increasingly looking to develop and foster festivals that can be categorised in this fashion. They are so intertwined with the destination and what is located there that they reinforce its spirit or sense of place (Getz 2008; Kennedy 2018; Robertson & Wardrop 2004). Often the name of the festival includes the name of the town, which again reinforces local links. An exemplar is the Gilroy Garlic Festival which has run annually in the Californian town of that name since 1979.

In a crowded tourism marketplace, this strong emphasis on distinctive local features may form the basis of a strategic competitive advantage, depending on how difficult it is for competitors to replicate these themes. Staging these events can help to regenerate and reinvigorate rural communities that have struggled to deal with a decline in traditional industries and changes in demographics. Rural hallmark events – as distinct from those in major cities – are therefore worthy of attention, both from a theoretical and from a practical perspective.
Rural food and wine festivals

Many rural hallmark events take the form of food and wine festivals, where the bounty of what is available and grown locally is a source of community pride and identity and can be argued in some cases to be distinctive to a region (Richards 2015). The Bluff Oyster Festival is an instructive example, focussing on an attractive local food product, and restaurants in New Zealand often proudly refer to the Bluff Oyster on their menus. In the case of wine festivals, there are links to notions of terroir, based on local climate and soil, manifesting itself in certain locations being known for distinctive grape varieties and styles. Such a concept can also be extended to other forms of rural production, as certain foods are often endemic to particular places, sometimes because of geographical or climatic conditions, but also because of the existence of a creative food economy that supports and promotes the local harvest (Richards 2015). In some cases, the choice of a food or wine theme is quite strategic, with the aim of filling a gap in the market in order to attract visitors (Lee & Arcodia 2011; Lewis 1997).

Whilst much of the focus on rural hallmark events has been on their role in gaining economic benefits through increased tourism, there are other dimensions that require study, particularly in the context of food and wine festivals. Producers often participate in these festivals to earn revenue, seeing them as a medium for direct sales and building their product image and market base (Beverland, Hoffman, & Rasmussen 2001; Frost & Laing 2018). In rural areas, involvement in food and wine festivals is critical for the development of small-scale entrepreneurs, particularly those involved in organic and alternative production (Bosworth & Farrell 2011; Dana, Gurau, & Lasch 2014; Herslund 2012; Moscardo 2014; Mottiar 2016; Nel & Stevenson 2014). Often these entrepreneurs are amenity migrants, attracted to areas through earlier tourist visits or the search for a change in lifestyle (Akgün, Baycan-Levent, Nijkamp, & Poot 2011; Argent, Tonts, Jones, & Holmes 2013; Perkins, Mackay, & Espiner 2015). There may be a juxtaposition of old and new industries, which may be either an opportunity or a problem for the region (Perkins et al. 2015).

In terms of social impacts, rural food and wine festivals that have become hallmark events may build resilience in their local communities through encouraging community spirit and celebrating local identity. In some areas, food and wine festivals are themed around minority ethnic groups – who may be diasporas – and their distinctive foodways and products (Laing & Frost 2013; Timothy & Pena 2016). Rural festivals are a source of pride, often seen as highly authentic, creating well-being, social inclusion and leadership amongst locals and leaving behind community legacies. However, much of the research to date has either been in terms of food and wine producers and their interactions (Alonso & Brennan 2013; Bosworth & Farrell 2011; Dana et al. 2014; Moscardo 2014), or on rural festivals in general rather than on those themed on food and wine specifically (Black & Black 2016; Davies 2015; Gibson & Connell 2015).

Despite all these potential positive outcomes, rural festivals face many challenges, including lack of resources and expertise to keep the festivals viable in the long term and attracting tourists to places that are geographically isolated (Frost & Laing 2011, 2015). California’s Stockton Asparagus Festival, for example, was initially hailed as a success for the strategic branding adopted by its organisers (Lewis 1997). However, in 2014 it closed due to declining attendances and the local council’s insistence that the festival pay a higher proportion of government costs (Parrish 2014).

Given these concerns, rural hallmark events such as food and wine festivals provide important opportunities to understand how the leveraging of ‘place’ can contribute to economic and
social sustainability. Our aim in this chapter is to go beyond seeing hallmark events simply in tourism terms. Focussing on food and wine festivals, we examine their economic importance more broadly, as well as considering the role of collaboration, and their impact on identity.

Methods

The chapter is based on a qualitative phenomenological study involving long interviews with seven key stakeholders of festivals in rural south-east Australia (Victoria, southern New South Wales and South Australia). These included managers of festivals, destination marketing organisers and agricultural producers. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, then analysed thematically. Transcripts were sent to the interviewees for reflection, which increases the trustworthiness of the study (Tracy 2010). Each interviewee was given a number (P1, P2, etc.) to maintain their anonymity and thus confidentiality in what they said during their interviews. A fuller and more detailed explanation of the methodology used in this study, notably the data collection and data analysis process, may be found in Laing and Frost (2015).

Findings

The changing landscape of rural Australia

The backdrop to the development of rural hallmark events is the changing nature of the economy, with rural restructuring resulting in employment shifting away from traditional agriculture towards tourism, recreation and services (Ooi, Laing & Mair 2015). There are also changes in migration patterns, with younger people leaving small towns for perceived greater opportunities in larger urban centres. P6 noted that rural Australia has traditionally focussed on

Agricultural production and we all know that that's under pressure in terms of being a major economic driver … if you go back to the ‘70s and ‘80s on any given little country road there were seven farms and seven families and all the economic activity that brings with it in terms of kids at the school and all those things in that village. Now there’s two farms that are three times bigger than they used to be for them to be viable so that means there’s only two families and those kids have now grown up.

In addition, there has been a move towards artisanal and niche production. As P7 observed, ‘traditional agriculture has certainly shifted, but we’re seeing more of that more intensive smaller property activity coming to the fore. We see agri-tourism as probably our next significant tourism product for the region’. P7 went on to refer to this transition in more depth:

All of the towns around here have all had some degree of change. [One town] had a $100 million tobacco industry close down overnight …The transition to something else has been, probably in the eyes of those that are right in the middle of it, quite slow, but those looking from the outside can really see that the town is shifting and really embracing that tourism message. There’s a lot of food venues that are now popping up.

This aligns with changes in the demographic make-up of rural communities, where there may be an influx of older people, often retired, known as tree-changers. Typically, these newcomers are looking for cheaper housing to free up their capital, a more unhurried lifestyle
and amenities such as shops and cafes (Wheeler & Laing 2008). Many of these people are interested in food and where it comes from. According to P6, ‘Every person out there is now a gourmet chef … they’re googling Jamie [Oliver] and making all this stuff … the consumers are more educated about organic, they’re more educated about the issue with the duopoly of the supermarkets’. The latter comment refers to the fact that there are essentially only two major supermarket chains in Australia, with a commensurate purchasing power which has led to some farmers having to sell their products unduly cheaply to remain on supermarket shelves. This concern about the food that they eat and the moral choices that this represents provides an opportunity for a festival to promote local produce and food products to the community and to develop a sense of pride in how it is grown or made.

Not all rural festivals are successful, and some of this is traced to these changes in the community, as newcomers arrive and take time to assimilate or have different needs which need to be accommodated over time. According to P7,

We’ve seen a drop off in events … in the last two years, and the best guess we’ve got is simply the community, the structure of the community, has changed. The events that the community traditionally got behind don’t align with the new residents to town. But what we’re seeing is those new residents are coming up with other ideas and it’s going to take some time for those ideas to be fully formed, but I think we’ll see a change and a re-emergence of events and festivals as they understand a little bit more about where their passion is and how it could work.

**Economic importance of rural hallmark festivals**

Rural hallmark festivals themed around food and wine were perceived by the interviewees as having a number of economic benefits. They raise awareness of the town and thus visitation. P1 explained, ‘We’re open seven days a week now – I’m pretty sure if it wasn’t for the festivals that we do, we probably wouldn’t be opening as much as we do, because it’s just given the area the exposure’. Similarly, P2 observed, ‘Events have historically been absolutely critical in the driving of visitation to the region’, and explained how this occurs:

[The festivals play] a big promotional role, very big. People will come to these events and go ‘we had a good time’. Then they will come outside of those events. That’s what we hope for, not just to attract them to the event. It’s about getting people in the door, so they get to know us and then they want to come back.

By working collaboratively, the numbers of visitors are far greater than they would be to an individual attraction such as a winery. However, in some cases, there is a limit to the number of attractions that should optimally take part to avoid splitting the audience too finely:

We find as a region when we do events, if we all do an event on the same day, there’s not enough people … but if four or five wineries have events over the course of a weekend that works quite well.

(P5)

From a marketing perspective, the festivals expand the tourism product for visitors. Thus for P3, a winery representative, ‘Attracting the visitor is a little broader than just cellar doors … [it’s] how the area is pitching events, which are the main drivers to get people up here’. They
may also increase the potential market segments for their products, particularly in terms of attracting younger people. P4 talked about the rural hallmark festival they took part in, which is geared towards the younger generation for sure. That’s bands, it’s fun, it’s the fun wines – the [sweet] moscatos … so that’s targeted fairly and squarely at the younger generation … so you’re trying to engage people on a more equal footing … people aren’t coming to us for pure unadulterated wine education. There’s a sort of lifestyle element that has really taken over wine appreciation over the last couple of decades, so you need to introduce regional food produce.

Staging a rural hallmark festival can overcome the problems of seasonality, particularly in the colder months. P5, for example, had success in focussing events on a quiet month, promoting red wine in winter: ‘So now July is one of our stronger months. You’ll find through that month that probably a dozen or more wineries will have events scattered through that month. So that helps visitation. It helps the accommodation in town’. They also offer individual businesses the benefits of leveraging off the resources of other businesses in the region. P1 provided the example of a lack of tourist infrastructure at their winery: ‘Individual cellar doors causes a bit of grief for people sometimes. Especially if you are not set up for food. Like we’re not set up, we don’t have a commercial kitchen’. Involvement in a rural hallmark festival allows these businesses to attract tourists, even if the winery can’t offer meals or snacks to their visitors. For producers, these festivals allow the consumer to come directly to them, rather than the producer being required to seek out sales. These festivals were therefore convenient and efficient in terms of reaching the market. P5, for example, was clear about the role that festivals play in the marketing strategy of their winery: ‘In terms of how we spend time and money on promotion, we look at local events first … where people come to us versus where we go to people’.

Collaboration and networking

The social benefits of staging rural hallmark festivals were also discussed. Many outcomes related to the facilitation of collaboration and networking, through working with other members of their local community on the festival organisation. Without this impetus, the community may lose their sense of togetherness, perhaps a reference to social capital (Alonso & Bressan 2013). Thus, P1 observed,

We did go through a little stage when we didn’t have any festivals. Probably nine or ten years ago … I think everyone did lose out, they got a bit involved in their own area, but now we are working as a group … we can provide support to each other.

It encourages coopetition rather than competition: ‘We’re all willing to help each other … we don’t view each other as competitors, we need to work together as a region to be successful. That’s what a lot of the bigger regions have done’ (P1).

While this strategy can be costly, in time or resources, it is seen by some as having clear benefits in terms of building a strong and healthy community, reflecting Richards’s (2015) findings in relation to food networks. It can be the outcome of joining a destination marketing organisation, where festivals are organised on a regional basis. According to P3,

Joining a regional marketing organisation, that’s been a huge marketing cost to us. That’s been the main financial commitment in one place that we’ve ever had … one of
the reasons why I joined was to gain some community inclusion, because I think the country doesn’t work like the city.

However, this made participating in these festivals mandatory for the members rather than an individual decision.

The other issue that was often raised by participants was the grass-roots nature of many of these festivals, which started within the community, rather than being imposed on a community: ‘Most of the festivals that are still going after 25 years all started in the backyard of a pub, or over a beer while someone was having a chat, or in a pop-up gallery’ (P6).

**Identity**

It was emphasised by the interviewees that their festivals were well patronised by locals, who saw them as their festival: ‘The food and wine thing 10 years ago was a visitor thing, but if you go to our wine festival in a couple of weeks’ time … there’ll be 5,000 people and 2,500 of them will be local people’ (P6). The nature of food lends itself to creating a sense of identity, through stimulating the economy but also encouraging conviviality. P7 explained what that might mean for a small rural town:

> Food is the precursor to further development; it seems to stimulate a confidence within the local community to see their neighbour out [eating]; they’re spending money, they’re conversing, they’re celebrating their town, which then supports them getting excited about it and investing themselves. Tourism operators may be coming in from outside that also get involved in that.

However, there may be a disconnection between how tourists see a place and how locals see it, which has implications for festival development. While locals might think their town is distinctive, visitors might see it as similar to others they have visited. The same may be said about local festivals. P6 unpacked this dilemma:

> Our challenge to the villages is give me [tourists] a reason to come to your village which doesn’t include historic buildings, quaint main street and boutique shopping because that just describes every village in the state … [otherwise] if I’ve seen this one, I’ve seen them all.

**Challenges of staging rural hallmark festivals**

While there were perceived benefits in staging festivals themed around food and wine, there were also challenges to overcome. One of the most important was the need to avoid the festivals becoming so big that it was difficult to deal with the number of visitors and the logistics involved in staging them. For P1, the increase in exposure and awareness had to be balanced by the impact on the region itself: ‘The main reason is to promote the area and give us a bigger name … it is a bit of a balancing act. We want to be careful about not being perceived as too big’. A few interviewees mentioned the need for de-marketing. For example, P2 stated,

> We don’t want [our numbers of attendees] to get more than 4000, that would be way too many. If it got to 4000, we would stop trying to promote it. We’d start to pull back, because it’s more about getting the quality visitor.
According to P1, 'We’ve learnt a lot off … [another festival]. They had all sorts of disasters from that. From getting too big. So I think we need to be clever about marketing and clever about who we’re marketing it to’.

Sometimes, resources, particularly staff, are too thin on the ground to cope with the influx of visitors. P2 explained how a coordinated wine festival across their region ended up being fractured into smaller events to make it easier for individual wineries to cope with:

There was a time that everyone went to the one spot [a central venue] and did tastings and food. Then as that grew, it got a little bit out of control. So it went back to the wineries … and each winery held their own event.

These festivals might also highlight a lack of accommodation when so many people visit at the same time: ‘A small problem with accommodation in that there is not enough of it. The festival weekends book out years in advance so it can be a bit difficult, especially for new visitors’ (P1).

Keeping the festival small was perceived by some interviewees as providing a point of difference:

They all claim to be different, but they’re really not … a lot of them are just – we have entertainment, we have food, we have wine, come along, skip from place to place. Essentially, that’s what ours is. But we just have [something different in] that we’re smaller.

(P2)

Keeping it small ensured a warm and intimate ambience:

So our atmosphere is different … I don’t really like big events, because if you’re really wanting to know about this particular winery, you just really can’t get a sense of it … that’s one of the reasons we don’t want to grow too big, because we want to keep that experience happening.

(P2)

This trend towards intimacy of gastronomic experiences has been highlighted by Richards (2015) in his analysis of the changing nature of gastronomy in the modern economy.

A number of interviewees mentioned concerns about crowd behaviour when festivals became too large, notably around drunkenness. According to P1,

It’s just trying to combat things getting out of control and trying to avoid the real drunken antics because it’s marketed as a family friendly event … [if] you turn into a bar, you lose that aspect of a wine tasting and a wine and food event.

Paradoxically, dealing with the risk of drunk driving by providing transport might also lead to the festival becoming too large, as it becomes more attractive to those who might otherwise be forced to abstain from drinking during the festival. P1 observed,

We were talking last year about running a bus [from the nearby large town] … we initially thought of doing it to try and combat drink driving … but our board actually said no to it … they said it’ll make it too big.
Another issue involved attracting the right kind of visitor to the festival. P2 noted, ‘We don’t want it to be a drinkfest. It’s a relaxed atmosphere. It’s not a drunken atmosphere’. One long-running wine festival made changes in order to target people who were looking to learn about the product, rather than taking part in a party weekend: ‘It was more around the audience and creating a better experience for people who are genuinely interested in the product … [and] removing part of that party element from it, which [potentially] decreases numbers, but that hasn’t played out’ (P7). They were prepared to see numbers of visitors fall rather than risk a decline in the experience.

Conclusion

This chapter provides a number of insights into the role of hallmark food and wine festivals in strengthening the economic and social sustainability of rural towns or regions. First, many of these festivals boost tourist visitation, the conventional view of the impact of hallmark events. This is vital in rural places where traditional industries have declined, although our findings suggest that there are potential economic benefits that go beyond tourism. This has been underplayed or overlooked in the literature to date. Second, these festivals can act as a strategic device in building a creative food economy or cluster – mobilising diverse stakeholders to work together and brand local food/wine and the region (as noted by P1). Third, they provide a marketplace to connect producers to educated or conscious consumers, or ‘quality visitors’, as P7 noted, forming relationships and creating new market segments, e.g. the younger market targeted by P4. The changing make-up of these regions was noted, which may have implications for the continuity of festival organisations, but can also provide new sources of support for the festivals, ensuring their survival.

Fourth, hallmark rural food and wine festivals link to Richards’s (2015) idea of co-creating communities through gastronomic networks. This means moving beyond studies focussed on individual gastronomic tourists and events. As shown here, these networks are based on strong relations between local producers, local residents, tourists and tourism operators, as P7, in particular, acknowledged. This bonding process may strengthen social capital (Alonso & Bressan 2013). Bridging social capital may also result from newcomers to the community connecting to others and thus feeling accepted through their involvement in these festivals.

Fifth and finally, the barriers to growth of hallmark rural food and wine festivals and the need for de-marketing highlighted in the findings can actually be opportunities for these places to distinguish themselves from the sameness problem of other towns through providing small-scale and personal creative tourism experiences and relational encounters with locals (Richards 2015). In the case of food and/or wine, the links with producer and region can be emphasised, providing a distinctive local story that sets the town and its festival apart and makes the experience more authentic. This might, in turn, build feelings of community identity and pride about local achievements, making rural regions and towns potentially attractive places to live in as well as to visit.

References


Festivals as rural hallmark events


