SEARCHING FOR THE AUTHENTIC: FOODSERVICE AT A MEDIEVAL BANQUET

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ABSTRACT

Special event research has found that the provision of quality food and beverage services and perceived authenticity are accepted as determinants of visitor satisfaction for special events. Previous work has proposed that these objectives can be aligned to increase both visitor satisfaction and an event's revenue. This paper has two broad aims: to draw on the authenticity literature from several fields of study to develop a broad understanding of the manifestations of food and beverage authenticity vis-à-vis special events, and to apply this conceptualization to an ethnographic study. A participant observation technique was adopted to situate the service of perceived authentic food and beverages within the milieu of various other event authenticity constructs, at a 'staged' Medieval Banquet. It was found that considerable efforts were made to align the food and beverage offerings, and their delivery, with other of the event's authenticity markers. These attempts to authenticate the food and beverage service augmented the overall event. The degree of perceived authenticity at this event derived from complementary authenticating agents and so served to develop a 'unique' authenticity. These agents included notions of impression and image management, the consumption context, and instrumental use of history and association. This paper edges closer to developing a conceptual framework, by which the contribution of food and beverage, and its service, to an event's authenticity might be effectively empirically evaluated.

Keywords: Food and beverage, authenticity, special events.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade there has been an unprecedented growth in the phenomena of special events, and this has been equally matched by considerable research attention (Allen, O'Toole, McDonnell & Harris, 2002). Studies have identified that the ongoing success of special events has a positive relationship with first, the satisfaction of visitors and second, a sound business management approach. The key to the satisfaction of special event visitors is the perception that the event delivers an authentic experience (Getz, 1998). It is contended that visitor satisfaction can be enhanced by the provision of quality food and beverage (F & B) services - those perceived of, by participants, as authentic relative to the

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* Any remaining errors or omissions rest solely with the author(s) of this paper.

event. This paper aims to demonstrate, supported with the presentation of an ethnographic study, that the special event visitor's search for authenticity and for quality food and beverage service can be reconciled – yet within a framework of sound event management.

The concept of authenticity has previously been applied, in the context of tourism, special events, and of food and beverage consumption - and it is acknowledged that it is a vexed issue. Authenticity has been discussed in the literature in terms of the tourist/visitor experience at both the conceptual level (Boorstin 1964; MacCannell 1973 & 1976; Urry 1990) and that of the more localised visitor perceptions (Goldberg, 1983; Hayllar & Griffin, 2005). Cultural and sociological research also explores notions of authenticity for the product itself – food and beverage. These constructs will be discussed to develop a framework for investigating how the provision of F & B services augment authenticity, but most particularly in event management. It is argued that the very fabric of an event, an enhanced visitor experience, and commercial viability can be successfully harmonised to the satisfaction of all stakeholders.

AUTHENTICITY TOURISM AND EVENTS

Within touristic, and to a lesser degree events, research there has been a long literary tradition on the topic of authenticity. It is apparent, there is a clear linkage between tourist experience and that of the special event visitor yet it is fair to say that no theoretical consensus has been reached on what represents authenticity in these contexts. Indeed, as Hughes argues, authenticity is couched within a wider debate: "…a crisis of representation" (1995:782) that has questioned the construction of reality itself. A critical distinction, though, must be drawn between the theoretical construct of authenticity, as it is applied in the conceptual and empirical tourism and events literature, and authenticity as perceived by the tourist/events consumer. This paper, critically, adopts the more fluid of the authenticity positions – that which relates to the experiential or 'existential' interpretation of authenticity rather than that assigned to the authenticity of objects and signifiers (Wang, 1997). As Reisinger and Steiner (2005) assert, this position sanctions the consumer of an experience a valid perception of what is authentic, free of the stated authenticity of 'experts'. Indeed, an object or event has no inherent authenticity but only that attached to it by the belief systems and past knowledge of the consumer. For while the theorist is consumed by the legitimate authenticity that an object (or event) represents, or it's various manifestations depending on worldview - or time/ space relativity - the consumer is captured by the object and its explicit relevance to them. This paper argues that, especially in the context of tourism as a leisure pursuit, special events should be conceived of as phenomena that consumers immerse themselves in practically - thus interpreting authenticity liberally rather than critically.

Apparent in the literature too, is a corpus of work on authenticity in the context of events. This approach has some authoritative support: "authenticity

can be considered as a part of the event product, because it is something that can motivate certain tourists, and it is a benefit that can at least be partially controlled by organizers" (Getz, 1998:316). Various studies have examined authenticity in the context of events (e.g. Papson, 1981; Kates & Belk, 2001), and heritage events/tourism (e.g. Chhabra 2004; Chhabra, Robert, & Sills, 2003; Coupland, Garrett, & Bishop, 2005; Hunt, 2004; Jamal & Hill, 2004). Yet scant work has previously explored the contribution of F & B in augmenting authenticity (Clifford & Robinson, 2006), despite its contribution to overall visitor satisfaction, and perceptions of event authenticity, being found to be significant (Chhabra et al., 2003:712). The role of food and beverage provision at special events will be considered further, but not before briefly discussing food and beverage authenticity independent of the event/ tourism context.

AUTHENTICITY AND FOOD AND BEVERAGE

Food and drink are defining cultural artefacts, and so it follows that they can be the object of a debate regarding authenticity. Anthropological interpretations of food and its preparation debated its status in the civilising process of man – from nature to culture (Levi-Strauss, 1972). Structuralists demonstrated that food "can signal rank and rivalry, solidarity and community, identity or exclusion, and intimacy and distance" (Appaduria, 1981:494). Sociological contributions pioneered the status of cuisine as a cultural signifier. Douglas (1975) argued that food and beverage, its production and consumption, assumed the status of symbols or social laden artifacts, privileging [or marginalizing] groups in society. Further work posited that food consumption is the act of incorporating the world into the body – an intimate exchange. This reflects the themes of this research on two counts. First, that the motivation for tourism/ events is to, via the sensory organs, soak up new experiences and second, that this interpretation emphasizes the symbiosis, individuality and embodiment of the process.

Into this *milieu* can be introduced agents of influence. An incisive essay by Jones and Taylor (2001) deconstructs the celebrated role of food, and its authenticity, in contemporary society. Yet authenticity is multi-dimensional. It is developed on multiple levels and a combination of a variety of layers of authenticating agents. Authenticating agents are those aspects of the production and delivery of the event with particular reference to food and beverage that serve to enhance or diminish perceived notions of authenticity. Authenticity is manifested in *impressions* people form about the product and these impressions are developed through the attendees' perception of the events including:
- History
- The process by which it is produced
- It's links to a particular place
- Associations with mythologies purveyed by producers
  (Beverland, 2005, 1003)

In addition to the general development of authenticity at an event level food and beverage products and services, can amplify authenticity by establishing *image and identity* as derivatives of the community and region. Consequently, authenticity can be increased by:

• Associating dish/ingredient with a specific place
• Using local /colloquial terminology
• Associations with personalities: real or fiction
• Use and promotion of 'naturalized' ingredients
• Reference to miscellaneous historical or fictional events
  (Hughes, 2003:784)

It should be noted that these *authenticating agents*, in the context of events, overlay the more generic consumer-based findings of Groves (2001) and Kuznesof, Tregear & Moxey (1997), who identify three factors: physical, situational, and personal. Physical markers include nomenclature, labeling, and packaging. Situational factors include the presence of tourists or visitors to the locale in question, and the presence of commercial catering or retailers. Finally, the personal factors, related to the broadness of personal cultural awareness and consumption freedom and the knowledge of the consumer.

Significantly, Groves (2001) finds that a perception of authenticity is matched with an expectation that a premium can be charged for the product. Attached to this though, is an expectation that the price tag is matched by standard – of quality and taste and pertinently, the experience. The authenticity of the whole manipulates the perception of the authenticity of food and beverage. So, though it is argued that authenticity is as much about the process as the outcome/encounter, we maintain that in the context of this research it is the final engagement – in this instance at a special event. One such special event, clearly temporally, spatially and culturally challenged in recreating an authentic experience, is the Abbey Medieval Banquet. This event will be discussed after situating it in the global phenomena of public medieval recreations.

THE STUDY

MEDIEVAL FESTIVALS

A US-based register for medieval festivals, although showing ambivalence to the distinction between medieval and renaissance, lists 185 annual events in the States alone, and five major medieval festivals in Australia including the Abbey Medieval Tournament (*Renaissance Festival*, 2006). To varying degrees these festivals embrace various role-playing through costuming and the creation of a medieval ambience with props, participatory events and the like. Research suggests a prime motivator for attendees to attend is to engage in a temporally and spatially distant experience that they otherwise could only read about (Pennington-Gray, Setton & Holdnak II., 2002).

On the supply side various event industry motivators have been suggested. It has been argued that motivators for event organizers, or at least stakeholders within these organizations, are to promote modern national identity and heritage through a period reconstruction (Ganim, 2002). Moreover, it has been suggested that a calendar of events might prove a further marketing strategy for a wider tourism destination, for example Santiago de Compostella in northern Spain, where it is proposed festivals and events along the 'Route to Santiago' might augment destination branding (Gonzalez & Medina, 2003).

Medieval festivals have attracted academic interest as a context for serious historical research (Callow, 2006) and as more light-heartedly celebrations of their endeavours (*Ascribe Higher Education News Service*, 2003). Tourism researchers have appropriated medieval festivals as a milieu for theory building – particularly for understanding the nexus between global and individual issues in the context of heritage reconstructions (Jamal & Kim, 2005).

The literature on food and beverage service at medieval festivals is fleeting. References range from how revelers delight in "gorging on vampireburgers" specially created for a Transylvanian Dracula themed festival (Chelminski, 2003:113), or on marketing food and beverage services to the perceived tastes of the market niche who attend, regardless of authenticity: "We obviously have a strong focus on eating and drinking with healthy food provided" (Preston as cited in Clarke, 2002:35). Clearly, a focus on food and beverage service, for this phenomenon, is justifiable.

ABBEY MEDIEVAL TOURNAMENT AND BANQUET

This current study contextualizes the notion of food and beverage service and consumption in the context of a staged Australian period event – the Medieval Banquet. This event is one of the traditional draw cards on the calendar of the Abbey Museum's Medieval Festival and Tournament, usually held annually in early July. First held in 1988, it has become a major festival for the Shire of Caboolture, about 50 kilometers north of Queensland's state's capital, Brisbane. In 2006, it attracted around 18, 000 participants, including both medieval hobbyists and a large contingent of reenactment groups, and visitors (*Abbey Medieval Tournament*, 2006). Besides being recognized as the "most prestigious festival of its kind" by various Australian living history groups (*Abbey Medieval Tournament*, 2006), significantly, for this study, it is also recognized as the most authentic such festival in Australia, and among the ten most authentic internationally (Bond, 2006). It should be noted though, that the designated medieval time window - 600-1600AD - gives some latitude for the interpretation of authentic.

In 2006 the festival incorporated several events in a week long format. Apart from a number of promotional events, workshops, and themed evening pastimes, the three key events were the main Abbey Medieval Tournament, the inaugural Masque Ball, and on the weekend preceding the tournament proper, the Medieval Banquet. The 2006 event was held on the Saturday night of the 1st July, and was

held in the Great Hall on the Abbey Museum's property just east of Caboolture. Attracting over 300 guests, the event format was an eclectic blend of ceremony, entertainment both serious and slapstick, and, of course, the provision of a banquet. Patrons were charged $70/head for the 2006 event and this included all but one complementary alcoholic beverage. Further details will be provided in the observations however, it is necessary to outline the methodology for this current study.

METHODOLOGY

Ethnography is an established qualitative method of inquiry, with a long tradition, that can embrace both fieldwork and participant observation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Newman, Ridenour, Newman & De Marco, 2003). It is particularly suited to the study of people and culture and although the initial rigor of methods has subsequently been questioned, it is widely accepted that ethnography was popularized as a methodology by the Chicago School (Fontana & Frey, 2000) - progressing from the anthropological to sociological disciplines. Axiomatic to this questioning is the 'observer bias' or 'crisis of representation' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) - accepting that a researcher brings their own view of the world into reaching an understanding of a phenomena. Key to the analytic process adopted for this study has been what Ellis and Boucher (2000) prescribe as 'auto ethnography', or a personal narrative. Thus, the findings for this study are represented as a personal narrative, which is then related to the literature to extrapolate themes and patterns. As is appropriate for ethnographic study, the researchers adopted a liberal view of what was interpretable during the study including "documents…, analysis of food… and whatever… help[ed] the researcher to answer the research question" (Newman et al., 2003:192). Interestingly, ethnography, in its various manifestations, has previously been used as a research methodology for event and festival management (Jeong & Santos, 2004), particularly in the sporting context (Choi, Stotlar & Park, 2006; Giulianotti, 1996; Ollis, MacPherson & Collins, 2006). As such, particularly given the complex cultural and social discourses at play in this research endeavor, ethnography has proved to be a useful medium of investigation.

APPLICATION

The researcher was allowed access to the Great Hall during the 'setup' period and also made periodic tours around the outside of the Great Hall. However, the majority of the event participant observation was from behind a slatted screen strategically placed in front of the operational catering and service area. This provided an excellent vantage point to observe the production of the food, the delivery of the service, acts of consumption both at the High Table and 'on the floor', and also to view various aspects of entertainment, which packaged the event.

These participant observations were supplemented by unstructured discussions with the event organizers - Abbey Museum Director, Michael Strong, the Tournament Coordinator, Edith Cuffe, and subsequently, with the Abbey Museum Registrar, Nigel Bond. Due to the researcher's inability to freely interact with the banquet guests, there was prolonged access to the back-of-house catering areas. As such, an in depth understanding of the menu design, procurement, food production and service for the banquet was gleaned both through questioning various members of the catering and service teams and observation. This experience was enhanced by regular menu tasting.

For the study at hand there was no interaction or dialogue with the banquet guests. To enhance the authenticity of the event, the organizers discouraged those not in period costume access to the banquet hall (*Abbey Medieval Tournament*, 2006). Clearly, this puts limits on the findings in terms of commenting on how the perceived authenticity of the food and beverage contributed to guest satisfaction. Nonetheless, following are reported the findings of the study, which generally follow a chronological sequence.

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE ABBEY MEDIEVAL BANQUET

Although held in a modern style multi-purpose school hall, the room setup (see Figure 1.) for the banquet comprised of the High Table, placed on the stage of the Great Hall perpendicular a number of long trestle-style tables, which it overlooked. The High Table was lavishly embellished with embroidered skirting draped from an overarching frame and was approachable, during the event, only by centered steps from the ground floor. In the Great Hall proper the banquet tables each sat, again on long wooden benches, about 50 guests. Various heraldic and coloured streaming fabrics hung from the walls and rafters. In the front corner, adjacent to the entrance, was placed the bar for the evening, and diagonally opposite, beside the High Table, were the kitchen and catering amenities. These were shrouded by the large slatted screen, behind from which the researcher made most observations.
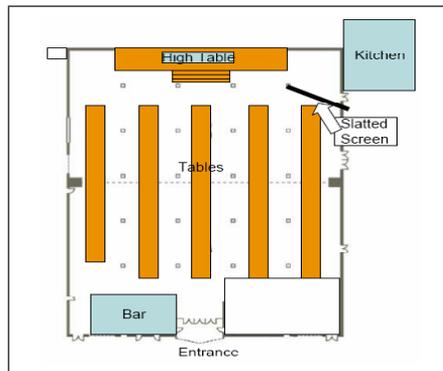

Figure 1 Banquet Floor Plan
Source: Authors' Presentation.

Both the High Table and the banquet trestles were simply laid on a white table cloth. Guests received a glass, a wooden handled knife, (but no fork), and a 'trencher' – or a round flat loaf of bread cut in half long ways to create a makeshift plate. Above the trencher was a copy of the menu, in a tied scroll, for each guest. The tables were candlelit and had baskets placed intermittently for bones and the like.

The 2006 event began with an impromptu 'guard of honour' formed at the Great Hall's entrance, by a group of re-enactment soldiers. On entering, guests partook in a traditional hand washing ritual, before proceeding to their places to await the guests of honour. The official party, including the Caboolture Shire Mayor, was lead to the High Table by the 'Steward of the Feast'. The Steward's role on the evening was to orchestrate the evening's entertainment, manage the formalities, act as arbiter between the operational staff and guests, to generate a jovial atmosphere, and, on occasion, reprimand guests.

Once the High Table had seated, formalities (including behavioral directives) were dispensed with, and the first 'Remove' was served (see Figure 2.). A remove is a self contained meal, covering the full suite of sweet and savory dishes – a meal structure which facilitates extended banqueting. Two removes were served at the event – and these were followed by an 'Issue', which constituted a cheese and fruit platter. All the guests received a complementary glass of mulled wine. Further beverage service was at additional expense. While an effort was made to authenticate some of the beverage offerings, for example mead and 'ale', the provision of this service clearly generated much additional revenue on the evening. Before reporting on the food itself, it is necessary to comment on the nature of the service.

Banquet Menu 2006

FIRST REMOVE

Soup of Herbs and Chicken

Venyson Y - bake - Venison Pies

Baked Fish with a White Wine Parsley Cream Sauce

Candied Carrots in Cinnamon and Honey

Baked Lamb Shanks with Rich Red Wine Gravy

Almond Cheesecakes

Sallets for fish daies - Green salad with Carrot and prawns

Figure 2 Excerpt from Medieval Banquet (First Remove)
Source: Abbey Medieval Tournament, 2006

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For all courses, the High Table was served first. Moreover, this was done with some ceremony. Each of the service staff, period costumed volunteers from the community, were required to walk out of the kitchen directly to the back of the Great Hall, before marching up the centre isle and stopping to bow lowly to the High Table. Only then could the server take their dish to its destination. This ceremony was performed regardless of whether the server was carrying roast pork for the High Table or a toothpick for a guest at the back of the hall.

Some efforts were made to historically represent the items on the menu. For instance, 'Venyson Y' described the venison pie and 'Coll-Flower' the buttered cauliflower. Menu descriptions indicated that some research had been conducted to reproduce dishes for the banquet that feasibly represented either the medieval availability of raw produce, contemporary culinary techniques and styles, but most impressively eating styles and etiquette of the time. Let us recall the serving of just the first remove to illustrate these points.

A simple soup of chicken and herbs was served in large earthenware jugs, which were left on the table for guests to share. The remainder of the dishes were served on flat round ceramic dishes, in portions adequate for approximately 6-8 people. These were shared at the table between guests, who placed food items on their trenchers, and ate as best they could with the limited cutlery at their disposal. The Baked Lamb Shanks serve as a good example of a dish, which once at the table, necessitated eating by hand, hence creating that medieval banquet 'feel' in consumption, if not taste. The researcher experienced these challenges first hand when juggling unboned quarters of Quail with Pancetta, Peas cooked in Broth and Roast Pork dripping in Pomegranate Gravy. Accompanying the soup and shanks in the first remove were Cinnamon spiced Honeyed Carrots, Almond Cheesecake and a Green Salad with Carrot and Prawns. While the medieval availability of some of these foodstuffs could be questioned it is evident there is a mixture of sweet, spice, salt and sour in the one course that reflected past meal constructions.

Several of the meal items were made to authentic recipes – the very doughy Treacle Tart with Rosewater Cream, being an example. Perhaps the gastronomic highlight of the evening was the serving of the Whole Roast Pig (which was actually roasted as separate primal sections and subsequently carefully reassembled). Placed on a large wooden stretcher, which required four men to carry, the pig, now strategically garnished with copious quantities of parsley, was presented to the High Table in the same fashion as all the food. Ironically, the paraded pig was not carved for the guests, as the evening's logistics prompted the caterers to 'cook double'. So after the whole pig had been returned to refrigeration, and a tactful delay, the pre-sliced pork was served as part of the second remove.

After the second remove a number of performers, period dancers, acrobats and swordsmen entertained the gathering. These performances were punctuated by the historically appropriate witticisms of the Steward, who did much to contribute an extra sensory layer of perceived authenticity to the event.

Discussion

Food and beverage in special events fulfils many roles. It is entertainment, historic recreation, community representation, educational, develops and defines culture, heritage, ethnic or regional identity, attracts consumers and enhances lifestyles of locals and tourists amongst other roles (Hall & Sharples, 2003). Within all these roles food and beverage can enhance or minimize the authenticity of special events.

Authenticity requires the management of identity and image construction (Svejenova, 2005), it is bolstered by strategic actions (Beverland, 2005) and is manifested in impressions people form about the product, it's history, the process by which it is produced, it's links to a particular place and associations with mythologies purveyed by producers (Beverland, 2005:1003).

CONSUMPTION CONTEXT

An integral part of the food and beverage offer is the food and beverage service. While the event organizers of the Abbey Medieval Banquet construct a menu and direct the production of a menu in a manner reminiscent of the banquet's Medieval origins it is the manipulation of the context, and the manner in which the banquet is served and consumed that 'locates' and creates the authentic notion perceived by event attendees. The instrumental use of history in the form of the décor of the hall and tables, the costuming of attendees and service staff, the strict limitation of any people not in costume entering the banqueting hall, the manner of service and the utensils provided to consume the meal that event attendees perceive as authentic codes. Thus, it is their perceptions that grant the event levels of authenticity as augmented by elements of the food and beverage service offer (Beverland, 2005; Hughes, 1995).

Consumption of food and beverage at events can be largely symbolic. People consume for pleasure & engage in eating practices different to their natural food habits and social norms of food at events to the other context (Rusher, 2003:194). This is illustrated by the ceremony of service involved in the food and beverage distribution at the Abbey Medieval Banquet. The consumption context influences the individual's behavior in terms of the choices that are made regarding food selection, quantity and degree of conformity to prevailing social norms (Rusher, 2003). Furthermore, the relaxation of food and beverage norms, by the utensils provided and the necessity to eat with one's hands creates and endorses the hedonistic environment in which individuals can express self-actualizing consumption behavior (Rusher, 2003).

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

An imperative to authenticity is the perception of event attendees that the food and beverage services were equal to the quality they perceived the images of the Abbey Medieval Banquet to have. This is maintained by the judicial use of strict

guidelines for service rituals maintained by the 'Stewart' who is versed in the historical protocol of the dining halls of Medieval times. This is further developed by the creation of a historically based menu that is at least partly original in language, if not in production techniques and ingredients. Hence, the quality of a service or product has the capacity to enhance or reduce perceptions of authenticity (Chhabra et al., 2003), and permits the premium charged for the Banquet.

Food and beverage services have an image and an identity - collectively managing such issues can be considered a form of impression or image management (Svejenova, 2005). Authenticity is augmented through the management of image: strategically this requires a commitment to quality of product and service, maintenance of stylistic consistency and an instrumental use of history and place as a positive reference (Beverland, 2005). For the food and beverage component to augment authenticity a congruent image has to be perceived by attendees across the overall event and the products and services associated with it. Event attendees make judgments on events through congruence and complementarity (Ruth & Simonin, 2003:19). Authenticity is manifested in the impressions and opinions people develop particular to the product (Beverland, 2005). The Abbey Medieval Banquet is a construct of costuming, service style and is testimony to this notion of authenticity.

Event attendees are encouraged to dress in costume and are provided with the eating utensils that proscribe that their food and beverage consumption is reflective of medieval banqueting. It is, therefore, of little consequence that the beverage offer is consistent with modern products and tastes. In the dining hall, guests can sit at cloth covered trestle tables, eat 'removes' with knives and trenchers, and order a 'Fourex' (beer). The food and beverage offer at this event is also authenticated as much by the style of service and dining accoutrements as it is by the sense of 'Medieval feast' created by the themed decoration of the halls with heraldry and banners as well as the employment of wait staff who 'typify' notions of Medieval banquet hall servers.

The degree of perceived authenticity of the food & beverage production and delivery at special events is developed by authenticating agents. Strategic agents that contribute to the perceived authenticity driven by the food and beverage production and service at the Abbey Medieval Banquet are the manipulation of the consumption context, the management of association, image and impression.

CONCLUSION

There exists an interrelationship between tourism, food, beverage and the economic, social, cultural and physical impacts which are manifested in the context of the food and wine offer and service at special events (Rusher, 2003). Food and beverage offers in special events can serve as the *raison d'etre* or as a peripheral service to the tourist/visitor experience (Fields & Stansbie, 2004). Clearly, for the Abbey Medieval Banquet, the food and beverage service fell somewhere between these categories – challenged by isolation in time and place. Here, it was found,

the manipulation of food and beverage service components augmented overall event authenticity via a number of authenticating 'agents'. These agents included notions of impression and image management, the consumption context and instrumental use of history and association. It is reasonable to suggest that the Abbey Medieval Banquet participants had an enhanced event experience through the consumption of various of these food and beverage authenticating agents, and that this complemented the overall success of the event from the perspective of the event organizers.

While a limitation of this study is that event participant views were not able to be accommodated within the methodology applied, it is clear that the food and beverage service did augment perceived authenticity. Further research could aim to complement this study with not only the viewpoints of the event participants but also other of the event stakeholders including organizers, caterers, servers, volunteers and even sponsors. Together with previous work linking food and beverage service as an authenticating agent (e.g. Chhabra et al., 2003, Clifford & Robinson, 2006), another natural progression from this work would be an effort to develop a conceptual model from which more structured empirical work could be developed.

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