

Food, glorious food. The Lowcountry has lots of it, but if you're a visitor, finding the local stuff can be difficult.



Right now I'm writing a business plan for a culinary tourism operation. Culinary tourism is a subset of cultural tourism that revolves around food. Any kind of food at any step of the way, from the producer to the processor, from your plate to your palate.

And culinary tourism is mostly about the foodways that reveal local culture.

This surprises a lot of people, because they think culinary tourism is something hoity-toity. It's not that all.

Gourmet tourism, with its focus on fine dining, is a type of culinary tourism, but it's not the only game in town. A place like Shrimp Shack is a culinary tourism asset just as much as Bateaux is.

Some people also think culinary tourism is a type of agritourism, with its focus on farms. That's not exactly true either. A farm, if it provides insight into local culture, can be a valuable part of the culinary tourism experience.

But if the farm is so far removed from the heritage and culture of a community that it no longer reflects that community – if it is a factory farm, for example – its culinary tourism value is diminished.

You can still have agritourism at a mammoth farm. After all, some people are truly fascinated by things like large-scale irrigation projects and management of itinerant labor. But culinary tourism it is not.

The sad truth is that, despite the riches of the Lowcountry's farms and fisheries, we fall short when it comes to actually getting all that local food into visitors' mouths.

Why?

This is the alleged quandary here in the Lowcountry: Local provisioners need to know they have a consistent market, including local retailers and restaurants. The retailers and restaurants, likewise, need to be assured that they can get consistent product from provisioners.

At least that's what I've read, and that's what I've been told. But I don't believe it's true. At least it's not that simple.

Emerson said that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, and this is a prime example of a fixation on foolish consistency, especially on part of restaurants and retailers. You have to ask yourself, why is this level of consistency so important to a local restaurant?

Take menus, for instance. It makes sense for a place like Ruby Tuesday's or Outback to have expensive, printed, laminated menus. When you've got that kind of volume, and that strong a supply chain, you can afford to have fancy menus.

But what about local restaurants? I'm not talking about little burger joints. I'm talking about the kinds of places that look as if they would sell local seafood dinners – but don't. Blackboards provide a lot of flexibility. So do photocopied daily or weekly menus. They are a good choice for an establishment that wants to start including seasonal local foods.

But a menu is not just words on paper. It takes a lot of time and effort for the total business operation to keep up with a constantly changing menu.

Cooks need to train their staff on how to prepare new dishes. Servers need to get training about the attributes that make these seasonal dishes so special – special enough that people

will pay more for the privilege of eating them.

Then, managers need to work out special pricing to make sure they are charging enough for all that extra work. And everybody needs to brace themselves for the moment when a dish runs out, and a customer goes away dissatisfied.

It seems like that is a big fear on the part of restaurateurs – that customers will come in wanting something they've had before, won't be able to get it, will complain to friends and family, and the restaurant's reputation will be ruined.

So part of the equation is getting restaurateurs and their customers to accept that there will be limited quantities of certain local foods.

That leads us to the concept of embracing the positive qualities of scarcity.

Scarcity breeds desire. People will pay a lot of money for the things they desire. Some of that money can land in the coffers of businesses here in the Lowcountry.

So, if we play our cards right, things that are available in seasonal, limited quantities could be a gold mine. That's how it works in the coffee industry – the good stuff from a known provenance demands top price.

The same applies to seafood. For example, jumbo white roe shrimp are scarce. They are available for only a few weeks each spring. And they represent dollars in the bank for our local economy.

Declining to offer them because they are not always available is prime example of foolish consistency.

Enough about foolish consistency. It's time to talk about wise consistency. And maintaining product quality is a prime example of wise consistency.

With local foods, inconsistency of supply is a given, and inconsistency of quality is unforgivable.

Enlightened restaurateurs and retailers will be understanding if you have an inconsistent supply. That's part of the appeal of offering local, seasonal foods.

Consistent quality is non-negotiable, however.

If a restaurant touts the virtues of sweet local shrimp, and the shrimp doesn't taste good, it kind of ruins the value proposition.

For shrimpers and processors, all it takes is one batch of bad shrimp that has been poorly handled on the boat or at the packing house, and you've created some serious trust issues with the restaurateurs.

This matter of shrimp quality is critical, because shrimp can provide the foundation for a successful culinary tourism industry in the Lowcountry.

I'd better get back to writing that business plan so I can help make that happen.