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Towards a Conceptualization of Restorative Environments in Culinary Tourism

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Abstract

Restoration and relaxation are central drivers of tourism. Contemporary tourism research increasingly integrates psychological constructs such as restoration, mental regeneration, and mindfulness, linking restorative experiences to subjective well-being. Although destinations are often chosen with these desired effects in mind, limited knowledge exists about the specific environmental features that foster restorativeness. Their relevance and operationalization within culinary tourism remain undertheorized, calling for a focused conceptualization of restorative culinary environments. This study examined adults in Austria (18+) who travel at least occasionally. Focus group discussions followed a semi structured interview guide and used projective techniques to explore elements and outcomes of memorable (culinary) tourism experiences, the role of environments and experiential settings, and the relevance of restoration in this context. Participants were purposively sampled according to predefined criteria, and recruitment continued until thematic saturation was reached. Four groups were conducted: international frequent travelers (n = 6), young travelers (n = 6), families (n = 6), and travelers aged 40+ years (n = 7). Sessions (~1.5 hours) were audio and video recorded and fully transcribed. Analysis followed Hennink's six step thematic approach (2014), supported by MAXQDA 2022. Participants viewed eating and drinking as inherently relaxing holiday activities that help buffer everyday stressors. Culinary tourism supported restoration by fulfilling motives such as enjoyment, indulgence, respite, calm, and escape from routines. Relaxing settings were described as achievable through simple measures — comfortable seating and low crowding — further enhanced by cleanliness, safety, and hygiene. Temporal flexibility and self-paced experiences strengthened restorative effects. Outdoor, natural, and biophilic environments were strongly preferred. Direct and indirect nature cues — plants, water, daylight, natural materials, and well-integrated design elements — were regarded to enhance memorability and deepen relaxation, while also underscoring the need for further research into the specific contributions of natural and biophilic design to restorative culinary tourism environments.

Keywords: Biophilic Design, Culinary Tourism, Memorable Tourism Experiences, Restoration, Well-Being