
Chef John Folse: A Case Study of Vision, Leadership & Sustainability

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Abstract

Louisiana-born entrepreneur and chef, John Folse, has successfully grown and developed his organization, Chef John Folse & Company, around Louisiana's unique gastronomic identity. His passion for the culture and food of his home state permeates through the various divisions of his company that are unified under his vision: to "Take the taste of Louisiana worldwide." Chef John Folse & Company represents a strong business model for entrepreneurial leaders who wish to use the gastronomic identity concept to create both awareness of a culture and a sustainable business advantage.

Introduction

Food and culture have always been of importance to Chef John Folse. Born and reared in Louisiana, Chef Folse grew up in Cajun Country where "food is a consuming passion" and "people live to eat" (Bienvenu, Brasseaux, & Brasseaux, 2005: 11). He attributes his passion for food and cooking to his family, the unique blend of cultures, and the semi-tropic climate of South Louisiana's Bayou Country that produces the "finest raw ingredients to anyone wishing to create a meal in Louisiana" (http://www.jfolse.com/mm_questions.htm). His obsession with Louisiana and its food grew with his experiences in restaurants and hotels, spawning an entrepreneurial spirit to open a restaurant of his own some day. The opportunity arose in 1978, when Chef Folse opened his first restaurant built around his own cooking philosophy: "Choose first the heritage of your people. Herein lies the spice and flavor of your very palate. Choose secondly the ingredients of your area. Herein lies the uniqueness of your creations" (http://www.jfolse.com/mm_philosophy.htm). Out of the success of his first restaurant Chef John Folse & Company was founded; thirty years later the company has grown into a multi-division organization still centered on Chef Folse's passion and vision for Louisiana's culture and food.

Vision

An analysis of Chef Folse and his company reveals a visionary leader with an innovative business model built for sustainability. His vision is simple: "Take the taste of Louisiana worldwide". From day one, his vision called for a business model

which reflected Louisiana's gastronomic identity, could grow while sustaining its core identity, and would travel well on to a worldwide stage. This case study provides a retrospective of nearly thirty years. It depicts Chef Folse's progress since he opened his first restaurant, Lafitte's Landing, in 1978. In the process, we take a glimpse at a visionary leader at work, and the models he used to create a sustainable business empire with implications far beyond the borders of the Louisiana Bayou.

Gastronomic Identity Business Model

The newest division of Chef John Folse & Company, "Louisiana Off the Menu," is yet another example of how Chef Folse translates his passion for Louisiana culture, history and food to others through experiential tours of regions with a food focus. His ability to see the great potential of the tours for education and exposure puts him at the forefront of this burgeoning niche of tourism development, and continues to strengthen his relationship with his employees and followers who are drawn to his charisma and philosophy as a chef: "Like all great artists, chefs must create a style that is recognizable. In order to stand out, you should stay true to your roots, stay true to your region, and stay true to your heart and soul" (<http://www.jfolse.com>). His approach and strategy, therefore, offer an example to regional and area leaders on how to best market one's gastronomic identity profitably.

Culture

Gastronomy, like so many other food-related words, has been defined in a myriad of ways; it has involved everything from guidance on proper food and drink, used as a historical topic, and is often seen as a reflection of a society's culture (Santich, 2004).

In this discussion, the definition of gastronomy relates to the history, cultural and environmental impacts on the "how, where, when and why of eating and drinking" (Santich, 2004: 17). A commonality among the definitions is the importance of place, and this is why we become aware of foods or cuisines that are attached to particular places (Bell & Valentine, 1997). Place is also a key component of understanding culture, thus the connection between gastronomy, culture and place must be recognized.

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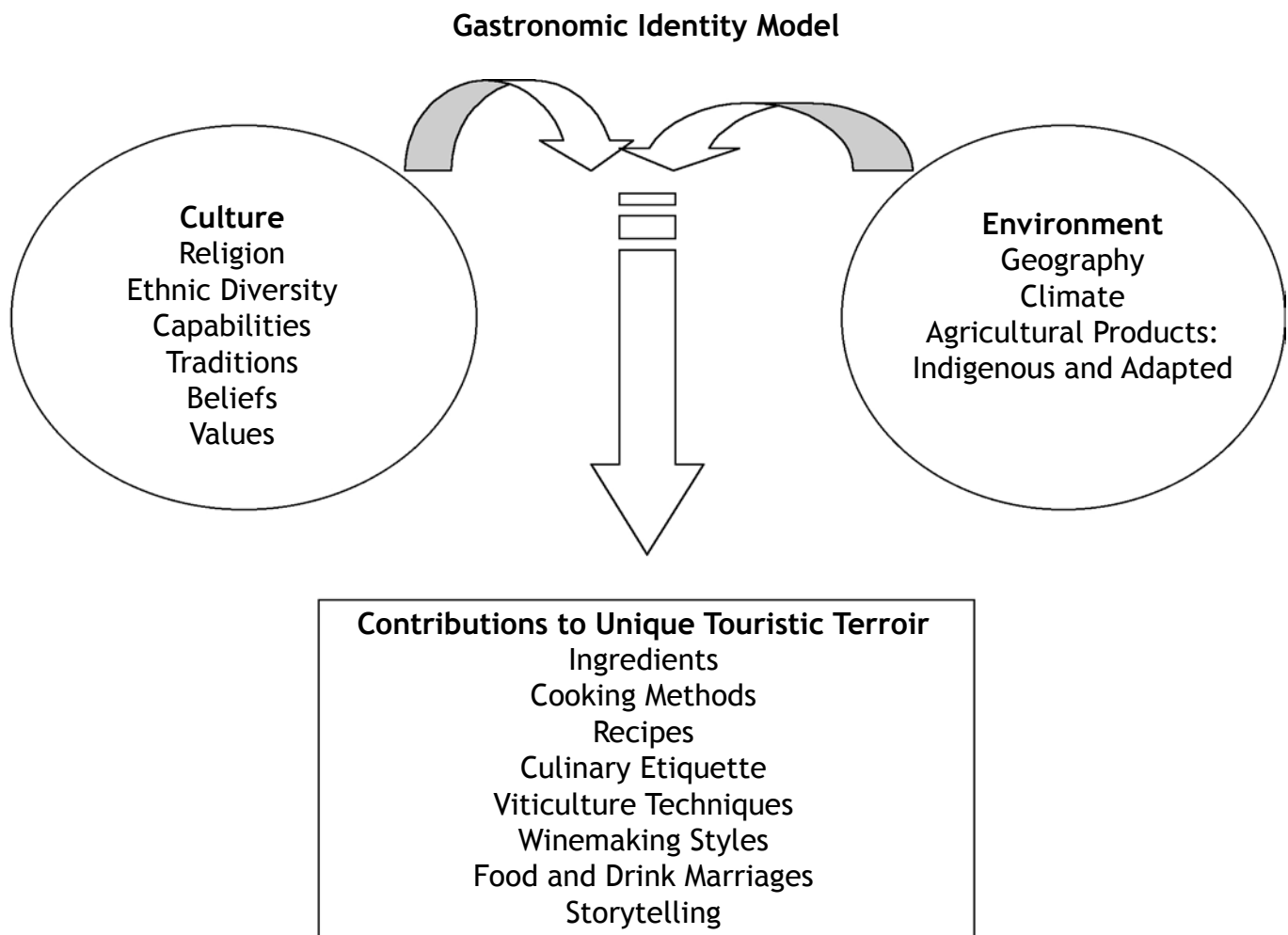
The gastronomic identity model showcases the links between these three elements, and points to how one might harness these links for a competitive advantage in both the foodservice and tourism industries.

Environment

A region's gastronomic identity is also determined by the environment. The dominant elements in the environment include geography and climate, which in turn impact agricultural products that are available and the adaptability of new products introduced because of trends, fashion or increased travel. The dominant culture elements include religious, historical, level of ethnic diversity, innovations, capabilities, traditions, beliefs and values (see figure 1). These issues have a significant impact on identifiable characteristics through the introduction of additional ingredients, cooking techniques, traditional methods of viticulture and winemaking methods to a region (Harrington, 2006).

The ability to leverage a gastronomic identity business model can be used to attract customers with a variety of interests. Part of the value-added is the enlightenment of the consumer - tying together history, culture and food products to create a unique bundle of activities. Consumers are enlightened on the unique terroir that provides a part of the concept of 'place' inherent in the attractiveness factor of a tourist destination. 'Place' has been suggested as an encompassing term that is a unique combination of "physical, cultural and natural environment [that] gives each region its distinctive touristic appeal" (Hall, Mitchell & Sharples, 2003: 34). Inclusive in this concept is the overlap with terroir and unique local food and wine products. All of these elements create a specialized offering of activities described as a 'touristic terroir'.

Figure 1:



Source: Adapted from Harrington, R.J. (2008). *Food and Wine Pairing: A Sensory Experience*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., p. 47.

Gastronomic Identity

A region's touristic appeal can come from many factors, food being an important one. Food can draw a very special niche of tourists often called "culinary tourists," "gastronomic tourists," or "food tourists." Such terms are used "interchangeably for describing tourism associated with the senses of smell and taste" (Ignatov, 2003: 3) yet they all point to a tourist whose primary or secondary motivations revolve around food and food-related activities. Activities range from visiting a local farm, trying out a well-known restaurant, or attending a food festival - places which should illustrate the gastronomic identity of a region or local area.

In the foodservice industry specifically, whether the identity is based on the firm location or the overriding theme of a restaurant concept, a determination and definition of the gastronomic identity of the location of interest provides an important area of marketplace differentiation. This is where a visionary leader makes a difference. Visionary leaders identify this differentiator early in the process and are willing to act on it!

This discussion is intended to provide a framework to contemplate relationships and their impact on the how, where, when and why of local eating and drinking. This framework can provide a useful model for gastronomic tourism strategic planning as well as restaurant concepts centered on regional and local cuisine.

In summary, a gastronomic identity of a region or locale is greatly influenced by the location's climate, geography, culture, history and traditions. This concept is what makes traveling to new places so special. It provides unique experiences for locals and visitors alike while preserving and enhancing local culture/history. Many firms have found that creating a sustainable market differentiator can be greatly influenced by the successful use of a gastronomic perspective. Our ongoing research continues to show that this will likely apply equally as well to the Louisiana Bayou, the upcoming British Columbia and London Olympic Games, and many places in between! Chef Folse has made profitable use of Louisiana's gastronomic identity. In the process, he has become a model for how regional leaders can successfully promote their gastronomic identity.

Leadership and Gastronomic Identity

In terms of gastronomy, the Cajun and Creole culture is, arguably, the most interesting in North America. Cajun and Creole cuisine has some of the most identifiable regional dishes in the world, and Louisiana has a unique climate, geography, history and tradition. Most importantly the Cajun and Creole cultures are closely connected to food and its importance is centrally positioned in the region's social structure.

There are a number of well-known restaurateurs, entrepreneurs, and food manufacturers from Louisiana. Unlike most, Chef Folse has an established reputation in all three fields. He was born in the St. James Parish, Louisiana in 1946. Like many Cajuns, he learned early the secrets of Cajun cooking and Louisiana's unique ingredients.

"Taking the Taste of Louisiana Worldwide"

Well-known throughout the culinary world, Chef Folse emerged onto the culinary scene in 1978 with the opening of his landmark restaurant - Lafitte's Landing Restaurant in Donaldsonville, Louisiana. From the beginning, he set out to market "a taste of Louisiana" to the region and worldwide. During the 1980s, Chef Folse became known as "Louisiana's Culinary Ambassador to the World" introducing Louisiana's indigenous products and cooking techniques to Japan, Beijing, Hong Kong and Paris. During the 1988 Presidential Summit between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow, he made international headlines with the opening of "Lafitte's Landing East" opening the first American restaurant in Russia. In 1989, he became the first non-Italian chef to create the Vatican State Dinner in Rome. And, during the 1990s, he opened promotional restaurants in London, Bogota, Taipei and Seoul.

In part due to his international success, Chef Folse has created a thriving company that leverages the food and history of Louisiana providing a unique brand based on the man himself and his unique surroundings. His cornerstone business - Lafitte's Landing Restaurant - spawned the creation of a number of related endeavors. These include a catering and events management division that serves clients both regionally and nationally (White Oak Plantation), a publishing division producing seven cookbooks and numerous works by other authors, an international television series "A Taste of Louisiana", a food manufacturing division (Chef John Folse & Company Manufacturing) producing custom manufactured foods for the retail and foodservice industry, the naming of the Chef John Folse Culinary Institute at Nicholls State University in his honor, a radio cooking show - "Stirring It Up", an artisan baking and pastry division, a B&B and fine dining restaurant in his former Donaldsonville home - Bittersweet Plantation, a dairy division offering a full line of top-quality fresh and aged cheeses called Bittersweet Plantation Dairy, and "Louisiana Off the Menu" - a culinary tours operation.

Sustainability Through Multi-Dimensionality

Chef Folse and his company demonstrate the contribution a visionary leader, entrepreneur and restaurateur can make on ensuring a continuation and recognition of a locale's gastronomic identity. He has done this serving as a master storyteller, historian, innovator and authentic Louisiana personality. His efforts

provide an example of how commercial operators can influence and shape our culinary taste while preserving the historical integrity of the what, how, when, and why of eating and drinking. It appears obvious that his success and accompanying notoriety can be attributed, at least in part, to the successful implementation of a gastronomic identity business model.

The Business Model & New Media

Chef Folse's business methods add value to the customer experience and at the same time enlighten the customer. He has had continued success with this basic business model utilizing all types of media (restaurants, catering, publishing, television, radio and manufacturing). A good example of this business model is his research and writings tied to his own publishing division. Chef John Folse has written numerous cookbooks that chronicle the gastronomic identity concept applied to Louisiana. Unlike most cookbooks, he adds varying degrees of gastronomic identity elements to each publication. His most recent work, *The Encyclopedia of Cajun & Creole Cuisine*, goes beyond any cookbook in this regard. With nearly 850 pages, he archives Louisiana's history, ethnic diversity, food, culture, recipes, and noteworthy contributors to the current food scene in Louisiana. Why has his company been such a success? And, why did he decide to focus on this particular business model? There is no easy answer to these questions but as with any successful entrepreneurial endeavor the role of timing, tenacity, vision, and engagement are evident.

Chef Folse emerged on the culinary scene during a period of renewed interest across North America in regional cuisine, the emergence of the celebrity chef, and the concept of place of origin as an important dining factor based not only on ingredients but also history and culture. While other regional cuisines in the U.S. are of interest to those in the profession, customers and tourists, Cajun and Creole cuisine is more clearly identifiable in terms of recipes, ingredients, preparation, culinary terms and dining etiquette. He is one of many celebrity chefs propelled into the limelight over the past several decades - but he seems to have taken a route in close connection with many professional associations such as the American Culinary Federation (ACF), Distinguished Restaurants of North America (DIRōNA), and the Research Chefs Association (RCA) rather than based solely on popular media exposure. This path seems to have given him great sustainability.

As with all successful entrepreneurs, it is obvious that Chef Folse brings an innate sense of purpose to work that is larger than the individual person or company. Folse's family has nearly 300 years of history in South Louisiana. He views his quest to preserve the cultural heritage of Louisiana not by virtue of his being a preeminent scholar on the subject but rather as a

combination of birth and obligation. This sense of obligation is apparent in his relentless motivation, tenacity and commitment to cultural preservation.

With more than 25 years of success as one of the world's top culinary-based entrepreneurs, Chef Folse continues to share his culinary talents and expertise with students and the public, relentlessly promoting Cajun and Creole cuisine worldwide. His integration of a gastronomic identity business model across a diverse group of business endeavors has been a groundbreaking development in North America.

Chef John Folse's biography remarks that after twenty-five years, he "is still adding ingredients to the corporate gumbo he calls Chef John Folse & Company, which is as diverse as the Louisiana landscape, and he would not want it any other way" (http://www.jfolse.com/mm_biography.htm). This quote indicates the leadership role he has taken in promoting Louisiana culture and cuisine, and his passion for personal and professional growth.

Cajun cuisine "remains a powerful cultural and economic force throughout the region, for it is one of the twin pillars supporting the area's burgeoning cultural tourism industry" (Bievenu, Brasseaux & Brasseaux, 2005, p. 176). As a subset of cultural tourism - tourism for the purpose of understanding a place and its culture as a whole, culinary tourism emphasizes cuisine and gastronomy, two things that the Canadian Tourism Commission argues "enriches the cultural tourism experience" (CTC, 2003). This area of tourism is certainly a growing market which some suggest is due largely to food and cooking shows that increase interest in food generally and travel more specifically as well as the large baby boomer demographic who represent educated individuals with discretionary time and income (Hunter, 2006). In spite of the limited research conducted in the area of culinary tourism, many organizations are developing products or expanding upon their current product line to meet the demand. Chef Folse's company is one such organization meeting the demand for culinary tourists' activities through his "Louisiana Off the Menu" division.

Erik Wolf, President and CEO of the International Culinary Tourism Association, remarks that "most chefs and restaurateurs do not seem to realize they are part of the larger tourism ecosystem" (Wolf, Hidden Harvest, 2006: iii). This particular statement does not hold true for Chef Folse who acknowledges his role in the tourism industry, and develops an innovative product catered toward a more recently recognized niche market labeled "culinary tourism."

Vision in Action...Again

Some consider culinary tourism too great a financial risk, partly due to the lack of research on its effectiveness and uncertainty around the universal application of the concept. Chef Folse is not deterred. Instead, he sees a strong link between culinary tourism and his ever-young thirty year old vision. Consequently, he has developed an entire division to fulfill that vision and meet what he sees as market demand. His "Louisiana Off the Menu" promotes organized tours of regional areas of Louisiana with a focus on food (<http://www.jfolse.com/laoff-themenu/index.html>). Three such tours have been attempted in 2006, and all three have been successful in offering a positive consumer experience to an audience made predominately up of educated females from a higher income bracket (Personal communication, December 28, 2006). The recognized demographics of the participants fall in line with the culinary tourist profile outlined in the literature (Ignatov, 2003; CTC, Wine & Culinary Enthusiasts, 2003). Based upon Erik Wolf's recommendations for a successful culinary tourism program (feature a noted chef, noteworthy ingredients or take place in a unique or memorable venue (Wolf, 2006)), it is no surprise that these tours are successful. They combine culture, history, and food as well as a chef, local ingredients and a unique venue—all of which make-up and showcase Louisiana's gastronomic identity.

Sustainability and Risk

While the future holds great potential for Chef John Folse's newest division, "Louisiana Off the Menu," there are also significant issues to overcome that will impact the sustainability of these culinary tourism products. Time and expenses are two issues raised in the literature (Wolf, 2006) as ones that can hinder the success of culinary tourism events; these issues have already been acknowledged by staff of Chef John Folse & Company (Personal communication, December 28, 2006).

Another challenge that the division will face is the hiring of a director who understands the purpose of the events and the uniqueness of this division. He or she will have to appreciate Chef Folse's leadership in offering a unique culinary tourism product to locals and visitors alike for exposure and education purposes.

Chef Folse appreciates as much as anyone that "getting to know another culture through travel and subsequently through local food is one of the best educational opportunities available to us, yet one of the most undervalued" (Wolf, Hidden Harvest: 111). He knows that out-of-state or abroad visitors (culinary tourists) long for "simple, regional dishes that have been a part of our culture and history from the beginning" and that "no one creates them better than the people of that region" ([\[www.jfolse.com/mm_questions.htm\]\(http://www.jfolse.com/mm_questions.htm\)\). The gastronomic identity of Louisiana therefore is an attraction that Chef Folse cannot, nor does he, ignore; instead his strategy is to use this identity to the fullest and his vision to take Louisiana culture worldwide makes him a charismatic leader in his organization and a business leader globally.](http://</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Conclusion

Chef John Folse is a leader both within his own organization and within the business community. His charisma in the kitchen and in public draws a following, and allows him to build up a loyal customer and employee base. In Chef John Folse & Company, his charismatic leadership style inspires his employees to pursue a myriad of activities in the name of promoting Louisiana gastronomic identity globally. Since the opening of his first restaurant in 1978, Chef Folse's passion for Louisiana culture, history and food has grown as has his methods of conveying it, but the heart of company still is with his first restaurant: "I'm passionate about all my companies, all my endeavors, but Lafitte's is the heart of my entire operation. It's the firm foundation on which everything else was built. Nothing will ever eclipse the feeling of uncertainty, risk and sheer excitement that I felt in 1978, when there were no guarantees of success" (http://www.jfolse.com/mm_press02.htm).

Chef Folse's entrepreneurial spirit and risk-taking philosophy has paid off as his company now reaches 30 years of operation, and is highly profitable. It represents a successful business model for regional leaders and entrepreneurs who wish to use an area's gastronomic identity for profit. As his company illustrates, a strong knowledge of place (history, environment, culture), an ability to innovate (food products, tourist products), a passion to communicate/educate on a specific cuisine and culture, and a desire to maintain the authenticity of cuisine and culture are all characteristics that must be present in order to effectively market a gastronomic identity to global consumers.

An analysis of Chef John Folse and the company bearing his name offers a glimpse at a charismatic leader who has built a profitable organization using an innovative business model with Louisiana's gastronomic identity as its focus. The newest division of his company, "Louisiana Off the Menu," which promotes Louisiana culture through organized tours, gives locals and tourists alike an opportunity to consume a place and part of Louisiana history. It is a great example of a unique culinary tourism product that attempts to meet the burgeoning demand of a niche market and, once again, showcases Chef Folse's risk-taking philosophy and steadfastness to his vision. What he has created provides context and content for wider reflection where vision, leadership, and sustainability are under consideration.

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