

ANALYZING THE POTENTIAL FOR EPICUREAN TOURISM IN TAMIL NADU

Sikhakolli Sai Lakshmi Mounika Gayatri
MBA, Department of Management Studies
Bharath Institute of Science and Technology,
Selaiyur, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600 073
Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research

ABSTRACT

Epicurean tourism is a sub-segment of culinary tourism and focuses on increasing the pleasure and enjoyment that tourists get from sampling local cuisines. It is fast becoming a niche segment of tourism in countries such as Australia, Ireland, the United States and Canada. However, it is not so well-known or developed in India. This paper explores the potential for Epicurean Tourism in Tamil Nadu. From the literature review, it was identified that epicurean tourism is a function of regional food, location, ambience, culture, history, customer service and collaborations with several stakeholders. An application of these factors to Tamil Nadu tourism sector indicated that the regions with the most potential for culinary tourism includes Chennai, Madurai, Pondicherry, Tirunelveli and Karaikudi. Culinary trails can be established in these regions, where small groups of tourists can be taken on guided tours of the farms, villages, historic monuments, local restaurants and hotels in these areas and introduced to the regional specialties. The foods which foreign tourists can most enjoy are authentic, regional specialties served in the traditional thalis or platters, prepared with aromatic spices and low on hot spices and oil. The locations include those that are closely associated with the region, its culture and history. For example, a Chettinad mansion is the best place to sample a Karaikudithali. The setting in which the food is to be served is to be very clean and hygienic and evoke local culture and traditions. Small departures are to be made from tradition for the sake of the comfort of the tourists. Thus, while most Indians sit on the floor whilst eating meals and eat with their hands, this will prove difficult to unaccustomed tourists and hence the recommendation is to use table, chair and cutlery based settings. This paper found that the pleasure got from food can be heightened if tourists are informed and educated about what they are consuming. The culinary experience can be enhanced if food is served against the backdrop of festivals, special events, music, dance and folk cultural activities. Collaboration between several agencies is however required if Epicurean tourism is to become a reality in Tamil Nadu on the basis of these findings several recommendations have been made.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores how epicurean tourism can be developed in Tamil Nadu. Epicurean tourism is the enjoyment of a different culture and a different lifestyle through cuisine and foods enjoyed in their own cultural context (Murray, 2011). Epicurean tourism is a fast-developing option for those discerning tourists, who seek niche experiences through maximizing the enjoyment and pleasure

got from food. Epicurean tourism differs from culinary tourism in that while the latter focuses on introducing tourists to new foods in various native cultures, epicurean tourism focuses more on the

whole dining experience (Getz and Brown, 2014). It emphasizes that food is not just for nourishing the body but for enjoyment and pleasure as well. Tourists have to take the time to explore the foods they are consuming, understanding where they come from and what makes them special (WTO, 2015). It includes sampling the food in their own cultural context and creating culinary trails in an area where several local dishes may be experienced (Pfleeger, 2011). All of this maximises the pleasure got from food. So far, the concept of epicurean tourism has not been explored in the context of Tamil Nadu. This research proceeds from the premise that the distinct cuisine of Tamil Nadu has great potential to develop epicurean tourism in the state. This is especially so not only because of the great diversity, range and variation in the numerous types of food available throughout the state but also because of the Indian concept of ‘Annam Brahma’ or ‘Food is God’ which implies that the dining experience must also be a spiritually uplifting one (Illamurugan, 2016).

RESEARCH QUESTION

How can epicurean tourism be developed in Tamil Nadu?

II. OBJECTIVES

- To explore various factors impacting epicurean tourism
- To analyse these factors with respect to Tamil Nadu
- To make recommendations on how epicurean tourism may be developed in Tamil Nadu.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Epicurean tourism is a sub-set of culinary tourism. Culinary tourism occurs when tourists visit a region to sample its food. Food then becomes the medium through which the local cuisine as well as the heritage and culture of the region gets showcased (Mason and O'Mahony, 2017). Epicurean tourism on the other hand leverages history, heritage and culture to heighten the pleasure got from the dining experience. It works on the principle that people who engage in culinary tourism wish to maximise the pleasure got from sampling local foods (Richards and Wilson, 2013). There are various ways in which epicurean tourism has been implemented in different areas of the world. Australia has combined food and travel to form ‘Epicurean Ways’ or circular culinary trails around four of Australia’s most famous food and wine regions. Also known as Australian Wine’s ‘Walk of Fame’ the Adelaide Hills, McLaren Vale, Barossa and Clare Valley incorporate many tasting rooms and farm stalls that provide tourists with leisurely and unrushed wine tasting experiences. In Ireland, the ‘Burren Food Trail’ enables a wide range of epicurean food experiences including having afternoon tea in the homes of local people and enjoying gourmet picnics during kayaking trips. Bessiere (2012) states that providing tourists with food that is destination specific, fresh and authentic is critical to creating epicurean tourism experiences. These are ‘taste of the place’ experiences. According to Frochot (2013) it is important to give tourists an immersive culinary

experience. Failte Ireland is a program that enables tourist to interact not just with local cuisine but also with farmers, chefs and restaurateurs (Skift, 2017). In Australia, tourists get to interact with professionals from the tourism sector, chefs, producers of local food and wine. Creating special events and festivals centred around local food is another way of promoting Epicurean tourism. In southern Australia, the wine trails include special farmland feasts, classes on food and wine, picnics hosted by primary food producers and such unique events such as mushroom tasting in limestone caves (Mandala Research, 2015). The Sheridan's Irish Food festival, the Greenbelt Harvest Picnic in Ontario, the San Francisco Street Food Festival and the Southern Living Taste of Charleston Festival are some of the food festivals where tourists get to interact with farmers, see concerts, sample local food from food trucks etc (Skift, 2017). Hall (2014) states that epicurean tourists also like being informed and educated about the food they consume. This includes multiple storylines around food and being spoken to in an authentic and conversational style by the producers of local food. According to Karim (2016) epicurean tourism is a possibility only when tourists are provided with fully integrated travel experiences including partnerships with farmers, tour operators, lodging owners, food tastings, education, entertainments and special events. In Nashville, epicurean tourism centred around beer tastings has been enabled through collaborations between farmers, farmers markets, brewers, distillers and local restaurants. Figure 1 indicates the theoretical model developed using the above findings.

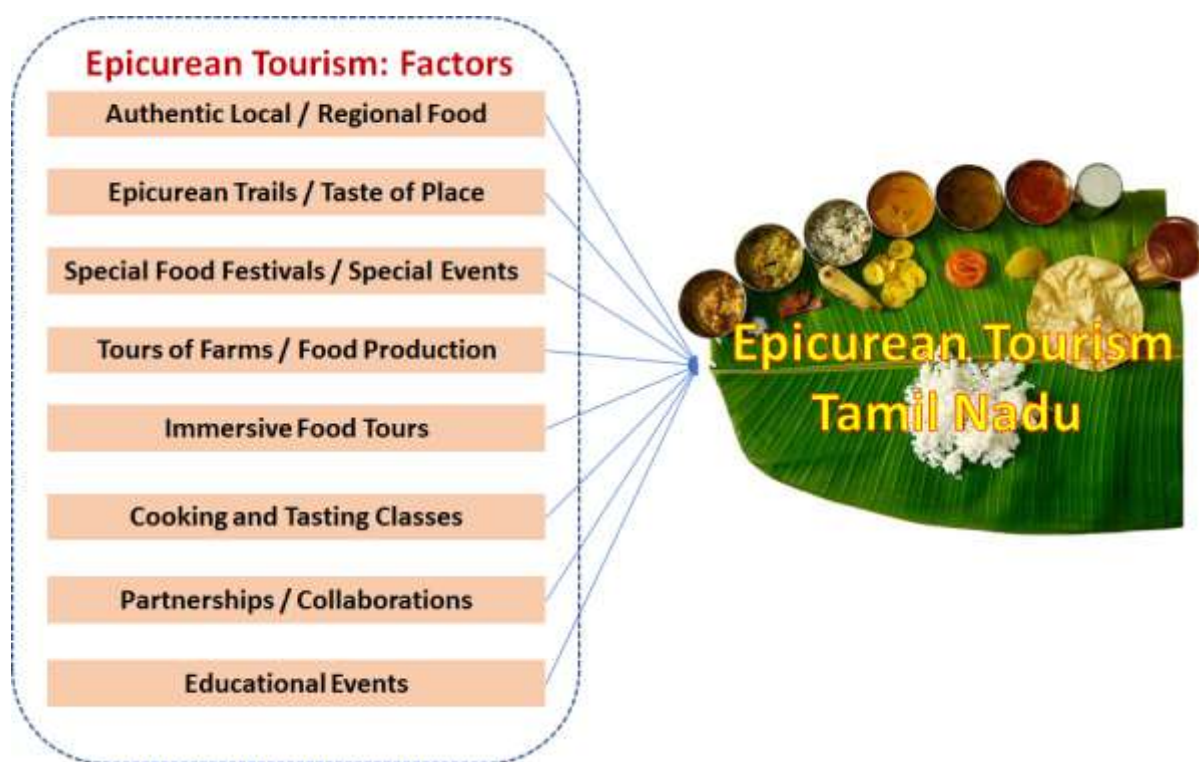


Figure 1 Theoretical Model

3. Methodology

A qualitative approach was followed in this paper using secondary and primary data. The secondary data analysis indicated what factors are included in the concept of epicurean tourism. The primary data was collected through a questionnaire administered by the researcher to fifty

cuisine experts in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry. The analysis of the primary data indicated what opportunities are available for epicurean tourism in Tamil Nadu and how this form of tourism can be further developed in the state.

4. Analysis

Regions -Figure 2 indicates the regions in which respondents feel, epicurean trails can be created in Tamil Nadu.

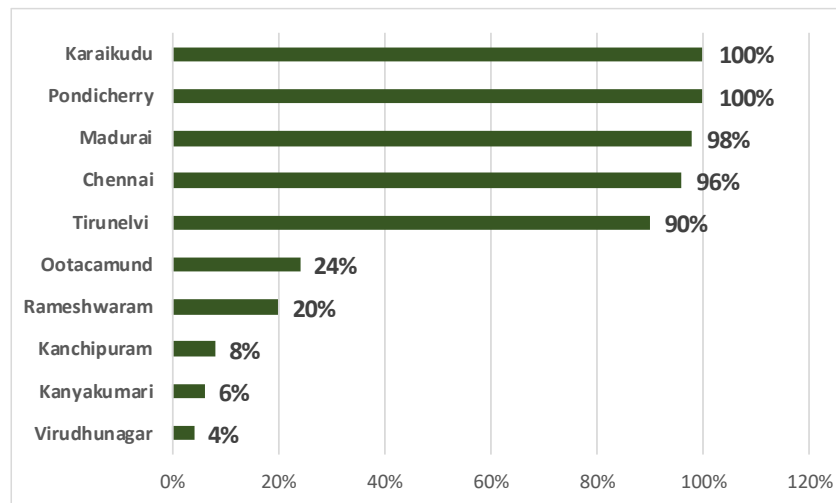


Figure 2. TN Epicurean Trails

From figure 2, it is evident that the regions of Tamil Nadu which hold the greatest potential for epicurean trails are those around Karaikudi, Pondicherry, Madurai, Chennai and Tirunelveli. Most respondents indicated that each of these areas have a distinct cuisine and hence can provide tourists with niche dining experiences. The respondents also indicated that the best way to do an epicurean trail would be to hire mini-buses (rather than car, train or bus) that can take small groups of tourists and their guides around the trail. This would be more convenient and comfortable for the tourists as well.

Dishes -Figure 3 indicates the most popular dishes in Tamil Nadu to which tourists can be introduced to.

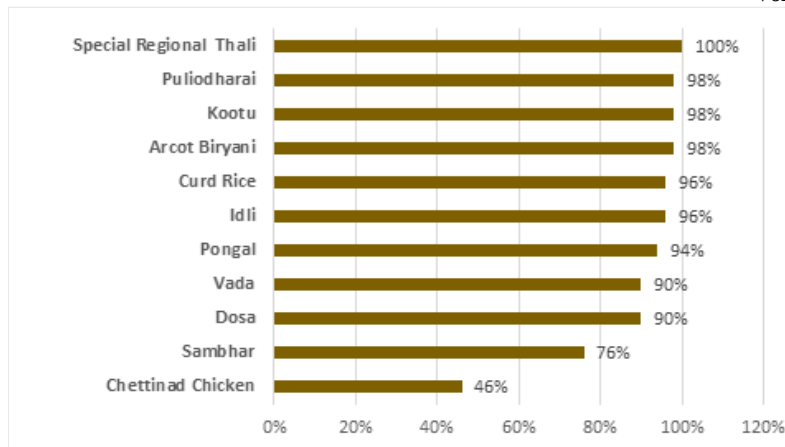


Figure 3. Popular Dishes of Tamil Nadu

From figure 3 it is observed that all respondents prefer tourists to sample special regional thalis or platters that showcase the special dishes of each region. One respondent pointed out that a thali in Karaikudi would be very different to that of Madurai or Chennai because it would comprise such dishes as Chettinad Fish Fry, AatukariKuzambhu, Uppukari and Chicken Chettinad which are specialties of the Chettinad region. Similarly, a Madurai Thali would include specialties such as Chicken Thokku fry, Jigarthanda, Paruthi Pal and KothuParatha. Tirunelveli is famous for its special sweet halwa and should feature prominently in a Tirunelvelithali. The principle here is to serve authentic, regional specialties. Another principle is to create epicurean experiences around dishes that are less spicy to suit Western palates. The focus must be on dishes that include fragrant spices such as cardamom and nutmeg rather than on dishes based on pepper or green chillies. It is for this reason that of the many dishes available in Tamil Nadu, most of the respondents indicated that the less spicy idli, vada, sambhar, curd rice, pongal and the fragrant Arcot biryani and Chettinad chicken would be more popular amongst tourists.

Education –All the respondents agreed that informing the tourists about the food they were partaking would increase their pleasure and happiness in consuming it. Figure 4 indicates what areas tourists could be informed about the food being served them.

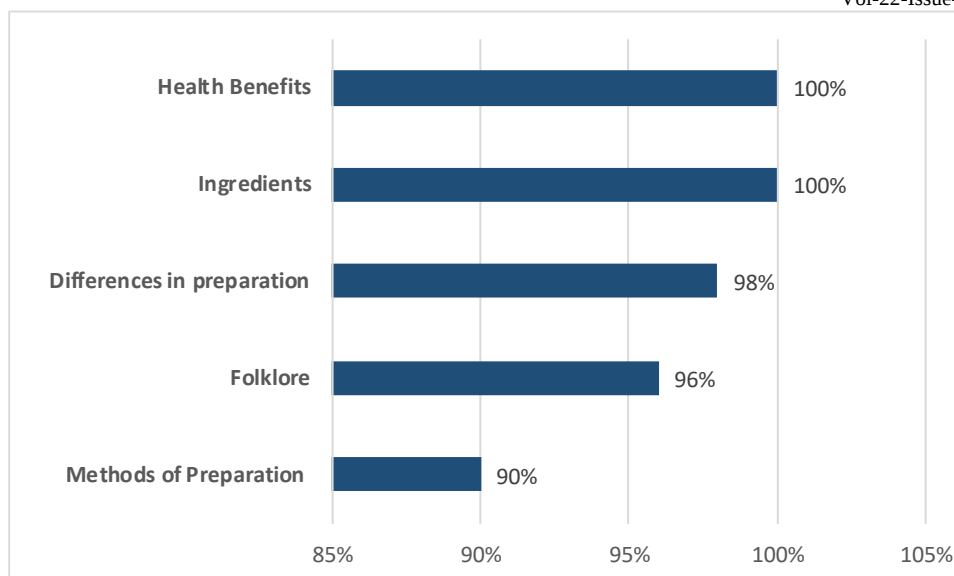


Figure 4 Areas of Education

From figure 4 it is observed that all the respondents feel informing tourists about the health benefits of food would be of great interest to them. Respondents stated that tourists could be informed about curd kept the body cool in the hot climate of Tamil Nadu and how it acts as an antidote to the spicy dishes that comprise Tamil food. Another respondent stated that tourists would be interested to know that tamarind which is regularly used in most Tamil dishes hydrates the body in the arid climate of Tamil Nadu. The therapeutic benefits of spices such as turmeric must be highlighted. Tourists could be informed about the differences in preparation of a basic dish such as ‘idli’ which resulted in so many varieties such as regular, Kanchipuram, Thatte, Malligai Poo, Kambu, Ravaidli etc. Some of the dishes have a history behind them. Several respondents indicated how the ‘Arcot Biryani’ was invented due to the influence of the Nizams of Hyderabad. Dishes such as ‘Pongal’ are harvest festival specialties and tourists can be informed that it comprises of the four staples of rice, dal, milk and sugar. Respondents would be interested to know that biryanis in Tamil Nadu are made of special ‘Seeraga samba’ rice and not the ‘basmati’ rice used in North Indian biryanis. Respondents said how special techniques such as the ‘dum’ style of cooking rice or the method of crushing spices using grinding stones should be highlighted to tourists.

Figure 5 indicated how respondents could be informed / educated about the food they were eating.

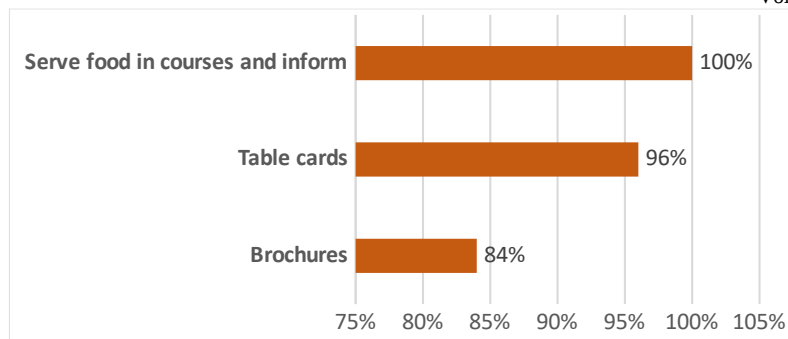


Figure 5 Means of Providing Information

Most of the respondents felt that tourists could be best informed about the various dishes by serving each dish in courses and the host talking to them conversationally about it. Other ways include providing tourists with brochures and keeping printer table cards near each seat for their easy reading.

Location –Figure 6 indicates the location specifications that would enhance the dining experience of the tourists.

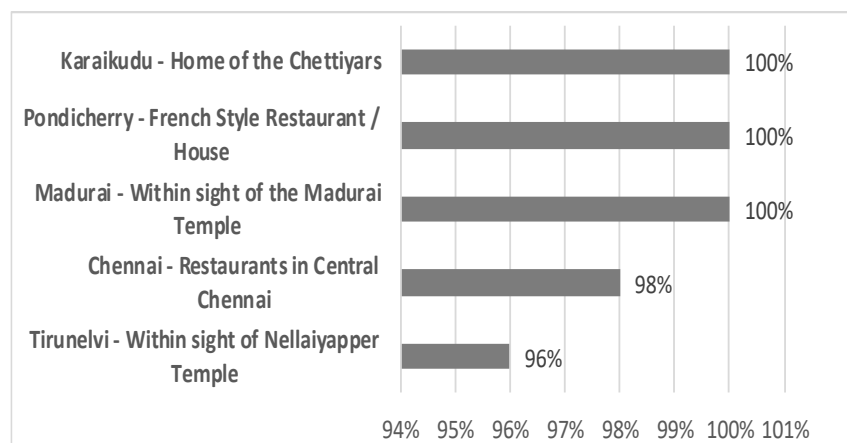


Figure 6 Location

All the respondents agreed that the location where the food was served to guests played a very important role in heightening the dining experience. Figure 6 indicates which location would be preferred in each of the chosen regions. For example, most respondents felt that in the Karaikudi region, the best place to have a meal is in the house of a Chettiyar nobleman. This would give the tourists the chance to sample local architecture, customs, traditions and hospitality as well. In Madurai, having a meal at a place which offers a good view of the Madurai temple would add to the traditional flavour of the food being served. In Pondicherry, having a meal in a French style house or restaurant would provide tourists with an understanding of the French heritage and history of Pondicherry town.

Ambience –Figure 7 indicates respondent’s views on ambience of location where tourists are served their food.

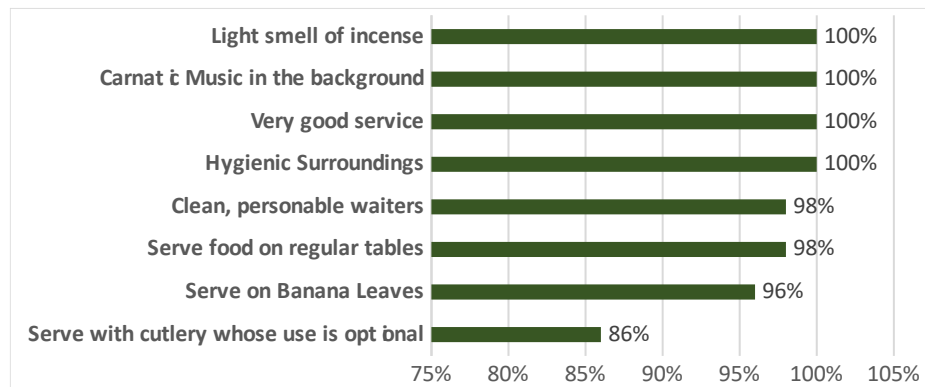


Figure 6 Ambience

Respondents said that while epicurean tourism must provide tourists with authentically local dining experiences, in India this must translate into maintaining Western standards of cleanliness and hygiene. Thus, while the traditional way to eat Indian food is by sitting on the floor, for the greater comfort of tourists, they recommend use of regular tables and chairs. While Indians eat with their hands, the tables must be set with cutlery whether tourists chose to use them or not. Respondents also indicated that all food must be served on clean banana leaves which would lend a traditional element to the ambience. They recommend the use of light incense to dispel any overpowering smell of food and to play soft Carnatic music in the background which would create a truly Tamil Nadu style ambience.

Special Events -Figure 8 indicates how special cultural events can be leveraged to develop epicurean tourism in Tamil Nadu.

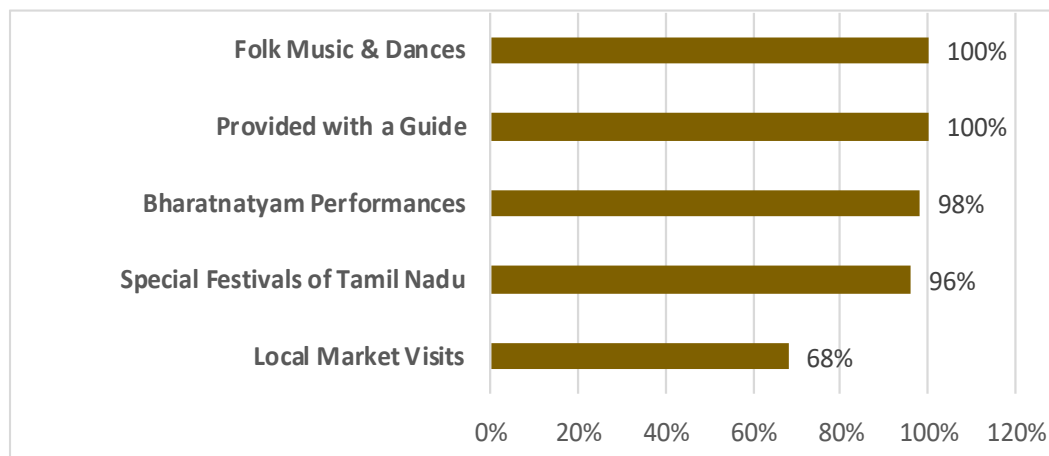


Figure 7 Special Events

Respondents highlighted the many festivals of Tamil Nadu each with its own special set of foods. For example, ‘Sakkarai Pongal’ is the specialty prepared during the harvest festival while

‘Adhirasam’ and a wide range of other sweets and savouries are prepared for Diwali. Special tastings of these items can be organized for tourists who visit India during festival times. Most respondents felt that special performances such as Bharatanatyam and other folk music / dance

programs can be organized just before or after meal times during the culinary trail to heighten the ‘flavour of Tamil Nadu’ to the tourists.

Collaborations –Figure 8 indicates the collaborations and partnerships required to fructify Epicurean tourism in Tamil Nadu.

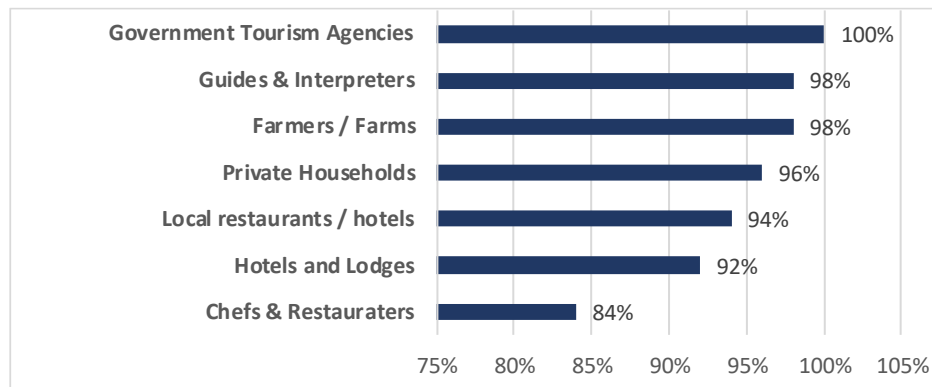


Figure 8. Collaborations & Partnerships

Implementing epicurean tourism in Tamil Nadu will be possible only through joint collaborations and partnerships. There must be a dedicated service provider who will provide the guides, interpreters, vehicles and chart out the itinerary for the tourists. In addition, the service provider must interface with farmers, farm owners, private households, with hotels and lodges and with government tourism agencies to ensure that the tourists have a superlative, seamless epicurean, culinary experience.

Based on the above findings, the conceptual map indicated in figure 9 was formulated.

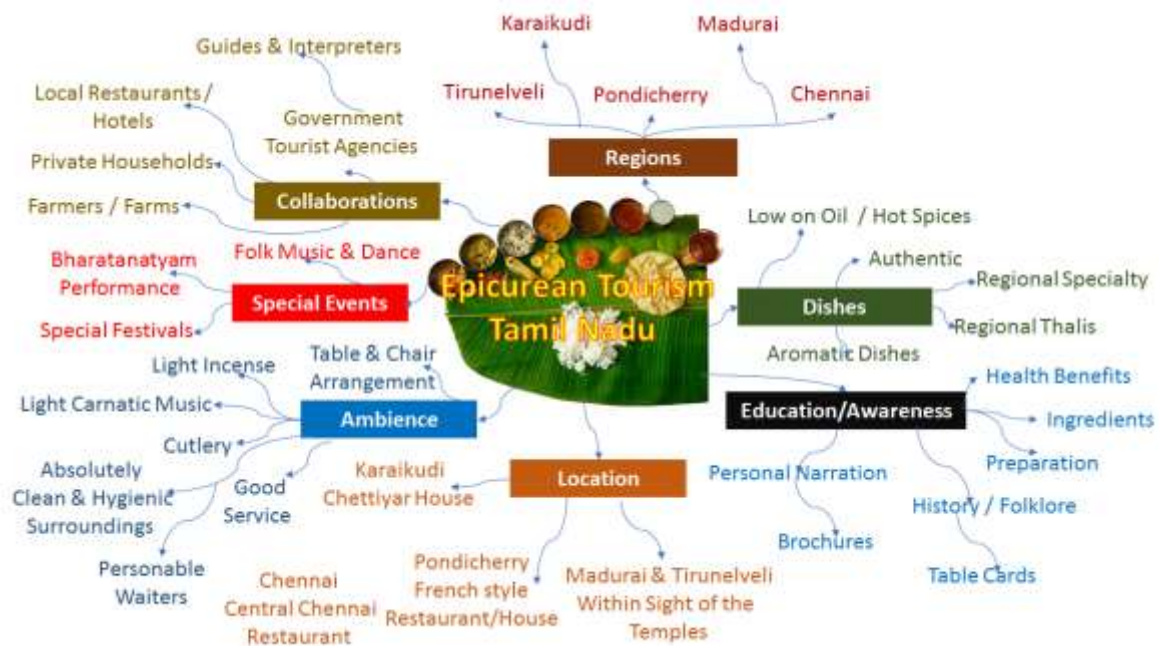


Figure 9. Conceptual Map – Epicurean Tourism in Tamil Nadu

5. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The objective of this paper was to understand how epicurean tourism can be promoted in Tamil Nadu. To develop this fast growing, niche segment of tourism, the following recommendations are made:

- Whilst good food may be found in all parts of Tamil Nadu, this paper has identified Chennai, Karaikudi, Pondicherry, Tirunelveli and Madurai has the greatest potential for epicurean tourism. This is because of the special varieties of food available in these regions.
- It is recommended to create special culinary trails around these regions. These culinary trails will take tourists around a circuit of these regions, to local farms, houses, restaurants, any places of historic interest such as temples and arrange for all the local specialties to be sampled in carefully selected venues.
- The regional speciality items around which epicurean experiences can be developed share common characteristics. They must be authentic, regional specialties not easily available anywhere else, must be low in oil and hot spices and must be aromatic.
- One of the principles of epicurean tourism is that tourists must be informed about the food they are consuming. In Tamil Nadu, most dishes contain special ingredients known for their health / therapeutic benefits, involve special methods/techniques in their preparation, include some folklore/history/religious significance etc all of which can be informed to tourists, enhancing their taste and enjoyment of the food.
- The best way of educating tourists about the food they are eating is to have the host engage with the tourists in conversation and explain about each course as it gets served. For this,

the normal practice of serving all items at one time must be replaced by a course by course introduction of different items.

- The locations in which tourists sample regional specialities must be absolutely clean and hygienic. Tourists must be provided with tables and chairs and with cutlery to increase their comfort levels. Customer service must be impeccable. The use of clean banana leaves instead of plates, light incense to dispel too much smell of food and playing of soft Carnatic music in the background will add the local / regional touch to the surroundings.
- This paper has indicated the various locations in each region best suited for the sampling of food. For example, in Karaikudi, food is best sampled in the mansion of a Chettiyar nobleman whilst in Pondicherry, food is best enjoyed in a French style house or restaurant.
- Special events can be leveraged to heighten the pleasure got from food. These include festivals, dance and music performances, folk art based cultural events all of which form the backdrop around which regional foods can be served and enjoyed.
- Epicurean tourism is a niche segment of tourism that can only be developed and implemented through collaborative processes between multiple stakeholders including the service provider who arranges epicurean trails for tourists, hotels, lodges, restaurants, local households and homes along the trail and government agencies as well.

6. REFERENCES

- [1] Bessiere, J. (2012) Local development and heritage: traditional food and cuisine as tourist attractions in rural areas. *SociologiaRuralis*, Vol.38(1), pp.21-34.
- [2] Frochot, I. (2013) An analysis of regional positioning and its associated food images in French tourism regional brochures. *Wine, food and tourism marketing*. New York: Haworth Hospitality Press
- [3] Getz, D., Brown G. (2014) Critical success factors for wine tourism regions: a demand analysis. *Tourism Management*, Vol.27, pp.146-158.
- [4] Hall, C.H. (2014) *Wine, food and tourism marketing*. New York, Haworth Hospitality Press.
- [5] Illamurugan, I. (2016) Tamil Nadu Tourism. Available at <<http://tamilnadu-favtourism.blogspot.in/2016/05/yercaud-lake-emerald-lake-yercaud>> Accessed on 18th November 2017.
- [6] Karim, S. A. (2016) Culinary tourism as a destination attraction: an empirical examination of the destination's food image and information sources. Oklahoma State University.
- [7] Mason, R., O'Mahony, B. (2017) On the Trail of Food and Wine : The tourist search for meaningful experience. *Annals of Leisure Research*, Vol.10 (3), pp. 498-517.

- [8] Mandala Research (2015) The American Culinary Traveller Study. Available at <http://mandalaresearch.com/index.php/purchase-reports/view_document/75-the-american-culinary-traveler-study> Accessed on 18th November 2017.
- [9] Murray, I., (2011) Culinary Tourism: Segment or Figment. University of Guelph.
- [10] Pfleeger, S.L. (2011) Principles of Survey Research. Software Engineering Notes, Vol.26 (6), pp. 16-18.
- [11] Richards, G., Wilson, J. (2013) Today's youth travellers: tomorrow's global nomads. Amsterdam, International student travel confederation (ISTC).
- [12] Skift (2017) The rise of food tourism. Canada, The Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance.
- [13] WTO (2015) Youth Travel matters. Understanding the global phenomenon of youth travel. Madrid, WTO