

Article

Planning and Promoting an Authentic Slow Food Tourism Corridor in a Suburban Town in the US

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Abstract: Interest in slow tourism is surging as consumers seek immersive experiences and self-enrichment. Only a handful of studies have examined this phenomenon minutely from an authenticity standpoint. To fill this vacuum, by employing a case study technique, this study examines the manner in which authenticity is promoted and showcased in a broad range of iconic food venues in the suburban town of Gilbert (Arizona, USA). Content analysis of the signature websites of fourteen iconic food venues is conducted in addition to an online survey of the venue managers. Based on the results, this study presents a roadmap for developing and promoting a slow food tourism corridor for Gilbert.

Keywords: authenticity; theoplacity; suburban town; slow food tourism; heritage; sustainable development; sustainable promotion

1. Introduction

The authenticity of slow tourism is an emerging area of inquiry. Recent studies postulate that slow tourism is one mode through which authenticity can be savored and experienced [1]. This observation can be traced to the desire to lead a “slow life” which refers to a harmonious life aligned with the natural environment and a desire to seek traditional, local, ethical, organic, and authentic products and experiences (e.g., [2,3]). Several connotations of authenticity permeate the documented literature. Drawing from antecedent perspectives, authenticity can be delineated into five notions: essentialist/object (endorsed by legitimate agencies and sources such as historical records; genuine and true to the original), constructivist (commodified for profit), existentialist (optimal and exhilarating), and negotiated [4–8]. Departing from the introspective and philosophical stances, Wang [8] defines authenticity as based on tourist experiences and toured objects/places. He makes a clear distinction between object (the purest version of authenticity) and existential authenticity. Existential authenticity refers to a state of being that can be achieved through leisure/recreation or tourism activities [8]. This school of thought pivots on the personal experiences of tourists. In contrast, aligned with the objective stance, Jones uses terms such as “truthful and genuine” and associates them with “notions date, form, authorship, primary context, and use” [9] (p. 133).

The postmodern view of perceived authenticity postulates that tourists not only evaluate authenticity from an intellectual space but they also relate to how it feels through the lens of emotional experiences [1,5,10]. This stance echoes the “theoplacity” undertone of authenticity which is molded by an interactive discourse between the visited place and the self, drawing on object authenticity as a reference point [11]. In other words, it confers social and cultural connotations to physical objects and settings and bridges the culturally tangible and subjective worlds [12,13].

Chung et al. [1] underline the significance of authenticity and “slow” pace for visitors who relish slow food. An authentic slow experience has the potential to lure repeat



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visits [14,15]. According to Meng and Choi, slow tourism is a responsible type of tourism, where the tourists leisurely spend their time during their journey to immerse themselves and “to engage with people and places” [16] (p. 397). It has also been contended that people’s desire to “slow down” may be a subsequent reflection of their psychological resistance to modern times as they seek opportunities for stress relief and slow their pace ultimately to rebuild and enrich themselves [17,18]. Meng and Choi claim that “by traveling slow, authentic experiences usually result in the sustainable development” of local food resources [16] (p. 398). Clearly, food is a symbolic countenance of a particular community. According to Corvo and Matacena, “slow tourism holds more promise and fits in accordance with the broader principles of slowness, meaning the just time to tune in to the rhythm of community life, synchronizing one’s own biorhythm to the one of nature and of the activities that take place in it” [19] (p. 107). The intersection between the slow food concept and existentialist authenticity lends credence to the theoplacity notion (that is, experiencing existentialist authenticity in an objectively authentic setting) [1,20]. Self-enrichment forms the core tenets of the existentialist theory of authenticity [8] and such self-fulfilling experiences can be augmented in genuine, educational, and enlightening settings, thereby offering theoplacity type of experiences. It is, therefore, important to investigate how authenticity and its various dimensions are manifested in slow food environments and how the food venue managers engage with them. Furthermore, perceived authenticity of food significantly influences visitors’ intentions to pursue slow tourism [16]. Shang et al. [20] also report that authenticity perceptions of local food influence place attachment and repeat visit behavior in a profound manner. This view is also reiterated by Chung et al. [1]. Because authenticity perceptions and experiences of slow food offerings can increase patronage and inculcate sustainable behavior, this line of inquiry (from the supplier standpoint) can offer useful insights. Very few studies to date have examined authenticity perceptions from the supply side.

Using a case study approach, this study scrutinizes the manner in which authenticity is perceived and promoted by the managers/owners of a variety of food venues (used as a term with broad connotations in this study) which include restaurants, a coffee shop, a farm, and a farmers market in a suburban town in the United States. Multiple dimensions of authenticity are inspected from objective authenticity, constructivist, existentialist, and theoplacity standpoints. To date, only a handful of researchers have paid attention to the important association between slow food tourism and authenticity [1,21–23]. To address this gap, this study examines the manner in which authenticity is used to promote food heritage experience and suggests innovative ways (such as developing a slow food corridor connecting all iconic venues) to leverage its potential to enhance slow food tourism.

2. Literature Review

Although the postmodern era critiques the notion of absolute authenticity, several scholars continue to lend credence to its objective perspective based on measurable attributes. For instance, in their study of Viking group leaders to determine their authenticity stance, Halewood and Hannam [24] report that faith in archaeological accuracy and substantiated material reinforces support for essentialist authenticity. Along similar lines, Leonard [25] refers to authenticity as historical and context specific in the cultural expressions showcased for tourists. From a tourist perspective, Chhabra, Healy and Sills [26] writes that a primary reason for visiting the Scottish Highland Games is to seek objectively authentic goods. In their study, Chhabra et al. note that the tourists aspired for handicrafts that were “original, handmade and depicted high quality workmanship, met aesthetic guidelines for color and design, depicted historical and cultural bonds, were made by native craftsman with local materials, and/or were available for purchase with descriptions of the craftsperson or written proof of genuineness” [26] (p. 799). The museum-centric view of authenticity refers to the intrinsic attributes of the showcased matter in original forms [6]. According to Leonard [25], museum authenticity is the purest version of authenticity legitimized by historical verification and the accurate manner in which the past

is interpreted and presented through the exhibit. In a similar vein, Jin, Xiao & Shen [22] associate objective authenticity with physical artworks, original objects, primary materials, and traditional craftsmanship. Genuineness and accuracy of tangible objects can relate to activities, artifacts, landscapes etc.

Based on the aforementioned, it can be postulated that objective authenticity is an inherent trait of a cultural/heritage object [6] and can be assessed based on an absolute standard, although, from a postmodern and social constructivist standpoint, it might not be possible “to achieve absolutely objective authenticity in contemporary museum or tourism contexts” [22] (p. 2). The postmodernism school of thought argues that the notion of absolute authenticity is not real [27] and lends support to more of a tradeoff between various notions. It attributes unpredictability and diversity to be the main reasons behind rejection of essentialist and absolute commercialization. Consequently, the objective version of authenticity has been questioned by numerous scholars because “inherent biases can influence what can be known about the past” [28] (p. 292). A sanitized or preferred version of the past is a piece of a society or community or heritage that custodians want to show [4,29]. However, while recognizing the fallacy of showcasing the most pristine version of objective authenticity, several scholars argue that it is useful as a point of reference and can promote the conservation and sustainable use of heritage resources. Chhabra [12] points out that the trail to objective authenticity is muddled and remains in a state of flux because traditions can be contested as they lend themselves to personal interpretation, such as the socio-cultural positionality of the historian, cultural custodian or author. Nevertheless, objective authenticity continues to be used as a reference point for several expressions of heritage tourism such as souvenirs, festivals, and cuisines. For instance, genuineness and historical integrity are regarded as crucial metrics for soaring demand of ethnic souvenirs [12,20].

The authenticity discourse within the context of slow tourism is an emerging field of inquiry. Although several studies have appeared which examine the authenticity of ethnic cuisines, few have examined authenticity in the context of slow food offerings and experiences. Mkono [30] showed that the token-based authentication process extends capabilities to include negotiated authentication strategies aimed at authenticity. Chhabra et al. [31] developed a comprehensive list of frequently used objectively authentic markers related to heritage food consumption and illustrated support for the theoplacity theory of authenticity. As mentioned earlier, the theoplacity theory advocates a blend between the real (objective) object/setting and the desire for an enriched/optimal state of mind (existential).

Few other studies on ethnic restaurants also note that distinct or ‘Othered’ experiences are offered through the use of ethnic menu items, connection to country of origin, ethnic language to describe menu items, gastronomic presentation, and the suggestion of ethnic seating schemes [32–34]. Various dimensions of the food service offered by ethnic themed restaurants are proposed which demonstrate the sincere efforts of the restaurant management to engage visitors with ethnic culture in an authentic (but negotiated) manner [35]. From a broader standpoint, according to Ellis et al. [32], cultural and sensory experiences emerge from food-based activities. Food tourism is about experiencing a destination’s gastronomic resources which can refer to a tangible experience extending to broader activities associated with food, such as visiting food production sites and attending cooking classes or other food-themed events [11,36]. The association between cuisine, identity, and culture is examined by Mak, Lumbers, and Eve [33] who reiterate that food experience involves emblematic consumption; that is, consuming food is about consuming narratives about the culinary culture and heritage of the visited place and these can be culturally symbolic or experiential in nature.

Sidali, Kastenholz, and Bianchi point out that “rural areas with their specific history, traditions, and eco-gastronomic heritage seem suitable for the development of successful food niches” [37] (p. 1180). Tourism can promote the local food heritage by inspiring the local community to uphold its traditional heritage, aptitudes, and lifestyle. Everett [38]

offers a discourse on the transformative and “place-making” impact of food tourism, whereby “production places” can be altered and changed into “consumption spaces” (cited and quoted in Ellis et al. [32] (p. 25)). The “local food” concept is occasionally supported here because it can not only help preserve the regional identity and offer historical and social continuity, but it can also hold the potential to augment the authentic experience of a place [30].

Shang et al. [20] explore the tourism experience of slow tourism in a city located in China. The authors report that the perceived authenticity of tourists can stimulate place attachment and intention to visit in the future. It is postulated that the “three underlying dimensions: objective authenticity, constructivism authenticity, and existential authenticity can be used to design a slow destination against those of the competitors in order to ascertain a suitable market position” [20] (p. 185). According to the study, objective authenticity expressions (manifested in the physical environment/local landscape) serve as a precursor and shape the demand for constructivist and existential authenticity. It is recommended that slow destinations should lend close consideration to the authenticity of the physical environment as they design deep experiences.

Meng and Choi [16] call for strategic marketing messages to enhance tourists’ cognition and perceptions of authenticity. The authors report that authenticity perceptions significantly predict desire and behavioral intention. Knowledge and appropriate information are important because “a tourist’s awareness and understanding of authenticity can prompt him or her to participate in various forms of slow activities” [16] (p. 406). Escalated attentiveness, with the help of educational materials informing of authentic engagement activities, can shape authenticity perceptions [19]. Enjoyable slow tourism characteristics include a feeling of relaxation, immersion in local culture and natural surroundings, and savoring the good quality of traditional/local food. These attributes epitomize demand for existentialist and objective authenticity. Previous studies have reported a significant positive relationship between perceived authenticity and the desire to visit. Perceived authenticity can assist in optimizing satisfactory experiences [1,16,29,31,35]. According to Meng and Choi, augmenting visitors’ “authentic awareness and perceptions” is one key method to stimulate desire to engage in slow food experiences [16] (p. 406). This paper uses an exploratory case study approach to examine the manner in which authenticity is promoted by food venues in a suburban town (Gilbert) in the United States. Food venues refer to a wide range of popular local settings for food consumption, ranging from iconic restaurants to a farm and the farmers market.

Gilbert was selected for two reasons. First, this study was sponsored by the City of Gilbert in collaboration with the Gilbert Office of Economic Development. This implies that the local government and the destination marketing organization recognize the significance of slow food tourism. Second, the rich agricultural history of Gilbert made it an ideal setting for exploration. The town was a farming community and was popularly known as the “Hay Capital of the World” in the early 1900s. It can serve as a role model for other suburban towns in Arizona and in fact, the United States, and the results can be used as a stepping stone for future explorations in similar towns.

3. Method

For less researched areas in specific locations, a case study approach can offer several advantages. For instance, it is a process that facilitates prompt comprehension and recognition at the micro level. It offers an opportunity to present information from a multitude of perspectives. According to Merriam [39], it is a holistic technique that can offer a deeper understanding of the process rather than the results. Another plus point of employing a case study approach is that it is grounded intrinsically from an emic standpoint. It can be operationalized at a complex level using a more nuanced approach and its units can range from an event, encounter, a community or a sustained process [40]. According to Beeton, “combining different interpretations of these contentions, a research case study can be described as a holistic inquiry to gain an in depth understanding of a contemporary

phenomenon in its real life context, sing multiple sources of evidence” [41] (p. 42). The how and why are particularly relevant to this technique as such Qs focus on multifaceted functional connections that cannot be adequately scrutinized with the help of other research archetypes such as a survey [42].

In this paper, the scope is determined by the manner in which the iconic eateries are deeply embedded in the town of Gilbert from a historic and authenticity standpoint. Examining the eateries enables a deeper view of their potential to offer authentic experiences and collectively contribute to a slow tourism corridor. The key purpose was to identify recurring themes, such as those related to enjoyment, social and optimal/contemplative state of mind opportunities, décor, showcased displays, gastronomy, menu/ingredients, use of traditional terminology, ingredients from the place of origin (in the case of ethnic restaurants), and connection with local heritage/history (drawn from Robinson & Clifford [11,31,35,36] for the restaurant, the farm, and the farmers market and to match them with the key authenticity dimensions. Simultaneously, an effort was made to detect new themes. With regard to the sampling design, the data are anchored in a purposeful sample of fourteen food venues, identified by the Gilbert Department of Economic Development (GDED). The selected food venues are iconic food settings popularly applauded for their local or ethnic produce and authentic heritage (GDED 2021). The GDED selected these eateries based on their localness (for instance, using local ingredients/produce and/or located in historic areas of the town), history, and rich agricultural past. Because the focus of this study is on authentic slow tourism experiences, only those restaurants which met these criteria were included. The selected food venues comprise eleven iconic restaurants (often referred as eateries), one coffee shop, one farm, and one farmers market (Gilbert Department of Economic Development, Personal Communication, February 2021):

Barrio Queen is home to regional authentic Mexican cuisine; *LoLo's Chicken and Waffles* is recognized for its signature family recipes, chicken, and waffles; *Romeo's Euro Café* is celebrated for its Mediterranean style menu; *Sherpa Kitchen* provides a rich array of homemade specialty sauces and is known for its trademark MoMos; *Uprooted Kitchen* is a famous plant-based eatery; *Arizona Wilderness Brewing* is known for its hand crafted, artisanal beers and food; *Garage East* is recognized for its exclusive/rare Arizona wines; *Joe's Farm Grill* boasts of its ingredients and locally sourced food; *Joe's Real BBQ* is celebrated for its BBQ and appetizing meats smoked for a long time, using Arizona pecan wood; *Liberty Market* is branded for its food quality aimed at the nourishment of the body and the soul; *Not You, Typical Deli* is well known for its full service cafeteria and bakery; *Coffee Shop* is iconic because it promotes novel mythical coffee with a local flavor. Agritopia is focused on preserving suburban agriculture and features as an enjoyable and relaxing social networking space for the local community. It features farm tours and is home to a solitary community garden, a farm store, an online farm shop, and four onsite restaurants. The *Gilbert Farmers Market* is situated in Downtown Gilbert near the historic Water Tower. It aims to boost local sustainability, healthful food, and green practices. Additionally, its purpose is to educate the public about local food by generating social opportunities to interact with the farmers and other vendors and learn about the manner in which the food is sourced, grown, and produced (The Gilbert Farmers Market 2021).

The data are collected in three stages. As stated earlier, a case study approach calls for an enriching technique that can combine methods in a manner in which they complement each other and enhance the validity of the assembled data, thereby offering stronger evidence and validation of the results [43,44]. This study collects empirical data using three techniques: content analysis of signature websites, online surveys, and participation observation. Like other empirical studies focused on the 'how' forms of inquiry, content analysis of qualitative data was conducted to identify recurring themes [30,40,45,46] and to obtain insights on how authenticity was perceived and showcased at the iconic food venues. Descriptive analysis was conducted for the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.

The participants are managers/owners of twelve iconic restaurants including a coffee shop, a farm, and the Gilbert Farmers Market. This list was shared by the GDED. A total of fourteen participants were the focus of this study. A representative from the GDED introduced the first author, via email, and requested the cooperation of all the respondents. First, a phone call was made by the first author to explain the purpose of the study. This was followed by an email to inform the participants about the voluntary nature of the study and the right to consent. A Qualtrics link to the online questionnaire was included. Only eleven participants responded and the response rate was approximately 79%.

The first phase focused on content analysis of the signature websites. The purpose was to identify recurring themes such as those related to enjoyment, social and optimal/contemplative state of mind opportunities, décor, showcased displays, gastronomy, menu/ingredients, use of traditional terminology, ingredients from the place of origin (in case of ethnic restaurants), and connection with local heritage/history (acquired from Robinson & Clifford [11,31,35,36] for the restaurant, the farm, and the farmers market and to match them with the key authenticity dimensions. Simultaneously, an effort was made to detect new themes. The content was coded, both manually and with the help of ATLAS.ti software. Word clouds were generated for authenticity. As postulated by Wang, Zhao, Guo, North, and Ramakrishnan [34], the key purpose of using a word cloud is to envision word frequencies to visually encapsulate a sizeable amount of text. The word clouds generate visual representations of the frequent word inquiries; the information can be sorted using a variety of factors such as font weight, color, and size. In this study, the font size is employed as a differentiating factor. The bigger font represents the most frequent word and as the size decreases, frequency decreases. Intercoder reliability was tested with the help of a second researcher who assisted in manually identifying themes from the content. These themes were tallied with the ones identified by the first researcher. This approach helped confirm the robustness of the word clouds. Intercoder reliability was found to be above 90%. The manually drawn themes corresponded with those of the software (ATLAS.ti 8).

An online survey was designed for the second phase of the study. Qualtrics (an electronic survey platform) was used to administer the survey. The questionnaire had multiple sections. One section elicited information on demographics (such as gender, age, educational level, position in the organization, etc.). A couple of sections elicited information on the authenticity of the restaurant, decor, history of the neighborhood, menu items, profile and place of origin of the chefs, and uniqueness and branding of the food venues. With regard to socio-demographic characteristics, approximately 87% of the respondents were male and middle aged (67%), that is, between 41 and 60 years of age. With regard to education, approximately 47% hold a Masters' degree while 20% are college graduates and approximately 27% have a college/technical school degree. More than 50% (61%) of the respondents are the sole owners of the food venue. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that almost 80% are college graduates. Furthermore, several studies have indicated that people with higher education levels are more receptive towards sustainable entrepreneurial initiatives [47]. It is interesting to note that only 40% of the respondents reside in Gilbert. On average, they have worked at the venue for approximately eleven years.

In the third phase, the participation observation technique was used. This naturalistic technique allows a researcher to gather a realistic view of a physical setting or a community by observing and taking notes. It is a kind of non-participant observation as it involves observing a setting or a community or a group of persons without participating in an active manner. This method can assist in understanding a phenomenon by arriving inside a community or at a setting of interest, while being distanced from them during observation. The first author visited several food venues and observed their décor and setting based on different dimensions of authenticity, while keeping object authenticity as a reference point. Another objective was to compare the manner in which the food venues are authentically marketed on the websites with the way they showcase authenticity on their premises. Due to the restrictions posed by the pandemic and time constraints, all food venues could not

be observed in person, although it was possible to examine their situatedness in the context of other venues, the key attractions, and Downtown Gilbert. Observing the venues and their location in person helped to realistically map the corridor route. A self-reflexive approach while taking notes was employed to minimize bias. This technique promotes a receptive and open-minded disposition, a keen interest to observe and know other people and settings, and close observation while being open to unanticipated information [44].

4. Findings

First, the results from the websites are presented. This is followed by the presentation of online survey results. Last, the key messages from website analysis and online surveys are compared and inferences are drawn. Based on content analysis of the signature websites of the selected food venues, we observe that the words ‘food’, ‘local’, and ‘Arizona’ appear to be used most frequently, thereby signaling a strong emphasis on localness and food. This implies that the food venues offer “iconic” offerings that capture the local attributes of their venue. The venues appear to attract markets which desire an objective or socially constructed showcasing of authenticity. They offer food experience in the backdrop of the local landscape, culture and heritage. As postulated by Bagnall [48], the backdrop settings can serve as a reassuring tool and facilitate an enriching genuine/truthful, negotiated or theoplicity type of authentic experiences.

The second most frequent term noted in the word cloud is ‘homemade’ followed by ‘fresh.’ These terms show efforts to showcase distinct “quality-based” attributes of food items. Coupled with the frequent mention of ‘organic’ and ‘unique’ terms, it is clear that the overarching focus of the food venues is to promote local and familial heritage and identity. The frequency of the word ‘traditional’ can also be viewed as a promotional strategy to attract an audience seeking authentic food and cultural experiences. The management is aware of the continuous market demand for “traditional cultural eatertainment”, that is, entertaining the eaters [49]. They continue to offer a myriad of “cultural Products” [46]. Furthermore, the use of words such as ‘Italian’, ‘Nepali’, ‘Mexican’, ‘American’, ‘Austrian’, ‘Indian’, and ‘Northern’ illustrate objective authenticity connotations as the purpose of using them is to generate nostalgic memories of a place or a country, particularly for the diaspora markets and other markets seeking to immerse in “exotic”, “othered” settings [1,31,35]. Gilbert has several iconic ethnic restaurants and food experiences that they promise on the signature websites, illustrating “the potential to intimately engage and submerge consumers into various cultural, spiritual, and spatial and temporal places” [36] (p. 323). Ethnic restaurants serve as conduits of cultural expressions and serve as the first touch point with the “Other” culture for visitors [36,50].

4.1. Online Surveys

Next, several questions were asked through online surveys to elicit insights on authenticity perceptions of food offerings. The comments associated with the local food culture promoted by the venues are presented on the next page. Noticeably, akin to the online content, the word “local” appears in the answers of approximately 58% of the respondents. Overall, four themes are identified: local, place-based culture, slow food, and ingredients. These themes describe the food culture of the restaurants, the farm, and the farmers market, although the latter differs in the manner in which embraces and promotes these themes. Examples for each of the gleaned themes are presented in Table 1. Several dimensions of authenticity are supported. Extant literature recognizes that authenticity of food experiences relies on local and/or ethnic ingredients; in fact, objective and negotiated authenticity of localized offerings are noted to be the important reference points for stimulating cultural capital [30,36,51].

Table 1. Culture of the Food Venues.

Theme	Example (in Direct Quotes)
Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “source locally”; • “local ingredients”; • “local farmers market”; • “local markets”;
Place-based culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Southern”; • “Nepali”; • “Gilbert”;
Ingredients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Organic”; • “Seasonal”;
Slow food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Make items from scratch ourselves as often as we can”.

With regard to the question eliciting information on the décor of the food venues, Table 2 outlines the key themes. Different décor items are employed to celebrate the history and heritage of Gilbert. The focus is elaborately on “provenance” which points to the significance of ingredients in terms of their local source and uniqueness [11,36] in culinary heritage offerings. This dimension supports the objectivist dimension of authenticity.

Table 2. Décor themes.

Theme	Examples (in Direct Quotes)
American Heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “mix of Arizona and Gilbert-centric décor”; • “mimics our vintage food truck which was a 1968 Avion Travel Trailer”; • “a lot of converted historical buildings on site”; • “Family, Agriculture, Freshness, a sense of Home”; • “There are photos and video presentation of us farming in the 60’s & 70’s”;
International	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Our food truck Everest MoMo is wrapped with scenery from Mt. Everest”;
Tangible attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “1948 John Deere tractor”; • “A 70-foot mural”; • “wall murals by local artists”; • “flooring, rafters, brick, signage and shopping carts as well as pictures of the original building”; • “Mid-century modern farmhouse”; • “items of decor that are scavenged from the Arizona wilderness”; • “a mural on one large wall showcasing Gilbert”.

As illustrated in Table 2, the themes reveal slant towards showcasing of objective authenticity. Additionally, respondents perceive tangible cultural resources to be important and relevant to their location. For example, one food venue owner celebrates the traditional attributes of Gilbert with decorations that pay homage to the traditional architectural style of the previous century by using old tractors, murals, flooring, rafters, brick, signage, and shopping carts. Another example can be noted in a converted farmhouse with farm-kitchen style furnishings. One restaurant proudly showcases paintings of the original building, while simultaneously communicating a sense of place. Almost all venues use tangible attributes to demonstrate the authenticity of their venue.

With regard to the description of the food/cuisine served at the food venues, Table 3 presents recurring themes associated with the served food. They appear to promote homemade and organic food items from their menu with a sense of pride. The serving style is described in a plethora of ways such as geographical outreach, beverage, food items, sense of taste, and personal touch/health.

Table 3. Type of Food/Cuisine.

Theme	Examples
Geographical outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Southern Comfort Cuisine. Soul Food”; • “from Nepali cuisine”; • “Everything from American to European, Mexican, Italian, French, and Asian”;
Beverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “espresso bar, beer, wine and cocktails”; • “local ingredients”; • “Coffee & Baked goods”;
Food items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Scrambles, pancakes, sandwiches, wood fired pizzas, burgers, steak, seafood and chicken dishes, house made desserts”; • “Snack boards, Hand Pies, Salads, Local Bread, Olives, Desserts”;
Sense of taste	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “flavorful”; • “elevated flavors”; • “global flavors”;
Personal touch/health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “healthful, nourishing”.

The food venues also illustrate efforts to highlight a sense of taste and higher quality items. The websites share information on how their menus are shaped by popular demand for ethnic food and veggie diets. Healthy and nourishing ingredients are listed to communicate a focus on nutrition and healthy meals. With regard to the question eliciting insights on how the owners serve and present food/dishes in a traditional or cultural manner, most respondents do not view the association of food with culture and traditions as important, rather their attention is more towards gastronomy. One respondent states *“BBQ traditions go back many years, to the days when people prepared their smoked meats in a “low and slow” fashion that we ascribe to today”*.

Another question asked if the owners occasionally change their menu and ingredients to offer novelty and/or cater to consumer demand. Themes gleaned from their answers are illustrated in Table 4. Noticeably, according to the farmers market: *“We have some rotating vendors in order to keep the market fresh”*. This implies creative efforts to offer variety and novelty to the repeat visitors market while recognizing the phenomena of agro-ecology (the typology and climate of the land) by celebrating seasonality aspects of the agricultural produce [19].

Table 4. Menu Items.

Theme	Examples
Cyclical menu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “do an menu redesign every 2–3 yrs”; • “constantly rotating seasonal menu”; • “Weekend specials and monthly changes to being new and unique items”; • “least annually to remove low performing items”;
Ingredients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “keep seasonal menu”; • “locally grown ingredients”; • “our ingredients are best”; • “full homemade”; • “seasonal ingredients”; • “seasonal vegetables”;
Customer feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “for feedback from our customers”.

As the table shows, the choice of local ingredients contributes to stimulating a sense of place. A farm restaurant, for example, offers dishes based on fresh ingredients. That said, in most cases, the menu is shaped by what is produced locally. Some hesitancy and

a lack of confidence is noted with regard to the efficient supply of local ingredients and food items. Depending on how ‘local’ is defined, there might simply not be an abundance of a particular product locally grown to meet the restaurant’s demand. In addition to celebrating the ‘localness’ of food items with a sense of pride, organic food predominantly features in the menus.

Local produce facilitates a sense of place. The sense of localness and connection with place would not be relevant without taking seasonality into consideration. Customers need to be informed of the dynamic behind the selection of menu items and their seasonal rotation. In the words of one respondent: *“We have a constantly rotating seasonal menu”*. This disposition and strategy, once again, showcases sensitivity and commitment to foster deep connections with the local landscape, typology, and climate [19].

Moving forward, the owners were also asked to offer insights into the efforts to retain the authenticity of their food venue in contemporary times. As Table 5 shows, five key authenticity-based themes emerged. In addition to connecting the customer to the place where the ingredients are produced, authentic showcasing at the restaurants also creatively connects the location and the history of the food venues. By promoting the history of the town and narrating it creatively through food items, the owners are embracing both objective and negotiated stances of authenticity [30,35,36,46]. Heldke [52] reports three aspects of authenticity in food: different or novel (mirroring the constructivist perspective); replicable (prepared by the cook as if it is somewhere else or sometime else, mirroring the negotiated perspective); native (emphasizing the objective notion of authenticity). For the most part, the latter aspects of authenticity are reiterated by this study.

Table 5. Authenticity Attributes.

Themes	Example
Ancestors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “passed down in my family from generation to generation”;
Flavors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “the flavors rather than ingredients”; • “compromise on the flavors”;
Ethical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “true to the recipes”; • “upgrades in ingredients and techniques”;
Timeless	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “a timeless authenticity rare to find these days”; • “This was and always be timeless”;
Local source	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “source locally when possible”; • “real food with real ingredients”; • “to shop local”.

Quality of food is the main focus in addition to ensuring an authentic dining experience. Although a lot of attention goes into the details on how the food is served such as the kind of plates and the manner in which food is organized on the plate, the key focus of the food venues is on the ingredients and the recipes, such as (in the words of some respondents): *“Ethically sourced ingredients; high value on humanity and; always pushing towards compassionate service”*. The connection between quality food and authenticity is based on the assumption that authentic local food will be relished by the customers who are seeking traditional food flavors and experiences. The dishes are homemade with different flavors and from locally sourced products. Another question elicited views on the main strengths of the food venues from an authentic food standpoint (see Table 6). The frequent messages conveyed are associated with timelessness (history), local (from the place of origin in the case of ethnic restaurants) ingredients, health, and nutrition.

Table 6. Strengths of the food venue.

Strength Points	Example
Ingredients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authentic ingredients; • The same flavors; • The most authentic food types; • Real food with real ingredients; • Our world class beer and food;
Health and nourishing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good for your overall being; • Food on which you are able to live and sustain; • More than caring; • Made with the intent of nourishing and energizing people to enhance their daily lives;
Timeless	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A good speed of service; • This food is and always will be timeless.

With regard to the use of the terms ‘scratch’ and ‘transparency’, the respondents use words such as: *“scratch kitchen; everything from scratch; you can see the vegetables growing in the field and immediately purchase them”*. Cooking from scratch means the food venues cook their own meals and incorporate whole, fresh ingredients, rather than pre-assembled or processed meals and meal components. The results of the responses suggest that they leverage flavor, taste, and local ingredients as evidence of authentic food offerings. Their answers draw attention towards the source and the manner in which ingredients are obtained. For instance, highlighting specific farms and growing methods (such as organic) helps to promote messages associated with healthy food choices. It also became clear from the answers that the respondents accord importance to nourishment and healthy ingredients. These initiatives hold the potential to support community building and wellbeing efforts as they encourage people to embrace healthy eating habits [16,19,23].

In one question, the respondents were requested to offer a narrative of the original history of their venue and explain the manner in which the history or heritage is used to shape the promotional materials and guide the type of heritage experience offered to the customers. Table 7 captures the essence of the responses received. Historical connections are frequently used to offer a sense of connection to the place. Furthermore, international connections or origin and natural or nature-related demonstrations also shape the promotional content to enrich the heritage experience of the customers. For some venues, it also appears that the traditional or familial connections, conveyed through the name of the venue, portray a sense of authenticity [1,11,36].

The farmers market is somewhat distinct and unique from other food venues. The manager of the farmers market feels that their place has the potential to be a hub of the Gilbert community and promotes a deep sense of connection/belonging with the land and the local produce. Furthermore, several studies have claimed that the birthplace and nationality of the chef has an impact on the manner in which ethnic or cultural aspects of food are prepared and presented [17,18,32]. Therefore, the next question was designed to find out if the owners/chefs are originally from Arizona or if they are transporting cultural norms from another state or country. Insights into the production process are also important and according to Robinson and Clifford [11], the production process refers to the authenticity of the cook and the authenticity of the food preparation process. The integrity of the chef is also an authentic part of the food preparation process [29].

Table 7. Importance of name and history of the food venue.

Items	Example
Original name	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “nickname”; • “Joe Johnston’s eponymous restaurant”; • “It comes from my name”;
International influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “with the country, Nepal”; • “is Spanish”; • “a French word”;
Historical connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “original name in the 1930’s”; • “many pieces of that history into our everyday culture”; • “accessible and to retell stories about humanity”; • “historical aspect of the place passively and actively”; • “the neighborhood”;
Nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Wilderness”; • “initially a mobile eatery”; • “plant-based”; • “conserving that wilderness”;
Iconic connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “original way”; • “we work hard to “keep it real”; • “the best”; • “signify the resilience”; • “bring out the stories that are innate”; • “used myths from”.

As Table 8 shows, the restaurant chefs have both multicultural and local roots. They were born and raised in countries such as Mexico, Nepal, and Chile. It is also not a surprise that their experience is shaped by their Arizonian lifestyle, the knowledge gathered from educational institutions, and childhood memories from their place of birth. It is also evident that the chefs continue to evolve and adapt their working styles to the changing environment and customer demand. Some of them bring experience from other cultures. Furthermore, what is noticeable is that they are devoted to their work and prepare and present dishes with a sense of fondness and ardor. As Table 9 shows, the chefs carry many years of experience with them and hold both cultural and nutritional values that are geared towards healthy and nourishing cuisines. These dispositions support the notions of both constructivist and negotiated authenticity.

Table 8. Background of the Chefs.

Theme	Examples
Roots	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “his roots go all the way back to”; • “is born and brought up in Nepal”; • “have deep roots in Gilbert and Arizona”; • “Chef is from Mexico”; • “a Gilbert native”; • “originally from Arizona”; • “I was raised outside of the United States (Chile/Kazakhstan/Uzbekistan)”; • “Arizona”;
Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Nepali and Indian Influence”; • “was greatly influenced by my childhood there”; • “incorporate influences from other areas”; • “from AZ, Midwest and Mexico the influence of each”; • “lived in AZ for more than 20 years now”.

Table 9. Chef’s experience.

Theme	Examples
Place of word	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brought up in Nepal; • Makes classic “American” dishes;
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wants to create the highest quality; • Has experience in kitchens for the past 30 years; • Completed a Culinary Arts degree more than 20 years ago;
Personal interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a love for food; • Values working hard and seeing that work turn into nourishment; • Their first passion.

The Gilbert Farmers Market response was, as expected, different. According to its management, it portrays a sense of sincerity and commitment to nourish the local residents and the visitors. With regard to competitors and symbolic markers that give leverage to the selected food venues, it is noted that approximately 10% of respondents feel that they have no competitors in the market because they provide unique food that cannot be replicated or substituted. In the words of one respondent: *“Locally, we do not have much competition. We do not believe there are products that can match our quality”*. Other respondents acknowledge competition from the market but emphasize that their quality, setting, location, and distinct way of cooking and presenting food makes them distinct: *“we are more multi-faceted; others do not focus on nourishing whole-food plant-based cooking; not aware of another competitor that does as much as we do”*.

One exception, again, is the farmers market, which competes with similar markets in the neighboring cities like Phoenix, Mesa or Scottsdale. But at the same time, it claims that its distinctive feature is the exclusive and unique selection of its suppliers. In the words of a manager: *“Our main competitors are farmers’ markets in Mesa, Tempe, Phoenix, and Scottsdale. Our primary difference is the vendors we have. It’s all about having the right and local vendors. According to the manager, local vendors and local produce signifies objective authenticity of its offerings”*.

4.2. Participant Observation

The first author visited several food venues and observed their décor and setting from the standpoint of objective, negotiated, and constructivist authenticities. Another purpose was to match the manner in which the food venues are authentically marketed on the websites to the way they showcase authenticity on their premises. Agritopia is an organic urban farm and garden. This community is engaged in growing vegetables, gardening, and in general, it can be called an educational resource on urban agriculture. It is home to organic produce, fruits, dates, eggs and more. The farm offers self-guided and guided tours. The farm has four iconic restaurants of focus in this study: Joe’s Farm Grill, Tae Coffee Shop, Uprooted Kitchen, and Garage East. Additionally, Barnone is a craftsman community located in the farmland. Here, visitors find some of Arizona’s most authentic retailers ranging from woodworkers to experimental winemakers, restaurateurs, etc. The farm offers an authentic slow agro-tourism experience as it not only offers traditional food but also houses a public garden and different volunteering opportunities. The gardening community houses more than 40 lots, a tool shed, and numerous activities. Visitors can stroll through the gardens to view the seasonal plants. This activity also offers participants an opportunity to chat with the gardeners and become informed about local produce and what grows seasonally.

Until the year 1981, the Liberty Market was the only grocery store in Gilbert within a 15-mile radius. Today, the Liberty Market has become a simple and modest urban bistro, in the heart of old town Gilbert next to the Historic Water Tower (an historic landmark of Gilbert). Many remnants from the past can be witnessed in the restaurant. Examples include old shopping baskets and ham slicing equipment. Another food venue, the Mexican

restaurant Barrio Queen is also located in the historic town of Gilbert. The restaurant is decorated in a Mexican style. Joe's Real BBQ restaurant is located inside a 1929 brick building which originally housed a grocery store. The front of the restaurant still showcases the look of the grocery store from decades ago. The restaurant offers a historic country ambience with a relaxed cafeteria style dining room and a giant outdoor picnic patio. The observation notes reinforce the key findings from the websites and the online surveys. This data triangulation approach confirmed the validity of the overall results.

5. Discussion

Slow food tourism is an emerging field of research and only a handful of studies have examined this phenomenon closely from an authenticity standpoint. To fill this vacuum, using a supply-side perspective, this study examines the manner in which it is perceived and showcased at iconic food venues in the suburban town of Gilbert (Arizona, USA). The data triangulation technique is used to test the reliability and validity of the study results. The data are drawn from the signature websites of the food venues, online surveys, and the participation observation method. Content analysis of the websites helped to identify relevant constructs/themes. Two coders were employed and intercoder reliability was found to be robust. The constructs were compared with the themes gleaned from the responses of the managers/owners (of the food venues) to the online survey questions. Additionally, the participant observation technique was employed to ensure the confirmability, dependability, and credibility of the findings [53]. Based on the results, this study presents a roadmap for developing an authentic slow food tourism corridor in Gilbert. Several caveats exist with regard to the generalizability of its results. This study is explorative in nature and was conducted in a small suburban town with rich agricultural heritage. While the identified themes resonate with other studies, caution should be exercised with regard to the general applicability of the results. Next, the food venues are mostly managed by men, thereby implying the likelihood of gender bias. Male domination, with regard to ownership in the restaurant industry, is also reported by Lee, Hallak, and Sareshmukh [54]. The influence of gender on the manner in which a particular version of authenticity is showcased in slow food tourism warrants scrutiny in future studies.

The eleven iconic food venues/eateries were handpicked by the Gilbert Department of Economic Development. Additionally, the Gilbert Farmers Market and a historic farm (Agritopia) were examined. The responses on overall perceived significance and showcasing of authenticity by food venues can be classified based on four key dimensions: *"Tradition"*, expressed in terms of serving regional dishes; *"Consistency"*, the concept of time and relationships with local suppliers; *"Place"*, expressed by serving local and seasonal ingredients, and making connections with the farms where the food is produced; *"Material"*, which describes tangible characteristics such as interior design and food quality. Table 10 presents a comparative analysis of the manner in which authenticity is portrayed on the signature websites and based on the perceptions of the food venue owners. The results illustrate that the geographic location of Gilbert as a town (in proximate distance from the metropolitan cities of Phoenix and Tucson and the towns of Scottsdale and Tempe) is an important asset and complements the positionality of the traditional and local food offerings. The tangible attributes of the restaurants, the coffee shop, the farm, and the farmers market are a significant part of the food heritage portfolio of Gilbert. This can be evidenced from the interior design which complements and is in resonance with the local environment and history.

Table 10. Comparative Analysis of Authenticity Depictions.

Theme	Examples (in direct quotes)
Local	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Décor: American Heritage, International, Tangible attributes”.
Homemade, Fresh, Organic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Menu ingredients to attract or meet customer demand: Cyclical menu, Ingredients, Customer feedback”.
Soul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Strengths of your food venue: Ingredients, Health and nourishing, Timeless”.
Unique, Traditional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Authenticity: Ancestors, Flavors, Ethical, Timeless, Local source”.
Italian, Nepali, Mexican, American, Austrian, Indian, Arizona	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Food menu: Geographical outreach, Beverage, Food items, Sense of taste, Personal touch/health”.

Although some differences are found between food venues, in terms of the manner in which they embrace authenticity, most share similar perspectives in terms of connecting with and showcasing local heritage from the perspective of history, architecture or important historic landmarks of the town. Adherence to the authenticity of food heritage (by embracing attributes associated with object authenticity) can contribute to sustainability by retaining local cultural heritage and by way of preparing and presenting food [11,16,37]. The examples illustrated in these findings include a traditional way of cooking and serving food by family-owned restaurants in a manner that is handed down through generations. Such rituals foster the preservation of traditional cooking and food consumption practices [36].

Clearly, the restaurants are slanted towards offering negotiated and theoplicity authenticity types of experiences by blending the past with the present [1,36]. Also, a strong intersection between object authenticity/theoplicity and a sense of place/belonging is detected at all food venues including the farmers market. These results are consistent with the findings of other studies [16,18,20,31,35]. Maintaining traditions and connection with the history and heritage of Gilbert is a source of pride and stimulates a sense of belonging for the farmers market and the iconic restaurants. The farmers market demonstrates connections and a sense of place in a different manner because, in a way, it is authentically connected with the other venues. It offers a shared social bonding space and hosts vendors selling local and organic food. Both objective and existentialist blends of authenticity (theoplicity) appear to be essential for offering slow heritage food experience in Gilbert; these are fortified by a strong sense of place and belonging (by offering socializing activities) promoted by the iconic venues and the Gilbert Department of Economic Development.

6. Conclusions

Corvo and Maticena postulate that “food has always been one of the assets of a touristic destination” [19] (p. 98). Furthermore, slow food related experiences are enriched by forging bonds with the local communities [16,23]. The results of this study illuminate creative ways in which authenticity is showcased in the suburban town of Gilbert. Although each food venue, the farm, and the farmers market are promoting a mix of objective authenticity and theoplicity, in their unique ways for the most part, a coordinated authentic message is important to promote slow food experience. Slow food experience is about consuming local/traditional food authenticated by narratives drawn from local culinary culture while soaking in the historic ambience of a location. Extant literature has emphasized that slow food tourism celebrates the values of preserving heritage and culture and conserving the environment while consuming food in an authentic manner [2,23,32,33]. The food venues and the farmers market should offer a variety of local food delicacies to savor at a leisurely pace so that visitors can develop a sense of social bonding and soaking up of the history and local landscape [12,18,36]. Slow food tourism is a sustainable form of

tourism. For instance, Petrini (2007)'s [55] key notion of “good, clean and fair” considers “both the esthetic-sensorial dimension and the sociopolitical aspect. Good is founded on education of senses, on the curiosity of the unknown, on the delightfulness of taste. Clean refers to agro-ecology, to the importance of the land, and to sustainability. Fair is based on coproduction and respect of farmers . . . rights, especially the right to earn a living wage. Also, is important, the awareness of slow nutritional practices” [19] (p. 101).

A slow food corridor can stimulate a quest for a holistic and complete experience. The first crucial step for the Gilbert Department of Economic Development is to identify the iconic attractions of the town, obtain in-depth knowledge of their history, and map a corridor to meaningfully connect them with the food venues. In Gilbert, the historic Downtown, the Veteran’s Park, and the Gilbert Historical Museum are noted to be the key attractions. Therefore, they can be selected as touchpoints in the corridor to aid in communicating the historic spirit of the town. The corridor map in Figure 1 suggests a slow food path that begins and ends at the Downtown information center. The information center can offer educational brochures, interpretive guides and direct visitors to the Veteran’s park, particularly during special events and festivals. At the park, oral and print narratives will be useful to showcase the history of the food venues, the farm, and the farmers market. To encourage slow mobility and to minimize the impact on the environment, the entire corridor should be made accessible by foot, trolley, and local buses.

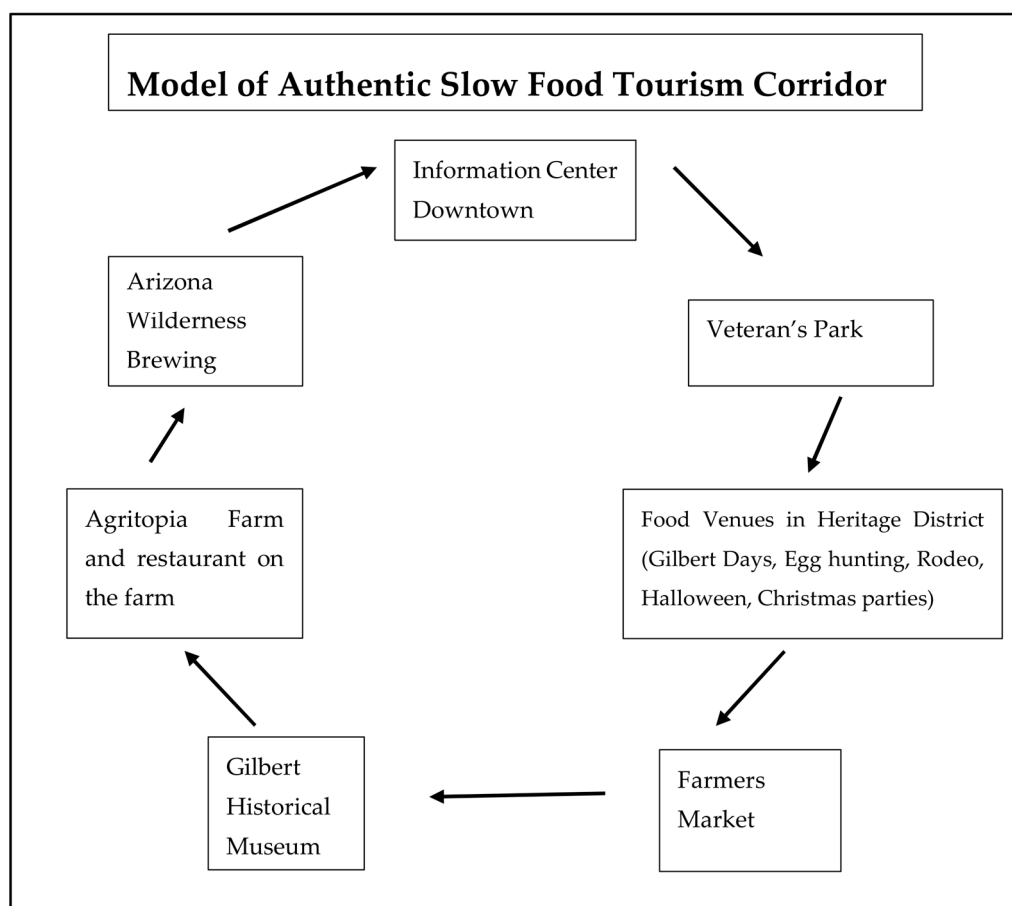


Figure 1. Proposed Slow Tourism Corridor in Gilbert.

The next stop can be one of the iconic restaurants in the Heritage District (historic Downtown) followed by a visit to the farmers market. The farmers market is an ideal setting for socializing and interactive engagement with the local food vendors. The market also hosts food trucks, local eateries, and several games/entertainment/educational programs for families with kids and other visitors. After immersing in the agro-ambience of the

farmers market, the visitors can be escorted to the museum by a tour guide or a local volunteer. The museum, known for various historic exhibits that showcase the agro-heritage of the town, can augment the knowledge of the visitors. Next, the visitors can be directed to the Agritopia Farm. The Agritopia Farm makes an impactful touch point as it houses some of the iconic restaurants of the town in addition to a solitary community garden. It also offers U-Pick programs and agro-classes. The Arizona Wilderness Brewing becomes the next touch point. It offers traditional food items and beer tasting with informative sessions on the brewing history. From here, the visitors can return to the information center. Geocaching activities can be integrated at different touch points along the corridor. To fortify memories, souvenir booths can offer handicrafts and locally made agro-related or cultural mementos, keepsakes, or tokens of remembrance that epitomize the authentic ambience of Gilbert [12]. Also, at this point, an effort can be made to elicit feedback on the complete experience using exit surveys.

Manufacturing handicrafts, producing food, patronizing local service and retail stores, and a diverse assortment of locally owned and managed accommodation establishments offer economic benefits as micro level tourism enterprises have a high propensity to purchase locally [12,56]. The town needs to share its heritage with visitors by “making collective knowledge accessible, from recipes to plant properties or artisanal production techniques, letting them encounter traditional lifestyles” [19] (pp. 106–107). The different touch points on the food corridor offer a ground to meet the ‘Other’ through mediation of food” [19] (p. 107). They can be designed to augment the theoplacity type of authentic experiences by blending historical narratives with alternated agro-heritage expressions based on the time of the year and festive/harvesting seasons.

The results of this study offer important theoretical implications. It confirms the post-modern view that authenticity is a negotiated phenomenon rather than an absolute trait of the slow tourism portfolio. It is bargained by a wide variety of public and private sector stakeholders including the government agencies (at local and national levels), destination marketing organizations, the business community, and the tourists [4,57]. That said, even in the postmodern era, support for objective authenticity (as a point of reference) continues to be robust. Several studies have also lent credence to this perspective from a demand standpoint [31,35]. For instance, according to Sims [36], those disillusioned by the mundaneness of everyday life seek for immersive and authentic experiences elsewhere, that is, “a meaningful sense of connection between themselves as consumers and people and places that produce food” (p. 334). While this study lends credence to the objective viewpoint to some extent, it argues that the theoplacity theory situates suppliers in socio-cultural, historical, and environmental contexts and therefore, offers a more realistic approach. Authenticity theory deliberations in the context of slow tourism remain meager. By sharing supply-side insights, this study makes an important contribution. Furthermore, only a handful of studies in the United States have examined the potential of slow food tourism at a micro level using a case study approach.

The results of this study also offer important practical implications. The formation of cooperative networks between different attractions, food venues, and the local government are key to the success of a slow food tourism corridor [17,19]. The town of Gilbert and the Gilbert Department of Economic Development have potential to perform a leading role in transforming the town into a slow food tourism destination. For instance, they can promote the authenticity of local and traditional food heritage and inspire the food venues and other tourism stakeholders to uphold their traditional lifestyles and embrace culturally and environmentally sustainable practices [1,58]. Directional marketing strategies can be designed that shape/support the theoplacity type of authenticity perceptions to inspire traditional, historical, educationally enriching experiences and a sense of place attachment. People desire to immerse themselves in the pasts and histories of others elsewhere and therefore, nostalgic elements of objective authenticity can serve as important pull factors to inspire slow travel. Markers exemplifying old, traditional, local architecture and historical landmarks can be epitomized in marketing messages [10,21]. Corvo and Matacena [19]

argue that “centering tourism around food and drink serves as a stimulus for agricultural activity and the whole food production sector, while preserving cultural authenticity. It allows the community to be self-assertive, generating pride and sense of belonging and, at the same time, strengthening the commercial vocation of the destination. Local gastronomic systems promote respect for the environment, social justice and fair trade” [19] (p. 105). Such initiatives can encourage synergies with organizations which pursue fair trade practices and are genuinely committed to promoting local farmers and organic food [15,16,23].

Digital marketing on social networking websites is crucial. Perceived authenticity holds the potential to optimize satisfactory experiences and hence, appropriate marketing messages are wanted to shape the perceived authenticity of slow food offerings in Gilbert. Policies need to be formulated regarding supportive infrastructure and connectivity through local transportation modes, park and ride, and parking lots at various touch points along the corridor. In developing a slow tourism corridor, organizations with the necessary resources at their disposal could potentially increase the popularity and sustainable image of Gilbert; for instance at Agritopia, ethical/ sustainable production practices can be illustrated. In summary, Gilbert has all the capabilities and resources to establish an authentic slow food tourism corridor. Slow tourism coalesces the goals of sustainable development and soft growth that can be optimized to benefit the host communities [56,59,60]. The slow movement calls for a return to a more sustainable slow life based on relishing experience, and the best locales to find and promote are the often ignored peripheral areas where diversity and authenticity abound and opportunities can be tapped [21]. Such initiatives, embracing and sustainably promoting delicately negotiated authentic and nourishing food experiences, nurture the needs of the present time to support local community building and the wellbeing of both the guests and the hosts. Future studies should extend this field of inquiry by scrutinizing authenticity perceptions of tourists.

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