

Food democracy as food security strategy: The case of a Costa Rican tourism town

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Abstract

Tourism communities such as Monteverde, Costa Rica, the site of this study, have been profoundly impacted by the loss of tourism revenue during COVID-19. Faced with intensified food insecurity caused by the cascading impacts of this pandemic, the community has organized initiatives to stimulate local, sustainable food production to increase food security during the COVID-19 economic recovery. This paper adopts a food democracy framework to analyze restaurants' regional food

purchases, barriers to local purchasing, and tourists' interest in and ability to identify local food products. Our findings show that nearly all restaurant owners identified benefits of purchasing regional food but reported multiple barriers to buying locally. Tourists reported high interest in eating locally produced food but do not have enough information to identify farm-to-fork options. Local food initiative stakeholder interviews show that emergent strategies demonstrate a move toward food democracy actions by promoting communication and co-learning between restaurants, food producers, and tourists to reinforce principles of food democracy. Based on our findings, we recommend (a) strengthening producer-to-restaurant networks, (b) enhancing communication of local food production benefits and responsibilities to restaurants, and (c) promoting the locally made certification for restaurants to strengthen localized food networks and direct tourists to transformative food strategies underway in Monteverde.

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Keywords

food security, food citizenship, farmer-to-farmer knowledge-sharing, community-based tourism, Monteverde, Costa Rica

Introduction

Agriculture is one of the most ancient and essential economic sectors, while tourism is one of the newest and most rapidly growing. Research has shown that agriculture and tourism vie for the same resources (Torres & Momsen, 2005). Land is frequently transitioned from agriculture to tourist accommodations and attractions. Extractive globalized tourism often delivers uneven economic benefits among those who can invest in tourism by purchasing land and those who work as laborers (Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2022). The unequal distribution of economic benefits from tourism impacts local food access and nutrition (Himmelgreen et al., 2006). Tourism scholars have reported that tourism has not only outcompeted agriculture for limited labor, land, and water resources but can also drive up food prices (Berno, 2011; Brown, 2013; Pirani & Arafat, 2016). The tourism industry's reliance on imported food can significantly affect the social and economic impacts of tourism, resulting in loss of earnings for local producers while contributing to changes in local diet (Hansen et al., 2023). As part of the neoliberal economic model, commercial tourism seeks low-wage labor and cheap natural resources to sustain profits (Patel & Moore, 2018), including importing food, which reduces the chances to expand local food production and direct farm-to-fork restaurant sales. Asiedu and Gbedema (2011) noted that tourism does have the potential to positively influence the production of some agricultural products to harness the benefits in tourism areas, if properly planned.

Bianchi (2020) observed that COVID, despite some scattered progress, is unlikely to create a real paradigm shift toward more sustainable and equitable forms of tourism, which remain inconsistent and “hindered by the relentless pursuit of growth” (p. 1, 619). Issues of farmland conversion to hotels, unmanaged waste, and water contamination indicate that unbalanced economic reliance on tourism is highly precarious (Norberg-Hodge, 2023).

Tomassini and Cavagnaro (2020) noted that a historical movement toward social and environmental justice involves a deeper connection to our spaces, relationships and communities and more democratic, just, and balanced power relationships. Instead of returning to “normality,” communities will need to actively restructure the return of tourism to serve community interests and harness the tools of democratic structures for just outcomes.

The extensive field of literature addressing community food strategies (Hawkins et al., 2022; McCullum et al., 2005; Raja et al., 2021) is complemented by scholarship on the impacts of COVID-19 on food security in tourism areas (Bianchi, 2020; Burke, 2021; Mtapuri et al., 2021). Recent community food system adaptations to responsible tourism initiatives still need in-depth examination. This paper adds to the field by focusing on the relationship between the democratization of the local food system and ways to actively involve restaurants and tourists in the economic and ecological benefits of responsible tourism.

Retaining tourism benefits and avoiding economic leakage depends on local communities having a voice and vote in decision-making. Sustainable tourism development has been promoted as an instrument for fighting poverty, enhancing responsible production and consumption, safeguarding the environment and its inhabitants, providing equal employment opportunities, and improving peace (Hall, 2019). To underscore sustainable tourism's significance in development planning and promotion, the United Nations (UN) officially celebrated 2017 as the UN International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development (Hall, 2019). The UN Environmental Programme (UNEP) described “tourism's potential for creating employment, supporting livelihoods, and enabling sustainable development due to [tourism] as a source of foreign income” (UNEP, 2011). More complex dialogue models have emerged to establish whether and how tourism fits with a community's values and ecosystem limits (Isla, 2016).

As interest in supporting localized tourism grows, concerns about economic leakage, agrochemicals, and scale must be assessed. Food experiences continue to attract more tourists and comprise a large part of tourists' budgets. Despite the

reliance on food imports in many tourism areas, through responsible gastronomy travel, more tourists are seeking authentic food products that benefit the community (Dimara & Skuras, 2003; Sims, 2009). Eight out of 10 visitors are influenced by culinary attractions when choosing a destination, and food purchases account for 40% of the world's tourism expenditure (Europa Press Turismo, 2019). Fusté-Forné and Jamal (2020) recognized slow food tourism as an example of a paradigm shift created by the slow movement (slow foods, slow cities, slow travel, and slow tourism) to address modern hyperconsumption. Slow food tourism is based on embodying an ethic of slow, sustainable, and secure action to facilitate diversity, commonality, sociality, and citizen democracy (Yeoman & McMahon-Beatte, 2016). Those who apply these values in their daily lives can support these principles in other communities with their tourist expenditures.

Some communities actively bring visitors into their sustainable food efforts to become food citizens, which Wilkins (2005) defined as people “engaging in food-related behaviours that support, rather than threaten, the development of a democratic, socially and economically just, and environmentally sustainable food system” (p. 271). The question remains whether the responsibilities and contributions of food citizenship can be extended to tourists when they travel.

Currently, academics and community organizers are questioning the extent to which tourism can positively influence human and non-human well-being and give back to the hosting destinations (Becken & Kaur, 2021). Regenerative tourism surpasses the aims of sustainable tourism by promoting tourism innovations that embed tourism practices within local communities and promoting ecological processes that elevate human and non-human well-being (Bellato & Cheer, 2021). In this regenerative tourism model, when they visit a destination, tourists acquire responsibilities, or temporary civic duties, including responsible consumption (Phi & Dredge, 2019). For this contract to function, tourism communities must find ways to convey tourists' responsibilities and facilitate accountable actions for tourists, such as supporting local businesses and buying local products

(Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010). First though, in order for tourists to support them, there must be responsible local food production networks such as the local food production and distribution networks being formed in Monteverde.

Study Site

Monteverde is located 4,790 ft (1,460 m) above sea level in the Tilarán Mountain Range, northwest of San José, the capital city of Costa Rica (Harwood & Zapata, 2006). Ecological and economic factors have shifted Monteverde's primary economic focus from agriculture to ecotourism, which has grown exponentially in the region. In 1972, there were less than 100 visitors to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve. In 1999, nearly 60,000 visitors entered the reserve (Weinberg, 2002). There were an estimated 230,000 annual visitors in 2019. Since Monteverde reopened to tourism in 2021, visitors have returned to pre-COVID numbers. Many community members have identified tourism reliance as a threat to long-term prosperity after multiple crises have interrupted tourism, including the 2008 economic downturn, the impacts of a devastating storm that closed off the community for weeks, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The area referred to collectively as Monteverde is a 2.7 mi² (7 km²). The district of Monteverde had a population of approximately 4,155 residents in 2010 (INEC, 2011). However, it is difficult to determine the actual population due to continued growth and development in the region that includes long- and short-term international residents and service workers (Cantor, 2016). The area includes three nature reserves that attract tourists and biological researchers. Traditionally, the area relied on subsistence farming and coffee production and later a dairy cooperative, a form of democratized local production with profit sharing (Gudmundson, 2018). Coffee, the main export crop, was also sold and processed by a cooperative south of Monteverde. Monteverde's distance from central political power combined with the democratizing practices of cooperative structures are factors that promote the citizen involvement and collaboration needed to support food democracy movements. Some tourism that features regional foods such as coffee, artisanal cheeses, dairy, and a

diverse selection of vegetables has emerged. However, incorporating these regional foods into local restaurants has been limited by the lack of an effective distribution network between the local producers, restaurants, and cafés.

Statement of Purpose

We propose that more demand for local food by tourists provides a more diverse customer base for producers to help ensure that local production is more profitable and available for everyone. Ideally, more economic opportunities for local farmers will strengthen decision-making about locally appropriate means of sustainable food production and distribution. Specifically, this study explored the relationship between restaurants and local production in the region of Monteverde, Costa Rica, by assessing:

1. restaurants' use of local food products,
2. restaurants' interest in purchasing more local food products, and
3. the challenges restaurants perceive in using local food products.

Additionally, we evaluate tourists' interest in:

1. eating local food,
2. their stated willingness to pay to eat local food, and
3. their ability to access local food.

We then apply the four dimensions of the food democracy framework to evaluate whether local food initiatives address these challenges and facilitate transformative food systems.

Literature Review

Food democracy movements and regenerative tourism share the core principles of diversifying and sharing prosperity among all community members without degrading the natural environment that sustains them. Hassanein's (2008) definition of food democracy emphasizes "production networks that create solutions to ecological, social, and economic problems in the dominant food system, determined socially and politically through meaningful civic participation and political engagement

by an informed citizenry" (p. 289). In comparison, the term *regenerative tourism* was coined to underline the need to assess not only tourism in terms of cost-benefit analysis but also the myriad human and non-human values underpinning tourism (Cave et al., 2022). The supply of local food to hotels is one channel by which agriculture–tourism linkages can be facilitated. Thomas-Francois et al. (2016) showed that for decades, farmers and hotel supply chain relationships have been weak, resulting in economic leakages due to high food importation to support the tourism sector. Creating a mutual purpose among residents and visitors provides an opportunity to encourage greater supply and demand for locally produced food. Boluk et al. (2022) explained that "purposeful tourism is about creating sustainable places to live, work, and visit, based on co-creating values with communities that are focused on localization and more than the pursuit of profit" (p. 16). However, if tourism is to contribute to the well-being of residents, it is important to consider how to reduce local economic leakages and increase local production. Research by Mtapuri et al. (2021) documented that community-based tourism approaches can improve the local economic development of communities by reducing economic leakages from the tourism industry. Despite the challenges in transmitting the benefits of tourism to local food producers, research has shown that surplus food production and the use of local food by the tourism industry can shift tourism relations from conflict to symbiosis (Muangasame & Park, 2019). Ferreira et al. (2021) pointed out the benefits of host community–driven food systems such as the one Monteverde is working toward. Ferreira et al. called for the "the formal tourism sector to embrace the sociocultural characteristics of the host community and grassroots business development strategies ... to align local microentrepreneurs with expected business opportunities generated by big tourism investments" (2021, p. 165).

Linking tourists to local goods and services can potentially decrease economic leakage and increase economic benefits, yet localizing agriculture does not inevitably mean more sustainable food systems. The particular social, economic, and ecological impacts of rescaling should be critically assessed.

Born and Purcell (2006) warned of the “local trap,” or “the tendency of food activists and researchers to assume something inherent about the local scale” (p. 195). They pointed out the biased belief that larger scales are associated with the harms of capitalist production systems while the “alternative food networks” are necessarily local and preferable (Born & Purcell, 2006, p. 199). Yet, carrying on with conventional agriculture as usual, which involves high levels of agrochemical application, does bring risks. Costa Rican academics and agricultural workers have been calling for bans and restrictions on agrochemicals for decades. In 2022, the UN Development Program contributed to these calls to reduce agrochemicals due to high rates of cancer among farm workers and communities (Alvarado-Prado et al., 2022). Produce that does not meet strict export requirements for the US and Europe is likely to be directed to the national Costa Rican market, increasing health risks from the production and consumption of conventionally grown monoculture crops (Galt, 2017).

Despite Costa Rica’s “green” image, less than 2% of agricultural land is used for organic cultivation (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2017). The Ministry of Agriculture does promote some sustainable practices, but support is inconsistent, and extension education services often depend on the knowledge and interest of local field officers (Sylvester & Little, 2020). Agroecological farmers have been working individually or in small collectives to extricate themselves from agro-industrial systems. In Monteverde, for example, LIFE Monteverde Coffee Farm shares knowledge with interested local producers through workshops on composting, efficient production of beneficial microorganisms, and other agroecological practices. The Monteverde Institute¹ has begun a *campesino-a-campesino* (farmer-to-farmer) agroecological training program to promote knowledge-sharing among agroecological farmers. This, and a history of farmers sharing sustainable production methods, signals the willingness and available network to ensure local production is increasingly sustainable production. For scholars like Shiva (2005; 2008),

relocalization is a return to localized practices that rely on the construction of decentralized, biodiversity-based organic food and energy systems operating based on grassroots democracy and local economies. Actions to reverse the environmental destruction and economic inequality of ever-expanding growth models call for reconnection with each other and with the more-than-human world to share the burdens and benefits of production. The relocalization of food presents an opportunity for a diversified economy with a strong communal base (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). Relocalization, in this context, is not solely about rescaling but about a movement to change the mentality behind farming from extractive to regenerative.

Food democracy refers to how people can control access to healthy food, creating local economic opportunities and making decision-making roles available to all citizens (Hamilton, 2005). It explores the interconnections between people, power, politics, and food systems so individuals, communities, and societies can be empowered to grow, access, and eat healthy food. This is accomplished by actively making decisions about food production and distribution and community food sharing and being involved in food citizenship, including the construction of alternative purchasing systems, such as short supply chains (Singer & Mason, 2009; Booth & Coveney, 2015). These mechanisms include community supported agriculture, solidarity, and collaborative processes in the community and provide knowledge about food, food production, and agricultural skills (Borne-mann & Weiland, 2019; Renting et al., 2012). Many of the local food initiatives in Monteverde embody these principles. We aimed to better understand how local communities can use the key dimensions of food democracy—communication, community care, co-learning, and efficiency (Hassanein, 2008)—to link producers with restaurants and create a way for tourists to identify local foods and understand the benefits of buying local. In tourism communities, a dual-purpose initiative is needed to engage the local producers and food citizens while also reaching out to travelers as temporary

¹ <https://monteverde-institute.org/about-us/>

participants in the local food system. Therefore, we also evaluated food democracy as a means of bringing tourists into responsible food strategies via local restaurants.

Food democracy can function as a conceptual tool for actors to regain democratic control over the food system to enable sustainable transformation (Hassanein, 2003; Lang, 1999). This study focused on strengthening relationships between local farmers and restaurants to transform the food system toward food democracy. Our analysis was based on Hassanein's (2008) key dimensions of food democracy. We applied these key food democracy dimensions to assess whether the relationship between food producers and restaurants promotes food democracy principles and which dimensions have not currently manifested. The first dimension is *communication* between actors. Communication includes opportunities for innovation, learning about each other, and increasing actors' participation in the local food system (Hassanein, 2003; 2008). The second dimension is *good community practices*, also known as caring practices that involve fair prices and access to food for all (Hassanein, 2008). The third dimension is *co-learning*, where citizens and actors in the food system share knowledge, including various perspectives of the food system (Hassanein, 2008). The fourth dimension is *efficiency*, the ability to determine and produce desired results that contribute to food system sustainability (Hassanein, 2008). Enhancing these four dimensions provides a pathway to boost local food production, thus improving sustainable agricultural livelihoods and local food security by decreasing reliance on imported goods. We assessed whether and how food democracy dimensions are present in local food initiatives and in strengthening local food production and distribution bonds.

Materials and Methods

We selected a mixed methods approach to utilize the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Our research goal was to collect primary data on whether tourism businesses in the Monteverde region of Costa Rica currently use and are interested in purchasing local foods to enhance democratic control and pro-

mote a sustainable transition toward food democracy. Combining qualitative and quantitative research approaches allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of local food security, an exploration of the local context and the complexities, and the inclusion of the perspective of local stakeholders, such as restaurant owners and actors promoting local food production.

We conducted two field surveys to examine both sides of an important social phenomena: restaurants' willingness to purchase local food and tourists' willingness to purchase local food. Three criteria determined businesses' inclusion in the survey:

1. The businesses were located in the central tourism area, including Monteverde, Santa Elena, Los Llanos, Cerro Plano, and Perro Negro.
2. The businesses prepared and served food. These businesses included restaurants, cafés, and hotels (collectively referred to as "restaurants" for the purpose of this study).
3. A person familiar with food purchasing at the restaurant was available to complete the survey.

We defined buying locally as purchasing a product that was produced in the Monteverde region. This region includes Monteverde, Guacimal, La Cruz, Canitas, Santa Elena, San Luis, and Los Llanos and was delineated with our local partner, the Monteverde Institute, according to farm distribution routes and community connections. Survey questions were created in collaboration with the Monteverde Institute, a nonprofit educational organization established to guide increased tourism in a positive and productive manner for the benefit of the visitors and the local community. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire. Most of these questions were binary or multiple choice. The survey questions centered around (a) current use of products produced in the six nearest towns, (b) interest in using more local food products, (c) benefits of purchasing food locally, and (d) challenges purchasing food locally.

In April 2022, we requested all known restaurants in the study area complete the in-person survey. We had a participation rate of 64%. A total of

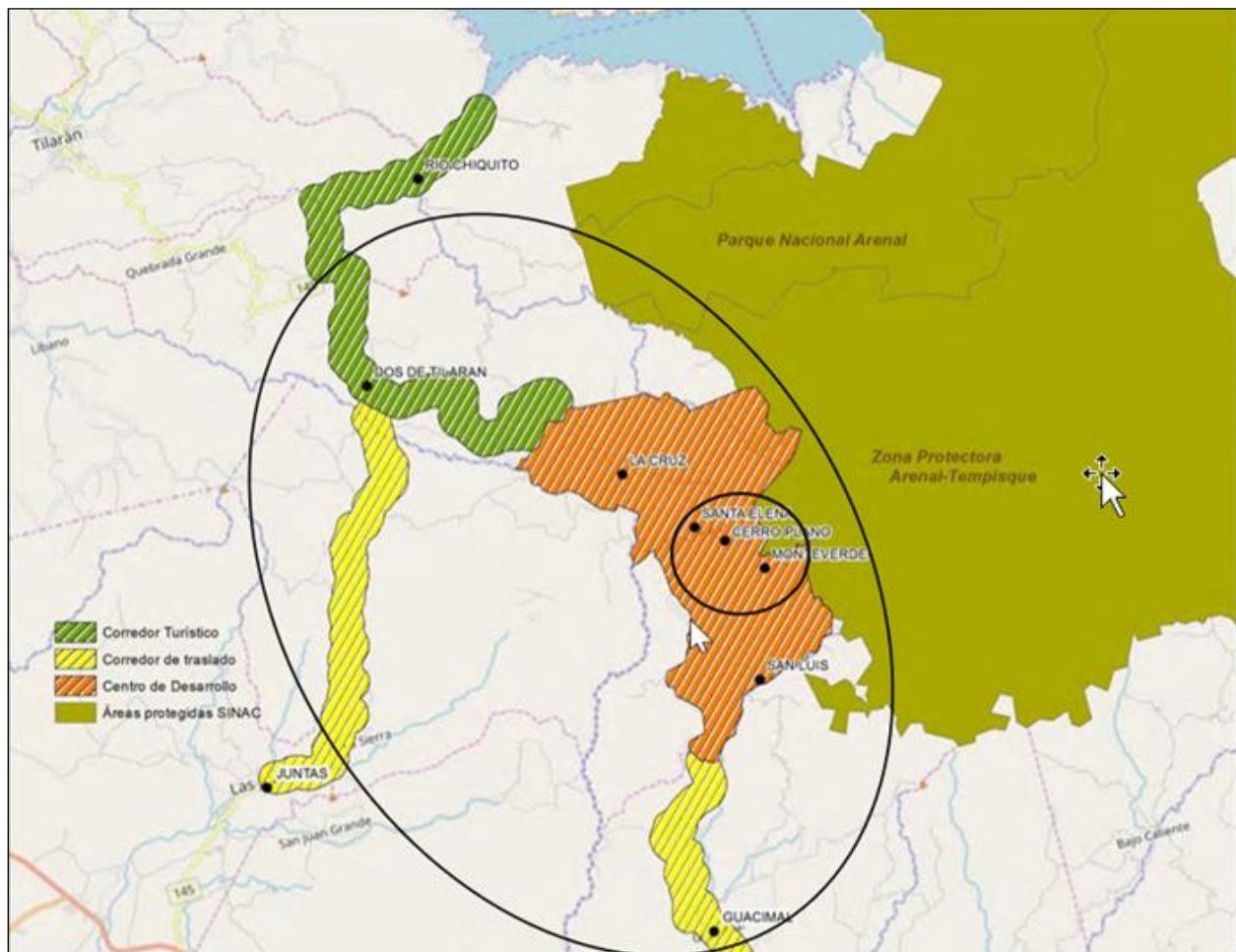
52 of the 80 local restaurants completed the survey; 26 of the restaurants were in the Santa Elena neighborhood, 14 in Cerro Plano, nine in Monteverde, and three in Los Llanos (see Figure 1). Of these establishments, 28 were restaurants, 16 were restaurants in hotels that generally provide meals to guests, and seven were cafés or bakeries. All restaurants had been open for at least one year.

To better understand tourists' interest in eating local foods and willingness to purchase local food, we conducted an additional survey of visitors ($n = 124$). Surveys were conducted at a grocery store and a restaurant in each of the three tourism centers of Santa Elena, Monteverde, and Cerro Plano. Only tourists who had been in the Monteverde

region for at least 24 hours were surveyed to ensure some familiarity with the local food options. Participants reported staying in the Monteverde region between one and 10 days with an average stay of four days. All participants were 18 years or older, with an age range between 18 and 68 years, and included 64 females and 60 males. Only foreign tourists were included in this survey. The tourist sample consisted of 47 Europeans, 34 North Americans, 28 Latin Americans, and 15 Asians. Tourist surveys addressed a) interest in eating locally produced food while visiting the Monteverde area, b) willingness to pay for local products, and c) ability to identify the local origin of food products. All survey data was compiled using

Figure 1. Monteverde Regional Map

The interior ring indicates the study site, and the external ring indicates the regional production area defined as "local" for this study.



Source: Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (2022).

Excel. Survey participants were provided with a verbal description of the research project and informed that the information would only be used in our academic research and gave verbal consent to participate in the survey.

Additionally, information was gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews with individuals from three organizations promoting local food production and community engagement: the director of the farmer-to-farmer knowledge-sharing initiative, the lead facilitator of the Hecho en Monteverde² local certification project, and an individual from Econexiones, a direct delivery online platform to order food from local farmers. All interview participants were provided with a written and verbal description of our research and signed a consent form before participating. Interviews lasted 30 minutes to one hour and were conducted face-to-face. We used the information from the interviews to identify active strategies for increasing local food production and distribution. We used theoretical thematic analysis to individually code actions that relate to the four food democracy dimensions. Interviewees' descriptions of the initiatives were used to align the initiative with the four food democracy dimensions and related factors. We conducted comparative analysis of our coding results to enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the themes. Further, the challenges that restaurant and tourist survey participants faced when trying to purchase local food were linked with initiatives to identify which projects could act as potential solutions to these issues.

Results

Restaurants and Local Food Use

Of the 52 restaurants surveyed, 58% reported pur-

chasing at least some products locally (Table 1). We specified six local community production zones nearest to Monteverde, which included slightly warmer areas where a wider variety of crops can be grown. However, many respondents described food products that do not grow in the region as "locally purchased," such as pineapples. We suspect that these respondents included area sellers, as well as area producers, in the term "local." We excluded products that cannot be produced locally from the results.

The fact that over half of the restaurants included in this study bought some local products should not obscure the reality that most products are imported from outside the region. Restaurants reported buying these products locally as often as possible. However, restaurants also reported they purchase items imported from other regions or countries when local items are not accessible. Additional obstacles included the high price of products (30%), availability and variety of foods (30%), consistency and quality of foods (17%), distribution issues (17%), and lack of communication between restaurants and farmers (8%).

Nearly all restaurants (96%) reported the benefits of buying locally and articulated at least one of those benefits: supporting the local economy, supporting the community, purchasing fresher or higher-quality products, and being better for the environment. Some respondents explained that a shorter delivery distance meant less pollution and that many local farmers are farming more sustainably in comparison to non-local farmers, which is beneficial for the environment. Despite being aware of some of the benefits of buying locally, all restaurants reported obstacles to buying local food.

Table 1. Number and Percentage of Restaurants (n = 52) that Report Purchasing Locally Produced Agricultural Products When Available, Displayed by Product

	Eggs	Cheese	Milk	Lettuce	Cilantro	Onions	Papaya	Tomatoes
Restaurants buying products locally	28	26	14	14	9	8	8	8
% of restaurants buying products locally	54.88%	50.96%	27.44%	27.44%	17.64%	15.68%	15.68%	15.68%

² <https://www.hechoenmonteverde.com>

Tourists and Local Food Consumption

In the second survey, tourists were asked about their interest in eating local food while in the Monteverde area and their willingness to pay more for local food. Tourists demonstrated a high level of interest in consuming local foods. There was an average score of 4.4 on a scale of 0–5, where 0 represents no interest and 5 represents the highest level of interest in local foods. All but two of the respondents reported they would be willing to pay more to cover any additional costs of buying local food. Since it may be difficult for tourists to specify an exact amount they would be willing to pay in a country they are visiting, we selected the more generalized indicators of “slightly more” or “as much as needed” to determine the increased willingness to spend more on local food. Fifty-six percent of participants responded that they were willing to pay slightly more and 40% were willing to pay as much as was necessary. Even though 95% of the tourists were interested in learning more about the origin of local foods produced in Monteverde, 82% reported they had not found enough information to determine whether prepared food was locally produced.

Community Food Security Initiatives

The COVID-19 pandemic raised concerns about overreliance on tourism and motivated collaboration on alternative models to support local livelihoods. Recognizing tourism overreliance as a danger to well-being, community members have questioned how to best share abundance and reduce scarcity to ensure that all members’ basic needs are met, particularly during tourism downturns. Residents have responded with several food security initiatives informed by the results of an unpublished 2020 initial community needs assessment survey conducted by the Monteverde Institute and the community development organization Comisión Enlace Monteverde. These initiatives include the creation of a centralized community garden, the development of a community currency (Little, 2022), initiatives to connect farmers to residents and business customers, farmer-to-farmer knowledge-sharing permaculture lessons to increase product variety and meet local demands sustainably, and the *Hecho in Monteverde*

local-origin certification. We outline how these initiatives help restaurants and tourists participate in local food systems that promote food democracy. Further evaluation is key to monitoring the initiatives’ effectiveness and evolution as they expand to include tourists and tourism businesses.

The Monteverde Institute (MVI) was established in 1985 to advance sustainable living at the local and global level through place-based education, applied research, and programs that benefit the wider community. To address food security issues that arose during the pandemic, the MVI has collaborated on food initiatives driven by community needs and objectives. The MVI identified a mismatch between what local producers are growing and the demand from local restaurants. To address the demand for more variety, the MVI has created a farmer-to-farmer knowledge-sharing course for local farmers who want to meet the product demand of restaurants and residents.

Hecho en Monteverde (Made in Monteverde) is a newly developed local-origins certification to elevate Monteverde’s position as an environmentally and culturally responsible destination. *Hecho in Monteverde* aims to diversify the economy to generate more responsible local production and consumption (Daniel Vargas, interview, June 22, 2022). Economic diversification promotes the circular economic model to elevate regenerative production, minimize extractive practices, and reduce waste. The certification will help residents and tourists identify local products and services including artisans, shops, galleries, tourism and cultural experiences, and food experiences.

Econexiones was founded in 2020 to act as a local produce distributor in Monteverde. Econexiones delivery service help farmers benefit from this platform by advertising local foods and connecting farmers with local buyers while their products are delivered by area drivers, which also creates jobs. Most restaurants did not have easy access to local products, and local producers were losing sales to outside food services. Econexiones’s mission is to provide Monteverde residents and businesses with local food that is produced under principles of social reciprocity and reaping mutual benefits. Farmers benefit from this platform by advertising and connecting with local buyers. Their

products are delivered by area drivers, which also creates jobs.

Table 2 links the four food democracy dimensions (communication between actors, good community practices, co-learning, and efficiency) to specific participant challenges and ways community actions such as farmer knowledge-share courses, *Hecho en Monteverde*, and Econexiones help address these challenges.

Discussion

Food democracy has become central to discussions and theories about food politics. Even so, food democracy principles are seldom applied in practice. This study applied food democracy as a useful conceptual tool to assess how food initiatives shape local food systems. To this end, we evaluated whether food democracy principles could be extended to include tourism businesses

and travelers in tourism areas. The Monteverde community has created a number of initiatives to promote local production and facilitate citizen participation in a more sustainable food democracy system, including community gardens, a community currency, a green market, and agroecological knowledge-sharing opportunities for local farmers. Still, restaurants face challenges receiving consistent deliveries from local farmers. Furthermore, while tourists demonstrate interest in supporting local farmers and participating in authentic local experiences, they face challenges identifying which products are local. In this section, we use Hassanein's (2008) four food democracy dimensions (communication between actors, food community practices, co-learning, and efficiency) to assess the shape these dimensions take in Monteverde. Then we use the four dimensions to assess the strengths and obstacles of

Table 2. Ways Food Democracy (FD) Dimensions Apply to the Challenges Businesses and Tourists Face and the Corresponding Community Solutions in Monteverde

FD Dimension	Description of FD Factor	FD Challenges by Participant	FD Promotion Community Actions
Communication between actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovate • Learn from one another • Increase actors' participation 	<p><i>Businesses:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of information about products • Difficulty communicating with farmers <p><i>Tourists:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of knowledge about source of food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-farmer product listing • Local food delivery system • <i>Hecho en Monteverde</i> local certification
Good community practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support fair prices • Access to food for all 	<p><i>Businesses:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher cost of local food <p><i>Tourists:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher demand, which could create competition for locally produced food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External price comparison • Local green market for businesses and residents • Higher demand, which encourages farmer to produce more food
Co-learning	Enable knowledge sharing	<p><i>Businesses:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few chances for businesses to interact with farmers <p><i>Tourists:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of clarity about ways to learn about local products 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farmer-to-farmer training • Farm-to-fork chef demonstrations • <i>Hecho en Monteverde</i> local product and experience certification
Efficiency	Contribute to sustainable food production	<p><i>Businesses:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product price, availability, consistency <p><i>Tourists:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time necessary to investigate food origin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More local producers, availability from broader producer base • New green market • Tourists, who provide additional customer base • <i>Hecho en Monteverde</i> information on local products and experiences

connecting tourists with local food and make recommendations for enhancing businesses' role as intermediaries between producers and tourists as food citizens.

Our research is connected to localized tourism defined and implemented by the local community (Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2023). We aim to contribute to these actions by demonstrating how residents can invite tourists to support localizing food efforts.

Community efforts to spread knowledge about human and environmental benefits of local, sustainable food production generate a relatively high level of engagement in the communication food democracy dimension. Nearly all of restaurants reported the benefits of buying locally and articulated at least one of those benefits, demonstrating a keen awareness of the benefits of local production. Some respondents identified the environmental benefits of shorter delivery distances. Hassanein (2008) pointed out that knowledge about the food systems is crucial to the development of food democracy (Hassanein, 2008). Restaurant owners' awareness of the environmental benefits of local production could be a communication pathway to encourage them to increase local food purchases, identified as good community practices in the food democracy framework. Buying locally provides benefits for restaurants as they can serve fresher, higher-quality products while circulating earnings locally. The high level of awareness indicates information about good community practices is already penetrating local business owners' consciousness and shows a foundation has been laid that can result in successful food democracy practices if challenges are addressed. However, many restaurants reported that they choose the cheapest alternative when purchasing food due to budget constraints. The availability of foods, particularly fruits, was mentioned by multiple restaurants as an essential part of their menu. While some foods can never be grown in the Monteverde climate, others can only be grown during certain seasons, resulting in products being imported during the off season. Restaurant owners stated that tourists demand certain fruits, but we questioned whether tourists would demand those specific products if the availability of local and/or agro-

chemical options were communicated to them. Seasonal eating is gaining popularity so restaurants could communicate region and seasonal variety as a unique feature of visiting Monteverde.

Restaurants' acknowledgment of benefits should not lead to the assumption that restaurants are full participants in community food democracy strategies. Distribution was a key barrier contributing to restaurants' inability to support their local producers, as transportation of products from farms to restaurants can be difficult to coordinate, particularly with the high delivery frequency that restaurants require. Price is another key issue for all businesses. Restaurants reported that local food was more expensive than imported fresh foods. Farmers expressed concerns that restaurants often do not conduct a complete or equivalent price comparison of imported and local produce or include the negative externalities of transportation emissions.

Farmers have all been working with Econexiones, a local distributor, to improve efficiency and allow farmers to focus on farming instead of orders and deliveries. Econexiones and the Monteverde Institute are developing workshops bringing together local producers, chefs, and agroecological farmers to increase food variety, quality, and consistency. While there have been some efforts to increase communication and co-learning between farmers and restaurant owners, there is little evidence that there has been significant movement toward food democracy to this point. Similarly to what Hassanein (2008) found in her work on food democracy between student farm workers and food bank participants, communication about and growing interest in local and fresh food does not always translate into reorientation.

Currently, there is a gap between some restaurants' practices and tourists' support for the economic, social, and cultural benefits of food democracy principles. Most tourists in our survey reported that they were willing to pay somewhat more or as much as needed to cover costs incurred by restaurants sourcing more local food. It is easy for participants to report a willingness to pay when they do not face an actual economic impact. Research has shown that participants may indicate a higher willingness to pay for sustainable activities

and are likely more price sensitive than they report (Stangl, 2020). However, this self-reporting is an indicator of preference and understanding about the benefits of investing resources to support local, sustainable producers. Linking tourists with local goods and services, including local, sustainable agriculture, increases the benefits of tourism to the local population (Rhiney, 2008). However, there must be strategies to address what Birch and Memery (2020) identified as a common gap between intention and behavior regarding tourists' interests in and actual consumption of local food (2020). Berno (2011), for example, analyzed the challenges and strengths of "farm-to-fork" tourism in a Fijian agricultural village practicing mostly traditional farming practices. Employing a localization strategy there has increased local production and diversification to higher-income crops, year-round growing seasons, and primarily sustainable production methods. Challenges include some chefs' lack of confidence in serving tourists local dishes and tourists' unfamiliarity with traditional cooking methods and ingredients (Berno, 2006). Cohen and Avieli's (2004) work supports our findings on the significance of communication gaps between tourists and restaurant owners and tourists' limited knowledge concerning the local cuisine in limiting uptake of local food options. Monteverde has the potential for a year-round growing season, but restaurants are hesitant to substitute local fruits and vegetables. Further research on Monteverde's farm-to-fork tourism movement would serve to create a more complete strategy to diminish challenges through local strengths.

Attracting tourists that support food democracy actions and relaying the benefits of local dining to all visitors is key. The Belmar Hotel in Monteverde has created an onsite agroecological farm that closes the loop between food production and the hotel restaurant (R. Morales, personal communication, April 21, 2022). The hotel supports sustainable food efforts by providing agroecology workshops to local farmers and seasonal-cooking workshops to local chefs. Many visitors report being attracted to Belmar's farm-to-fork concept, supporting sustainable agricultural by dining at the restaurant and paying an additional fee to take the farm tour. This indicates some tourists' commit-

ment to assuming the responsibility of caring for the economy and ecology of their host community. The Belmar family, who owns one of the local hotels, does not use chemical-based pesticides to control insects. Because hotel guests complained about the insects that are attracted to the crops, they instead use a chrysanthemum-based product that kills harmful insects and have installed window screens in guest rooms (Reed & Palich, 2017). Teng and Chang's (2014) research suggests that hotels should focus on communicating the benefits of sustainable practices and involve tourists in sustainable actions by requesting tourist commitment to support hotels' environmental actions. The *Hecho en Monteverde* local certification is a tool to fill that information gap about local sustainable production tourists face and create a path for their active participation in projects that support the local economy.

Understanding the challenges and opportunities created by the intersection of tourism and farming makes collaborative responses possible. Three local efforts to implement initiatives to address the obstacles of linking local food producers to restaurants and increasing tourists' participation in the localization process are detailed below. Table 2 connects the four food democracy dimensions with local challenges and community actions to overcome these barriers.

Econexiones aims to recruit farmers who are implementing and expanding sustainable practices since there is high demand for these products and these practices provide ecological benefits for the whole community. MVI has created a farmer-to-farmer knowledge-sharing course for local farmers and acts as a space for the exchange of ideas to coordinate and promote other food security actions, including community gardens, a local producers guide created by Corclima, and the community currency Verdes (Little, 2022). The certification has the potential to address the difficulty tourists reported identifying local producers and products and encourage more regional production to enhance food security. This effort was driven by collaborative community workshops to create responsible tourism initiatives that capture revenue, diversify local skills, and create job opportunities. The creation of this certification is a tool to apply

the food democracy principles of communication and generate direct transformation.

The Monteverde community is exercising strategies to reclaim control and enhance a food system so more benefits can accumulate within the community. These efforts support the localization of tourism, defined and implemented by the local community (Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2022). Food democracy offers an avenue for residents to invite tourists to support local-food efforts. Community-designed systems place local benefits at the fore so that the economic, ecological, and social benefits collect within the community instead of being siphoned off by third parties. Long-term organizational efforts such as agricultural cooperatives and the Monteverde Institute's community development programs have laid the groundwork for a community that has experience with economic benefits through collaborative action. More recent organization efforts in reaction to COVID-19 have focused on relocalization efforts. Knowledge sharing by *campesino-a-campesino* teaching increases the amount of locally produced food available. A new green market for local producers and a local food delivery service increases efficient access for residents and restaurants. The *Hecho en Monteverde* local certification enables tourists to identify and support businesses buying locally. Implementing food democracy principles has created more opportunities for local farmers and strengthened decision-making regarding locally appropriate means of sustainable food production and distribution.

Recommendations

Based on our findings from restaurant surveys and interviews with local food production organizers, we highlight the following recommendations to support and strengthen food democracy efforts:

1. *Strengthen producer-to-restaurant networks.* Many restaurants know about the benefits of buying locally but perceive high barriers to purchasing local food. Communication between producers and restaurants is limited but is key to raising producers' awareness of restaurants' needs and enabling restaurants to learn about fair prices, seasonal production, and the benefits of investing in local food production. Harwood and Zapata's (2006) research on the community planning process in Monteverde showed that validating local knowledge in formal planning discourse can create future practice partnerships. A farm-to-table social media chat could use a popular method of communication to enhance connections. The existing guide of local producers developed during the pandemic could also be shared with restaurants to ensure they are aware of local food purchasing options.
2. *Enhance communication about local food production benefits and responsibilities.* Key actors in the local food movement have focused on making local food available to residents. These organizations actively communicate the environmental benefits of sustainable production and the socioeconomic benefits of a circular economic model through social chat forums, workshops, community gardens, and a green market. Restaurants purchase more food than residents during the peak tourism season yet are often excluded from discussions on local purchasing because they are perceived to be more interested in their own economic outcomes than in supporting local food efforts. It may be useful to recenter restaurants as community members that can influence food democracy outcomes due to their purchasing power and role as intermediaries to tourists, who spend up to one third of their travel budget on food (MacLaurin et al., 2007; Torres, 2002). In 2024, Monteverde becomes a *canton* (an administrative district with its own municipal government), which many residents hope will increase autonomy over local policies. The newly empowered local government can consider measures such as taxes for imported fresh food or tax rebates for restaurants that source locally.
3. *Promote the Hecho en Monteverde certification for restaurants.* Tourists are keen to support local producers but currently cannot identify which food is locally grown. Consumers' willingness to buy a local product is tied to the information exchange between producers and consumers, and trusted local certifications can increase local

purchases (Polenzani et al., 2020). Protected geographical indication label strategies have been criticized as a neoliberal product scarcity tactic (Guthman, 2007). Local certifications created by communities can communicate the link between product and place, between local knowledge and local culture, and have been reported to successfully increase local product sales among residents and tourists (Fonte, 2010). The newly launched *Hecho en Monteverde* local-product certification is a community-created certification with the aim to help consumers find regional products and support the local economy. Fonte's (2010) work suggests that this certification presents consumers with information about local origin and ownership and increases sales of local goods. This certification should be extended to restaurants, though as the creators of the *Hecho in Monteverde* initiative explain, determining how to provide restaurant certification has been more challenging than certifying a single product as locally made. Restaurant certification options include a certain portion of overall products offered at the establishment being locally sourced or certifying seasonal plates featuring local products.


Limitations and Further Research

Previous research conducted in Monteverde helped familiarize us with democratic food strategies in the region (Cantor, 2016; Himmelgreen, et al., 2006). Due to time constraints and the early state of some initiatives, we were unable to analyze the portion of local crops that are produced using agroecological methods. A more nuanced study of specific production methods could help determine what concrete ecological benefits localized food production creates. Working with our partners at the MVI made it possible to build trust with community members and conduct surveys at most restaurants. However, the voices of smaller vendors, which may include more women and young people, could have been unintentionally excluded from this study. Finally, a more complete assessment of tourists' roles in local sustainable food movements, particularly their willingness and ability to participate, is needed for a complete assessment of food democracy movements in tourism areas.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As tourism rapidly returns to Monteverde after COVID-19's peak, the community is restructuring food systems to responsibly feed tourists and enhance local food democracy principles. Diversifying tourism offerings to include locally produced food can strengthen local production and thus diversify food economies. There is also the potential to enhance tourists' culinary experiences by highlighting local products and extending the role of food citizens to tourists while they visit. A localized economy is a central link in the interconnected networks of humans and other-than-human beings that sustain life in mutual relations (Spice, 2018). This research demonstrates that restaurants can articulate the economic, social, and environmental benefits of purchasing local food, which creates a strong foundation for food democracy principles. Tourists are seeking local food and are willing to support local farmers. However, obstacles for restaurants buying local food may be more profound than the market issues of price reported by many restaurants. Building strong participatory food democracies requires avenues for multiple actors to communicate challenges and concerns to inform cohesive action plans.

Food democracy efforts should avoid the local trap, which assumes rescaling will bring about positive change. Instead, the community must continue to evaluate whether local production and distribution strategies support ecological and economic aims. An explicit understanding of the food democracy dimensions of collaboration, community good, co-learning, and efficiency can help community members direct tourism in ways that benefit more community members and the local ecosystems. Several initiatives promote knowledge-sharing among restaurants, food producers, and residents to cultivate the mutual benefits of a food democracy. The Monteverde Institute provides community spaces to connect producers with customers and teach local food preparation while training farmers on permaculture methods. A local distributor has begun to bridge the gap between restaurants and local farms. To further these collaboration efforts, we recommend (a) strengthening producer-to-restaurant networks, (b) enhancing communi-

cation about local food production benefits and responsibilities to restaurants, and (c) promoting the locally made certification for restaurants. The lessons learned and next steps to growing food democracy in Monteverde can help tourist towns multiply the benefits of localizing tourism. 

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