Authenticity and Product Geography in the Making of the Agritourism Destination

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Abstract
Agritourism is emerging as a common solution to sustain agriculture-based communities bereft of economic viability. Drawing from the intersecting literature of product country-of-origin and destination branding, we use a case study to show how agritourism in Messinia, Greece, creates and houses a multitude of meanings suitable for tourism consumption. The study highlights the challenge for the destination to sustainably convey experiential authenticity and interpreting its role in a greater product geography to sustain that capability. The agritourism destination must develop consistency in addressing the multitude of meanings it embeds while simultaneously addressing its stakeholders’ divergent needs.

Keywords
agritourism, experiential authenticity, destination branding, country-of-origin, product geography, sustainable tourism

Introduction
Agritourism, which denotes activities and practices using farms to provide recreational and educational experiences to the public (Barbieri 2013), has become a mainstay in recent tourism literature (Fitz-Koch et al. 2018). The potential benefits of agritourism’s sustainable growth on rural areas are economic (McGehee, Kim, and Jennings 2007), sociocultural (Nickerson, Black, and McCool 2001), environmental (Barbieri 2013), and recreational (Grala, Tyndall, and Mize 2010) as compared with mass tourism development initiatives (Cai 2002). With the global integration of agricultural markets (Oosterveer 2007), agritourism represents one of the few means available—beyond innovative production means and tools, access to globalized funds and the promotion of farming among younger generations (Santacoloma, Suarez, and Riveros 2005)—for the long-term economic viability of many small-to-medium agricultural enterprises (Sharpley 2002). Indeed, agritourism contributes to the creation of more sustainable multifunctional rural areas (Anthopoulos and Melissourgos 2013) through farm diversification and natural and cultural resource conservation. Given the significant implications for the future of agricultural economies, there is a pressing need to better circumscribe what constitutes the conditions for its success (Sharpley 2002).

The literature on the antecedent conditions driving tourists’ propensity to visit and revisit a destination highlights the importance that it convey a sense of “experiential authenticity” (MacCannell 1973); a state of being (Steiner and Reisinger 2006) experienced by tourists when encountering what they regard as sublime (Brown 1996) to restore and reconstitute themselves when on holiday (Graburn 2001). The degree of authenticity in the tourism experience is what Phillip, Hunter, and Blackstock (2010) identified in their typological framework of agritourism as a key factor in the debate addressing the confusion in its definition. Consequently, the range of products and activities enabling an experience within highly differentiated practices at agritourism destinations are of significance. The connection between the place and the encounter (Ricky-Boyd 2013; Wang 1999) is pivotal to the long-term success of a tourist destination (Di Domenico and Miller 2012). An agricultural operation, which comes prepackaged with historical and cultural content repurposed for tourism, could therefore be poised to convey experiential authenticity.

The tourism encounter effectively allows for the agricultural productionscape to become a destination consumption-scape for visitors to appreciate augmented agricultural products. For example, the websites of two major European farm networks, Farm Stay UK1 and Bienvenue à la Ferme2 explicitly connect producers with consumers by offering farm products, food, hospitality, recreation, and leisure. International visitors are often familiar with such agricultural practices and traditions through the products they consume

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as exports before visiting the agritourism place itself, highlighting the importance of provenance associations that not only "implace" the product (see Casey 1993) but also play a discrete world-making role, whereby exports serve as creative promotional devices for the place. Thus, marketing and promotion of brands like Mercedes-Benz include specific representations of the place (Germany), its people (efficiency), and history (superior engineering), beyond other representations of the same product category (ibid.). While the effects of a product’s country of origin (COO) on consumer preferences have been well established (e.g., Verlegh and Steenkamp 1999) and discussed in terms of quality inferences based on product attributes (Bilkey and Nes 1982) or of “contagion” as an enabling factor in consumers’ perception of authenticity in brand transference (Newman and Dhar 2014), the literature at the intersection of COO and tourism destination marketing is still developing (Ryu, L’Espoir-Decosta, and Andéhn 2016). Studies by Nadeau et al. (2008) and Mouland, Babin, and Griffin (2015) have drawn parallels between destinations and products. Ryu, L’Espoir-Decosta, and Andéhn (2016) demonstrate that attitudes regarding products from a place can predict intentions to visit that place, revealing that products can influence attitudes towards destinations.

The present work explores how different products constitute artifacts of promotion of the destination itself. In agritourism, this principle is amplified as the link between place and product reaches its most palpable synergic potential. Using as empirical context the Greek Peloponnese region of Messinia (see Figure 1), which is renowned for its olives and olive oil, this study uncovers the process by which the promotion of agricultural products integrates the destination image through agritourism as consumption mythologies of the two “commodities” overlap. To that end, we develop and employ theoretical links between experiential authenticity (Wang 1999) and mythologies derived from a symbolic geography of agri-product exports to unpack the making of an agritourism destination. Such a geography renders a form of social imaginaries (Appadurai 1990) of experience resulting in what L’Espoir Decosta and Andéhn (2018) call a “product geography,” an alternative symbolic account referring to a system of places joined by the commonality of an association to a particular product or category (ibid.).

While the marketing of Messinia’s staples already draws on their implacement, their state of being necessitates being in place (Casey 1993). That benefit is pertinent with regard to country-to-good (White 2012); that is, the brand marketing of olive products enjoys the effect of its origin of Messinia and Kalamata’s product-country image (PCI). It is the cultivation of a synergic relationship through which the PCI can be leveraged to shift the tourism destination image (TDI) away from mass tourism, for which Greece is renowned, to an alternative that holds untapped promise (see Ryu, L’Espoir-Decosta, and Andéhn 2016). We posit this potential is especially pronounced for agritourism in Messinia because the product of olive oil in conjunction with the “tourism product” of the olive grove agri-hotel can provide the symbolic backdrop for experiential authenticity. In effect, consumption of an implaced commodity creates residual meaning that can be re-appropriated to promote a tourism product (Smith 1994). This process draws on the meanings and mythologies connected to commodities and destinations, becoming intertwined through agritourism. Such a process subsequently accounts for the evocation of place, which is contingent upon its associated mythologies. Thus, different evocations are drawn into consumers’ consciousness when, for example, a site known for its olive groves and oil production is viewed as a potential destination to visit (Figure 2).

**Agritourism and Experiential Authenticity**

The recent rapid growth of agritourism is believed to be supply-driven and a consequence of the increasingly competitive and less lucrative productivist agricultural industry (Kirschenmann et al. 2004), encouraging a policy shift towards agri-environmental concerns and diversification by farmers (Capt 1997; Sharpley and Sharpley 1997; Roberts and Hall 2001). Agritourism represents the most popular form of such diversification because of the relative ease with which it can be combined with agricultural activities, its positive impact on the work–life balance of farmers, and its potential for generating income (Tew and Barbieri 2012). As such, the study of agritourism achieves economic relevance as it impacts the survival of small-scale agriculture and rural communities in desperate need of economic regeneration (Veeck, Che, and Veeck 2006). This may be especially true for the struggling Greek economy after defaulting on its debt in 2012 (Krugman 2012), making the examination of an increasing preference for authentic agritourism operations and products particularly timely. In their call for a conciliatory definition of agritourism, Arroyo, Barbieri, and Rich (2013) argue it “should include staged and authentic agricultural activities or processes occurring in working agricultural facilities either for entertainment or educational purposes” (p. 45). The emphasis on product customization, independent forms of travel, special interest tourism, and demand for eco-friendly alternatives as part of a return to more authentic natural and cultural experiences (Urry 1990; Poon 1993; Long and Lane 2000) have bestowed on agritourism the potential to address new tourist consumer needs (Hummelbrunner and Miglbauer 1994).

One highly established condition for the long-term success of destinations is their ability to convey experiential authenticity (MacCannell 1973). There is a natural fit between experiential authenticity and agritourism, as the latter allows tourists to “experience the farm setting and the context of rurality as a whole . . . [and] to create their own understanding of the farming way of life” (Di Domenico and Miller 2012, p. 292). Authenticity is itself inherently problematic (see Belhassen and Caton 2006) and has been
Figure 1. Map of Greece; cutout of the area surrounding Messinia with noteworthy places indicated.

Figure 2. Messinian Olive Grove; image taken from Costa Navarino promotional material.
subject to significant debate, yielding diverse strands of critical understanding (see Wang 1999). This frustration essentially concerns the definition of the antecedent properties of being perceived as authentic, or “true to oneself” (Trilling 1974), as it is nearly impossible to ascertain the essential characteristics of the destination itself. The edited work of Rickly and Vidon (2018) charted the various trajectories of scholarly works on authenticity in a tourism context to posit that “authenticity does matter” (p. 1). However, scholarly consensus has congealed in the conversation that the experience of seeking authenticity is, if not an exhaustive explanation for consumption of tourism products (Urry 1991), at the very least a reference point for activity-based consumption (Wang 1999). In view of the foregoing, we see experiential authenticity as both a (performative) process informed by meaning (Knudsen, Rickly-Boyd, and Greer 2014) and an outcome, as the activity-based agritourism experience can yield authentication of the site, defined by Cohen and Cohen (2012, p. 1296) as “the social process by which the authenticity of an attraction is confirmed,” including the objects therein and the encounter (De Andrade Matos and De Azevedo Barbosa 2018).

Broadly understood as encompassing activities that are part of the experiential economy (Schmitt 1999) and rurality discourse (Bunce 1994), agritourism can convey experiential authenticity through recreation (Nickerson, Black, and McCool 2001), as it offers visitors experiences and experiences typically linked to agricultural and farming production (Choo 2012) and agricultural landscapes (Vanslembrouck and Huylebrouck 2005). Related literature reveals diverse views on achieving authenticity, including disagreements on objectives and experiential, cognitive, and affective modes of engaging with authenticity (Di Domenico and Miller 2012). However, the intersection of experiential authenticity with the broader cultural framework of agritourism is understudied. Agritourism in Messinia provides the cultural context to our investigation, at the intersection of cultural framework, international marketing, and experiential authenticity.

**Product Geography: Situated Product Mythologies as Tourism Products**

We address the concept of “product geography” through the country-of-origin effect (COO) (Bilkey and Nes 1982; Verlegh and Steenkamp 1999). COO studies generally explain the effects of provenance associations in the context of marketing of brands (Andén and L’Espoir-Decosta 2016), products (Bilkey and Nes 1982), and services (Javalgi, Cutler, and Winans 2001). However, the link between COO and tourism as an area of scholarship is relatively underexplored, given how they intersect in a highly palpable manner (Nadeau et al. 2008). In fact, both deal intrinsically with the marketing of a place. It is only recently that scholars have considered linking marketing by place to the marketing of place (see Zeugner-Roth and Žabkar 2015; Lee and Lockshin 2012; Elliot, Papadopoulos, and Kim 2011). In their study of product–place dyads to convey experiential authenticity in the form of enacted narratives, L’Espoir-Decosta and Andén (2018) use the illustrative cases of Napa Valley in California (USA) and the triangle du café in Cali (Columbia) to show how the symbolic consequence of a system of provenance associations drawn from geographical entities results in “product geography.”

The concept of “product geography” as a system of places can be organized around any commodity, including products (goods), services, or intangible consumables, such as music, practices, or brands. Its defining characteristic is one or more implacement properties that exert an influence on the place in which it is symbolically situated (Casey 1993) and where commodity mythologies form both an anchoring and a reverberating system. Such is the case for South Korea, whose success in manufacturing exports enhanced its visibility and eventually contributed to its burgeoning success as a tourism destination (Ryu, L’Espoir-Decosta, and Andén 2016). Similarly, the geography of tourism refers to the spatial consequences of practices and how tourists, hosts, and producers reshape the new localities of the destination. For example, advertising by the Canadian government serves to generate national symbols and myths to direct the conversation about citizenship (Rose 2003) and to shape national and local identity building (Robb 1998) through myth-making via tourism, including heritage (Nilsson and Blom 2018; Palmer 1999). As such, the “tourism state” (McKay 1994) in Nova Scotia, Canada, essentializes geographical identity through ideological narratives that turned the industry into the moteur for myth-making (Hollinshead 2009). In McKay’s study, the myths are (political) messages transmitted and reinforced by the media (see Brody 2012). Thus, within discourse, the narration of place generates a plethora of marketable cultural events, artifacts and readings of the place. In that sense, products, services, or brands serve as tropes of the narrative that in the aggregate constitute the mythomoteur of the place.

Agritourism provides the frame for such tourist spaces, and this study explores the authentication process of these places, or lack thereof, through product origin narratives. This presents a conundrum in the tourism context: a destination is invariably also a place, a symbolic assemblage with a spatio-territorial correlate, albeit not always fully crystallized. The subsequent implication for agritourism is that the cultural effects of commercial practices within such a space transcend mere borders through a combined place and product image association (Kalamata > olive > olive oil > Greece), thereby evoking the notion of a product geography. The agritourism space thus becomes a destination in a marketized symbolic space burdened with competing or complementary marketing actions from similar regions or countries with related products, for example, Tuscany in Italy, Rioja in Spain, and Izmir in Turkey.
A crucial element of this study is a particular facet of how place and exports interact, that is, the pertinence of product categories perceived to be associated with particular places. COO exerts its most palpable effect on consumer evaluation through this perception (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy 2000; Josiassen et al. 2013; Andéhn and L’Espoir-Decosta 2016) and arguably represents its clearest relevance for agritourism, just as a specific product category can project characteristics onto a place. A place known to potential visitors as the origin of wine is different from one known as the origin of electronics or automobiles. The practice of explicitly attempting to leverage provenance associations through themed resorts and events is common and constitutes an effective means for using such associations to promote regional development (Jeanneney 2013). A brand for the product–place pair (Fotopoulos and Krystallis 2001, 2003) can also increase a product’s credibility through significant institutional and legislative backing (Tse 1999).

The proliferation of legally “Protected Designations of Origin” (PDOs) has yielded “alternative geographies” (Whatmore and Thorne 1997) of food, whereby various places have become part of a geography based on food product categories, their quality, and the legislative framework that governs their use or reference to them (Parrott, Wilson, and Murdoch 2002). We know that a product can define or provide an identity to a place (Galani-Moutafi 2004). In mainstream geography scholarship, the very definition of place is a phenomenological construct in which diffuse space has become place based on assigned meaning (Relph 1976; Tuan 1977), and this meaning could also be derived from an association with a product or product category. In the product–geography case under scrutiny, the production, as opposed to the consumption, of an agricultural product serves as the potential attraction to tourists and consumption. For instance, the consumption of coffee in various circumstances is heralded in consumer research (Karababa and Ger 2011), as is the consumption of olive oil (Dekhili, Sirieix, and Cohen 2011). The commercial relevance of productionscapes in the making of consumptionscapes, however, is scarcely explored except for significant literature on wine and wineries (Lee and Lockshin 2012; Beverland 2005). In fact, for products like coffee and olive oil, it is possible that the product’s mythology is integrated with consumers’ (perceptual) placement of the product further down the value-chain. For instance, chocolate enjoys a premium connotation if it is perceived to originate from countries associated with the refinement and consumption of the product, such as Belgium or Switzerland, rather than the country in which the raw material, the cocoa-bean, is produced, like Venezuela (Deshpandé 2010). This illustrates the potential for complex interactions and unexpected outcomes that can be traced back to the mythologies, practices, and narratives that envelop the products. Such is one objective of this study, applying as an empirical context Messinia in Greece.

The Empirical Context: Messinia, Greece

Messinia, an agricultural region on the southwest coastline of Greece, is renowned for its olives and olive oil. The local agricultural industry is small-scale and suffers from a dearth of development in relevant infrastructure. The tourism industry in the country has a history of success but has seen a downturn in recent decades because of increasing competition (Briassoulis 1993) and a significant lack of coordination among governmental planning bodies (Galani-Moutafi 2004). Agritourism, however, has growth potential based on the country’s link to olive and olive-based products. The olive grove is an iconic agricultural setting, and olive oil is a product category that is demonstrably sensitive to origin effects (Dekhili and d’Hauteville 2009). Kalamata, the capital city of Messinia, holds a PDO for the Kalamata variety of olives that is well-known and popular among consumers worldwide. Recently, Messinia became more accessible with a new highway to Athens and increased air traffic to the local airport, setting the stage for increased agritourism. Olives and olive oil represent a product category with characteristics that could project a particular image in the minds of potential tourists, but the question remains how local governance and stakeholders will react to these circumstances.

Methodology

To examine the convergence of the commercial relevance of place between exporting agricultural products (PCI) and attracting visitors to an agritourism destination (TDI), this article relies on a case study of places in Messinia, Greece, that are, either by design or by circumstance, viewed as burgeoning product–geography-based agritourism destinations.

We rely on qualitative case study and research methods in circumscribing the role of commercial geographies in agritourism. The rationale for this approach is the exploratory nature of the study, which probes the intricate and symbiotic relationships (Yin 2014) between exports and agritourism development and their emphasis on deriving symbolic meanings and authentic experiences in the social imaginaries (see Appadurai 1990) of the place. To that end, this study employs a multistage inductive approach (see Maxwell 2005) with Messinia, Greece, as the illustrative case of the place and olives and olive oil as its cardinal export product “brand.” The case approach is appropriate to develop knowledge about the inherent capacity and enhanced relevance of synergies between exports and agritourism development in Messinia, as understood by its stakeholders. The case approach allows linking conceptual ideas with the concrete specifics of the case being observed in detail (Yin 2014). Online and archived secondary data were first collected for familiarity with the region’s business activities and to help determine (1) which places would be the most relevant to visit, and (2) which category of business stakeholders
presented the best potential for pertinent and insightful knowledge. Secondary data consisted of socioeconomic information from trade, hospitality and tourism, farm industry publications and reports, and from tourism and product advertising and promotional materials (regional, national, and international) collected online, in publication repositories and through direct contact with stakeholders in the region related to hotels, tourist destinations, and commercial activities. These data also served as part of the triangulation to validate the primary data for the study.

Primary data were collected through a two-pronged field study consisting of (1) a period of immersive nonparticipant observation as one of the authors interacted with stakeholders in situ as a researcher (Vanderstoep and Johnston 2009), and (2) a series of semistructured in-depth interviews with the aid of a Greek–English translator. This observation did not facilitate connection and rapport because of the language barrier, but it served an alternative purpose in providing “the advantage of some degree of objective separation and distance” (Vanderstoep and Johnston 2009, p. 238) through the researcher’s contemporaneous notes. Furthermore, the relationships built with locals through the liaison agents and translator facilitated negotiation on the degree of participation that yielded the most meaningful data (Patton 2002). The month-long participatory field study was conducted in May 2014 as the researcher traversed the region, visited various sites, held short discussions (in addition to semistructured interviews) about business in the region, and attended meetings on the region’s socioeconomic development. During that time, semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 stakeholders from agricultural products- and services-related businesses, local organizations, and public sector and private citizens (Table 1).

A purposive selection of informants was guided by the recommendation of two liaison agents who were part of a national and local network of people and organizations, identified through a list of industry experts from the Greek trade office in the home country of one of the researchers. They were familiar with the region and had in-depth knowledge and access to local businesses and people. The first four respondents were recruited through these contacts and the remainder through snowballing, with respondents assisting in identifying, recommending, and recruiting the others who were engaged in commercial and/or political activities in the region. Theoretical sampling was necessary, as ongoing data analysis allowed identification of additional interview subjects (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). The interviewees were deemed appropriate and knowledgeable based on their socioeconomic, professional, and political status and their involvement in local and regional business-related decisions.

In-depth interviewing enables researchers to “gain insights into opinions, experiences, motives and ideas that are not readily obtained through mere observation” (Gao, Zhang, and L’Espoir-Decosta 2012, p. 203). To generate rich discussions and relevant data, open-ended questions were used to provide respondents the opportunity to express unanticipated points of view, followed by probing questions to elicit further insights.3 With permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and notes taken. Daily casual conversations with people like taxi drivers, salespeople at markets, and café and bar patrons provided additional useful insights. Taken together, these procedures rendered rich material that addressed a variety of issues pertinent to exploring the dynamics of the region.

The observations provided not only a means to collect empirical data but also a means by which observed problems, issues and questions raised by participants could be

| No. | Alias | Role |
|-----|-------|------|
| 1   | R1 & R2 | Agritourism operators, Farmer |
| 2   | R3a | Olive oil trader and producer |
| 3   | R4a | Restaurateur |
| 4   | R5 & R6 | Olive product producer/CEO, Operations Manager |
| 5   | R7 & R8 | Press liaison and Head of Development, agriculture and tourism |
| 6   | R9 | Olive oil soap producer and reseller |
| 7   | R10 | Agritourism operator |
| 8   | R11 | Foundation executive |
| 9   | R12 | Owner and operator of a shop selling regional specialties |
| 10  | R13 | Exporter/producer of agricultural products |
| 11  | R14 & R15 | Public sector funding officials |
| 12  | R16 | Director of a foundation with interests in the region |
| 13  | R17 | Owner of a company producing and exporting agricultural products |
| 14  | R18 | Customer relationship manager at large luxury hotel operation |
| 15  | R19 | Restaurateur and farmer |

Note: Because of the occasionally sensitive content of interviews, real names have been replaced with aliases.

a. Interviews performed partially, or fully, with the aid of a translator.
explored and explicated in subsequent interviews, and vice-versa. This cyclical methodological process of persistent observation through the researcher’s own negotiated position, together with the procedural dependability provided by interview recordings and field notes, reflect a form of between-method triangulation (Denzin 1989) and serve to corroborate the trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln and Guba 1985). The validity of the inquiry is ensured through verbatim interview quotes in the Findings section to support the results derived from the data analysis. The interviews also featured attempts to ascertain the emic validity of the data (see Denzin 1989).

Data analysis followed an inductive approach, consistent with the research purpose of developing a conceptual framework to explain a process at the intersection of product geographies and tourism. The analytical approach is borrowed partly from the hybrid method of analysis in Zhang, L’Espoir-Decosta, and McKercher (2015), relying on a coding system from Grounded Theory as proposed by Charmaz (2006), and an integrated constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This hybrid analytical scheme helps to distill key issues pertaining to the intersecting roles of exports and tourism development in the economic and cultural ecology of the region. This approach was necessary to confirm that both the interview data and observations collected would effectively inform and complement each other at the point of analysis. The collected material was transcribed in situ to enable the remote researcher to engage in ongoing analysis that facilitated theoretical sampling. The authors independently performed an initial open-coding that relied on a phrase-by-phrase analysis to highlight the respondents’ perceptions about the processes involved in emerging agritourism development, its linkage to product geographies, and the broader question of regional development. This revealed the theoretical sensitivity of each author in their identification of both similar and different substantive codes (in vivo and constructs) based on their individual appraisals and identification of key data points, the meaning ascribed to them, and the constant comparisons of theoretical arguments (Glaser 1978). The subsequent rounds of interviewing and coding permitted connecting higher level codes through theoretical coding to reveal possible relationships among the original sets of codes. Figure 3 shows an example of the coding process, from selected basic open codes to the focused codes supporting the first analytical theme, “the making of sustainable tourism.” Ultimately, this iterative process and constant comparative analyses allowed for the emergence of five analytical themes pertaining to the unfolding of the commercial life of agritourism in the product geography:

1. The making of sustainable tourism;
2. Safeguarding placehood through experiential authenticity;
3. Implacing mythology in commercial mythologies;
4. Staking a claim in the product geography; and
5. Building the destination consumptionscape.

Findings and Discussion

The Making of Sustainable Agritourism: A Grassroots Response to an Economic Conundrum

Messinia did not escape unscathed from Greece’s economic difficulties. The Eurozone crisis damaged relationships between the EU and Greece at both the popular and political levels (Clements, Nanou, and Verney 2014). At the time of the research, memories of the Greek financial crisis, referred to as “a thing of the past” (R1, Agritourism hotel manager, and R2, Farmer), still echoed as a relevant issue that had changed the region’s economic prospects. To some respondents, the Eurozone crisis presented a socio-political conundrum that ultimately ushered in a new era for agribusiness and required critical examination of existing attributes of the region: “This [crisis] shook the agricultural world, at least some sectors of it” (R16, Foundation director). Such questioning allowed the conscious emergence of an underlying grassroots entrepreneurial spirit and an assessment of the efforts required to propose new spins and narratives on business linkages to capture benefits from other sectors, previously considered separate and unconnected. To R16, “Now we can see that people are becoming more aware of the work needed, more and more [like] entrepreneurs rather than farmers. We can see this happening in other industries in the area.”

Several respondents evoked this Greek entrepreneurial awakening in various ways, including embracing sustainable development of Greece’s agriculture with the essential features of typicality and identity: agri-”cultural” heritage and modern reconstruction. To R16, “Costa Navarino managed to promote good practices through examples of what sustainable development means, how to provide environmental protection with development, and give work to the local people.” Besides “creating a market for the local farm producers,” these good practices precipitated certification, as “farmers did not follow any certification system and now they had to—so to sell to Costa Navarino” (R16). Though an a priori inventory framework with ongoing processes was already in place in the region’s agricultural sector, the revitalized traditional agricultural sector provided residents more than just economic benefits, as they express pride in the renaissance and “showcasing of local traditions and culture of production to visitors” (R16). Consumers provided a further developmental impetus, as “customers we have are very educated about excellent olive oil, proper production methods and the recent excellent olive oil has been associated with the production of good wines; there is a similarity” (R3, Olive oil trader). These agriculture-based qualities become resources to protect in creating a unique sense of place, character and image of the region as a place- and experience-based
Figure 3. Excerpt of coding scheme, processing from “Open codes” (left) to the analytical theme “Making of sustainable agritourism: a grassroots response to an economic conundrum” (right).
agritourism. Petr (2002) considered the physical attributes of a place (a landscape of olive trees rolling down hills and valleys to the sea) as part of the place's symbolic identity, where consumption by visitors occurs (Eroglu and Machleit 1993). Olive and olive oil production become cultural “icons” positioned within the region’s tourism promotion campaign. As R16 explained: “Because of their potential value as tourism products, Messinia’s protected areas became less of a burden and more as an asset.” The physical attributes are thus important, not only to the objective authenticity conveyed by the place (Wang 1999) but also to the genuine experience of consumption they help visitors to construct.

The transformation of the place may be explained by the move from a bottom-up local initiative of private agency to regional development under a coherent plan. In Messinia, the search for identity and diversity in response to economic globalization and its consequences triggered expansion of agricultural economic activities, the production of tourism goods and services, thence agritourism. Presently, through its traditions of olive production and with agritourism as a catalyst, the region has acquired a place image with implications for its tourism destination image (TDI) and for the country’s PCI (Elliot, Papadopoulos, and Kim 2011). Thus, to the visitor, an image symbolic and representative of the destination is deemed to be of constructivist authenticity (Wang 1999) as it is conceived as existing in their mind. In Messinia, the major reason for PCI’s contribution to the tourism-based country image lies in the evocation (in the visitor’s mind) and integration of traditional agricultural production as a symbolic characteristic and particularity in the commercial relevance of the region (as exuded by the place).

Indeed, promotional tourism materials demonstrate how specific products are referenced as part of Messinia’s appeal: “Their dishes are delicious, cooked with natural products like the Messinian olive oil and their renowned Kalamon table olives.” Visit Greece exemplifies this reference to a particular product acting as a synecdoche for the entire regional cuisine. This combined approach can be effective only if it genuinely represents a grassroots response to crises (Holt 2004) by implanting the agricultural tradition and product category “olive” in the symbolic construction of the commercial relevance of Messinia as a tourism destination. Respondents emphasized that “visitors should experience the combination of traditional culture of our olives and olive oil in a landscape that goes all down to our beautiful seas” (R3). In Casey’s (1993) application of implacement, a mutual effect is exerted through association between “implaced” agritourism as cultural icon and Messinia as destination. The region’s grassroots recognize the need for regional development that avoids the concurrent negative effects of overexploitation and underdevelopment. Agritourism is seen as economically viable, with the potential of sustainably preserving the region’s sociocultural ecosystem and heritage. The impetus provided by the grassroots thus becomes a contributing element to “hot” authentication (Cohen and Cohen 2012) of the place within the framework of “true” experiences that olive groves and farms can provide to tourists (Petr 2002).

**Safeguarding the Place through Experiential Authenticity**

One illustration of how agriculture sustained its commercial ecology in Messinia is the establishment of the Costa Navarino hotel near the village of Pylos, which, according to several respondents, represented a component of sustainable regional development. While constituting a premium tourism facility, the hotel also promotes local agricultural business and culture as core attractions in its augmented offerings. In fact, one function of evolving resort tourism in Messinia’s coastal regions is serving as a base for exploration of the rural hinterland and its communities (Williams and Lew 2015). The challenge is integrating the appropriate form of tourism into the existing agricultural economy so it becomes a tourism destination providing an authentic experience. The region employed a holistic approach to destination planning and development and enjoyed other improvements, including flights to Kalamata and a highway from Kalamata to Athens, pivotal to a customer-oriented place-based approach that ensures an authentic farm experience. Several farmers with tourism experience believe there is a desirable and prospective form of tourism development that relies on sustainability and quality as “[quality] authentic tourism has much more to offer than [other forms] of tourism” (R3). This sentiment rejoins Trilling’s (1974) explanation for the increasing appeal of authenticity in contemporary society because it reflects what modern life lacks. Several respondents for whom “quality and authentic tourism are a necessary next step in healing Messinia’s economy” (R1, R4, Restaurateur & R5, Olive oil producer) expressed similar sentiments.

While insisting on authentic tourism, most respondents also feared that tourism would lead to overexploitation like in Lagana, where “the local environment has been completely destroyed, and the village does not exist anymore—Lagana is dead, a ghost town!” (R1). To avoid repeating Lagana’s destruction of the environment and heritage, Messinia’s development plan is intentional and requires awareness of the consequences of change: “We don’t want negative consequences in Messinia . . . or anywhere in Greece really” (R1).

The solution may be a mix of development types whereby Messina can combine agritourism with “a few all-inclusive hotels, larger family-run hotels, and self-catering accommodation” (R1). This suggests the potential of sustainable tourism for Messinia: a hybrid development geared toward authentic experiences relying on a combination of the physical landscape of the place, the image it projects, and the atmosphere it creates in the minds of tourists. According to Pike (2008), the image of the place as perceived by tourists...
and its identity as Messinia as perceived by locals form a positioning interface. R1 reveals why “quality tourism” lacking authenticity is unsustainable: “it does not provide a true experience or feeling of being in the company of Greeks [the others] and Greece [the place] and enjoying great natural produce of its soil [products].” The “Messinia tourism experience” can therefore be positioned as a “double” place-product authenticity in that it enjoys a credible association at:

1. a micro level, with the specific product category of olives, as agritourism businesses contribute to its TDI by means of the right narratives through branding or image association with the product to influence consumers’ intention to visit (Beerli and Martin 2004) and satisfaction with the experience of the place; and

2. a macro level, phenomenologically through the country–product associations of Greece to tourism and agriculture, whereby olives and olive groves, as part of the country’s identity, are a necessary condition for and intertwined with quality tourism experiences.

Although these associations signify a “cool” authentication process, a desirable situation of compromise where destinations host accommodations on different scales to safeguard the original nature of the place evokes “hot” authentication. Authenticity constitutes the epistemological linkage among agritourism practices, the region, its products, and its identity. This suggests, as did Cohen and Cohen (2012), that both authentication types are interlinked rather than dichotomous. Messinia represents a finite geographical space within Greece, with inherent affective values through which “[you] feel you are in Greece and identify and keep the Greekness of the area” (R1). The feeling of belonging, national identity and an “atmosphere” of Greekness are strongly subjective (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) and part of hot authentication. The totality of these spatial consequences of practice (agritourism, authentication, authentic accommodation and authentic experience) forms the product geography of Messinia’s tourism (Andéhn and L’Espoir-Decosta 2018). Ultimately, the region’s TDI should enjoy a reinforced association with the product category of Kalamata olives to then engage with the greater geography of olives and olive-oil production. It is clear from R1’s and R3’s responses that a balance between economic growth and sustainability requires appropriate narratives based on the region’s authentic identity and values, and by association, with the product and (associated) image, including the country’s renowned physical landscapes.

The foundation managed by R11 (Foundation executive) performs activities relevant to agritourism development in the Mediterranean region: it oversees cultivating the area’s UNESCO world heritage for the Mediterranean diet. R11 envisions Messinia’s future visitors as it moves to a more mature state as “cultural tourists,” visitors interested in Greece and Messinia for its weather, olive grove landscape, and coastline, but specifically its cultural offerings, including the regional gastronomy. However, adjustments are needed: “Stakeholders will need to display greater engagement with the region beyond ‘sun and sand’ tourism.” The movement is from the intangible characteristics of culture and heritage to physical aspects of objective authenticity (Petr 2002), and such cultural tourism has the potential of extending the season and boosting local culture (Richards 1996). Attempts to market heritage sites often fail to attract visitors and attain commercial viability, as was the case in uKhahlamba/Drakensberg rock art (see Duval and Smith 2013), because heritage destinations require “accumulated symbolic and aesthetic value” (Richards 1996, p. 262) or credible engagement with the preexisting authentic cultural fabric of the place being taken seriously by visitors (Cohen and Cohen 2012). Messinia has several potential heritage attractions, including the temple of Apollo Epicurius and Methoni castle. Place authentication is achieved by building trust between hosts and visitors and through product-origin narratives and consumption (olive and olive oil) that herald the constitutive role of product geography as mythomoteur, which establishes a narrative to provide the destination a claim to authenticity. In Messinia, this occurs through implacement of its embodied, and situated, mythology from intangible olive-related agricultural production imagery and practices. Olive groves with a small-scale organic oil pressing operation and an attached restaurant using olives and olive oil from nearby groves in its recipes and Eliopit (olive bread) are part of such a “postcard image.”

**Implacing Cultural and Commercial Mythologies**

To become symbolically sustainable, a destination’s tourism sector must turn its intangible resources into authentic experiences as a key selling point. Respondents emphasized the importance of leveraging the region’s cultural heritage, mostly around its food and lifestyle, commercial activities, and inherent challenges. To R11, November 1, “the symbolic inscription of the Mediterranean diet in UNESCO’s List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity,” presents opportunities for “Greece and Messinia in particular to organize, in cooperation with our embassies of the seven countries, an event promoting agricultural products, culture and everything . . . that constitute the Mediterranean diet.” This highlights a noteworthy process. The Mediterranean diet is a regional reality, part of a populist fabric, and by extension a “cultural brand” (Holt 2004). In R11’s words, we see how this brand has been cemented through institutionalization via UNESCO,⁵ which formalizes the diet’s narratives while directly designating associated places; in effect, “implacing” (see Casey 1993) the Mediterranean diet brand. By highlighting the international recognition of the Mediterranean diet’s cultural brand “implaced” in Greece, while simultaneously developing its destination infrastructure, Messinia could effectively unleash the potential for olive oil and other
agricultural products to be perceived in terms of its *terroir*; the quintessential expression of a region’s relationship with its commodities, including the special nature of its products due to unique physical and cultural conditions (Nilsson and Blom 2018; Barham 2003). Thus, by evoking its product geography, olive oil will exert a powerful influence on Messinia (the place), in which it is symbolically situated.

Respondents reported difficulty in turning what they perceived as a valuable regional cultural, symbolic or implicit resource into practical commercial relevance for visitors to experience in a direct and tangible manner. The problem dates back to the country’s European Union membership, which means that although “Greece has excellent extra virgin olive oil with a rich history . . . [we] don’t have a national strategy for exporting agricultural products. . . . With UNESCO we are trying to make producers understand that if they produce good products, they must export them outside of the EU” (R11). The Eurozone crisis highlighted Greece’s EU conundrum of initially focusing on Europe’s lack of action and not enough on what Greece could do for itself (Surowiecki 2015). To R11, the crisis had positive ramifications, as “many people came back home . . . well-trained to become new producers of agricultural produce” and triggered government assistance for training and research “in new cultivation methods of produce without using harmful . . . chemicals.” The stage for rejuvenation of the region on a foundation of sustainable development is set, with the tangible environmental aspects (such as the pristine coastline, groves and traditional farms) and atmosphere (entrepreneurial initiatives—producers—and tourists—consumers of experiences) for objective and constructive authenticity (Wang 1999).

R11 laments the lack of national strategy to connect with potential consumer export markets for Messinia’s specialties, particularly at the “level of branding, leading to much of the olive oil Messinia produced to be sold in bulk and bottled in Italy.” This illustrates how a subordinate role in the symbolic economy of the olive oil product geography (Messinia being subsumed to Greece and Greece being overtaken by Italy) leads to dire consequences in everyday agricultural operations. Therefore, branding of their product will always be part of a greater sign system evoking different meanings (Andèhn and Zenker 2015). Apart from its impressive number of olive groves and traditional olive-pressing facilities, Messinia also hosts one of the most recognizable EU-sponsored PDOs for olive oil, the “Kalamata olive” brand. To those in agriculture, however, much remains to be done in the olive and olive oil industry, as “now the level and competition are so high and strictly regulated that it is not possible anymore to just have olive oil and sell it. You can’t!” (R5). One issue is the gap between the quality of olive oil produced for export and that for local consumption. To premium olive oil producer and reseller R3, the care taken in production, packaging and storage is more than production for local consumption, as “a lot of farmers produce only for themselves; it is a big difference in quality control when you sell abroad . . . you have to take care of more things.” Inferior quality control in batches for local consumption has implications for on-site experience of the product, which, based on evidence provided by R3, would be consumption of sub-par olive oil likely to generate negative word of mouth from visitors to the region, “because you can’t believe how well-educated customers and visitors are” (R5). To R5, increasing awareness of regulations and quality control for olive oil as a product category and as a market have sensitized the region to issues of Internet reputation and word of mouth. One negative experience of an influential consumer or quality watchdog can damage the entire region.

Some respondents highlighted the distinction between reputational factors and issues pertaining to the “objective” quality of olive-based products, including geology, the amount of sunlight and rain, and soil properties: “It is like a good wine, you need to know the type of grapes, where they grew, in which type of casks the wine matured and for how long . . . it is difficult to sell wine if the consumer does not have an idea of quality” (R3). The wine analogy essentializes geographical identity through selected ideological product narratives (e.g., labeling on bottles) that turn the industry, in all its renditions and linkages, into the *moteur* for myth-making (Hollinshead 2009) and contagion (Newman and Dhar 2014). Overall, respondents confirmed the literature, specifically, that product evaluations are influenced by the image of the region with which they are associated (Van Ittersum, Candel, and Meulenberg 2003), exemplified by wine and wine regions (Lockshin et al. 2006). Respondents underscored two central determinants of quality in both the “raw material” (Caporale et al. 2006) and “human conditions,” that is, the traditions and competencies surrounding production of olives and olive oil in a procedural sense (Dekhili and d’Hauteville 2009). Sustainable tourism, within its agricultural trope (farm tourism, food tourism, slow tourism), becomes a commercial narration of the place such that the plethora of commercial and marketable cultural events, artifacts, brands, services, and products it generates constitute the mythomoteur of the place, Messinia. Consequently, the symbolism, traditions, and culture of a place are intangible bases of authenticity. These assets must embody the symbolic resilience of the place for it to survive.

**Situating Agritourism in Product Geography**

Data on the development of Messinia’s agritourism reveals the importance of interrelations between places in Greece and other Mediterranean countries as a nexus of meaning constituted in product geography. In fact, the sequential aggregate of the three previous themes leads to product geography. As R5 hinted, Messinia is part of “a greater olive and olive oil production region and market that span the entire Mediterranean.” For R5, the circumstances surrounding olive oil production as far away as Spain create a strategy
“based on price competition alone unviable.” The Eurozone crisis forced consideration of a holistic approach encompassing the cultivation and promotion of product quality and experiences associated with each category of an integrated place-based “agri-” and “cultural-” tourism. Respondents, however, felt there are ways places act as reference points within the system of places. One common example is Tuscany. To R1, Messinia has a “leader to follow in Tuscany, which is well known around the world as a high-end destination . . . developed in a beautiful agricultural area steeped in history . . . that has not made any concessions to [mass] tourism.” In other words, Tuscany has successfully embedded its localized identity, the heritage of its signature products (grapes, olives, and wheat—wine, oil, and pasta), projecting the local identity and ecology in its destination image and narratives, despite mass tourism: Tuscany conforms to its social category (see Davies 2010). The region’s proper classification, idealized representation (Grazian 2004), and conventions reflect its “type authenticity” (Carroll and Wheaton 2009, p. 257), defined by audiences of producers and consumers. Historical and cultural texts connect products to places that enable tourists to reenact product mythologies in situ and attribute authenticity to the place. To R1, Messinia possesses all those characteristics, with “the added advantage of Mediterranean climate and nearby beaches,” which should place the region “in what it has to offer, ahead of Tuscany.” This sentiment is echoed in promotions of associations linked to compound images, such as Tuscany’s rolling countryside or peppery extra-virgin olive oil. Of relevance is the opportunity, beyond unified constructs at the core of COO research, to view the meaning of place as contingent on the context in which it is evoked. To realize its own potential as a tourist destination, Messinia may face challenges in exploiting its regional ecology, that is, “olives, good food, olive groves, olive oil, farms, small beautiful mountain villages, quality places and accommodations, sunny beaches, old buildings and churches” (R4) to provide different and authentic experiences to tourists. R4 references the area of Mani to exemplify the potential to become something akin to Tuscany. The missing ingredient has been category membership as determined by [consumer] audiences (McKendrick and Hannan 2013). Tuscany possesses a positive connotation of place and is one of several reference points in a broader geography that respondents use to understand Messinia and other regions and places. Messinia and Tuscany are thus comparable nodes in a commercial geography of olive oil and tourism. When asked, “In your mind, with which country do consumers primarily associate premium olive oil?” R3 replied that “it is unfortunately not Greece, it is mostly Italy, then Spain and Greece together” and explained Italy’s association (and connection) with quality olive oil based on market proximity and road connections to Italy after World War II, “when many Germans took their car . . . to travel in five hours to Italy.” The associations effectively linked to the compound image (PCI) of Italy—olive oil was anchored in, and facilitated by, travel and tourism. The TDI of Italy was in turn reinforced by the integrative evaluation (Nadeau et al. 2008) of theoretical constructs of Italy’s PCI (Ryu, L’Espoir-Decosta, and Andéhn 2016). This supports our thesis of the enabling role product geography plays in the development of authentic agritourism in Messinia and in strengthening its product-image association with olive oil.

By definition, “product geography” helps capture the alternative geographical understanding stemming from implacing product categories (L’Espoir-Decosta and Andéhn 2018). R3 projects his customers’ understanding of the “place system” of olive oil and provides a tentative place hierarchy in that product geography. Various audiences perceive the interrelationships among places as referential sense-making devices (Andéhn and Zenker 2015), but their overall comparison does not facilitate a hierarchy without some additional evaluation regime, such as olive oil quality in situ. Both R1 and R4 engaged in the same referential sense making of Messinia through parallels with Tuscany. However, the evaluation regime in their references relates to the success and sustainability of the tourism sector in the two regions. This system of place provides fresh evidence that characterizes the link between spatiality and place, particularly in commercial use. The compound-based means of understanding place–commodity interrelations in Messinia could just as easily evoke COOs as a basis for agritourism development. This addresses the call by Ryu, L’Espoir-Decosta, and Andéhn (2016) for further research on how discrepancies in consumers’ perceptions of different products from the same country “pertain[s] to the development of a country’s image” (p. 305) by demonstrating that a single place does not only draw meaning directly from an associated product, but that the product can also contribute to ordering the place in a product-based system of interrelations, that is, a product geography from which it draws meaning by reference to other places.

**Building the Destination Consumptionscape**

In Messinia, production mythology is promoted as a critical cultural constituent of consumption through the agritourism it enables (Rabbiosi 2016). This practice of (tourists) consuming the production site as a (tourism) destination can be understood as the transformation of a consumptionscape (a site for agricultural production) into a consumptionscape (a site for experiencing agricultural production). The concept of consumptionscape evokes an understanding of the site as housing a tourism product or as a servicescape (Bitner 1992), in that the place must be transformed into one in which consumption practices can be performed [and services provided] but is also itself “consumable” as an authentic place to visit. For example, an olive grove, principally a site for olive production, can be extended into a consumptionscape by allowing tourists to engage in olive picking, thus experiencing what is essentially agricultural labor repackaged as a tourism
product. For this to happen, “people [who] run tourist accom-
modations as a second income need training and help to
improve their service level . . . without sacrificing authentic
Greek hospitality” (R1).

Servescape, however, entails spatial configuration of
the site and does not account for the symbolic and cultural
integrity at the core of its appeal to purposeful cultural tour-
ists (McKercher and Du Cros 2003). Thus, a focus on man-
aging the destination as a servescape to generate revenue
runs the risk of depersonalizing authenticity derived from its
cultural appeal and replacing it with a commodified experience
easily understood and consumed by visitors. Kavaratzis and
Ashworth (2005) provide a typology revealing the duality
of the symbolic and material existence of consumable places.
They view purposeful manipulation of spatial configurations
and properties as “place marketing” and the cultivation of
symbolic content and meaning as “place branding.” R5 artic-
ulates this distinction when discussing agritourism strategies
for the region: “Of course Kalamata has to focus on its brand
name to make it famous and Messinia has to focus on its
brand name to become famous and known for quality.” In
the tourism context, however, this typology reveals a conflict.
A destination with little to offer beyond streamlined service
delivery becomes the quintessential example of an overex-
loped mass tourism destination stripped of its unique mean-
ings (Wall-Reinius, Ioannides, and Zampoukos 2017).

In Messinia, agritourism operators and farmers like R1
understand the potential attraction of cultural heritage arti-
facts and local produce as compared with sun-and-sea visi-
tors to the region: “The sun-and-sea families that come in
summer want to go to Nestor-Pylos, one of our ancient sites.
[But] now they will even go with their children to Koroni and
Methoni castles. They're very interested in culture and they
want to eat the local produce and olives in local tavernas with
local people. They want to be with Greek people!” (R1). The
perception of place authenticity is expressed through an
experience of the region as the “real” life of the place for
visitors to see and share (MacCannell 1973). Linkages
among the various categories of cultural heritage assets,7
such as the natural environment’s influence on the crops and
animals that are basic signature ingredients of local cuisine,
serves as catalysts to experiences central to the region’s tour-
ism products (Smith 1994). The end result is a geographical
understanding of the place as space with assigned meaning
through experience (see Tuan 1977).

For Messinia to become accessible to broader interna-
tional audiences, efforts must be made to safeguard the
mythology of olive oil as embodied in the region’s traditions,
rituals, practices, and meanings surrounding the product.
R14 (Public sector funding official) believes that “olive oil
should have a set of standards” to benefit consumers and
visitors; they “should know what [they] buy, and we should
know what we sell” with the support of “policy [that] must
come from the government.” However, this collaboration
is not easy to achieve because “here in Greece it is difficult to
do things like they have historically done for wine in regions
of France and Italy, where a certifying body forms when a
few farmers come together” (R14). The collaboration
required for transformed consumption practices has been
missing because “the government has never supported busi-
nesses so they can be combined and achieve higher levels to
provide authentic produce and experience” (R14). The senti-
ment expressed by R14 parallels a general trend in reports
and other sources examined. One report notes, “The National
Statistics Service of Greece (NSSG) does not have data on
the number of farmers who have a tourism activity”
(Auterbach 2012, p. 15).

Similarly, preserving the mythology of the place while
fostering economic opportunities to make agritourism viable
requires a balancing act. The symbolic capital of the region,
linked to its agriculture, history and culture and their over-
laps, must be preserved to convey an experiential authentic-
ity while still catering to visitors. R4 encourages visitors to
go to the next village, as “it enriches the whole experience . . .
as the place [I] know is a nice traditional village that has not
changed, and I say, ‘try the smoked ham in that taverna,’ it
should be high quality.” Operators must therefore engage
with the category and its boundaries to create within the
commercial relevance of the place a consumptionscape
perspective whereby the mythology of the product’s place
association is anchored in its consumption (Karababa and
Ger 2011).

To R16, Messinia, as the prime Greek olive and olive oil
production region, needs a more holistic approach to create
an [agri-]tourism destination image drawn directly from its
product category. One such initiative is “a virtual Messinian
diet museum to gather all data, information about the
Messinian diet and its nutritional value, its products etc.”
(R16). The repository of knowledge and practices within a
service-consumptionscape as part of the place’s cultural
identity and heritage needs an educational conduit to “teach
the new generation of the value of olive oil tasting so this
knowledge flows in the production line to upgrade the qual-
ity of olive oil” (R16). This is consistent with Knudsen,
Rickly-Boyd, and Greer’s (2014) application of Barthes’s
(1972) theory of mythologies and its idea of “bourgeois”
society’s self-perpetuation, implying that the perceived con-
stituents of a country are reliant on the product–country myth
association and the narratives necessary to construct an
“authentic” place image for tourist consumption.

Authenticity relies on authoritative information (Richards
1996), exemplified in Messinia’s development as an agri-
tourism destination through word of mouth. To be perceived
as authentic, Messinia should convey both its narratives and
sense of being a piece of the “real” life of the place for visi-
tors to see and share (MacCannell 1973). Our data show that
this approach constitutes “the primary means of marketing
products and services, whether they are agritourism resorts,
olive oil or other agricultural produce” (R16). Returning
visitors and their acquaintances can be reached through
word-of-mouth marketing. They are generally educated and have prior experience with Greek culture but feel a sense of learning through the service consumption experience (Gupta and Vajic 2000). Various actors in Messinia strive to meet this tourist desire and offer products catering to it: “We want to bring the experience firsthand. . . . We’re doing a Messinian cooking class . . . in a local household, with our guests and we cook together with [a] local woman, traditional Messinian recipes. . . . Either we take the guests out or bring the local people in, like an interactive thing. . . . We have a local association coming in and we make traditional Messinian bread, or Kalamata olives. . . . This is, more or less, how the hotel interacts [with the surrounding environment]” (R18, Hotel customer relationship manager).

The imagery of olive groves and their associated gastronomy are a rich source of historical and symbolic referents toward the consumption and image of the place. The productionscape renders a consumptionscape without disturbing the mythology of the production itself. In this study, that occurred as an extension of a region (Messinia, Greece), where agritourism development exploits its product image (quality Kalamata olive oil) to create a greater destination product (agritourism) through its symbolic conveyance and relevance (TDI), made sustainable through the development of a system of “tourism products” to convey experiential authenticity.

At this point of potential multiple evocations (e.g., Messinia as a site of olive and olive oil production and as a cultural tourism destination), we encounter a place’s polysemic capacity (Malpas 2018) to house or render implacement (Casey 1993) of multiple associated mythologies that influence its commercial potential (Andéhn and L’Espoir-Decosta 2018). These circumstances require theoretical coherence and coordination of mythological symbolism and histories to support the conveyance of experiential authenticity, often threatened by managerial intervention through a design of place divorced from its cultural essence (Hornskov 2010), thereby posing a significant risk of robbing the place of its ability to convey authentic experiences. Ergo, the present study adopts an approach focusing on the integration of TDIs with a diverse set of commercial objectives, narratives, and mythologies linked to the destination.

Conclusions

To explore how tourism operation stakeholders in the commercial ecology of Messinia, Greece, can leverage alternative forms of export promotion of the product category of olives and olive oil, this study reveals the bridging capacity of experiential authenticity to integrate TDIs with mythologies and narratives derived from the symbolic geography of agri-product exports linked to the destination (see Ryu, L’Espoir-Decosta, and Andéhn 2016). Indeed, a product and its exports can help promote a destination. In fact, the commodity itself effectively becomes an artifact of promotion for the destination, not just as a means of attracting attention but also as a constituent element of place meaning to serve as a central destination brand element. This study provides the empirical material to illustrate how various stakeholders understand the risks and promises of tourism development in the agricultural region of Messinia. By making the qualities of the place that are most vulnerable to exploitation the very means to development, the region’s commercial potential can be sustainably expanded, echoing previous works on agritourism by Koutsouris et al. (2014) and Tew and Barbieri (2012), and on place by Rickly-Boyd (2013). However, we extend these works by revealing that the convergence between capital and culture and their commercial relevance present potential for the place to convey experiential authenticity. This relationship we uncover is a novel element that highlights how culture can be preserved and safeguarded (heritage) by the very process that threatens it (business). For this process of convergence to occur, however, a coherent narrative of the place’s story must be constructed, one that underscores the value of authenticity and institutionalizes safeguards against threats. The study shows that this endeavor in turn requires the intersection of powerful commercial mythologies to complement one another. The case of Messinia illustrates how a housed mythology, the product geography of olive oil and other olive products needs to be reckoned with as a mythomoteur for a place. The ability to implace product mythologies is coupled with the potential of evoking specific contingent meaning through association with meaning-laden mythologies, such as those related to commodities and practices associated with their production and consumption. Thus, the creation of an agritourism destination turns on its ability to effectively enact and embody a product mythology, to consequently be construed around an extant meaning derived from such mythologies. Furthermore, this situation shows that the phenomenon captured by Newman and Dhar (2014) as place “contagion” to product and brands also applies in the inverse, and places, because of their polysemic nature, can more readily house a multitude of “contagious” mythologies.

This study amplifies McKay’s (1994) theory of political cultural selection through stakeholders’ perception of the world-making of “Messinia—the destination” as contingent on its symbolic and mythological components working in harmony (Ryu, L’Espoir-Decosta, and Andéhn 2016; Nadeau et al. 2008). This synthesis is necessarily grassroots-driven to support construction of a narrative about what the region Messinia is and means as a place (L’Espoir-Decosta and Andéhn 2018), first and foremost to the locals. The study adds an additional layer to Hollinshead’s (2009) explanation of the power of tourism as the “moteur” of myth-making, positing that the world-building narration of Messinia “the destination” must be related to places against which it is evoked in economic, cultural, or spatial terms. This is how product geography assists in agritourism world-making. Thus, the meanings attached to a place are
fundamentally referential (Andéhn and Zenker 2015) or require an anchoring or “implacing” component (Casey 1993). As such, the place is always dispositional and exists by virtue of its differences and similarities vis-à-vis the places to which it relates, as well as the mythologies of “objects,” such as products and brands, for which it provides implantation.

This study furthers understanding of the challenges faced in reconfiguring the region from focusing strictly on agricultural production into one that can synchronously serve as a tourism service delivery system. The reforms center on cultivating the ability of stakeholders and visitors to elevate performances of cultural narratives linked to an experience of the place that visitors will deem authentic. Such enactment, which occurs for example during service encounters, constitutes a reference to mythological narratives. However, some level of agreement among stakeholders of what Messinia represents must guide such collective action. Implementing any institutionally supported program requires delimiting the spatial correlates of “Messinia—the place,” which in turn requires allocating resources and containing mythologies to a spatial and organizational frame.

The mythology of Messinia is interwoven with that of agricultural products and practices, placing it at the nexus of product geographies. Messinia is thus imbued with a wealth of “mythological capital” that facilitates sense-making of the place, reinforces its image (PCI) through agritourism activities such as tasting, farm stays and local food experiences (TDI), and places it in a relational sign-system, the product geography.

Two principal questions to be addressed in future research emerge:

- When is place mythology threatened by influences of incommensurable narratives derived from tourism activities?
- What circumstances are conducive to deriving gainful synergies from co-supporting narratives of otherwise distinct commercial ventures?

Both questions have the potential to further understanding of opportunities for developing successful destinations, as well as place and world-making. Furthermore, a comparative study with other agritourism destinations with similar product geography is needed to transcend the contextual limitation that this study presents. This research topic raises additional concerns. In addition to economic and social sustainability (see Andéhn, Hietanen, and Lucarelli 2019), environmental sustainability (see Hall 2019) is increasingly intertwined with commercial objectives. This study is limited by its methodology, given it is contingent on the destination and is therefore construed as generative and explorative. Further confirmatory approaches are required to frame the scope and interrelations of the factors uncovered in the present study.

Acknowledgments
A special thanks to Angeliki Triantafyllou and Erica Öjermark Strzelecka for their invaluable assistance in helping organizing and facilitating contact with the respondents and in some cases assisting with translation during the interviews. A great thanks is also warranted to all the respondents for their time and insights over the course of this project.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The field research was supported by a grant from the Capitan Vassilis Foundations, Stockholm University and Fontana Foods AB.

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Notes
1. www.farmstayuk.co.uk, retrieved April 5, 2020.
2. www.bienvenue-a-la-ferme.com, retrieved April 5, 2020.
3. Questions and statements included:
   - What is your assessment of the economic future of this region?
   - Do you think tourism represents the future for your agricultural products?
   - Describe the customers for your products. Where do they come from?
   - What is the nature of your business activities in this region?
   - Elaborate on your view of the future of tourism and olive production in your region.
4. www.visitgreece.gr/en/mainland/messinia, retrieved May 15, 2020.
5. The seven countries of Cyprus, Croatia, Spain, Greece, Italy, Morocco, and Portugal have been designated by UNESCO to constitute the territories that embody the in situ preservation of the Mediterranean diet heritage (https://ich.unesco.org)
6. www.discovertuscany.com, retrieved April 15, 2020.
7. Thorne (2009) evokes the five categories of human (social) heritage, industrial and agricultural heritage, the arts, cuisine, and natural history.

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