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“Gross National Cool” and the Global Food Frenzy: New Perspectives of Japanese Inbound Tourism Promotion in the Years 2010s

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ii. Introduction

During the last decade, inbound foreign tourism rate in Japan underwent an outstanding escalation: from 5.22 million in 2003, the number of tourists visiting the country skyrocketed to 19.3 million in 2015[1]. While efforts towards increasing inbound tourism can be traced back to the Meiji era (1868-1912), and more significantly to the 1960s (Soshiroda 2005, 1103), the early 2000s constitute a pivotal point for Japanese international tourism promotion. Indeed, in those years the country inaugurated an active inbound promotion policy (Soshiroda 2005, 1100), and the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (□□□□□ kokudo-kōtsū-shō, MLIT) identified tourism as one of the pillars of its economic development in its "New Tourism Strategy to Invigorate the Japanese Economy" (MLIT 2016). The fundamental goal of inbound policies, was to make Japan into what the Japan Tourism Agency (□□□ kankō-chō, JTA) defines a "tourism nation" (□□□□ kankō rikkoku),[2] a goal that would be achieved by adapting inbound promotion policies to the new national brand strategy, started in the same years. Ultimately, the branding strategy would serve as a way for the country to reaffirm its status as an internationally competitive nation, to eventually boost the economy and improve its national image overseas (Sakamoto and Allen 2011, 110). For this reason, officials decided to build Japan's national brand around the non-threatening appeal of its content industries and popular culture; among these assets, Japanese cuisine was given a leading position.

Because of the already established popularity of sushi in the world scene, the positioning of Japanese food as a keystone of the national brand proceeded smoothly and steadily, to the extent that Japanese cuisine became ubiquitous all over the world (Cwiertka 2005, 242). The national branding strategy went hand in hand with tourism promotion policies, as their success can be best developed when the two sectors are mutually thriving (AALEP 2015). The tourism nation that the Japanese government aims to build highlights a profound change in terms of classic touristic patterns (Funck 2016, 361). With the progressive popularization of Japan as an international destination, its typical tourism market based on pilgrimages and hot springs had to evolve in order to satisfy an anxious class of foreigners demanding the authenticity of their touristic sights. This brought the government to research into new ways to make its tourism appealing (Funck 2016, 361), and the role of food as part of the national brand here played a key role. We must not regard

1 "Inbound and Outbound Travel Trends," Japan National Tourism Organization, accessed May 10, 2019, http://www.mlit.go.jp/common/001169453.pdf.
2 "About the JTA," Japan Tourism Agency, accessed April 14, 2019, https://www.mlit.go.jp/kankocho/en/about/index.html.

food here as the consumption of food itself, but rather as the experience of its culture, as, in this ambit, food and foodways are a cultural artefact providing a medium for the expression of local culture and identity (Ottenbacher and Harrington 2013, 4), conceived to give tourists the ultimate authentic experience they are looking for.

Recent trends in media and tourism made food the perfect product to sell the Japan brand through tourism consumption; specifically the growing global interest in food–fueled by the production of food-centered media (Cramer et al. 2011, ix)–and the rise of the experiential travel (Skift 2014a). In this context, gastrodiplomacy campaigns brought forward by the Japanese government actively worked to strengthen the image of Japanese cuisine abroad and the country's edible brand (Cwiertka 2018, 102). It will come as no surprise then that, according to JTA's "Survey on Consumption Trends among Foreigners Visitors in Japan" (□□□□□□□□□□□ hōnichi gaikokujin shōhi dōkō chōsa), "eating Japanese food" (□□□□□□□□□ Nihon-shoku wo taberu koto) has become the number one activity prospective inbound travelers want to engage in once arrived in Japan (JTA 2018, 24).

In this context, the international popularity of Japanese food has played a key role: the growing popularization of sushi and the global interest in food created a common ground for the development of a worldwide interest in Japanese cuisine. For this reason, my research will focus on the role of food within the Japanese branding strategy, to ultimately explore its relevance in the tourism sector. Due to the recent development of a separate kind of niche tourism related to Japanese distilling and brewing traditions, the role of drinks and beverages in the same context will not hereby be discussed. However, a significant amount of actors tends to refer to Food & Beverage or Food & Drinks as a unified category; for the purpose of this study, I chose to consider them solely relevant to the food ambit.

The main research goal of this study is thus twofold: first, to understand why Japanese government is using food as a product to give legitimization to its entire national brand, specifically by selling it through tourism consumption; second, to establish which strategies are being adopted in order to reach this scope. More generally, I intend to explore current trends in Japanese tourism in order to understand them in a broader context: why did food become such a central aspect of contemporary culture and, eventually, international travel? How did this brought benefit to the Japan brand? This thesis tries to answer these questions. The focus of my research mainly remains within the years 2010s, as they constitute the period in which strategies for national branding saw the strongest focus on Japan's contents industries. However, I adopted a considerable amount of references from the years 2000s, considering the importance that these years represent in the efforts aimed at improving both inbound tourism development and the national brand. In order to conduct my analysis I made use of a wide range of primary sources, both in Japanese and English, ranging

from governmental statistical data, press releases and online statements, as well as personal communication with JTA officials, to analysis of field studies and reports conducted by marketing firms and research companies. I have also taken part in two Tokyo tourism experiences revolving around Japanese food, specifically aimed at foreign tourists, where I collected statements and observations from both guests and hosts. Moreover, I conducted two separate interviews with the hosts to investigate their impressions on foreign tourists' interest in Japanese cuisine; lastly, I issued a survey to fellow participants in the experiences to explore their motivation and overall impression of the activities.

This thesis will be divided into four chapters. To introduce the topic of tourism in Japan, the first chapter outlines the development of both the national brand and international Japanese tourism, in order to give a broader historical context to the topic. It will also introduce the concepts and events that led to the creation of the Japan brand, with a particular regard to the role of food in this ambit.

The second chapter builds up on the idea of food as a fundamental part of the national brand of Japan, exploring reasons for its importance in public diplomacy and inbound tourism. Indeed, later on the chapter introduces the concept of food tourism, to then understand it in the Japanese context with an analysis of the country's latest international tourism campaign, which directly tackles the global trends of food tourism and experiential travel.

In the third chapter, I tried to draw possible explanations for the increasing interest of the world for food-related media, production and consumption. After trying to establish the actuality of the phenomenon, I then shifted my analysis to explore it within the tourism context, narrowing the discourse by researching the interests of younger generations. Lastly, I drew my conclusions by specifically referring to the case of Japan in this ambit.

The last chapter concentrates on the fieldwork I conducted while in Tokyo. To introduce my findings, I first explain the concept of collaborative consumption as a phenomenon directly linked to the rise of food tourism and experiential travel, in such a way to introduce the impact of Airbnb Experiences on Tokyo's tourism patterns and trends.

Finally, I will include my conclusion, where I will present an overview of the concepts I hitherto explored in order to summarize my research's findings.

1. Chapter One: Development of tourism and the national brand

1.1. Literature on Japanese inbound tourism development

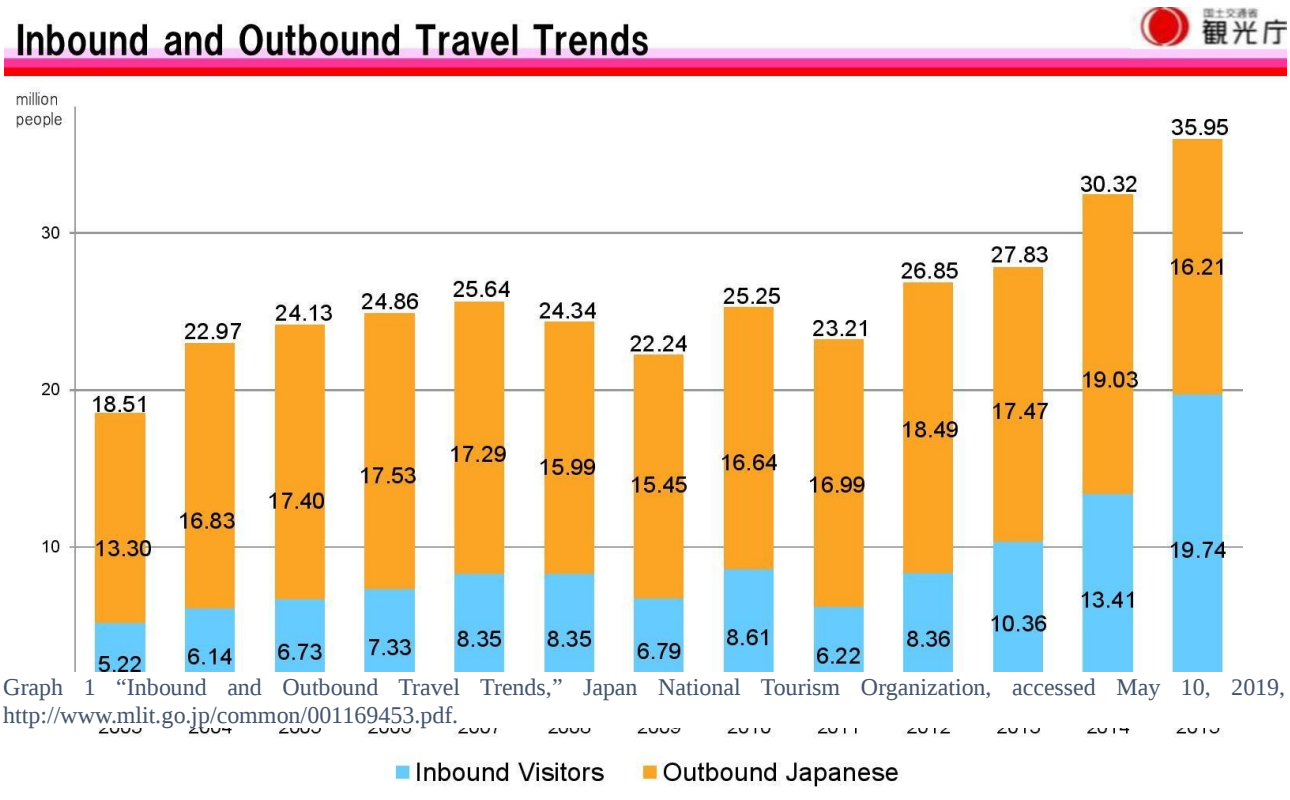
The literature on Japanese tourism is extensive and it has been covering the historical development of the industry in the country as well as exploring the reasons behind it. Funck and Cooper (2003) drew a compelling outline of the phenomenon, researching the evolution of tourism patterns in Japan, with special regards to domestic tourism. While domestic tourism remains outside the scope of this research, understanding its historical changes has been helpful in drawing a wider picture of the Japanese tourism phenomenon. Inbound tourism, on the other hand, is highly relevant to the purposes of this study but it has not been quite researched as Japanese domestic tourism; a foundation study is represented by the work of Soshiroda (2005), who first analyzed the characteristics of inbound policies with regards to promotion, overseas advertising, services, and education (Soshiroda 2005, 1101). Understanding the history and means of Japanese tourism development constitute a perfect framework to analyze the development of the phenomenon today. However, scholars in this field have not yet adequately addressed the influence of the Japan national brand on tourism promotion policies, especially in regards to the concept defined by McGray (2002) as “Gross National Cool”, precisely “a reminder that commercial trends and products, and a country’s knack for spawning them, can serve political and economic ends” (McGray 2002). Recent developments in the sector show that popular culture and media trends are indeed influencing tourism promotion campaigns, ultimately shaping the Japanese tourism industry. The purpose of this study is to contribute to literature in this field.

The modern era of Japanese tourism can be traced back to the late 19th century, when the government first started to adopt tourism policies in a national effort to show Japan’s competitiveness as a civilized country (Soshiroda 2005, 1102; Funck and Cooper 2013, 33-34). During a period going from 1893 to 1912 (year of the foundation of the Japan Travel Bureau, the oldest travel agency in Japan), Japanese international tourism policies were intertwined with diplomatic policies, as they closely cooperated to the same goal: raising Japan’s international status (Soshiroda 2005, 1102). This shows how the use of tourism as a mean of public diplomacy is not a new practice in Japan, and that the government kept an eye on the country’s international reputation since long before the development of the concept of nation branding.

While Japanese government has been trying to attract foreign tourists into the country ever since the nineteenth century, up until the 1960s traveling to Japan remained a luxury for wealthy travelers from Western countries or remained limited to business trips (Funck and Cooper 2013, 185). It will be in the twenty-first century that Japanese inbound tourism will enter a new phase,

with the government taking positive action into encouraging foreign tourists to visit. Indeed, the 1960s have been credited as the start of active inbound tourism promotion in Japan (Funck and Cooper 2013, 43; Soshiroda 2005, 1103), as they encompassed several of the sectors milestones, including the enactment of the 1963 Basic Tourism Law (国国国国国 kankō kihon-hō) and the founding of specific associations aimed at promoting inbound tourism, like the Japan National Tourism Organization (国国国国国国国国 kokusai kankō shinkō kikō, JNTO) in 1964.

However, the years 2000s constitute a pivotal point for Japanese inbound tourism. In fact, ever since then tourism has been positioned as one of the pillars of Japanese economic development strategy by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT 2016). The year 2002 marked the official designation of tourism as a national policy issue, also due to the designation of Japan as the co-host of the Football World Cup together with South Korea. The event was a chance to put Japan back on the international map, such a good chance in fact that in 2003 JNTO inaugurated the "Visit Japan!" campaign, setting a target to reach 10 million inbound visitors by 2010. For comparison, in 2003 foreign visitors coming to Japan amounted to 5.22 million, a figure amounting to only 30% of its 16 million outbound tourist rate, placing the country at the 35th place in the world for international arrivals (Soshiroda 2005, 1100). In order to meet the "Visit Japan!" goal, in 2008 the Japan Tourism Agency (□□□ kankō-chō, JTA) is founded, marking a new turn for Japanese inbound tourism policies: indeed, JTA identifies making the country into a "tourism nation" (□□□□ kankō rikkoku) as the primary goal of its activities.[3] The joint forces of JTA and JNTO and their numerous tourism campaigns have thus brought the number of foreign tourists visiting Japan from 5.22 million in 2003 to 10.36 million in 2013. The number then almost doubled when it reached 19.3 million tourists just two years later in 2015 (graph 1), completely exceeding the initial premises of the "Visit Japan!" campaign.



Graph 1 "Inbound and Outbound Travel Trends," Japan National Tourism Organization, accessed May 10, 2019, http://www.mlit.go.jp/common/001169453.pdf.

3 "About the JTA," Japan Tourism Agency, accessed April 14, 2019, https://www.mlit.go.jp/kankocho/en/about/index.html.

Japanese government's concern with inbound tourism rate is not coincidental: it is instead part of a carefully crafted strategy to make the best use of Japan's national brand, in order to make it coherent together with other national interests. Indeed, JTA was created in an effort to actively coordinate the cooperation between public and private stakeholders operating in the tourism industry (Funck and Cooper 2013, 54). One of the prime challenges that nation branding faces is to balance the diverse mix of attributes that most nations have, in an adequate way (Dinnie 2008a, 193): possessing an image related to either only innovation or business, or uniquely to heritage and natural history may alter the international perception of a nation's industry. The reason why JTA's tourism strategy actively oversees the cooperation between public and private stakeholders is to make the most coherent use of the Japanese national brand in the tourism sector, so that the two can mutually benefit each other.

1.2. The Japanese national brand

According to the Council of Foreign Relations[4], the practice of nation branding stands for the action of applying corporate branding techniques to countries. While branding of products and services might be considered easier because of the direct involvement of the issuing company in its marketing and/or advertisement, the reputation and the image of nations is an independent concept and therefore it operates in more complex and random ways (Anholt 2011, 6). Nation branding is a powerful tool to influence a country's image in a proactive way, and it can benefit its citizens across various sectors. Indeed, nation-branding techniques can be used in a multitude of contexts: they can be aimed at increasing inbound tourism, attract foreign investment, improving export and or attracting talents (Hieronimus et al. 2005, 12). Furthermore, Van Ham (2001) observed that smart states build their brands in the same way smart companies do, and Akutsu (2008, 219) that the equity of a nation brand resides in the minds of its audiences. It will come as no surprise then that in recent years, an increasing interest in the concept and practice of nation branding sparked among nations. Today, more and more governments try to apply techniques of commercial branding in an effort to improve their country's image and reputation.

The starting point of the use of national branding strategies by the Japanese government can be traced back to 2002, when the then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi issued a speech declaring a goal to increase the country's international competitiveness through the creation, protection and strategic utilization of intellectual property (Intellectual Property Policy Headquarters 2006, 18). This speech foreshadowed the rise of bunka gaikō (□□□□ cultural diplomacy), a form of diplomacy that in the following years would have shaped the Japanese national branding strategy; more specifically, it anticipated the new inclination for Japanese government to employ popular and

4 "Nation Branding Explained," Council on Foreign Relations, last modified November 9, 2007. https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/nation-branding-explained.

consumer culture to further national interests (Cwiertka 2018, 99). Therefore, in an effort to start the planned intellectual property policy on a full-fledged scale, March 2003 saw the enactment of the Basic Law on Intellectual Property (□□□□□ chizai kihon-hō) as well as the foundation of the Intellectual Property Policy Headquarters, which eventually established the Task Force on Contents (Task Force).

The discussion of the Task Force initially focused on the management of media contents such as music, movies, game software and animation; however, later on, other key resources of Japanese branding were included in its agenda, specifically intellectual and cultural assets related to food culture, local brands and fashion. Precisely, in 2004 the Task Force organized the Japan Brand Working Group (Working Group) to "discuss the directions and the key elements of branding Japan" (Akutsu 2008, 211). Subsequently, in 2005 the Working Group compiled a report titled "Promotion of Japan Brand Strategy", which recognized "foster[ing] a rich food culture" as one of its three main goals (Akutsu 2008, 213). As the country aims to become an intellectual property-based nation, the Japan Brand strategy focuses on improving Japan's cultural power and promoting the free exchange of culture, by using cultural resources such as local brands, fashion and food culture to create a Japan brand based on the Japanese lifestyle (Intellectual Property Policy Headquarters 2006, 130). Food culture particularly has come to cover a special place in the Japanese national brand making, considering the massive popularity that sushi received abroad since the 1990s.

1.3. The reasons for a new brand

There are three main reasons why the government felt the need for Japan to assert its image through the building of a national brand. The first reason has to do with the external brand of Japan, as the country needed, and still needs, a non-threatening way to exercise its international influence. Precisely, in the early 2000s, Japanese government identified in soft power a way to regain and reformulate its national identity away from its association with wartime aggression (Sakamoto and Allen 2011, 109). Nye (2003) was the first to illustrate the concept of soft power, describing it as the process through which attractive culture and ideas might be a more useful tool to countries acting in world politics, if compared to more conventional, coercive means of hard power like military or economic. Indeed, soft power tries to attract and move opinion to create positive outcomes through the attraction of values and culture, rather than through the coercion or violence of hard power (Nye 2003). For this reason, the 2005 report to the Japanese government that explained the concept of soft power was titled "'Bunka-kōryū no heiwa kokka' Nihon wo sōzō wo", which can be translated as "towards the creation of Japan as a nation of peace and cultural exchanges" (Bunka gaikō no suishin ni kansuru kondankai 2005). The main weakness posed to the development of a Japanese

brand built on cultural power lied in the historical memory of the Pacific War and colonial period, and the only effective way to change international perceptions linked to these events was "to create a positive counter-image that [had] more truth to it than existing negative image" (Grimes 2005, 44). The focus on culture as something soft and non-threatening proved to be attractive to the Japanese state and many Japanese people: the idea that not military power but culture was the new indicator of influence in a country increasingly proliferated.

The second reason concerns the country's interest in becoming a tourism-oriented nation. Positioning a country as a distinctive brand can be useful to attract the attention of a number of international actors, such as international organizations, trade partners, investment bankers, and the global travel (AALEP, 2015). Indeed, promoting tourism in a successful way requires in turn a context that will allow visitors to appreciate the country's offer. As a result, Japanese tourism promotion cannot be conducted successfully without appropriate consideration of the state of the country, presented abroad as the national brand. As the two are directly connected, their development will be most successful in a case when the national brand and tourism promotion are equally and mutually effective.

The last reason has to do with the perception that Japanese people have of the country in itself, or the "internal brand" (Dinnie 2008a, 248). This form of promotion that focuses on soft power, becomes more difficult and less effective when Japanese citizens view themselves negatively, for the domestic population is an active participant of the internal nation branding (Dinnie 2008a, 248). The unbalance between the perspective on internal and external satisfaction with the Japanese brand makes it vital for the country to reinvent its image, precisely because Japanese people are the best promoters of the Japanese brand. An article written in collaboration between *U.S. News & World Report*, BAV Consulting and The Wharton School of Pennsylvania, found that Japanese citizens view their own country much more negatively and pessimistically than the rest of the world (Bedi and Reibstein 2019). However, in 2019 it was reported that the world outside of Japan sees it as one of the best countries in the world,[5] proof that the Japan brand is working. Creating soft power thus became a way to relieve both the internal and external sides of the Japanese brand: in this way, the Japan Brand Strategy could continue pushing for the exploitation of its contents industries, and in return, it would gain the domestic support needed to give credit to this exploitation.

5 "Overall Best Countries Ranking," U.S. News & World Report, accessed May 17, 2019, https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/overall-rankings.

1.4. Japan's "Gross National Cool"

As explained earlier, in 2003 Japanese government set an ambitious target to attract 10 million international tourists a year by 2010. This was the main objective of the "Visit Japan!" campaign, which started in a moment when the Japan branding strategy was being developed, and probably because of it. To reach the campaign's goal, the focus of national branding began to shift from a focus on tradition to include a blend of traditional and pop culture (Seaton and Yamamura 2015, 6). In a report commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (□□□ gaimu-shō, MOFA) on the use of pop culture in cultural diplomacy, pop culture (□□□□□□□ poppu karucha), has been defined as "culture produced in the everyday lives of ordinary people" (ippan shimin ni yoru nichijō no katsudō de seiritsu shite iru bunka, MOFA 2006). This rather broad definition allows what many recognize as forms of traditional culture–such as visual arts and pottery–to be categorized as pop culture along with anime and manga (MOFA 2006). Pop culture in the Japanese context can be thus considered a sort of an umbrella term: it refers to that merging of traditional and contemporary culture that makes the essence of the country's new national brand. Japanese government placed a high priority on making the most out of the potential of contents industries and popular culture, and after Douglas McGray (2002) famously coined the "Gross National Cool" expression in a Foreign Policy article, quickly the discourse of culture as an indicator of a nation's status and influence became ubiquitous in Japan (Sakamoto and Allen 2011, 109). As a result, Japanese politicians gradually began to circulate the idea that exploiting the Cool Japan phenomenon could generate soft power (Valaskivi 2013, 488).

1.5. Why food: the sushi boom

Food is today widely recognized as one of the main contents industries of Japan, its careful consideration within nation branding strategies alone is a clear proof. Just a little over a decade after having first identified the potential of popular culture as soft power, in 2012 the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (□□□□□ keizai-sangyō-shō, METI) launched the "Cool Japan Strategy"[6]. In its "Cool Japan Strategy Interim Report" (METI 2012), the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry committed to "promote the Cool Japan strategy to transform the appeal of Japanese culture and lifestyle [...] into added value [...] and create new growth industries" (METI 2012, 4). This report identified five product categories that the Cool Japan Strategy could harness: content, fashion, lifestyle, tourism and food.

Japanese food talks about Japan's soft power and cultural diplomacy much like anime or manga (Bestor 2014, 60); it fosters the same charm and affection on foreign and domestic public

6 "Cool Japan Strategy," Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, accessed June 27, 2019, https://www.cao.go.jp/cool_japan/english/index-e.html.

alike. The fascination of the global public with Japanese cuisine can be undoubtedly be traced back to the 1990s, when the phenomenon now known as sushi boom (Sakamoto and Allen 2011) established its impact worldwide. The global sushi boom is an undeniable trend and has been subject of extensive research (Issenberg 2007; Bestor 2000; McKevitt 2017; Cwiertka 2005): while the phenomenon originally began in the 1970s, the 1990s marked its global escalation when Europe started to catch up with the trend, first originated in the United States (Sakamoto and Allen, 101; Bestor 2000, 56). Between 1988 and 1998 the number of sushi bars in the US increased by 400 percent, and by the second decade of the twenty-first century, more than 20,000 Japanese restaurants operated across the country (McKevitt 2017, 156). Concerning the last twenty years, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (□□□□□ nōrin-suisan-shō, MAFF) (2017b) declared that the number of Japanese restaurants in the world went from 24,000 in 2006 to over 117,000 in 2017.

Surely enough, much of the Japanese restaurants that have mushroomed around the world since the 1990s may or may not have little to nothing related to Japanese cuisine, people, and culture. However, as Bestor (2000) noted,

> In the global economy of consumption, the brand equity of sushi as Japanese cultural property adds to the cachet of both the country and the cuisine. (61)

This meant that the more popularity sushi acquired on itself, the more Japan acquired as well, posing as a potentially endless source of approval for its cultural capital. However, a consideration of the sushi boom context is necessary, as sushi acquired its popularity in a moment where it was not the only cuisine booming; in 1990s, dining out was increasingly becoming a leisure activity (Cwiertka 2005, 243), and ethnic cuisine started to become more popular, affordable and available in many European cities. Customers were looking for new and exotic experiences, and demand peaked: as a result, the owners of these establishments were overwhelmingly in quest for economic gain (Benton and Pieke, 1998). Following this trend, the culinary boom of Japan reached such an extent that Japanese food was soon identified as a most valuable path to follow for the future of the country's nation branding (Dinnie 2008b, 62).

1.6. Japanese response to the sushi boom

Policy-makers quickly noticed the sushi boom and grasped the potential represented by Japanese food popularity. In 2005, the Japan Brand Working Group selected "foster[ing] a rich food culture" as one of the three main goals of the Promotion of Japan Brand Strategy" (Akutsu 2008, 213), and in 2006, the Strategy listed food one of the "important properties that represent the gross national cultural power of Japan" (Intellectual Property Policy Headquarters 2006, 130). As a result, the government started to delve into looking at how to promote Japanese food as the "bearer" (□□□

ninaite) of the Japan brand, as explicitly labeled by the 2005 report "Nihon shoku-bunka no suishin – Nihon burando no ninaite" (Promotion of Japanese Food Culture – Bearer of the Japan brand), in such a way to "promote food culture as a state strategy" (kokka senryaku toshite shoku-bunka wo suishin suru koto) (Shoku-bunka kenkyū suishin kondankai 2005, 12).

As the sushi popularity kept on booming worldwide, soon enough foreign countries started following their own inventive, creating staples such as the notorious California roll, hence at times distancing themselves from what Japanese people and officials considered the purity of the country's food. An initial amusement experienced in reaction to these creative initiatives was soon followed by a sentiment that resembled irritation; for this reason, various intervention initiatives labeled as "sushi police" (Faiola 2006) were taken into consideration to regulate the image of Japanese food abroad (Sanchata, 2007; Faiola 2006). Nevertheless, these sentiments eventually proved themselves a threat to a Japanese brand built on non-threatening peace and cultural exchanges, and they were rather rushed on the way to acceptance. The public received the initiatives negatively, as they suggested an essentialist and nationalist rhetoric that rejected the value of non-Japanese restaurants that pretended to be real Japanese (Sakamoto and Allen 2011, 109). The government quickly realized that soft power is of no use if the sushi police may lead to the glorification of any nationalistic sentiments (Sakamoto and Allen 2011, 111). Therefore, instead of renouncing to the idea of using food as a national cultural asset altogether, they freed themselves from the commitment to authenticity and started condoning alterations of Japanese food abroad as homages to national cuisine. At the same time however, other initiatives were still taken to regulate Japanese restaurants abroad that were worthy of being called such (see for example JRO, Japanese Restaurant popularization and promotion Organization [7]). In the Japanese case, state culinary nationalism never disappeared, never softened, it just changed face; even without a commitment to authenticity, food and cuisine remained an essential part of Japan's nationalist agenda and soft power discourse (Sakamoto and Allen 2011, 112).

Finally, the renouncement to authenticity did not represent a change of plans for the Japanese government: the main quality the brand needed was cool, and Japanese cuisine is cool (Bestor 2018, 107); still, in order to be cool it did not necessarily have to be quintessentially Japanese. The story of Japanese food being used as a product finds a clear proof in these events. While the Japan Brand Strategy identified food as one of the assets that made the Japanese brand, or

7 "Nihon-shoku resutoran fukyū suishin kikō setsuritsu no go annai (Japanese Restaurant Promotion Organization –Guide to Establishment)," Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, last modified May 2007, http://www.maff.go.jp/j/shokusan/export/e_conf/h19_soukai/pdf/070525_sankou04.pdf.

the Japanese identity, the reality is that to be part of this brand, of this identity, the food the government was talking about did not have to be authentically Japanese as a prerequisite.

2. Chapter Two: Japanese Food and Tourism

2.1. Cool Japan Fund and the edible brand

In November 2013, the Cool Japan Fund (CJF) was founded as an investment fund aiming to commercialize the Cool Japan and to increase overseas demand by providing risk capital for businesses across a variety of areas[8]. Just by looking at the foundation date, it becomes clear that the reasons for founding CJF were far from coincidental, especially in regards to food and the country's edible brand. In fact, in December 2013, "Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for the celebration of New Year" was added to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) list of Intangible Cultural Heritage.[9] Recently, scholars have argued that washoku is a myth constructed for the inscription (Kohsaka 2017, 66; Cwiertka 2018, 98): this is because, among the others, the demarcation line between what is and what is not washoku became thinner with time. In the inscription, washoku is clearly described as a "social practice based on a comprehensive set of skills, knowledge, practice, and traditions related to the production, processing, preparation, and consumption of food. It is associated with an essential spirit of respect for nature closely related to the sustainable use of natural resources"[10]. Despite this extensive description, today washoku came to include a much more indulgent list of dishes and products.

The hypothesis that the foundation of CJF depended on the official recognition of washoku as part of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list might be haphazard; however, food indeed represents a valuable and fundamental asset of CJF's activities. CJF operates on five main areas of investment, in line with the Gross National Cool (McGray 2002) aspect of the national brand: Media & Content, Food & Services, Lifestyle, Inbound & Healthcare and Various Industries. Of twenty-nine invested projects, nine of CJF investments are listed within the category Food & Services, and one more aims at promoting Japanese food through social media, thus falling into the media category[11]. Therefore, food is clearly one of the most profitable assets of "Cool Japan": the

8 "What is Cool Japan Fund?" Cool Japan Fund, accessed May 13, 2019, https://www.cj-fund.co.jp/en/about/cjfund.html.

9 "Evaluation of nominations for inscription in 2013 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (item 8 on the agenda)," United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, accessed May 19, 2019, https://ich.unesco.org/en/8-representative-list-00665.

10 "Nomination file no.00869 for inscription in 2013 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity", Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, last modified January 15, 2013, https://ich.unesco.org/doc/download.php?versionID=20649.

11 "Investment in a Modern Media Brand to Promote Japanese Food, Travel, and Design to Millennial Consumers around the Globe", Cool Japan Fund, accessed May 15, 2019, https://www.cj-fund.co.jp/en/investment/deal_list/vol29/.

institution of CJF recognizes the economic value of Japan's Gross National Cool, referring specifically to its application to content industries. The argument here is not just the fact that washoku was a myth created for the inscription, but that the inscription of washoku into the UNESCO list was needed in a long process of strategic branding, to give credibility and official character to the Cool Japan Strategy.

Ever since the establishment of the Task Force on Contents, the government started to include in its nation branding activities every contents industry that represented Japan's national cultural power. This choice was made to strategically build and strengthen the contents business through the assimilation of the brand image, which was being led in collaboration with the tourism industry (Intellectual Property Policy Headquarters 2006, 130). As this collaboration represented great importance, in 2014 JNTO and CJF started a joint effort to increase the number of foreign visitors and "to improve overseas development and international competitiveness of Japan's incredible and world-famous products and services" (JNTO and CJF 2014). The cooperation between JNTO and the CJF is clear proof of the fact that the government is using contents industries as a product, and that tourism is a vehicle for selling. Food is a content industry, and contents industries are driving tourism in Japan: Japanese cuisine has a longstanding reputation for being a global icon of "cool" (Bestor 2018, 107) and its appeal is increasingly growing amongst travelers visiting the country. Food as part of contents industries is being recognized as a trend, a valuable product to appeal to a relatively upscale class of customers that is not much different from that of 1990s Europe looking for "a novel, exotic experience" in ethnic restaurants (Cwiertka 2005, 244).

2.2. The UNESCO inscription of washoku

As previously stated, the 2013 inscription of washoku into the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list was not casual and instead a carefully pondered event to establish the official character of the Japanese cultural diplomacy (Bestor 2018, 107). Various events can be taken into consideration when making this statement. First, the CJF was instituted just one month before the washoku inscription; both the name and the intent of the Fund suggest its implication with content industries. Second, the events surrounding the inscription lead to believing that it was a calculated event: in 2012 South Korea was asked by UNESCO to withdraw its proposal for the inscription, which focused on the "Royal Cuisine of the Joseon Dynasty" (Cwiertka 2018, 97), quickly prompting the Japanese team in charge of submitting that year's proposal to revise it entirely. In fact, the initial Japanese proposal had little to do with the traditional home cooking the washoku inscription talks about: instead, the proposal supported the nomination of "Distinctive Japanese

cuisine with traditional features centered on kaiseki", traditionally considered the Japanese haute cuisine (Rath 2013, 68).

Countries that wish their nomination to be inserted in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list must make sure that the nominations meet five specific criteria mentioned in the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage[12]. Of these five criteria, one was particularly overlooked by officials from both the two countries, namely the fact that "the element has been nominated following the widest possible participation of the community, group or, if applicable, individuals concerned and with their free, prior and informed consent"[13]. The Japanese officials linked the Korean rejection to UNESCO's stance against nominations that focused narrowly on elitist or other less inclusive versions of culinary experience (Bestor 2018, 109): if the "Royal Cuisine of the Joseon Dynasty" failed to meet the criteria, chances were that the same outcome was set for the Japanese inscription as well. Therefore, the initial plan to center the nomination on kaiseki was discarded, and instead Japanese officials revised the nomination in such a way to submit an entirely new application that would meet all of the UNESCO criteria. These events suggest that the recognition of Japanese food as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity was a goal that had to be achieved at all costs, regardless of whether or not it was altering the truth (Cwiertka 2018, 98).

The government and private entities are equally interested in promoting washoku abroad, and that is also because of Japan's accelerating depopulation and shrinking demands (Kohsaka 2017, 68). Contents industries are an excellent way to push for consumption and boost the economy: the investment and promotion of Japanese food serves as a way to promote a completely wider set of products. However, the events surrounding the inscription give away a rather sudden sense of urgency in the promotion of washoku (Kohsaka 2017, 68). Officials have already linked the UNESCO application to the concept of Japan's Gross National Cool (Bestor 2018, 107), and this urgency might be a suggestion of how much needed and carefully crafted the inscription was in relation to the Cool Japan Strategy. The government needed an official source to give recognition to the branding strategy, and the inscription gives Japan's soft power an international response, thus becoming a key event to maintain Japan's standing in the world. In this way, Japanese food can be promoted as a true leading asset of the country and in turn be able to give official character to the other contents industries as well. The country needed the UNESCO inscription because the

12 "Inscription on the Representative List – Criteria," United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, accessed May 20, 2019, https://ich.unesco.org/en/procedureof-inscription-00809#inscription-on-the-representative-list.
13 Ibid.

recognition of its entire cultural diplomacy depended on it: the Japan brand is now as intricately linked with washoku as it is with Hello Kitty (Cwiertka 2018, 102).

2.3. Gastrodiplomacy and tourism in Japan

A country's culinary culture provides a tangible demonstration of its history and distinctive culture (Riley 2000, 188-190), and it is thus the reason why it is such an important feature of Japanese cultural diplomacy. However, the recently coined term gastrodiplomacy highlights a new role for food in shaping diplomatic relations (Rockower 2012, 236). Gastrodiplomacy is a form of public diplomacy that highlights and promotes the understanding of a national culinary culture among a foreign public. Rather than simply promoting food abroad, gastrodiplomacy refers to "raising international awareness of a country's edible national brand through the promotion of its culinary and cultural heritage" (Rockower 2014, 14). This form of edible nation branding is a growing trend in public diplomacy (Haugh 2014, 9); countries like Thailand, Malaysia and South Korea have tried to use their own culinary tradition to appeal to foreign public, and now Japan follows too. As discussed above, the Intellectual Property Policy Headquarters identified food culture as one of the assets to best represent the "gross national cultural power of Japan" (Intellectual Property Policy Headquarters 2006, 130): gastrodiplomacy operates in such a way to give international recognition and credibility to food because of its intrinsic potential to engage hearts and minds (Chapple-Sokol 2013, 181). Gastrodiplomacy essentially accepts that food is an influencing factor of the public's image of a country's brand, and it tries to make the most of that influence. Its implications in tourism however are just as important: 84% of respondents in a study on national cuisines' ability to influence public opinion on a nation's image reported considered visiting a country based on its national cuisine (Ruddy 2014, 30). Gastrodiplomacy is then first an important strategy in nation branding; however, because a country's gastronomy provides a tangible demonstration of its history and distinctive culture (Riley 2000, 188-190), at the same time food is a prominent differentiating factor in destination image marketing (Dogan and Petkovic 2016, 88), therefore making gastrodiplomacy a valuable part of strategies for tourism promotion and development.

Some gastrodiplomacy campaigns may involve events and attractions to establish their countries' credentials as culinary destinations (Suntikul 2017, 1082), such as the 2006 "Washoku – Try Japan's Good Food" campaign jointly developed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The campaign consisted of organized events at which Japanese food produce could be sampled at Japanese embassies and consulates all over the world (Cwiertka 2018, 99). While the campaign was specifically labeled with the word washoku, the nature of the singular events was in reality much broader and revealed to include the promotion of

more common products, such as tomatoes and peaches, presented as typical regional products coming from various Japanese prefectures[14]. Such campaigns are relevant to the field of tourism because they provide ways to appeal to foreign public who might be reluctant to international traveling (Rockower 2012, 235). Presenting culinary products that relate to the public's familiarity is the government's effort to reach those who might be unwilling to see Japan as a travel destination, in such a way to secure the widest audience possible. The gastrodiplomacy of "Washoku – Try Japan's Good Food" campaign was planned in this sense: by a sort of "exposure effect" (Obermiller 1985, 28), the public audience will have acquired more knowledge of Japanese food, fostering their familiarity with it and increasing the chances of them visiting the country in the future. At the same time, that same familiarity would have increased the chance of foreign exports. The exposure effect draws on the contact hypothesis, through which increased contact and familiarity encourage acceptance and even desire for further contact (Suntikul, 2017, 1080). Another important event setting the tone of the success of Japanese gastrodiplomacy was the World Expo held in Milan in 2015, titled "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life". Given the relevance of the event to the purpose of the Japan Brand, the country worked as hard as it could to give to its cuisine the recognition it deserved, especially since the Expo took place just two years after the UNESCO inscription. The Japan Pavilion proved itself a great success: it welcomed 2.28 million guests, and it was awarded the gold prize for best exhibition in the history of Japan's participations in International Registered Exhibitions (MOFA 2016, 115). The Expo participation constituted a mean to engage with people on a more direct level, while still being under the immediate control of the government.

While campaigns and policy-making is the first idea coming to mind of a country's involvement in gastrodiplomacy, considering the above-mentioned potential of food to engage hearts and minds (Chapple-Sokol 2013, 181), more and more countries are engaging in activities like ambassadorships as a mean to foster more individual interactions between people. In February 2015, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries first started to appoint the figures of "Special Goodwill Ambassador and Goodwill Ambassador to Spread Japanese Cuisine" (MAFF 2019). The ambassadors are "Japanese cuisine experts who serve as advisors to Japanese restaurants, etc. overseas [...] to better promote Japanese cuisine and culture" (MAFF 2017a). As of February 2018 there are 24 ambassadors appointed worldwide, and they serve as culinary emissaries to "disseminate information on Japanese food and dietary culture through their own

14 "'WASHOKU - Try Japan's Good Food jigyō' Nihon-kakuchi no shokuzai wo sekai he shōkai! ("Washoku – Try Japan's Good Food Project" Introducing to the world ingredients from every Japanese region!)", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, last modified April, 2011, https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/annai/zaigai/washoku/.

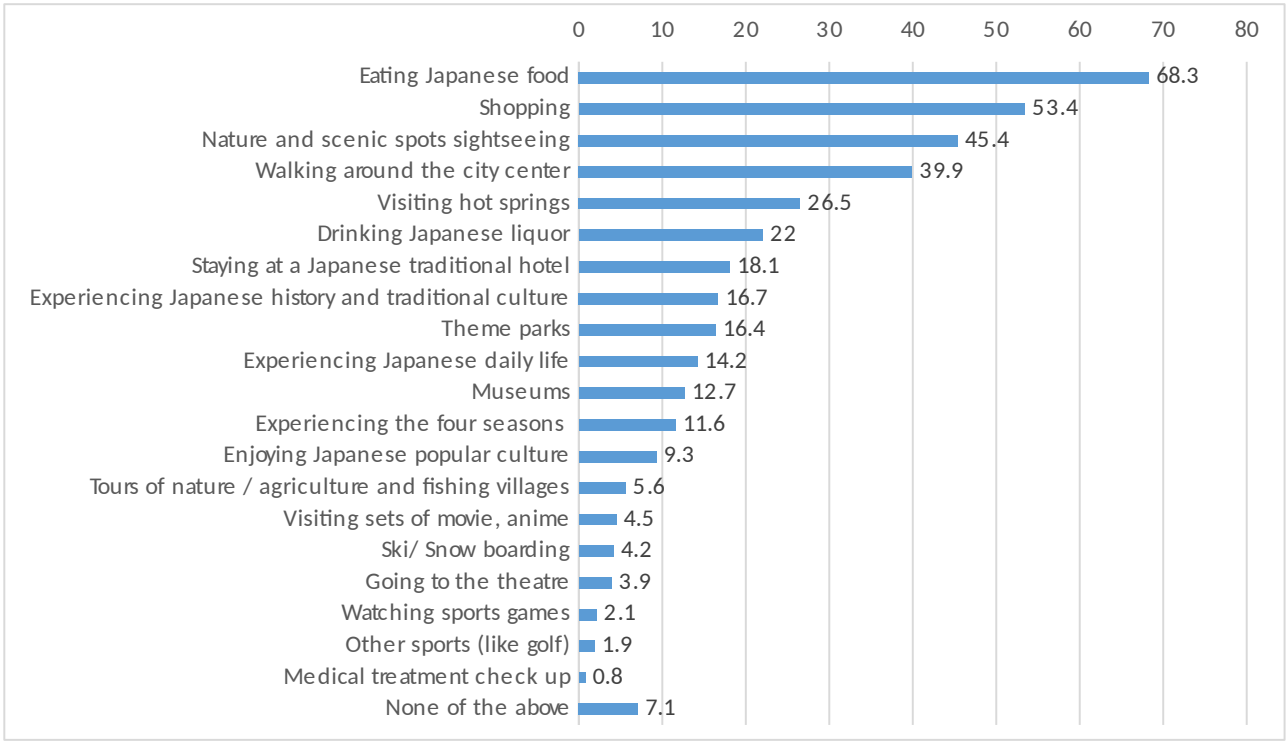
activities and appearances in media" (MAFF 2019) thus giving gastrodiplomacy campaigns a more individual interaction that can be tailored and adapted to the specific needs of the country. This individual interaction will then serve as a sort of peer-to-peer gastrodiplomacy (Suntikul 2017, 1086), which does not necessarily have to rely on governmental initiatives, as it will be discussed later with the topic of collaborative consumption in food tourism.

The internal (gastrodiplomacy campaigns; Expo Pavilion) and external (ambassadorships; peer-to-peer gastrodiplomacy) sides of gastrodiplomacy in tourism, are equally important to reach Japan's aims of fostering a rich culinary culture as part of its national brand. The joint effort of these two sides makes it sure that what the government has implemented made its way across people and locals: food is indeed a protagonist of the Japanese tourism experience, because the government has decided so.

2.4. Japan, food and tourism: expectations and income

Japan is facing the hardships of a shrinking economy and decreasing population: promoting tourism and private consumption in this context is an excellent way to propel growth (Frangos and Hsu 2010; Murayama 2012, 152). Scholars have previously highlighted the positive association between international tourism and economic growth (Du et al. 2010, 460), and as Cárdenas-García et al. (2013) have pointed out:

> The expansion of the economic activity influences positively the economic growth of a country [...] Tourism is considered as an economic activity with the potential to stimulate global economic growth because of its complementarity with other economic activities. (206-207)



Graph 2 "hōnichi mae ni kitai shite ita koto (What I expected before visiting Japan)." In "hōnichi gaikokujin no shōhi dōkō hōnichi gaikoku hito shōhi dōkō chōsa kekka oyobi bunseki heisei 29-nen nenji hōkoku-sho (Consumption trends of foreigners visiting Japan. Results of survey and analysis of foreign consumption trends: year Heisei 29 Annual Report", Japan Tourism Agency, 25. Last modified September 2018. http://www.mlit.go.jp/common/001230775.pdf.

Food is a perfect marketing product to apply to the Japanese tourism sector, precisely because of their "complementarity with other economic activities" (Cárdenas-García et al. 2013, 207). Due to the above discussed "exposure effect" (Obermiller 1985) caused by gastrodiplomacy initiatives, increasing foreign public's familiarity with local cuisine increases the possibility of prospective tourists, foreign exports and investments (Suntikul 2017, 1082). Food consumption provides great revenue to the receiving country, and its impact on tourism revenue in Japan is clear: according to JTA, in 2018 tourists spent 9783 billion yen on food and beverages, amounting to 21.7% of the whole revenue originated from tourism (JTA 2018). The success of Japanese cuisine among travelers is clear, even before they actually visit the country. The first activity that prospective foreign travelers expect to do once arrived in Japan is, in fact, "To eat Japanese food", which is by far a more popular motivation than established assets such as "Shopping" or "Natural and scenic spots sightseeing" (graph 2). One of the characteristics of eating Japanese food is that there is no bias towards Asia or other continents: while shopping and natural sightseeing might be linked to particular interests of travelers, food carries within itself great potential and high expectations from all markets.[15] Therefore, food is a product that can be marketed diagonally, even to prospective tourists, whose first interest might not be directly linked to Japanese food, making food the perfect product for tourism consumption.

15 Ōsakaya Kazuki for JTA, personal communication, January 24, 2019.

According to the 2013 Mandala Research's "American Culinary Traveler Report", the percentage of U.S. leisure travelers who travel to learn about and to enjoy unique dining experiences grew from 40% to 51% between 2006 and 2013 (Mandala Research LCC 2013). In 2012, it was estimated that tourism expenditures on food services in the U.S. topped $201 billion, nearly a quarter of all travel income (Liu et al. 2013, 5). In 2018, a very similar situation occurred in Japan: according to JTA, in 2018 food and beverages amounted to 21.7% of the whole revenue originated from tourism (JTA 2018). Indeed, food tourism has increasingly become a big business (Andersson et al. 2017, 1).

2.5. The concept of Collaborative Consumption

Considering recent trends in tourism experiences, when talking about the consumption of food and beverages the discourse does not have to be limited to the act of eating in itself. Consuming food when traveling is often not as important as its experience: for example, when taking part in tourism experiences related to food, travelers can engage with local culture, living the novelty of a new city or country through a meal, which does not have to be special in order to be memorable (Hall and Mitchell 2003, 60). Today, technology is enabling alternatives that aim to change the tourism industry; food tourism experiences with local hosts are an emerging trend supported by websites, online platforms and apps (Suntikul 2017, 1082), connecting tourists directly with hosts offering home-cooked meals, cooking classes or walking food tours, thus falling within the category of collaborative consumption. According to Botsman (2015), collaborative consumption can be defined as

> An economic system of decentralized networks and marketplaces that unlocks the value of underused assets by matching needs and haves, in ways that bypass traditional middlemen.

Cultural experiences are powerful agents in defining the scope, force and direction of a civilization (Maccannell 1976, 29), and the modern class of tourists live them as a way to establish their status. When individuals take part in sharing activities like those mentioned above, they are trying to take more control over their experience while seeking personal interactions (Sotiriadis and Nduna 2019, 312). They are establishing their status as well-informed and experienced tourists, while at the same time taking advantage of the development of collaborative consumption and its convenience.

Collaborative consumption is mainly revolutionizing two tourism-related industries: accommodation and in-destination activities (Sotiriadis and Nduna 2019, 312). For these reasons, in recent years endless tourism experiences revolving around food became available in Tokyo alone, focusing not only on consumption but also on food making and experiencing, giving tourists and travelers the opportunity to delve into imageries of authenticity and millenary culinary culture.

Because of the local, familiar image of culinary connection that they portray to prospective visitors and tourists, these experiences can be considered as forms of peer-to-peer gastrodiplomacy (Suntikul 2017, 1086). Contrarily to other peer-to-peer gastrodiplomacy initiatives like ambassadorships, food experiences are promoted directly by local hosts rather than the government, and can thus be categorized as part of citizen-led peer-to-peer gastrodiplomacy, while at the same time falling within the collaborative consumption phenomenon.

The leading provider in the field is the peer-to-peer accommodation colossus Airbnb, counting an offering of 5000 Experiences available worldwide (Airbnb 2018a). While providers like Airbnb can host experiences related to any field, more and more activities concentrate solely on offering gastronomic experiences to tourists; the success of these experiences might stand in the fact that, according to Sotiriadis and Nduna (2019, 316), "sharing a diner with locals is always a rich experience". Airbnb Experiences' website itself, while already featuring a Gastronomy category, is expanding its Experiences category list by adding the new "Social Dining" (Airbnb 2018a). Since tourists are increasingly demanding authentic, experience-oriented opportunities in order to feel transported to the context (Grayson and Martinec 2004, 302), these activities channel the demand for passion and give tourists the extra personal take that they need from a holiday. Without ever ceasing to be a product on sale, experiences like those proposed by Airbnb sell to tourists their need for connection and authenticity.

2.6. The "Enjoy my Japan" Campaign

Postmodern society is characterized by a massive globalization, and often consumers find themselves concerned with a quest for identity, meaning and values (Lalicic and Weismayer 2017, 781); as a result, they end up striving to overcome inauthenticity and seek for authenticity (Lewis and Brigder 2000, 15). Authenticity is increasingly becoming a commodity in the tourism sector, as it is a highly sought after feature by travelers. In this context, collaborative consumption offers a viable peer-to-peer way to provide the authentic products tourists are looking for, but tourism campaigns brought forward by countries are also picking up after this strategy. The "Enjoy my Japan" Global Campaign, launched by JNTO and JTA in February 2018, was created in an effort to welcome potential international travelers while they "discover a Japanese charm that is just right for them" (jibun ni pittari no Nihon no miryoku wo hakken, JNTO 2018). The campaign tries to rebrand typical images of Japanese tourism by inviting tourists to create their own personalized video portraying various activities they could engage during their stay in Japan. By inviting tourists to delve into local culture and contents through digital marketing, the campaigns allows tourists to imagine their own unique prospective trip while exploring content that has been tailored to their interests. The ultimate message is that they can indeed have an authentic experience within their

comfort zone, as the content of the campaign is approved by locals, as assured by a “warm welcome from the Japanese side” (Nihon-gawa no shitashimi wo kometa kangei no kimochi, JNTO 2018). Specifically started in an effort to attract tourists from Australia, Europe and US, the campaign strongly channels the Cool Japan Strategy to promote tourism abroad.

Presented at the Internationale Tourismus-Börse Berlin (ITB Berlin), the largest tourism trade fair in the world,[16] the “Enjoy my Japan” campaign tries to appeal to foreigners by developing a marketing approach based on the concept of “fun country Japan” (□□□□□□ tanoshii kuni Nihon), strongly building on the national branding strategy. By focusing on the promotion of seven different passions (□□□□ kyōmi kanshin), the campaign specifically aims to attract overseas tourists who “frequently travel but do not recognize Japan as a travel destination” (kaigairyokō ni wa hinpan ni ikuga Nihon o ryokō-saki to shite ninchi ishiki shite inai, JNTO 2018). “Enjoy my Japan” was created to appeal specifically to travelers from Europe, North America, and Australia, where Japanese tourism managers have identified an especially high growth potential: only 11% of tourists to Japan come from these regions, whereas 85% came from the neighboring Asia-Pacific region (Kluge 2018). The videos are accessible through the campaign’s website, and the passions they refer to were identified through a survey conducted in the target countries (JNTO 2018). The viewers can access over one million personalized automatically generated videos by selecting the preferences that most apply to their interests (JNTO 2018), summarized in the seven passions: tradition, city, outdoors, art, nature, relaxation and cuisine.

Maccannell (1976, 31) argued that in an industrial society, the refinement of life-style occurs through a process of emulating elites, and Richards (1996, 272) suggests that individuals from higher socioeconomic background serve as the cultural intermediaries identified by Bourdieu (1984, 91). It will not come as a surprise then why Japanese government decided to dedicate this highly personalized campaign at six specific countries (Germany, UK, France, US, Canada and Australia, JNTO 2018) of which five are included in the G7 together with Japan itself. By tailoring its marketing to wealthy tourists’ specific interests, JNTO creates for them the portrait of a unique experience, in the hope that they will set a trend for prospective visitors as well, in such a way to maximize its marketing prospects. Whether or not Japan was ever in their interests, the idea here is that tourists are going to find what they are looking for, one way or another.

In relation to food promotion, conventional communication channels have increasingly lost importance in favor of new digital means (OECD 2012, 121): indeed, digital marketing is an appealing strategy more and more adopted by Japanese government in order to increase its gastronomic and tourism appeal abroad, and the “Enjoy my Japan” campaign is a clear example.

16 “Facts & Figures: ITB Berlin at a glance,” ITB Berlin, accessed May 24, 2019, https://www.itb-berlin.com/ITBBerlin/FactsFigures/.

Travel technology and digitization has transformed the tourism experience to make it richer and more enjoyable based on tourists' personal preferences (Sotiriadis and Nduna 2019, 312): the personalization feature of the "Enjoy my Japan" campaign videos shows just how much recent promotion strategies are intertwined with digital technology. The advent of social media only made this connection grow: in October 2018, CJF announced a project called "Investment in a Modern Media Brand to Promote Japanese Food, Travel, and Design to Millennial Consumers around the Globe",[17] investing 12.5 million USD on Tastemade.com, an online video network that offers food and travel related programming.[18] This project is not just a perfect addition to a branding strategy based on popular culture and aiming to reach a consumption goal of 8 trillion yen by 2020,[19] it is also a great gastrodiplomacy initiative for younger generations, able "to attract a new generation of fans of Japanese culture"[20], directly from their phones. These two assets show the investment of Japan in promoting both food and tourism abroad, in such a way that the two are deeply interconnected and fueling one another. Digital marketing that makes use of food is a perfect way to conduct the Cool Japan Strategy, as the growing interest in Food & Beverage themed travel is driven by a number of factors including the explosion of food-focused media and social media (OCTA and Skift 2015, 6).

17 "Investment in a Modern Media Brand to Promote Japanese Food, Travel, and Design to Millennial Consumers around the Globe", Cool Japan Fund, accessed May 15, 2019, https://www.cj-fund.co.jp/en/investment/deal_list/vol29/.
18 "The World's Top 10 Most Innovative Companies of 2015 in Food," Fast Company, last modified September 2, 2015, https://www.fastcompany.com/3041647/the-worlds-top-10-most-innovative-companies-of-2015-in-food. Accessed 12/06/2019.
19 "Enjoy my Japan gurōbarukyanpēn o shidō! (Launching Enjoy my Japan Global Campaign!)," Japan Tourism Agency, last modified February 6, 2018, http://www.mlit.go.jp/kankocho/news03_000169.html.
20 "Investment in a Modern Media Brand to Promote Japanese Food, Travel, and Design to Millennial Consumers around the Globe", Cool Japan Fund, accessed May 15, 2019, https://www.cj-fund.co.jp/en/investment/deal_list/vol29/.

3. Chapter Three: A Global Food Frenzy

3.1. Food in tourism as cultural capital

The globalization of modern society has influenced many aspects of human activity, including food production and consumption (Lang 1999, 179; Quaye et al. 2010, 357). As a result, individuals experience a growing awareness concerning their global existence as world citizens an awareness that is directly linked to the problem of "globality", precisely the problem of how to lead a meaningful living experience while dwelling one global system (Mak et al. 2012, 5). In response to this problem, individuals yearn for new ways to identify themselves (Mak et al. 2012, 5), trying to give new meaning to their existence as global citizens, while the world homogenization accelerates.

Food is a particularly appropriate asset to explore the means of globalization, as it is a basic necessity (Hjalager and Richards 2002, 17) deeply embedded in local culture but also a status symbol for people living in the globalized age. The symbolic meaning of food consumption can be explained through the cultural capital theory, specifically when it is experienced within the tourism setting. Bourdieu first described the concept of cultural capital in 1984, when he proposed it as one of the four aspects of capital (Bourdieu 1984). It consists of the amount of knowledge and experience individuals acquire over the course of their lives, and the ways in which this knowledge and experience enables them to succeed more than someone in possession of less cultural capital. Indeed, Bourdieu identifies eating habits as one of the main arenas in which cultural practices appear (Bourdieu 1984, 6). Empirical evidence suggests that many tourists see the engagement with local food culture as a way to acquire knowledge on a country's culture (Chang et al. 2010, 1001; Kim et al. 2009, 426), and this acquired knowledge then becomes part of the cultural capital. Cultural capital also serves as an indicator for the cultural sophistication of the tourist, whether it is used to correctly order food at a restaurant or it enables to appreciate and enjoy foreign food (Cohen and Avieli 2004, 765). Moreover, local delicacies can also be a status and prestige motivator for tourists can build their knowledge of the local cuisine by eating as the locals do, and exploring new cuisines and food that they or their friends are not likely to encounter at home (Chang et al. 2010, 992). Considering these premises, it could be argued that the establishment of food as part of cultural capital may be at the basis of the extensive proliferation of food-related media of the recent years. Indeed, there is a new awareness of food and culinary tradition as cultural assets: over the last few decades, a significant rise occurred in food-focused consumption, media, and culture, to such an extent that while the phenomenon has been labeled a "food explosion" (Green and Cramer 2011, ix), it has now become a food frenzy.

The food frenzy is shaping people's interest in food and has found large resonation among the public; however, up until a few years ago food was considered a niche interest only appealing to a specific clique of people, known as "foodies". The word foodie first appeared around the 1980s to describe a person who has an interest in food, and Barr and Levy (1984) define foodies as follows

> A Foodie is a person who is very very very interested in food. Foodies are the ones talking about food in any gathering – salivating over restaurants, recipes, radicchio. They don't think they are being trivial – Foodies consider food to be an art, on a level with painting or drama. (6)

While at first the term was used in order to refer to a narrow class of aficionados, around the 90s and 00s the word acquired such a popularity that its definition expanded to refer to anyone who considered food as a hobby (Howe 2017). Today, the term has been subject of extensive research and so far, the discourse on foodies has been divided in two scopes (Getz et al. 2014, 53). On one side, being a foodie can be associated with healthy eating, favoring of local cuisine, organic produce and the slow food movement. In other words, being a foodie can be considered part of a broad trend that everyone can participate in (Getz et al. 2014, 53). The other side of the foodie discourse tends to connect imageries that are more related to social distinction and money. Considering food culture as part of cultural capital, some critics find that while accumulating capital through food consumption, foodies are trying to fit into a lifestyle or social group that requires knowledge and ability to talk about great food experiences, whose sharing is only limited within the group (Getz et al. 2014, 53). There is no universal truth about the means behind the current global food obsession; however, both these discourses have had some merit in the establishment of reasons for the booming of food-centered media.

Therefore, the foodie culture nowadays is not at all limited to the niche interests of a narrow clique of people, and it has instead grown to such an extent that the number of food-related assets has surged, especially within media and entertainment. Countless TV programs about cooking; Netflix series and/or documentaries about local cuisine; cooking competitions and even the figure of celebrity chefs contributes to the phenomenon, assuming the role of new cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu 1984, 91) mediating between production and consumers (Mentinis 2017, 129). In other words, every single production related to food contributed to the growing positive image of the public for gastronomy, causing individuals with similar interests to increasingly come together, engaging in a process of belonging and sharing within a social world (Getz et al. 2014, 64). This process today is not limited to face-to-face interaction: it is intrinsically linked to the growth of social media and the power of the internet to bring people together.

3.2. The business of food

As today's foodies tend to be under the age of 35 (Howe 2017), current discourse surrounding contemporary culture obsession with food tends to inevitably include the millennial generation (people between 18 to 35 years of age). Understanding their demand is a fundamental part of the economic process, as they represent ¼ of population and hold 10 trillion dollars of future buying power (CBD Marketing 2017). Despite its growth in numbers, the industry of food-centered entertainment is not new in itself; cooking shows and cookbooks are longstanding prominent examples. However, the digital age, social media and smartphones have fueled an explosion of interest in the sector. Thanks to social media, all of millennials' opinions and experiences are shared on multiple platforms every day, and because of the appeal of the visual element in recipe videos, media companies promoting similar content have proliferated, and food is now ubiquitous (Cramer et al. 2011, xiv). Social media allow individuals to engage with other peers who share the same interests; users are now able to follow accounts dedicated to food and in turn sharing their own experiences through uploading content on their profile. Similarly, by engaging with YouTube channels, Instagram accounts and digital media companies operating through Facebook like Buzzfeed and Tastemade, prospective tourists can take inspiration for their travel motivation and then publish their own experiences (Liu et al., 2013, 12). The online success of food-related videos is evident, as, according to a *Financial Times* article (Nicolaou 2016) users viewed them 23 billion times in 2015, a 170 per cent rise from the year before, with nearly all of that viewership on YouTube and Facebook (Nicolaou 2016). The direct involvement of Cool Japan Fund with Tastemade.com is proof that Japan, among other countries, has noticed the powerful likability of food: exercising this likability through social media helps to assert the Cool Japan Strategy among younger generations.

Younger generations' interest in food has been documented by numerous studies, which have established that they tend to spend more on groceries and eating out compared to older generations. For example, a study by Bankrate, a US-based consumer financial services company, found that millennials spend 15% more than the other adult generations on food (groceries and eating out) (Bankrate 2017). Moreover, a study by CBD Marketing analyzed more than 12 million social media posts about food and drinks by millennials over a course of a year, in order to understand the generation's preferences in the sector (CBD Marketing 2017). The extent of the available number of posts to analyze exemplify the engagement of millennials with food; as they share their opinions and buying habits online via social media and other platforms, CBD Marketing (2017) suggests that businesses and brands that intend to brand their products successfully should treasure millennials' passion for online sharing. Furthermore, a 2018 study conducted by Piper

Jaffray Companies found that food qualified as teenagers' number one spending category (Piper Jaffray Companies 2018). In conclusion, food is a business that is central to contemporary culture because of its reputation as one of this generation's fondest interests. It is in itself a vehicle carrying the potential for authentic experiences, encounters with local cultures, sharing and discovery: which are all part of millennials' driving values (OCTA and Skift 2015, 20).

3.3. Food tourism globally

As food consumption is primarily part of fulfilling a biological need, food is considered an obligatory rather than discretionary aspect of travel (Hjalager and Richards 2002, 18). However, food can also be a primary motivation for travelling, as gastronomy can be a determinant factor in attracting tourists while they choose destinations (Sormaz et al. 2016, 726; Tsai and Wang 2016, 56). The term food tourism stands in fact for the act of travel for which food is a significant motivating factor (Hall and Mitchell 2001, 308). Hall and Sharples (2003) further explore the definition of food tourism, describing it as a

> visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of specialist food production region are the primary motivating factor for travel. (10)

In regards to food tourism, we must not regard food here solely as the consumption of food itself, but rather as the experience of its culture. In this ambit, food and foodways are considered as a cultural artefact providing a medium for the expression of local culture and identity (Ottenbacher and Harrington 2013, 4), suggesting that the experience of food in a tourism destination helps tourists gain a wider understanding of local culture (Lee 2012, 102). As global competition between tourist destinations increases, so does the search for distinctive products (Hjalager and Richards 2002, 18). Destinations should and do, in fact, consider gastronomy as a synergetic tool to create a unique travel experience for visitors. Whether it is an obligatory step taken to fulfil a physiological need, or whether it is a conscious act to establish social distinction through the experience of different cultures (Mak et al. 2012, 171), food can be thus considered as an essential part of travel.

3.4. The case of Japan

The extent of Japanese food popularity has grown even more in the global food frenzy context. The constant exposition to food makes consumers more prone to try new experiences, highly favoring the positioning of Japanese food, in concordance with the exposure effect (Obermiller 1985). The Japan brand strategy plans to exploit the already internationally established popularity of its food to improve its image abroad, with the ultimate goal to boost tourism. It is not a coincidence that food became a pillar of inbound tourism promotion policies: food is a huge trend worldwide across a variety of consumers, who are either actively interested in food (conscious

foodies and/or millennials) or passively looking for novelties through which acquire cultural capital. The obsessive attachment of the Japan brand to its contents industries, and the success that food and foodways have gathered worldwide, make food the perfect product to be sold to consumers. Again, these consumers might not be immediately interested to Japanese food, or to Japan at all, but exploiting their interests and their need for authenticity is indeed in the Japanese inbound tourism promotion agenda[21]. As explained earlier, it is not coincidental that sushi became a global trend, and it is not coincidental that Japanese officials condoned foreign interpretations of sushi in spite of the loss of Japanese identity in its food. Every move has been made consciously to gather soft power, likability, and to appeal to the broadest public by creating, promoting and officially recognizing the Cool Japan strategy. The washoku inscription in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list was essential for Japan's cultural diplomacy, and it remains such even if it was exposed as a myth (Kohsaka 2017; Cwiertka 2018). In other words, if washoku is a myth constructed for the UNESCO inscription, now the UNESCO inscription is in turn giving official recognition to the myth, officially declaring that the cultural diplomacy and the "Gross National Cool" (McGray 2002) aspect of the national brand are a force to be reckoned with.

21 See 3.3 "Japanese tourism and the digital era promotion".

4. Chapter Four: Collaborative Consumption and Japanese tourism

4.1. Experiential travel as a social signifier

The rise of experiential travel has become mainstream in the recent years, and the creation of cultural experiences, particularly cultural attractions, has become a fundamental part of modern societies, where individuals from higher socioeconomic groups consume tourism experiences in a search for distinction based on a complete lifestyle (Richards 1996, 272). With tourists willing to spend more on in-destination authentic activities and experiences (Skift 2014a, 13), the sharing economy has highly benefited from the rise of experiential travel. In fact, the shared economy gave tourists more platforms through which easily engage with locals, who benefit from the trend as well: online platforms operating through the sharing economy are now a well-established presence retaining positive prospects. Indeed, according to OECD, peer-to-peer platforms have the potential to drive economic growth and job creation, and generate added value by encouraging tourists to disperse to less well-known destinations (OECD 2018, 71). As a result, peer-to-peer platforms have the potential to satisfy tourists' demand for unique experiences outside the beaten track while revitalizing other areas in need of economic development.

While pursuing the authentic tourism experience they are looking for, travelers often have to face the possibility of the disappointment in experiencing staged authenticity (Maccannell 1973); however, the sharing economy provides them with a valuable alternative to find it. In fact, tourism experiences offered through sharing economy platforms create value by helping tourists construct their own experience through the direct engagement with locals. Truly, the rise of the sharing economy had a solid impact on in-destination activities (Sotiriadis and Nduna 2019, 316), as exemplified by the fact that Airbnb Experiences bookings increased an astonishing 2500% since their creation in 2016 (Airbnb 2018a). This spark in growth may be due to the platform's popularity among the millennial generation, the largest generation in history, which will account for 75% of all travelers by 2025 (Airbnb 2016a). As it offers "tours and unique experiences hosted by locals" (OECD 2018, 75), Airbnb is the perfect platform for millennials seeking unique travel experience: after all, millennials have already been credited with looking for immersive travel experiences (OCTA and Skift 2015, 20).

With these premises, it could be argued that the sharing economy phenomenon is shaping tourism also through the newfound role of CC tourism experiences as modern social signifiers. More concretely, Warde (1992, 18) observed that people engage in different spheres of consumption with a view to express their identity as certain sorts of individuals or groups. Later, Ahmad (2012, 488) proposed that the choices tourists make in the realm of tourism consumption are produced and

reproduced by, and in conformity with, their respective class habitus, which is structured by cultural capital. As a result, in-destination experiences might be considered the ultimate self-expression of the new millennial tourist class: according to Skift's report, "The Rise of the Millennial Traveler" (2014b), the biggest travel trends today, especially for millennials, revolve around personalization and connectivity. Millennials actively seek for highly personalized experiences, to then share them within larger networks of like-minded travelers, both real and virtual (Skift 2014b): understanding their use of technology while traveling is an essential task for providers. Finally, with a market share of 40%, millennials are the largest age group for international travel; they are tech savvy, they grew up with the internet and are highly educated (ITB Berlin 2018): their profile proves that the tourism industry is indeed evolving to meet their demands as a distinct tourism class.

4.2. Collaborative Consumption in Japanese tourism

The demand for tourism experiences was quickly met in Japan: Tokyo was selected as one of the first 12 cities in the world to launch Airbnb Experiences (Airbnb 2016b) and ever since then their number has almost doubled; the city is now the second in the world for engagement with the platform (Airbnb 2017a). An event leading to this increment might have occurred in January 2018, when Airbnb and Japan Tourism Bureau (JTB), Japan's largest travel agency and partner of JNTO,[22] announced their partnership to increase the experience industry (Airbnb 2018b). The rise of collaborative consumption's involvement in tourism represents a perfect way for the government to channel the national brand, as the heavy focus on personal experiences rather than consumeristic tourism consumption is also the main feature of the "Enjoy my Japan" campaign. While the campaign encourages the tourists from the world's wealthiest countries to pursue their passions, collaborative consumption gives them an accessible way to do it while feeling integrated in local culture.

Therefore, Airbnb Experiences functions as a perfect platform for providing tourism activities related to the Japan Brand, especially the ones channeled in the "Enjoy my Japan" campaign: among Airbnb's most popular categories, there are Arts, Nature, History, Food & Drink, Health & Wellness and Nightlife, all of which strongly echo the seven passions identified by the campaign. As of November 2017, Food & Drink Experiences were the most popular Experiences on the platform with a strong margin, accounting for 29% percent of all bookings (Airbnb 2017b). Unsurprisingly, Tokyo strongly follows on the food experiences trend: with more than 700 Airbnb Experiences available in the city as of May 2019, around 300 concentrate on food[23], Japan's leading content industry and cultural asset. The experiential travel trend and the food tourism trend both

22 "Japan National Tourism Organization Partners: Private Sectors," Japan National Tourism Organization, accessed May 28, 2019, https://www.jnto.go.jp/partners/eng/privatesector.php?cat[]=41.

influence each other and are now able to generate consistent revenue among destinations: the Japanese food boom is not a coincidence, and so is the outstanding escalation of the country's inbound tourism; both of them were carefully crafted strategies to boost the economy and re-establish the country's international image. In addition, the rise of collaborative consumption tourism experiences is highly favoring the positioning of Japanese food as a product for tourism consumption: as their popularity is due to tourists' demand for connection and uniqueness, the engagement with local cuisine provides fast and convenient access to feeling connected with a country's history and distinctive culture (Riley 2000, 188-190). Japanese food is hereby being sold in itself, as a product for tourism consumption, and for everything that it represents: social distinction, prestige, authenticity and connection.

4.3. Airbnb Experiences in Tokyo

As stated earlier, the tourism market in search of experiences was deeply influenced by the sharing economy (Sotiriadis and Nduna 2019, 312), as collaborative consumption made connecting with locals easier and more efficient through app accessibility. Food experiences are now ubiquitous in Tokyo, and they are quoted as the most popular Experiences available on Airbnb (Airbnb 2017b). To explore the extent and the means of this popularity, while in Tokyo I took part in two Airbnb Experiences revolving around food, respectively a cooking class in the Kichijoji area (Experience 1), and a food tour of the city's main fish markets, Tsukiji and Toyosu (Experience 2).

The two experiences were very different in themselves: Experience 1 was significantly quieter than Experience 2, as it only counted one more person besides myself. During the experience, the host first gave us a lecture-style informative introduction on the topic of wagashi, traditional Japanese confections particularly consumed with tea (Itoh 2011), then she taught us how to make it and helped us in the making, and finally conducted a tea ceremony where we consumed the sweets we prepared. The host (Host A) is originally from Tokyo, where she lived her life as an industrial designer; she is now retired. In April 2016, she first started offering wagashi-making cooking classes for foreigners via Airbnb, and since then has acquired good popularity: the Experience currently[24] has 85 reviews and a rating of 4.89/5. The experience heavily focused on tradition and on offering authentic Japanese food, which the host cared to stress that "is not just sushi and ramen". The cooking class was rather a peaceful experience and saw the participation of the host involved to explain the reasoning and philosophy of Japanese traditions. She cared to explain the deep involvement of Japanese aesthetics with seasons and the passing of time; indeed,

23 "Things to Do in Tokyo," Airbnb, accessed May 15, 2019, https://www.airbnb.com/s/Tokyo--Japan/experiences.
24 June 29, 2019.

since the experience took place in spring, she taught us how to fashion wagashi in the shape of a sakura flower.

On the other hand, with 1557 reviews and a rating of 4.93/5, Experience 2 is currently[25] available on Airbnb as the most popular Experience in the whole Tokyo area. It consisted of a visit to the tuna auction held in the recently established Toyosu market, and a tour of the outer Tsukiji old fish market, ending with a lunch meal prepared using the ingredients bought during the visit to the markets. The host (Host B) is now working full time offering different tours for foreigners around Tsukiji and Asakusa. Considering the already established popularity of Tsukiji as a tourism destination, the Experience's popularity will not come as a surprise. Truly, according to a survey issued by the Metropolitan Government of Tokyo, Tsukiji Market was one of the most popular attractions for inbound tourists to visit in 2017, with a 17.6% of the year's total visitors making a trip there (Tokyo Metropolitan Government 2017, 3). Tsukiji fish market officially terminated its activities in October 2018, following years of elucubrations and delays, and its main functions were moved to the new Toyosu Market, only a few kilometers away. The market moving, now estimated at about 600 billion yen in costs (Nakamura 2018), proved itself to be rather hectic. Besides including the moving of 900 businesses handling 480 kinds of seafood worth $14 million daily, as well as 270 types of fruits and vegetables, the area needed an intervention of soil pollution clean-up, as well as the stipulation of a massive rodent disinfestation plan (Dyer 2018).

The already mentioned popularity of Tsukiji as a tourism spot might have been one of the reasons why its outer part was not involved in the moving and instead kept unaltered, maintaining its lively activities and shops despite the upcoming rodent infestation menace. The numerous available tours and experiences involving the tuna auction in Toyosu inevitably end up with a tour of outer Tsukiji as well, as so did the tour I took part. Regarding the two markets, one of the fellow participants in the tour recollected, "I visited the tuna auction in Tsukiji almost ten years ago. Back then, you were surrounded by real action and working people; the new market […] feels much more impersonal". Indeed, in Toyosu, the tuna auction can only be seen through windows placed on an elevated floor looking down at the auction location. Online reviews of the two markets leave no space to doubt, a quick Google search for the two markets reveals that visitors have enjoyed Tsukiji significantly more, and the reason might be the appreciation for the outer market's more authentic atmosphere and direct involvement with local culture. The tour of both markets saw the active participation of numerous local shop owners, all close friends with the host, who either offered samples of their products or showed how to perform and recognize different cuts of tuna. However,

25 June 29, 2019.

besides the fish, none of the products sampled in the markets was later used in the meal preparation, giving away a sort of choreographed feeling to the ensemble.

Two separate interviews were held with both hosts, and the same questions were posed. What emerged was that both hosts were doing something unrelated to food prior to the establishment of Airbnb Experiences in 2016. Host A was retired, and while Host B was already working with tourists, providing bike tours around Asakusa, as soon as he started the Tsukiji Tour in 2016 his profits skyrocketed, and the biking tour now constitute his side product.

A quick tour of the Airbnb Experiences reveals that the "Food & Drinks" category is indeed offering the highest number of Experiences on the website. Interestingly, a deeper dive shows that the category includes a significant number of Experiences that one would not immediately come to link to food. For example, "Samurai Workshop in Kamakura" and "Sumo Culture Workshop" both seem to fall within the "Food & Drinks" category. By giving a look to the program, part of the schedule of both experiences is actually dedicated to food for one part, for either a tea break or a warm chanko nabe (□□□□□, large stew dish traditionally eaten by sumo wrestlers[26]); the collateral consideration of food confirms that food is not indeed the protagonist of the event. Whether this means that is Airbnb boosting the numbers on the Food & Drinks category, or that locals push to be listed in the most popular Experience category, this eventuality happens to be the case for a considerate number of other less popular experiences on Airbnb, which might not be inherently about food, but food somehow makes it way there.

Both the interviewed hosts agreed that foreigners have a deep interest for Japanese food, and both agreed that the government is pushing for food-related activities to improve tourism. The two experiences saw participants very happy, the reactions were extremely positive and the online reviews only confirm their popularity: many reviewers described the experiences as "the highlight of [their] trip". Tourists highly value experiences with locals, and food is a perfect way to engage with a country's culture. When tourists complained the impersonality of Toyosu market, they were agreeing that the star of the experience was the active interaction with locals, which is an essential aspect to experiential tourism; otherwise, the resemblance to an old-fashioned group tour would be too strong, therefore sacrificing the experience's unicity and authenticity altogether. Tourists are looking for unique experiences, unique enough that their friends have not heard of them (Skift 2018, 28), as exploring new cuisines and food that their friends are not likely to encounter at home can be a status and prestige motivator (Chang et al. 2010, 992). The massive popularization of food-related media makes food omnipresent, ubiquitous and the perfect product to sell experiential

26 "The Special Stew at the Heart of Sumo Wrestling," Atlas Obscura, accessed June 29, 2019, https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/sumo-wrestlers-stew-diet-chanko-nabe.

tourism: it is quite easy to sell tourism through another product whose popularity happens to be internationally well established. In conclusion, Japanese food has the power to be the leading content industry of the national brand: food does not need to acquire popularity; food is here serving as a vehicle to give popularity to Japanese tourism. Locals noticed the heavy focus on food promotion; now they are making food the protagonist of their offered experiences, even if this means tweaking their initial intentions.

5. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have taken into consideration the reasons why Japanese government uses its food as a product to establish its national brand through tourism consumption, as well as having explored the strategies used to reach this aim. In order to do this, in the first chapter I have introduced an overview of the history of inbound tourism development in Japan, together with the concepts and events that led to the creation of the Japan brand, with particular regards to the booming trend of Japanese cuisine. The outstanding escalation of Japanese inbound tourism ever since the early 2000s is the product of a strategically planned tourism promotion policy. In order to achieve its goal to become a tourism nation, Japanese government had to find a way to attract an ever-growing class of tourists and reconsider its traditional approach to tourism. In order to do this, the country had to evolve and reaffirm its public image abroad, as well as to be able to coherently apply that image to other sectors as well, to produce revenue through exports and foreign investment. To achieve this desired image, the government started in the same years an operation of national branding, heavily focused on popular culture and contents industries, with the ultimate goal to acquire soft power. Establishing the reasons why the government pushed for inbound tourism development allowed me to prove that the country's international reputation was always in the country's political agenda, since long before the development of the concept of nation branding. Lastly, by introducing the phenomenon of sushi boom (Sakamoto and Allen 2011), I argued that the success that sushi met worldwide paved the ground for the creation of a cohesive edible national brand that could be immediately recognizable. The government exploited this success in order to develop a national brand created around the appeal of popular culture.

In the second chapter, I focused on the actual efforts adopted by the government towards the legitimization of the national brand, through the strategic use of Japanese cuisine. First, I explored the events surrounding the 2013 UNESCO inscription of "Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for the celebration of New Year", as well as the consequent establishment of the Cool Japan Fund. I thus suggested that the UNESCO inscription was created in order to give official character to Japan's cultural diplomacy, and that the Fund was able to conduct its activities

through the recognition that the UNESCO inscription provided. Second, I focused on understanding how gastrodiplomacy initiatives served as a mean to familiarize the public with Japanese cuisine through the exposure effect (Obermiller 1985), with the ultimate goal to improve inbound tourism rates in the country. As these events confirm the importance given to food in the Japan brand, in the last part of the chapter I explored the actuality of the revenue that food produces in the country, specifically in the tourism context. Food keeps on growing as a popular trend among tourists, and the income from food consumption in tourism is ever growing, both as consumption in itself and as part of in-destination activities. For this reason, I then took into consideration its popularity among travelers, and I explored how the digital era is influencing the engagement with in-destination activities. Indeed, the latest, highly digitalized campaign by Japan National Tourism Organization exploits two increasingly popular tourism trends to attract visitors to the country, namely food tourism and experiential travel. Researching the campaign was important because it exploited the search for authenticity and unique experiences by tourists, while at the same time proving that Japanese government is indeed very interested in exploiting the lucrative aspect of food tourism and experiential travel. By inviting the audience to experience the country through their own interests, the campaign was a perfect match for the rise of the sharing economy, where wealthier tourists can create authentic experiences that resonate with their personal interests.

Subsequently, in the third chapter I tried to draw possible explanations for the ever-growing global interest in food happened in the recent years, in order to understand it in the Japanese context. To do so, I first established the role of food as part of cultural capital, and suggested that the general public interest in it is part of an expression of social class. For this reason, the business of food is central to contemporary culture, as it allow individuals to recognize themselves; food-centered media and social media fuel younger generations' interest in the field and due to their future buying power and their fruition of technology, understanding the interests and activities of younger generation is a key business step. Finally, the Cool Japan Strategy and the reasons why food is so central to it are to be understood in this context: far from being an accidental matter, food, as Japanese government is currently selling it, is a product exploited to increase inbound tourism and economic development. Whether consumers are actively interested in food (like foodies and/or millennials), or passively looking for novelties through which acquire cultural capital, the obsessive attachment of the Japan brand to its contents industries, together with the success that food and foodways have gathered worldwide, make food the perfect product to be sold.

Finally, the last chapter is a report of the fieldwork conducted in Japan, specifically centered on two different food tourism experience in Tokyo, after which I was able to interview the hosts and to collect statements from tourists, both in loco and through a questionnaire. The reasons I took part

in these initiatives was to understand the measure of the impact of the national brand and the global food trend among international tourists, as well as Japanese people hosting tourism experiences. My research allowed me to understand that the rising trend of experiential travel further favored the positioning of food as a tourism product, as the most popular category on collaborative consumption platforms offering in-destination activities is indeed the Food & Drinks category. Food tourism experiences are now ubiquitous in Tokyo, and their popularity was confirmed by the field research results and the analysis of the two Airbnb Experiences' online reviews. The locals' participation and their interaction with tourists was considered a crucial aspect contributing to the popularity of these assets, and a major source of satisfaction for participants.

In conclusion, Japanese cuisine is the most easily recognizable of the country's content industries, and its appeal to the public is of great help to the country's inbound tourism; moreover, food is a product for tourism consumption able to generate the most revenue, as it can be targeted to the widest audience possible. Finally, my analysis led me to believe that the role of food in the Japanese national branding strategy is to familiarize the audience with the country's national brand, and it is able to do so because it is capitalizing on already established global trends in food consumption and production. The business of food is thus truly central to contemporary culture, and so it shall remain until the next Global Frenzy will make its appearance on the world stage.

6. Appendices

6.1. Host Interview Questions (in Japanese)

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6.2. Host Interview Questions (in English)

1 Background information□

5.7. Name, date and place of birth

5.8. Where do you currently live?

5.9. Occupation

5.10. When did you start offering tours/experiences to tourists?

5.11. Why did you start?

5.12. How did you first get the idea that led you to start?

6. Offer

6.1. What is the tour/experience about?

6.2. How many tourists would normally attend?

6.3. What is the most popular activity you offer?

6.4. Please share the content of the tour/experience.

7. Target audience

7.1. What kind of customer would normally join the tour/experience?

7.2. Would Japanese nationals normally participate?

7.3. What countries do tourists mainly come from?

7.4. When you first started, who was your main audience?

7.5. Compared to when you first started, did the average customer change?

8. Demands

8.1. What do you think are the main concerns of tourists joining the tour/experience?

8.2. What do they want to see/experience?

8.3. Which ones are the most popular attractions/experiences?

8.4. Do you know other hosts offering similar tours/experiences to foreign tourists?

9. Motives

9.1. Do you think foreign nationals have an interest in Japanese food?

9.2. Why do you think so?

9.3. Do you think Japanese people are proud of their culinary culture?

9.4. Do you think Japanese food is a valuable asset to attract foreign tourists into the country?

9.5. Do you think that the Japanese government encourages or promotes activities such as food tours to increase foreign tourism?

9.6. Did the Japanese government develop measures or systems that helped your business?

6.3. Survey Questions

1. How did you first learn about this experience?
    - Internet advertisement
    - Tourism information centers
    - Airbnb website
    - Travel agent

- Other:

2. Is this your first experience related to Japanese food?
   - Yes
   - No
3. If no, can you remember where and what that previous Japanese food tourism experience was?
4. As a tourist, are you interested in Japanese food?
   - Yes
   - No
5. How would you rate your motivation for the following?

	Not important	Not very important	Neutral	Important	Very Important
Learning and experiencing Japan food culture					
Meeting Japanese locals					
Tasting authentic Japanese food					
Experiencing Japan's traditional culture					

6. What sorts of things did you learn about Japanese food from your experience?
7. What was your favorite part of the experience? Please briefly explain why.
8. In your opinion, what was the most important part of this experience?

	Not important	Not very important	Neutral	Important	Very Important
Authenticity of the experience					
Education about traditional Japan					
Tasting authentic Japanese food					
Price					
Entertainment					

9. Please rank how much you agree with the following statement: “Tasting Japanese food was a key factor in my travel motivation to the country.”

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly agree

10. Would you participate in another experience involving Japanese food?
    - o Yes
    - o No
11. If no, why?
12. Do you have any further comments regarding your Japanese food experience?

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