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# **Food Clusters, Rural Development and a Creative Economy**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents a conceptual framework that outlines the formation of a food cluster as part of creative rural development, transforming the ‘comparative advantages’ of a place into ‘competitive advantages’ by enhancing a local food production and consumption nexus. The conceptual framework emphasizes four facilitators that constitute the innovation process that underpins the creation and operation of food clusters as place-based rural development. The framework is used to guide information acquisition, analysis and presentation in a case study of SAVOUR Muskoka, a food cluster in Ontario, Canada. Together, the framework and case study show how the innovation process involved in the formation of a food cluster contributes to the development of a creative rural food economy.

Keywords: food clusters; rural development; creative economy; comparative advantage; competitive advantage

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## **1.0 Introduction**

‘Creativity’ is increasingly being promoted as a fundamental driver of urban economic growth (Stevenson, 2014; Stolarick et al., 2010). However, most of the discourse on the ‘creative economy’ has focused on metropolitan areas and global cities with little attention being paid to the relevance of creativity to other urban and regional settings. In this paper, food clusters are understood as an important element of the creative economy that is particularly suited to place-based development in small towns and rural areas. Food clusters can play a vital role in place-based creative economies because a food cluster itself is a product within the creative economy. For example, food clusters might be developed in coastal urban areas based in part on the availability of seafood or they might be established in large cities to draw upon ‘authentic’ ethnic cuisines. Rather than

addressing food clusters in large urban centres, this paper focuses instead on the rural and small town context, although we believe that our ideas have wider applicability.

Rural communities in North America face significant challenges in promoting economic development (Stolarick et al., 2010). The challenges come from two main factors: (1) 'disconnectedness' and (2) 'relatively small scale' (Halseth et al., 2010). As a result, rural economies are often stagnant when compared to urban economies.

Since the early 1990s, the economic landscape of rural communities in North America has started to change (Woods, 2005). Woods (2005) and others argue that knowledge-based economic globalization has led to a significant decline in small-scale, local businesses in such places with consequent degradation of local characteristics and a sense of place. This has also undermined the individuality of many rural communities including their economic, cultural, and environmental well-being (Knox & Mayer, 2009). Further, Stolarick et al. (2010) and Woods (2005) argue that the process of restructuring of the global economic system has resulted in the decline of economic activities in rural communities, especially due to the restructuring of the agricultural sector, the loss of manufacturing and out-migration involving the exodus of educated, talented young people primarily to urban centers. This has left ageing populations in rural communities that have lacked the leadership to address the changed future (Woods, 2005).

At the same time, some rural communities are attracting both capital investment and population. Bunting and Mitchell (2001) argue that 'counterurbanization', "the movement of population from urban to rural areas" (Woods, 2005, p. 74) has occurred since the 1970s. This has been, in part, a consequence of improvements that have been made to the infrastructure of rural communities and enhanced communication networks which have improved 'connectivity' (Halseth et al., 2010). These have made some small towns and rural areas more attractive to both investors and other individuals through improved accessibility and the availability of relatively inexpensive land. For example, entrepreneurs have taken advantage of and contributed to counterurbanization by focusing on the commercialization of cultural heritage assets, such as local arts and local traditions. This is an innovative activity that leads to the replacement of an 'old' by a 'new' sector through a process that Mitchell et al. (2001) have called "creative destruction". As a result of such economic activities, 'heritage shopping villages' are becoming increasingly commonplace in rural communities in southern Ontario, Canada (e.g., Stratford, St. Jacobs, Elora, Fergus, and Niagara-on-the Lake).

In addition, there has been a movement of some jobs away from urban centres to rural communities. For example, Bunting & Mitchell (2001) point out that there was a significant increase in the proportion of Canadians employed in the 'arts' in the period 1971 to 1991. This is a creative industry. While this activity is still concentrated in urban areas, many artists seek out rural areas and small towns for their alternative lifestyles and pursue their artistic profession from

such a base. Similarly, as Woods (2005) stresses, many baby boomers have retired to rural communities in search for a high quality of life. With increased financial security, they have been enabled to move out of urban centers in search of a modified lifestyle.

Thus, rural communities that had previously been considered as monotonous and restrictive have been re-evaluated by many individuals, who favour the rural atmosphere and the charming and scenic places that contribute to it. These images are associated with high quality local leisure and recreation facilities, such as cafes and restaurants with attractive ambiances (Knox & Mayer, 2009; Woods, 2005). Counterurbanization has played an important role in current rural area and small town development and has brought considerable increases in the prosperity of some communities, especially those in propinquity to major cities. However, there are differences in rural and small town development as communities in dissimilar geographical settings have different opportunities and challenges (Knox & Mayer, 2009). To overcome the disadvantages and challenges of small scale and lack of connectedness, it is necessary for such communities to search for new opportunities to maintain and enhance their economic, cultural, and environmental well-being (Stolarick et al., 2010). This can be achieved through the formation of innovative collaborative networks and partnerships (Hague & Jenkins, 2004; Halseth et al., 2010).

The development of a food cluster may be one way of addressing such challenges and the creation of a cluster is best regarded as a response to such issues rather as an end in itself. A food cluster has the potential to make a positive contribution to place-based creative economic development in a rural context by supporting local creative jobs (e.g., entrepreneurship) and incomes, both existing and new, and increasing place identity and pride in place by harnessing 'territorial assets' (Stolarick et al., 2010), including assets that are predominantly available locally, such as cultural heritage and attractive environments.

## **2.0 Food Clusters and a Creative Rural Economy**

In a globalizing world, the landscape of cities is arguably becoming more and more alike (Kunstler, 1993). Paradoxically, however, it is now understood that even small differences are becoming increasingly significant in the development of place-based creative economies (Florida, 2003, 2008). Municipalities that are interested in benefitting from 'territorial assets' (one of the 4 T's of economic development: Technology; Talent; Tolerance; and Territorial Assets) (Stolarick et al., 2010) commonly try to find distinctive natural as well as cultural attributes, including authentic local cuisines, to harness and build upon with the goal of attracting new residents, talented entrepreneurs and visitors. Thus, they look for comparative advantages that can be turned into competitive advantages (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003) often through the adoption of a place marketing and branding strategy that involves highly creative activities (Stevenson, 2014). The innovation process is much more than the creation of a catchy logo or slogan,

and embraces many aspects of product development and marketing (Kotler et al., 1993; Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009).

This paper proposes a conceptual framework that informs the establishment of a food cluster that will enhance the attractiveness of a place by helping to forge a unique place identity and image, and stimulate the creative economy and rural development. Emphasis is given to what needs to be done: i.e., the creative activity that is required to form a food cluster. The framework will then be applied to Muskoka, Ontario, Canada, to demonstrate its applicability and utility.

### 3.0 The Conceptual Framework

This research began with thorough reviews of the economic geography, urban, and rural development, food/wine tourism, and place branding literatures. These reviews led to the identification of key factors that seemed to be relevant to the creation of food clusters as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. *The Formation of a Food Cluster*

| Inputs                                    | Facilitators                                    | Outputs I                      | Outputs II                    | Outcomes   |
|---|---|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| <b>Cultural sector (creative economy)</b> | Environmentally friendly strategy<br>Leadership | Food and food related products | Development of a food cluster | Creative economy development                     |
| <b>Primary sector (agriculture)</b>       | Stakeholder collaboration                       | Other cultural products        | Place marketing and branding  | Enhanced attractiveness (place identity & image) |
| <b>Tertiary sector (tourism)</b>          | Communication and information flows             |                                |                               |  |

#### 3.1 Inputs

Food clusters are built through the combination of the primary sector (agriculture) and tertiary service sectors (tourism) activities with strong links to the cultural sector (creative industry). Ideally, this occurs in an attractive setting that is in proximity to a substantial, usually urban, potential market. Food stuffs and other agricultural products are grown and processed creatively in many rural areas. In some cases the local product may be sufficient to form the basis of a substantial creative food economy, as in many winery areas in Italy, Australia, and throughout the world (Croce & Perri, 2010; Hall, et al., 2002) or, for example, in the case of whiskey distilleries in Scotland (McBoyle & McBoyle, 2007). Furthermore, as in the case of particular beverages and cheeses, attempts have been made to protect the product name and reputation by copyrighting. Also, where substantial tourism already exists (e.g., resorts and cottages), as in the Muskoka case, which will be described below, food clusters may be

developed to complement existing tourism, recreational, artistic and heritage products in places where local agriculture may not be particularly remarkable.

Unfortunately, both agriculture and tourism are seasonal activities, especially in middle latitudes such as Ontario. Peak seasons for both occur in the summer, although they seldom compete for the same labour. Blossom tours in the spring and harvest festivals in the autumn may help to support the experience economy in shoulder seasons. Both residents and tourists constitute a market for local produce, reducing transportation costs for producers, reducing leakages through local purchases, and providing the fresh ingredients for high quality authentic food products that are compatible with other creative offerings (Lee, 2012).

### **3.2 Facilitation as a Creative Process**

The juxtaposition of food production and consumption does not guarantee the creation of a successful food cluster. Rather, a creative process has to be initiated to put in place the synergistic relationships that are desired. The conceptual framework derived from the literature reviews and presented in this study identifies four ‘facilitators’ that underpin the formation and operation of a food cluster: (1) ‘an environmentally friendly strategy’, (2) ‘leadership’, (3) ‘stakeholder collaboration’, and ‘(4) communication and information flows’. Together, they comprise the institutional arrangements that drive the development of food clusters. The formation of these relationships and the initiatives that result from them constitute the creativity that stimulates the generation of new linkages, ideas and, indeed, research and development and, ultimately, new products. The result is a new chain of supply and production that must be matched with discerning markets to form a creative food economy (Lee, 2012).

*3.2.1 Environmentally friendly strategies.* More and More consumers are interested in eating high quality food that is locally grown and produced through responsible farming in ways that respect the environment. The growing interest in the organic and slow food movements confirms this (Donald, 2009; Petrini, 2007; Pollan, 2006, 2008). Residents and visitors are also attracted to high quality environments (Croce & Perri, 2010). Thus, environmental friendliness is in line with current cultural trends. It unites the interests of certain types of producers and consumers.

*3.2.2 Leadership.* Leadership is important in facilitating stakeholder collaboration and ensuring that communication and information flows occur between participants in the food cluster. Leadership can come from a variety of sources: government departments at a variety of levels, place brand management organizations, and creative individuals such as prominent chefs and entrepreneurs (e.g., ‘Talent’ of the 4 T’s).

*3.2.3 Stakeholder collaboration.* Stakeholders include producers such as farmers and those in animal husbandry, service providers such as hoteliers, restaurateurs,

as well as creative workers such as marketers, prominent chefs, artisans and other entrepreneurs.

*3.2.4 Communication and information flows.* Communication and information flows are required both internally, among stakeholders, and externally to reach out to potential markets. These can take many forms including websites, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, e-newsletters, forums, workshops, meetings, and training sessions. Thus, 'Technology', another of the 4 T's, is of great importance in this regard. Hence, it is argued that food clusters are developed by stakeholders, under an energetic leadership that may differ in form from case to case, based on communication facilitated by innovations in information technology. The result is the development of new products, often as part of a place branding strategy, for new markets (Lee, 2012).

### ***3.3 Outputs I and II***

The first-level outputs are new products: specialized restaurants, new menus, creative farms, farmers' markets, 'pick-your-own' opportunities, farm-gate sales, food trails, annual food tasting events, and so on. However, such products need not be confined to those with an obvious food focus for they may be creatively packaged in ways that combine food with the broader cultural sector (e.g., the performing arts) or accommodation. This may occur within the same establishment or between different co-operating establishments in new vertical and/or horizontal relationships. Examples include craft shops that also sell creatively processed foods made by local artisans from locally-grown ingredients, as well as cultural businesses such as art galleries and antique outlets that draw residents and visitors who want to try local cuisine and enjoy high quality cultural products. Such initiatives stimulate the local economy and contribute to community well-being.

The creation of a critical mass of local food products and other cultural goods is commonly associated with the establishment of a formal organization, such as 'SAVOUR Muskoka' in the case study that follows. Hence, informal arrangements are likely to be replaced by more formal arrangements (commonly locally-based, often not-for-profit, small-scale organizations) with membership, for programming, place marketing, and branding. The coordination of knowledge and skill-based creative activities is indicated as 'Outputs II' in Table 1. Ideally, this results in efficient communication between stakeholders, and greater visibility of the cluster, leading to the outcomes of strengthened place identity, both internally and externally, and an enhanced creative rural economy (Lee, 2012). In order to explicate and illustrate the proposed framework more fully, a case study is presented.

## **4.0 Research Methods**

### ***4.1 Case Study Approach***

The underlying principle for a case design approach is that it makes the process of ‘theory building’ through qualitative analysis possible (Yin, 2009). The case study approach provides the researcher with an opportunity to use mixed methods so as to observe a phenomenon from multiple perspectives (Stake, 1994). Mintzberg (1979, p. 587) noted that the outcome of the mixed method approach can be synergistic: “while systematic data creates the foundation for our theories, it is the subjective data that enable us to do the building.” Mintzberg (1979, p. 587) further suggested that the creation of conceptual models requires rich description: “we uncover all kinds of relationships in our hard data, but it is only through the use of soft data that we are able to explain them”.

As Yin (2009) suggests, the subjective information obtained through such a qualitative research approach is useful for understanding the relationships among the components of the conceptual framework created for the study. Yin (2009) stresses that ‘theory building’ is based on the classification of information, and case study evidences can be used to either prove or disprove a ‘theory’: the resulting ‘theory’ is generally a narrative, which has an empirical validity and applicability. Further, it will likely be consistent with participant observation because the process of ‘theory building’ is directly linked to empirical corroboration (Lee, 2012). Accordingly, this paper has introduced a new conceptual framework, the utility of which is assessed using qualitative research methods. The findings of the case study that follows attest to the appropriateness and value of the framework.

### ***4.2 Case Study Site: The SAVOUR Muskoka Food Cluster***

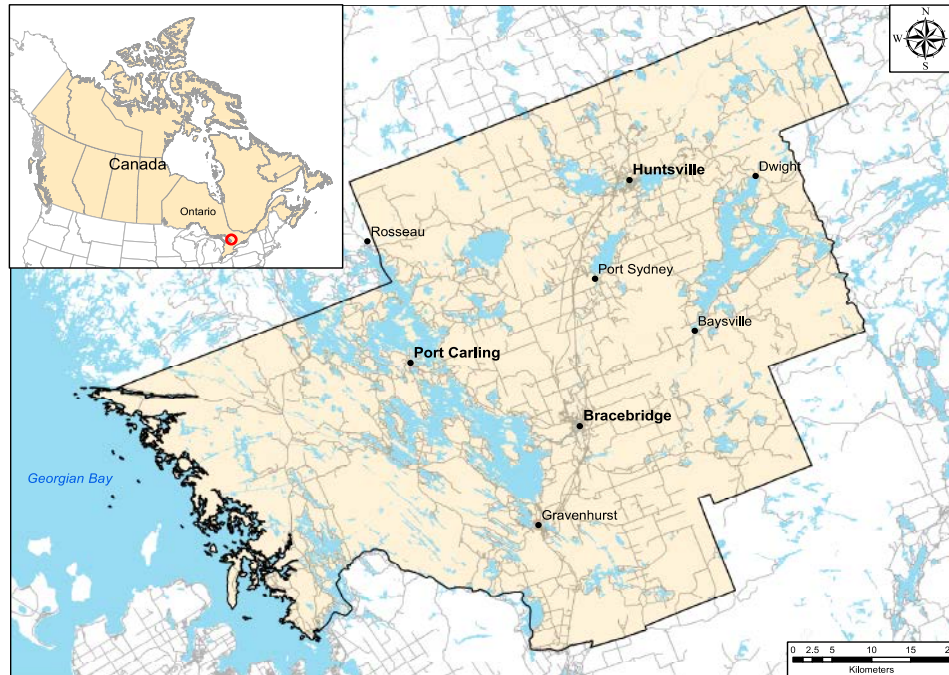
The selection of an appropriate study site is determined by the research questions being addressed. The SAVOUR Muskoka cluster, which is located some 150 kilometres north of Toronto, Ontario, was selected based upon the nature of the research topic since it was known that culinary initiatives had been built in Muskoka, ease of access, the availability of data/information to assess the applicability of the framework, and the willingness of key players to participate in the study as interviewees (Yin, 2009). The conceptual framework (see Table 1) was used to guide data collection, analysis and interpretation.

Fieldwork was conducted in Muskoka (see Figure 1) in the summer of 2011, using a mixed method approach. The busiest season for summer festivals was a good time from the researchers’ perspective, because it provided an opportunity to observe many activities taking place in the study area. Published and unpublished documents were collected and analyzed, official websites were accessed and examined, in-depth interviews with key players were undertaken, and field observation occurred through site visits at relevant establishments and cultural events, including food events. Interviewed informants included the



current and former chairs of the SAVOUR Muskoka organization, a former general manager of the organization, full-time administrative staff, three member farmers, one member artisan, restaurant managers, employees of the member establishments, and visitors.

*Figure 1:* Location of the ‘SAVOUR Muskoka Culinary Trail’ in Ontario, Canada.



Interviews were conducted in the Town of Huntsville, the Town of Port Carling, and the Town of Bracebridge by the first author. In Huntsville, a meeting was held with one of the founders of SAVOUR Muskoka. In Bracebridge interviews were conducted with the current chair of the board and the administrative staff of the organization. These interviews were conducted in the office of SAVOUR Muskoka. In Port Carling, three SAVOUR Muskoka member farmers (a honey producer, a four seasons seedling grower, and a specialty mushroom grower), one SAVOUR Muskoka artisan, and several farmers who were not members of SAVOUR Muskoka were interviewed at the local farmers’ market. The in-depth interviews with stakeholders provided insights into the practices and issues in the formation of the food cluster as part of the creative food economy. They also allowed the researcher to make necessary adjustments to the conceptual framework, which had been created based primarily on the review of academic literature.

An important purpose of this study was to assess issues of stakeholder collaboration in the creation of a food cluster. In-depth interviews with farmers and managers of restaurants were challenging to undertake and did not precisely follow the detailed interview questions created for them due to their different levels of expertise, understanding, and time constraints. These interviews were less formal and the interviewees were able to express their comments freely on

issues, such as the benefits they received after becoming a member of SAVOUR Muskoka, as well as on the partnership and collaboration processes between chefs and farmers, which appeared to be interesting to them. Thus, although farmers and restaurateurs, for example, were not considered to be key informants in the sense that they were not expected to possess inside knowledge of the operation of the cluster, they were included purposely to understand better the leadership and communication processes, which are critical factors for stakeholder collaboration in the formation of food clusters. Information is presented as evidence especially from four main respondents identified as A, B, C and D. These informants were: (1) a former senior executive of SAVOUR Muskoka, (2) a chair of the board of directors, (3) an executive chef, and (4) an administrative staff member (Lee, 2012).

In the two sections that follow, the findings of the research will be presented (see section 5.0) with attention being placed on re-examining each component of the conceptual framework (inputs, facilitation, outputs) as they apply to the Muskoka case study (see section 6.0). Key considerations that are important in the operation of food clusters and the development of a creative food economy will also be addressed in both of these sections.

## **5.0 Findings**

Muskoka, Ontario, has a long history of tourism that dates back to the middle of the nineteenth century (Wall, 1977; Shifflett & Wall, 2010). Although it does not possess prominent agricultural resources, it is developing a creative food economy under the leadership of the not-for-profit organization SAVOUR Muskoka. As such, it is an appropriate place to investigate the establishment and operation of a food cluster. The purpose of the development of the food cluster as part of a creative economy was to promote locally-grown agricultural products and related local small businesses. It's all about using local food...that's really the reason for developing SAVOUR Muskoka...we have seen the growth in local food interests... [Food cluster development] starts with the farmers and if there is no link to local food, a food cluster can't really exist (Informant B).

SAVOUR Muskoka is distinctive as a culinary organization because it is operated by a group of local farmers, chefs, artisans, and restaurant owners as they seek to sustain their livelihoods within the region. It is a culinary organization that is based upon a bottom-up organizational approach. Decentralized local groups have approached destination marketing organizations (DMOs), municipalities, and other economic development organizations to get them involved rather than the other way around. The food economy initiative was started by local farmers and chefs who realized that direct sales provide the greatest return on investments in farming (Informant B).

Direct sales had traditionally taken place at the farmers' markets. However, the focus of the local farmers' markets began to shift away from the land (i.e., selling

products from the local farms), evolving instead into ‘flea markets’. The farmers’ markets also began to let in ‘re-sellers’ who brought in agricultural products from the Toronto food terminal. The result was the creation of a market place that local farmers could not compete in financially (Informant A). In response, several local farmers made arrangements to sell directly to local restaurant chefs. In this way, both farmers and chefs could minimize the disadvantages of geographical conditions and the changing market. Farmers know what the chefs want ahead of time and deliver in a just-in-time delivery system (Informant C).

In December 2004, representatives of the region from the agricultural, restaurant and retailing sectors came together to create an organization with a vision to promote ‘a wide selection of regional culinary products, experiences and packages that are distinctive to Muskoka, which will be marketed successfully to the visitor market’ as a culinary place (SAVOUR Muskoka website, 2011). The idea of menu-branding and place-branding soon emerged. It took two years for the board of directors and stakeholders to reach decisions on goals, a common vision, and a mission statement to create the culinary place brand (Informant B). In 2007, SAVOUR Muskoka became a formal entity as a not-for-profit organization, which has since been run primarily on government grants and membership fees (Informant D). The activities of this not-for-profit include engaging in marketing and finance, compiling monthly newsletters, recruiting and assisting members, and participating in community events (Informant A).

SAVOUR Muskoka is a strategic alliance run by a board of directors (13 board members including 4 executive members: chair, vice chair, treasurer, secretary, plus 9 board members representing a diversity of interests) and two administrative staff. The organization’s general manager (GM) is responsible for day-to-day operations: once a month the GM meets with the board of directors to review what has taken place the month prior and to address what is planned to take place the following month (Informant A).

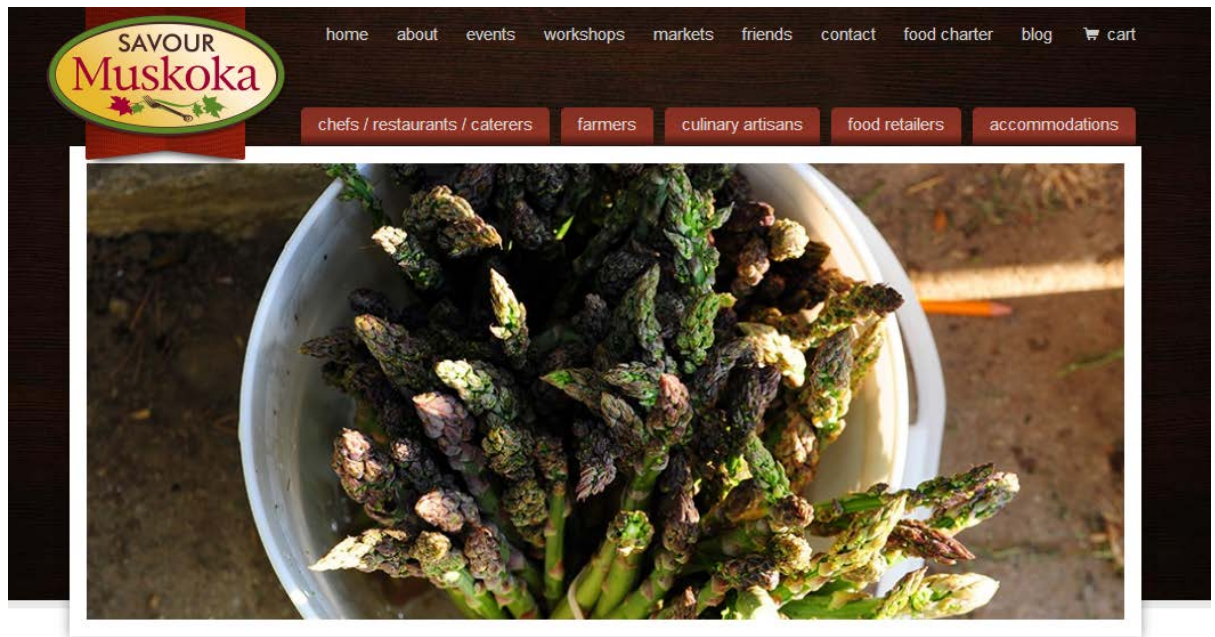
In 2010, SAVOUR Muskoka hosted a brainstorming session to decide on a strategic direction for the culinary movement. It was a group exercise that began with the question: ‘What are the issues and opportunities facing Muskoka/Parry Sound region as we look for ways to expand production, distribution and consumption of local food?’ (Informant D). As a result of this activity, five task groups were established to work strategically with members and move forward the culinary movement in the region. The five task groups are: Production Task Group, Delivery Task Group, Education Task Group, Culinary Trail Task Group, and Northern Ontario Task Group.

As outlined on the organization’s website (see Figure 2), SAVOUR Muskoka currently strives to achieve the following goals:

- Increase revenue for all stakeholders, particularly in the off-season through the development of recognizable food products
- Improve cross-promotion of regional culinary offerings

- Market products and services from the Muskoka/Parry Sound region both locally and to the visitor market
- Provide culinary movement educational support and services to the partners of SAVOUR Muskoka
- Improve communications between growers, micro-processors, accommodation stakeholders, restaurants, chefs and the retail sector
- Be a self-sustaining, non-governmental organization
- Have a current ongoing inventory of locally-grown/made products

Figure 2: Screenshot of SAVOUR Muskoka Website.



*“Cultivating appreciation & the development of local food & drink in Muskoka & Parry Sound.”*

SAVOUR Muskoka's mission encompasses a full SAVOUR network of Chefs, Restaurants, Farmers, Culinary & Beverage Micro-processors, Retailers, Farmers Markets, Governmental Partners, Customers, the Muskoka/Parry Sound Community. We work for our membership & community to assist in increasing fresh regional produce, meat, culinary artisan products & craft beer and wine capacity by offering a wide selection of signature events, experiences, programs, outreach & support. Our goal is to help strengthen our Local Food System Capacity nurturing our lively Culinary Tourism Sector while cultivating overall greater appreciation for the bounty offered by Muskoka/Parry Sound. Learn more - About Us

Source: SAVOUR Muskoka website, 2011

SAVOUR Muskoka is not itself a formal marketing organization and it has no particular branding strategy and budget (Informant B). Members of the not-for-profit organization, however, use the logo and the SAVOUR Muskoka map of a culinary trail. For example, the logo is displayed on the cover of SAVOUR Muskoka member restaurant menus (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: SAVOUR Muskoka Logo as Presented on a Restaurant Menu.



Source: A menu of a SAVOUR Muskoka member restaurant, 2011.

Financially, the organization was initially supported with a CAN\$15,000 grant by the Ontario Trillium Foundation. The grant covered marketing materials, website design, promotion, and advertising. Membership fees are used to cover operating costs such as wages, overhead, travel expenses and capital expenses such as a computer, fax machine, and photocopier. The organization also raises funds through events and community initiatives. The Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario (FedNor), which is a subsidiary of Industry Canada, covers the bulk of the organization's operating budget and the costs of certain projects (Informant C).

At the time of the field investigation, the SAVOUR Muskoka cluster had 143 members (28 chefs, 40 farmers, 51 restaurants and caterers, and 24 culinary artisans) who hoped to self-sustain their livelihoods through the initiative (Informant D). Thus, SAVOUR Muskoka is a food cluster, albeit one with somewhat different characteristics than many other culinary clusters in that it has a less rich agricultural base and has adopted a bottom-up approach to clustering.

## **6.0 The Conceptual Framework Application**

### **6.1 Inputs**

Although Muskoka does not have a strong agricultural base, it is blessed with an attractive environment comprised of the forest-lakes complex of the Canadian Shield. It has a significant competitive advantage in terms of related and supporting assets. These include artists and galleries, attractions such as parks and beaches, trails and festivals, heritage and museums, recreation opportunities

such as skiing, fishing, golfing, horseback riding, and boat tours, First Nations events and sites, and supporting infrastructure such as marinas, outfitters, public and private clubs, travel agencies and tour operators, a tourist information centre, and shopping. In 2008, the District Municipality of Muskoka declared Muskoka to be a Designated Arts Community (District Municipality of Muskoka website, n. d.) and the town of Bracebridge has started a feasibility study to create a 'Muskoka School for the Arts' (Informant D). In their study on the creative economy of Muskoka, Shyllit and Spencer (2011) state:

Muskoka has a strong and diverse artistic community, however, statistics showcased few artistic registered businesses and [as a result, there are] misconceptions regarding the value and economic reach of local artists. With recognition of Muskoka as a Designated Arts Community, potential exists for arts based community economic development.

Shyllit and Spencer (2011) indicate that the Muskoka Region possesses a great number of assets and advantages, including a beautiful natural environment, a potential niche food economy, and access to a large market in Toronto and other cities in southern Ontario. Currently, about 60 percent of the regional economic base and entrepreneurial activities in Muskoka are focused on meeting the needs and wants of visitors and seasonal cottage owners (District Municipality of Muskoka, 2005). "In 2004, Muskoka had 1,993,792 person visits, which generated over \$234,000,000 dollars in expenditures, benefitting the local economy.... Of all visitors, 1,880,773 were from Canada, 27,391 from the United States, and 37,628 were from other countries..." (Shyllit & Spencer, 2011, p. 36). According to the Ontario Ministry of Tourism's regional tourism profile of Muskoka, the experience economy is a leading economic sector and the importance of a creative economy is increasingly being recognized in the region.

## **6.2 Facilitation as Creative Process**

**6.2.1 'Environmentally friendly strategy':** SAVOUR Muskoka members are aware of the importance of promoting an environmentally friendly movement linked to locally-grown food. For example, one interviewee stated:

Each farm and each restaurant does their own things that meet the environmentally friendly movement... Every farm we work with is basically a sustainable farm because they produce products without using [commercial fertilizers] or pesticides and these farms have been around for generations (Informant C).

The organization's strategic plan promotes the use of locally-grown agricultural products. However, when fresh vegetables from Muskoka are not available, chefs try to get them from Ontario first and then from elsewhere in Canada (Informant B). Nevertheless, the informants noted that a problematic situation could arise if the organization pushed its members too strongly to become

'environmentally friendly' even though environmental awareness is associated with the 'Slow Food Movement,' an initiative which initially helped influence the local food community to think about the sustainability of a food economy in the region (Informant B). Additionally, the University of Waterloo Summit Centre, an environmental research facility, opened in January 2011. It 'boasts a number of sustainable and green initiatives, including radiant solar heat, a living wall of plants, geothermal heating and cooling, Muskoka granite stone and Hardie cement siding' (Muskoka Lakes Chamber of Commerce, 2011). This facility could allow Muskoka to become a centre of environmental research, linking it to the international green movement.

6.2.2 '*Leadership*' is among the most critical factors for the successful development of a creative food economy and food cluster. It is important in facilitating stakeholder collaboration and ensuring that communication and information flows occur between participants in the cluster. Leadership can come from a variety of sources: government departments at a variety of levels, place brand management organizations, and creative individuals such as prominent chefs and entrepreneurs (e.g., 'Talent' of the 4 T's of the creative economy).

There are many economic development organizations in Muskoka that are involved either directly or indirectly in SAVOUR Muskoka culinary initiatives (e.g., Economic Development Office, New Regional Tourism Organization, Ontario Tourism, Muskoka Tourism, Muskoka Creative Economy, and Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance) resulting in some fragmentation of responsibilities and initiatives. Certainly, a number of development projects are being undertaken in collaboration with many of the regional development organizations to improve the economic, cultural and environmental well-being of the place.

We try to align ourselves as many ways as we can. As well, on any publications and press releases, we try to send them our stuff because they cover a lot of publicity and that's the way we align ourselves with them. However, we do not join their meetings and we do not have a formal say on how they operate. We are totally independent and we do our own things... we talk to them and they also talk to us on many occasions. For example, for the G8 Summit, 'Ontario Tourism' came to us and said that they have to promote Ontario; and 'Muskoka Tourism' came to us and said that they have to promote Muskoka. So, I took all of them... I used all Muskoka products for one of the events and all Ontario products for another event and it is good for SAVOUR Muskoka to expose itself in the press by doing it (Informant B).

According to the interviewees, both Muskoka Tourism and the Economic Development Office recognize SAVOUR Muskoka as an important contributor to the experience economy in Muskoka. However, these organizations focus on

other entrepreneurial activities located in the downtown cores to attract more investors and visitors to the urban centres. The Economic Development Office recognizes the importance of the experience economy to Muskoka, but agriculture and farms are often forgotten. Nevertheless, the SAVOUR Muskoka informants hope to collaborate more effectively with the District of Muskoka in the future:

We are working on better collaboration with the District of Muskoka to increase more awareness of local farms and products out there, and our farmers committee has done presentations to the District of Muskoka. We wanted them to know that [SAVOUR Muskoka] is here, the farmers are here, and agricultural land is here... so now they are interested in it, but they do not realize it is a big part of tourism. They do not see [a culinary cluster] as a big component of [the experience economy] in this region... we receive funding from two other government organizations, but the funding is too little and that's why [it is hard] for us to make a move... and this is one of our challenges we are working on. We are going to make a strategic planning goal in the fall for the next three years... we try to self-sustain ourselves (Informant D).

6.2.3 '*Stakeholder collaboration*' is a key element in the development process, and the successful creation of a food cluster depends on stakeholder involvement and the formation of strategic alliances and partnerships within and between the private and public sectors (Aas et al., 2005; Selin, 1999; Selin & Chavez, 1995; Selin & Myers, 1998; Timothy & Tosun, 2003).

Culinary [clustering] does not happen from one restaurant or from one event... it takes many different pieces to make that whole movement happen... partnership and collaboration between members is absolutely the key in SAVOUR Muskoka... Absolutely, it is the key... the biggest aspect of everything here... Coming to Muskoka five years ago, for example, no one really thought about food as an important part of [the creative economy], but the world is changing and at the same time we are changing.... So we have to have that partnership to drive the whole culinary movement (Informant B).

'Stakeholder collaboration' involves cooperation among various stakeholders and empowers them to create a sustainable food production and consumption nexus, thereby helping to self-sustain their livelihoods. Collaboration among SAVOUR Muskoka stakeholders is strong. The grass-roots organization is made up of four local culinary-related groups of farmers, chefs, restaurants, and artisans. It is a membership-based organization that depends greatly on membership fees. Members share their skills and knowledge, for example, by actively participating in workshops to meet the organization's ultimate goal of



promoting and sustaining local livelihoods. In SAVOUR Muskoka, each stakeholder is considered to be a major player of the organization. They are encouraged to attend board meetings and share information gathered in the meetings (Informant C). SAVOUR Muskoka holds a full general membership meeting once a year.

There are a chefs' committee and a farmers' committee.... It's really important because, for example, the growing period [of agricultural products] is too short in Muskoka. So, actually, the farmers need to have an outlet for their products and chefs want the local products to work with... so the more we work together, the better.... One of our farmers is 60 years old, for example, and grows the best vegetables and she hopes that she can do it for another 20 years (Informant C).

As indicated in the above quotation, SAVOUR Muskoka has created two different sub-committees: (1) a 'chefs' sub-committee' and (2) a 'farmers' sub-committee' (Informant B). Each sub-committee meets six times a year to discuss the challenges they face in developing and maintaining the food cluster. The discussions from both sub-committees are shared with the board of directors. Member restaurants and artisans are not currently active in this way (Informant C).

6.2.4 '*Communication and information flows*' are required to bring in new ideas and make consensus and to share accumulated knowledge and know-how. The volume and quality of communication is often a reflection of leadership and coordination, which influence information flows in stakeholder collaboration in the formation of a cluster. Communication and connectivity are recognized as being vital (Halseth et al., 2010) to the formation of a food cluster in creative rural community development. Communication and information flows among stakeholders can take many forms, as indicated above. 'Technology', another of the 4 T's, is of great importance in this regard.

Through its FedNor program, Industry Canada has played a significant role in Muskoka by enhancing information technology (IT) infrastructure (Informant B). Interviewees stressed the importance of high-speed internet access for it has facilitated connectivity between SAVOUR Muskoka members and has enabled the not-for-profit organization to attract more members who are interested in the creative food economy (Informant B). This is particularly important because membership fees are an important financial source for the organization. Many organization members formerly had limited access to IT, but recent improvements have allowed SAVOUR Muskoka to position itself better through the creation of an effective and efficient communication process. SAVOUR Muskoka now makes 90 percent of communications through email correspondence and only 10 percent are made through phone calls. However, some members still do not have IT access (Informant D).

A workshop series is organized regularly. For example, in 2010, six workshops were held, including a Basic Canning and Preserving Workshop, Advanced Canning and Preserving Workshop, Introduction to Working with Draft Horses, Muskoka Meats Workshop Series, Winter Gardening, and a SAVOUR Muskoka Farm Workshop. These workshops were available to both members and non-members, creating more connections between local people and promoting greater awareness of SAVOUR Muskoka (Informant D). The workshops, which are offered throughout the year, also provide members with opportunities to share knowledge on an array of topics (e.g., shiitake mushroom cultivation, specialty honey products) (Informant C).

### **6.3 Outputs: Outputs I and Outputs II**

The number of culinary programs and workshop series provided by SAVOUR Muskoka, during the off-season in particular, is an indicator of the organization's contribution to the local food economy. According to interviewees, culinary experiences need to be diverse and not just focused on grapes and winery tours as is the case in many other culinary places in Canada and around the world. SAVOUR Muskoka is a different culinary place brand model in that it has been developed in a region lacking vineyards and wineries or a rich agricultural sector. Unlike wineries, which are often built with tourism infrastructure in place, this is seldom the case in areas comprised mainly of small farms (Informant C).

Muskoka's member farmers are increasingly involved in farm-gate sales and pick-your-own activities; however, they are admittedly slow at building specific infrastructure. Nonetheless, SAVOUR Muskoka is certainly playing a vital role in helping to build a creative economy in the region, thus, complementing the regional municipality's own official 'Creative Muskoka' development agenda. Indeed, SAVOUR Muskoka is itself a product within the creative economy, and it uses the slogan 'Eat Local, Think Global' to promote the local food economy (Informant D). One of the informants made the following statement regarding the organization's role in the development of the regional creative economy:

We work with this group... the whole process is taking consideration of our chefs and artisans.... Back in fall the creative economy organization had an event at the local high school, and in order to show how we fit into the creative economy we did presentations....We also did cooking demonstrations with the kids to show how food fits into the creative food economy and why it is important (Informant D).

In its fourth year at the time the research was conducted, the 'Field-to-Fork Tasting Event' took place in August and was initiated by Muskoka's chefs, local farmers and artisans who pride themselves in sourcing locally grown products. The festival provides an opportunity to promote and sell specialty food products made by members. The festival is a celebration of the culinary organization of SAVOUR Muskoka and its members are united in their efforts to celebrate and share in

Muskoka's agricultural and culinary heritage as these activities support a healthy environment and economic growth (SAVOUR Muskoka press release, 2011).

Visitors and local people can buy a ticket at the tasting event to taste local food, beverages, and [food] products from around the region. They also can chat with local chefs, farmers, and food and beverage producers, and engage in a culinary experience. Ticket prices are set for adults at \$65. Children's tickets can be purchased at \$30 (for those aged between 10-18) and admission is free for those under 10 years of age (SAVOUR Muskoka press release, 2011).

In 2010, SAVOUR Muskoka gained international attention when it was invited to participate in the G8 (Huntsville) summit to help showcase Ontario's growing culinary movement and creative food economy (Informant B). The following statement from the menu of a member restaurant illustrates the pride that was felt in this recognition:

'Taste of the Nation': [...] is proud to celebrate foods that are produced on the growing SAVOUR Muskoka culinary trail, across our province, and around our country. The locally inspired dishes on the menu, some of which were served to world leaders during the recent 2010 G8 Summit, reflect both the diversity of Canada's table and the finest backyard and regional Ontario farm-raised harvests, plus pure maple syrup, wildflower honey and herbs produced right in [Muskoka].

This opportunity raised the profile of Muskoka as a place to hold events. SAVOUR Muskoka has since strengthened its connections with local events, including Bala's Cranberry Festival (established 1985). Many participants who sell their wares at this particular festival now use the SAVOUR Muskoka logo. An increasing number of Asian visitors are also coming to Muskoka to attend this and other events, such as a maple syrup festival (Informant D). Significantly, the Town of Gravenhurst was the home of Norman Bethune, a renowned figure in China, and the Visitor Centre of Bethune Memorial House continues to be an important attraction for Chinese visitors.

New infrastructure, such as the G8 Summit Centre, which was financed by the 'G8 Legacy Fund', will allow Muskoka to bid on larger events 'which were out of reach in the past due to lack of such large facilities' (Muskoka Lakes Chamber of Commerce, 2011). In addition, the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport recently established 13 Regional Tourism Organizations to engage in new product development and place marketing and branding activities. The Muskoka region is the largest such organization. Increased provincial funding in conjunction with further product development, including the culinary movement, is likely to further restructure the creative economy and rural development of in the region.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

It has been argued that the development of a food cluster that involves the forging of synergistic relationships between a primary sector (agriculture) and a tertiary service sector (tourism), linked to and supported by a vibrant cultural sector (the creative economy), can underpin a creative economy that can provide some rural areas and small towns with the opportunity to improve their local economies and place identities.

The establishment of a place branding strategy in support of the creative food economy does not necessarily require direct investment in a primary or tertiary sector. Rather, initiatives must be facilitated that will result in the creation of new cultural products, collectively forming a food cluster, as part of a place branding process. The innovation process involves talent and creativity in the initiation and management of diverse relationships among many stakeholders resulting in the offering of new products, leading to the formation of a recognized food cluster.

A conceptual framework has been presented that describes the innovation process that underpins the rural development and operation of a creative food economy. Components of the framework have been illustrated through a case study of SAVOUR Muskoka. This framework can act as a template for research, indicating key topics that require examination in the assessment of a food cluster. It can also be used as a guide for those interested in initiating a creative food economy to strengthen place image and encourage rural development.

The conceptual framework was developed primarily from a literature assessment and has a variety of roles, as demonstrated in this case study. First, it was used to guide the collection of information in the field investigation. Second, it was used to structure the qualitative analysis in the case study. Third, the details of each of the components can be used as an evaluative tool in the assessment of the innovation process necessary to the formation of a cluster. Thus, it can also assist prescriptively by drawing attention to elements that require further attention in the formation of a food cluster, thereby strengthening rural development through the stimulation of a creative economy. Clearly, there is an opportunity to apply the model to other cases in the search for similarities and differences.

The transformation of a place's comparative advantages into a competitive advantage is based in part upon the identification of the strengths of the place through the inventory of the culinary-related cultural and environmental resources. Since these will differ from place to place, one should expect different outcomes based on local things and knowledge that are used to create the taste of a place. Nevertheless, in many cases a synergistic relationship can be established between primary agricultural and tertiary service sectors leading to the creative economy through entrepreneurial activities that build upon local strengths and assets. Furthermore, the components identified in the framework should all be present for the creation of a food cluster. Thus, for example, it is necessary to have agricultural products within reach of an interested market of

sufficient size. In the absence of either of these, it will be difficult to establish a food cluster. These are necessary, but not sufficient, for it is also a requirement to have a facilitating organization that can communicate to establish partnerships and collaboration and, eventually, to market the cluster. This is certainly a creative process. The framework suggests that all players involved in the cluster should work together to create and share in the mutual benefits that the innovation activities will provide through the development of a creative rural economy.

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