

20,000 Tourists Rush to This Trending City in China, Why?

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Source:OT-Team(S,J), China News,Global Times



Since early March, Zibo local barbecue has caused a sensation online. The little double-layer stove, small pancakes, green onions and sauce became icons among netizens.

According to reports, Zibo received 4.8 million visitors in March, with a year-on-year increase of 134 percent, and tourist revenue was up by 60 percent. A total of 1,288 barbecue businesses served 135,800 customers a day on average, most of whom were university students from across the province and nationwide.

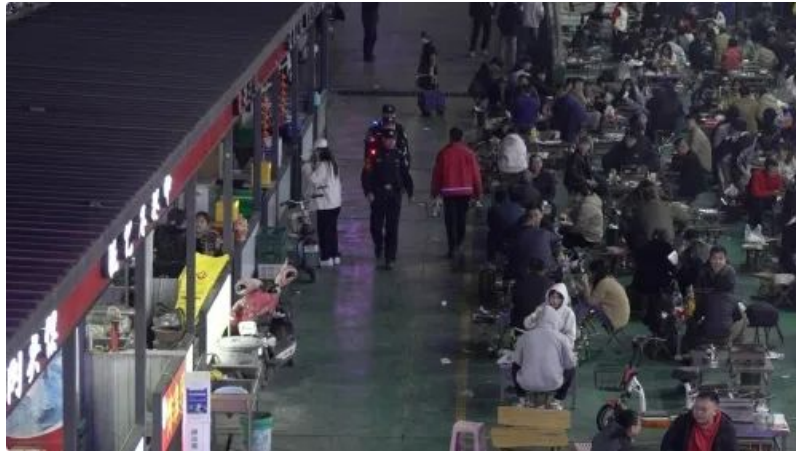


Back to May 2022, more than 12,000 students from Shandong University were transferred to Zibo for quarantine, and they were well cared for and felt touched.

"Local people were doing their best to offer us the good condition during the quarantine time." A student told the People's Daily reporter that, local people prepared daily necessities and epidemic prevention materials in advance, even the small things such as nail clippers were included. "To make sure that we get good internet service and could continue with study, they even prepared new SIM cards for us."

Before the quarantine was lifted, the Linzi District Government contacted all barbecue restaurants throughout the city, and order barbecue for all the students quarantined in the district, as a special meal for farewell, and told that the students would be welcomed to come to Zibo again after the epidemic. When the students posted videos of their recent visit and the barbecue carnival, it made the Zibo barbecue go viral soon.

The warm story was known by more students in Jinan, and train tickets to Zibo were sold out soon. And later the special trains for "barbecue tours" between Jinan and Zibo were organized.



China's "Barbecue Capital" Offers a Distinct Dining Experience!

Media reports suggested that at least 120,000 tourists are expected to visit Zibo by train during the Labor Day holiday. This influx of tourists will present a significant challenge to the city's capacity.



In order to encourage people coming to the city, Zibo set up a specially customized "barbecue map", and added 21 new barbecue bus lines, so that tourists can "get on the bus to rest, get off to eat", paper.cn reported.

People flocking to Zibo from highway nationwide, with red banners saying “Heading to Zibo for the Barbecue”, which is quite trendy now:

In order to provide good dining environment for tourists, local government in Zibo spent 20 days to build a “barbecue town” that could accommodate nearly 10,000 people, which already started accepting tourists since April 28.

And Since March on, local police has resumed night patrols, to ensure safety of people who stay outside late for having barbecues.

Former UN Official Gives Thumbs Up to Zibo!

Erik Solheim, former UN Environment Executive Director and Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, praised the trending Zibo barbecue after tasting it in Shandong Province on April 28, saying that it has a very distinct Chinese character.

Solheim also suggested that as a revitalizing and old industrial city, Zibo is rebranding itself as the barbecue capital of China, which is a brilliant idea.

20 May 2023 - China's barbecue boomtown: how Zibo fanned its fortunes with a food festival

https: Catherine Wong SCMP

[//www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3221156/chinas-barbecue-boomtown-how-zibo-fanned-its-fortunes-food-festival](https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3221156/chinas-barbecue-boomtown-how-zibo-fanned-its-fortunes-food-festival)

The eastern industrial city has struggled to shake off a downturn in its mainstay chemical industry. A government campaign to tempt holidaymakers with grilled meat has buoyed revenue and raised hopes of an economic transformation.

Before it became China's "outdoor barbecue capital" for budget-conscious young Chinese travellers, Zibo was a little-known, rusting industrial centre struggling to keep up with the country's rapidly changing economy.

The deeply indebted city in the eastern province of Shandong had been hammered by a drop in demand in its chemical industry, the mainstay of its economy. It has also struggled to retain its younger generations, who head out of the city for better opportunities elsewhere.

Then this year, city authorities launched a concerted tourism campaign to attract visitors with tight purse strings, dangling freebies for a "barbecue festival".

The campaign worked. Millions of young holidaymakers from across the country headed to Zibo in search of flamed-grilled salty lamb in the weeks that followed.

The waft of meaty treats also drew officials from other provinces to the city to understand its recipe for success. The rise in the Zibo's national profile has been dramatic but there are doubts about just how much the barbecue boom can transform its economic fortunes.



About 120,000 people – many searching for barbecue food – visited Zibo over five-day Labour Day holiday this year. Photo: AFP

Zibo has hundreds of barbecue restaurants and open-air stalls where diners can roast skewers of cumin-spiced meat over charcoal and eat them with chives in a pancake.

But catering is a small part of Zibo's economy, which has been weighed down in recent years by weak export demand and Covid-induced disruptions in its chemical industry.

To boost revenue, Zibo decided to seize on the demand for lost-cost travel, unveiling a series of incentives to attract travellers on a budget for a "barbecue festival" over the May holiday.

As part of the promotion, the city government handed out discount vouchers, revamped bus routes and increased railway capacity to bring in the visitors.

Market regulators policed restaurants and hotels to prevent price-gouging during the holiday period and youth hostels operated by the local branch of the Communist Youth League offered half-price accommodation for visiting university students.

The municipal government also launched an interactive map within WeChat, making it easier for tourists to find barbecue restaurants and hotels.

These government-led measures, coupled with glowing reviews from online influencers on Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo and Douyin, generated unprecedented buzz for Zibo's barbecue scene.

Initially, younger Chinese consumers came in search of affordable holidays but word spread to attract other groups looking for an inexpensive break.

The influx of visitors peaked in May over the Labour Day break, the first major holiday in China in the post-pandemic era.

In all, more than 120,000 people descended on the city over the five days, the highest number of tourists during a holiday period in a decade.

"Zibo's success is a case of government-driven boom," said Chen Ji, a specialist on industrial economics at the Capital University of Economics and Business.

"There are many similar industrial cities in northeastern provinces facing similar challenges, but they have never devoted as much resources and effort to promote themselves as Zibo."



Zibo has made a name for itself with its grilled meat pancakes. Photo: Xinhua

Travel and spending were up throughout the country over the Labour Day holiday as Chinese holidaymakers put the pandemic behind them after three long years of restrictions.

However, travellers spent less, outlaying just 540 yuan per person during the national holiday compared with 645 yuan during the same time in 2019, according to data from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Younger tourists, in particular, have taken extreme measures to squeeze on their traveling costs with what has become known as "Special Forces-style tourism".

The trending term refers to the increasingly popular militant-like travel planning strategy that involves cramming travel itineraries with as many attractions as possible and unconventional, cheap accommodation such as overnight stays in bathhouses or internet cafes.

That belt-tightening was apparent in Zibo. Online travel agency Qunar said that every tourist who went to Zibo for a barbecue meal spent 750 yuan on average on the trip, including transport and accommodation.

That is about half the per capita spending of visitors to more well known and established tourist centres like Chengdu in Sichuan province, home of the giant panda and hotpot.

The manager of a luxury hotel in Zibo said the hotel had seen a significant increase in bookings in recent months and it was fully booked during the May holiday.

But most visitors stayed for no more than two days, in part because there was little else to see.

"Zibo is not a tourist city after all. We don't have that many attractions other than barbecue. So we expect the bookings will drop after the May holiday boom," the manager said, declining to be named.

We don't have that many attractions other than barbecue Zibo hotel manager

Chen, from Capital University of Economics and Business, said bigger structural changes if tourism was to flourish in the city.

"Much of Zibo's success is due to the government's heavy involvement," he said.

"But if Zibo wants to branch out into the service industry, it should leave it to market competition.

We should also strengthen the overall economy and increase household disposable income so that people are willing to spend."

Ren Zeping, a former chief economist at the real estate giant China Evergrande Group, said Zibo could try to capitalise on its tourism boom to overhaul its economy.

"Zibo has attracted much attention and earned a good reputation among the public with its earnestness ... I hope Zibo can continue such good practice so as to encourage more people to invest and settle in Zibo," Ren wrote on his WeChat account.

But he also said that "the fact that Zibo has managed to stand out with its barbecue but not with any major industry or technology breakthrough shows the weakness in Shandong's economy".

"In recent years, a host of promising enterprises in the new-energy sector have emerged along the Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta regions, while Shandong has not progressed much from its traditional industries," Ren said.

Ren added that while the barbecue boom reflected the city's efforts to turn the economy around, more attention should be devoted to improving the overall business environment, in particular the private sector.

The local government has in recent years pledged to restructure its economy and move away from an overreliance on traditional industries of oil and chemical plants.

If Zibo does manage a wider revival in its economy, it could find it easier to attract and retain young talent.

But Lin Hua, who moved from Zibo to Hangzhou a few years ago for better career opportunities, said wages in the city remained low.

"I went to the best high school in Zibo and only one of my classmates chose to stay in the city after graduation. Most of us moved to other provinces because the wages were just too low in Zibo," Lin said, adding that air pollution and a weak medical system had also deterred many from staying in the city.

"The only career options for those who chose to stay in Zibo are state-owned enterprises or becoming a civil servant," Lin said.

To make the most of the boom, officials in Zibo need to encourage young people to stay longer than a barbecue meal.

"If the barbecue boom can bring new sectors and more opportunities, I would probably consider moving back to Zibo. It depends on whether young people like myself can see a future there beyond the current buzz," Lin added.

21 May 2023 - Inside the Barbecue City That Is China's Hottest Tourist Destination

By Vivian Wang By The New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/21/world/asia/zibo-barbecue.html>

Zibo has become a social media star for its distinctive barbecue style. Now the city is overrun with visitors.



Singers performing this month in Zibo, China, at a popular barbecue restaurant that has become a must-see for visitors.

The flame-shaped neon archway was visible from miles away, which was good since there was little other reason for anyone to be in that part of town, an expanse of fields outside an industrial city in eastern China. The lights flickered between icy blue and red-hot, leaping toward the night sky beside a jumbo sign: “Zibo Barbecue Experiential Ground.”

And what an experience awaited. Inside this Coachella for barbecue, visitors could pose with a mascot dressed like a meat skewer. They could watch a concert against an LED backdrop of radiating flames. They could eat from one of the hundreds of grills scattered across the grounds the size of 12 football fields — if they waited hours for a table, and if their chosen meat purveyor hadn’t run out of food.

Zibo, a once-obscure chemical manufacturing city in Shandong Province, has suddenly strangely — thanks to, of all things, barbecue — turned into China’s hottest tourist destination.



This city of 4.7 million received 4.8 million visitors in March, after it began attracting notice on social media. During a public holiday earlier this month, a Zibo vegetable market was more popular than the Great Wall, according to a mapping service. High-speed rail tickets from Beijing sold out one minute after their release.

The local government has set up 21 buses to ferry visitors from the train station directly to barbecue restaurants. They erected the barbecue festival on the site of a sprawling seafood market, the only place big enough to host 10,000 people.



Zibo has become crowded with visitors seeking the local barbecue. Credit



Social media postings by college students extolling the joys of the local barbecue style may be responsible for attracting the increasing crowds to Zibo.

“We’ve all had good food before, but this kind of hustle and bustle, this warmth, is hard to find,” said Zhang Kexin, a college senior who, within half an hour of arriving in Zibo during the recent holiday, bought six souvenir tubs of pan-fried crackers, another local specialty.

Ms. Zhang had traveled 500 miles from Shanxi Province — not a journey she had ever considered before, though Zibo was a friend’s hometown. “I thought it seemed like a very ordinary place,” she laughed.

The question of why, exactly, this ordinary place took off has absorbed seemingly all of China, with officials in other cities even [sending research teams to Zibo](#) to try and emulate its success. Most explanations attribute the craze’s origins to college students, some of whom posted on social media about the joys of the local barbecue style. Diners grill their own skewers on tabletop charcoal stoves, which lends the meal a D.I.Y. feel, and wrap them in a local specialty of tortilla-like shells, alongside a sprig of raw green onion and a smear of hot sauce.

The cheap prices were also a draw — skewers start at 15 cents at the most popular restaurants — so other young people began flocking to town. Influencers followed.



A charcoal maker in Zibo



Diners picking out food to grill.

But perhaps most crucial has been the very fact of how unexpected Zibo's rise was. As a result, locals — seemingly unable to believe their luck — have done all they can to keep the frenzy alive.

Residents have offered their homes to strangers who couldn't find hotels. After some social media users joked that they wanted eye candy with their barbecue, officials [organized](#) a "180 group" — men taller than 180 centimeters, or 5 feet 11 inches, and wearing suits — to greet train station arrivals.

At the station during the May 1 holiday, there were no suited men in sight. But there were plenty of other cheery greeters, handing out water bottles, sunscreen, watermelon (grown in a Zibo suburb), mouthwash (for after barbecue), even flasks of local liquor.

"Welcome, out-of-town visitors! I hope you have fun!" a woman shouted as she pressed pumpkin-flavored crackers into arrivals' hands, many of which were already overflowing with freebies.



Outside the train station in Zibo, cheery greeters meeting visitors. Credit...Qilai Shen for The New York Times



“To see all this liveliness, after three years of the pandemic, my heart feels pretty warm,” one Zibo local shouted over the noise of the visitors.

For many visitors, the crazy crowds are the point, after China’s prolonged Covid lockdowns. At one of the most popular barbecue restaurants, where hundreds of diners perched on tiny folding stools around outdoor grills, officials had designated an elevated viewing platform just for tourists to watch the people below eat, through a cloud of cumin-scented smoke.

Li Yang, a local, snagged a table around 6 p.m., after having lined up at 3 a.m. His commute to his job at a steel company was now clogged with traffic. But he didn’t mind.

“To see all this liveliness, after three years of the pandemic, my heart feels pretty warm,” he shouted, over the sounds of maracas shaken by four men, seemingly unaffiliated with the restaurant, who were gallivanting between tables serenading diners.

Several tables away, Bai Lingbin, 25, was already digging in, having waited since midnight. His grill, shared with four other men, was piled with toothpick-thin skewers laced with crispy pork skin, sweet potatoes and wraps.

Mr. Bai, who had traveled from Anhui Province, was frank: He prefers the barbecue in northeastern China, another famous grilling region. But, he declared as he raised a beer to his table mates, whom he’d met in line: “The atmosphere here is the best.”

Still, some locals secretly profess a desire to see their hometown’s sudden fame ebb, at least a little.

Staff at barbecue restaurants said they were sleeping only a few hours each night. Residents who used to buy groceries at the suddenly popular vegetable market — where there is now nary a vegetable in sight, as snack and souvenir vendors have piled in — must find their produce elsewhere.



A mascot of a meat skewer is joining the fun in Zibo.



Local BBQ delicacies at a street market in the neighborhood of Badajiao, a street market now turned into a super popular tourist destination in Zibo.

There was intense pressure to keep customers happy, though, because the government was determined to maintain Zibo's streak, said Wang Jiuyuan, the manager of a barbecue spot a 30-minute drive from the city center, yet still overrun. Mr. Wang had pasted posters at every table, asking customers for patience because many waiters spoke only the local dialect.

"We're afraid of having a complaint filed against us, because as long as it's an out-of-town customer, the government will accept it, whether it's reasonable or not," Mr. Wang said, adding that the restaurant had been scolded after a customer complained about not being seated.

Some online have worried that the pressure on locals to be accommodating has gone too far, especially after a viral video showed one restaurant owner kneeling to ask forgiveness from a customer upset by long lines.

Last month, even the Zibo government seemed to pull back, urging people to visit other nearby cities, because it was overwhelmed.

Down a quiet road on the outskirts of the city, workers in aging factories were kneading handmade sesame crisps, a local delicacy that had also seen a boost in orders as tourists poured in, said Gao Juan, a factory owner.

Ms. Gao had considered pivoting to making the barbecue wraps, which were in even higher demand. Vendors of those wraps were already taking orders for August.

But the machines for making those wraps were sold out. Ms. Gao was willing to take a long view about whether the craze would last.

"When there's a shortage in the market, it's easy to overreact," she said. "Let's wait and see."



No social distancing at this barbecue restaurant.

22 May 2023 - Zibo sets hot pace with economic transformation

By ZHAO RUIXUE in Zibo, Shandong | CHINA DAILY

https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202305/22/WS646aa461a310b6054fad439f_1.html

zhaoruixue@chinadaily.com.cn



A customer shows how to eat Zibo barbecue on March 31

Barbecue trade brings influx of visitors, triggers internet sensation

On a working day late last month, a yard that is home to more than 10 barbecue restaurants in Zibo, Shandong province, was packed with diners at about 5 pm.

Lines formed as people waited for tables at the businesses in the city's Linzi district. Some diners even made their way inside the restaurants to obtain skewers, instead of waiting for waiters to pass them the implements, as the staff members were so busy.

A 51-year-old resident, who wished to be named only as Yu, said: "In the past two months, we have seldom come to the yard for barbecue food because there are so many people. We had to wait in line unless we arrived extremely early. Many diners come from outside Zibo, judging from the license plate numbers of vehicles parked near the yard."

Yu added that she had never seen such crowds in the area before.

Zibo, an old industrial city, barely featured on most people's list of must-visit places in the past, until its barbecue scene went viral, attracting a huge influx of visitors during the past three months. These arrivals, who are mainly young people, have made the city well-known nationwide.

The once-thriving industrial hub with a population of 4.5 million is capitalizing on the fame of its sizzling culinary fare to fuel economic growth amid efforts to upgrade an old economic structure dominated by large industrial projects.

In the first quarter of this year, Zibo achieved GDP of 105.77 billion yuan (\$15.07 billion), a rise of 4.7 percent year-on-year, the city's bureau of statistics reported.



Visitors enjoy barbecued food, pancakes and beer in Zibo, Shandong province

The bureau said the local consumer market showed a strong recovery in the first quarter, with retail sales of consumer goods reaching 31.36 billion yuan, a year-on-year rise of 8.3 percent.

Since March, an average of 135,800 customers a day have headed to the 1,288 barbecue businesses in the city, the Zibo Bureau of Commerce reported at the end of last month. These customers generated a 35 percent year-on-year rise in revenue for major barbecue restaurants in Zhangdian district, the city's main urban area, while the districts of Zhoucun and Linzi reported rises of more than 20 percent compared with last year.

During the five-day May Day holiday, Badaju market, a wet market in Zibo, was China's most-visited destination, ahead of well-known tourist sites such as the Great Wall, data from Baidu Maps show.

Zibo railway station catered to 240,000 passengers during the holiday — growth of 55 percent compared with the same period in 2019.

The outstanding performance of barbecue restaurants attracted officials from many cities, especially those with heavy industrial projects, to Zibo in search of new development paths. The officials conducted field studies on how Zibo's barbecue industry went viral on the internet.



Visitors enjoy barbecued food, pancakes and beer in Zibo, Shandong province

Student posts

Zibo has long sought to publicize its unique take on roasted skewers of meat, vegetables, seafood and other foodstuffs in the hope of attracting business.

But it was only in March, when college students tried the barbecue food, took videos of themselves enjoying it, and posted the footage on social media that it went viral.

Last year, more than 12,000 college students from other cities were quarantined in Zibo during the COVID-19 pandemic. After they completed their quarantine, the local authorities treated them to barbecue food and invited them to return for a visit in spring, when the flowers are in bloom. Some students accepted the invitation, revisiting Zibo to sample its barbecued delights. They unwittingly triggered a trend that spurred the hashtag "College students visit Zibo to try barbecue in groups", which went viral on social media platforms.

Since then, young people from across the country have flocked to Zibo to try its barbecued food.

During weekends last month, Yang Benxin, who has run a barbecue restaurant in the city for nearly three decades, used a loudspeaker to tell people waiting in line for a table to choose another restaurant because the meat at his business had sold out.

Yang's restaurant has 200 tables, which can accommodate about 1,000 diners. But almost every weekend for the past month, the number of people visiting the eatery surpassed its capacity, forcing him to tell those waiting to try elsewhere.

Zhu Wenbin, the owner of another local restaurant, has raised the number of tables at the business from 60 to 200 to cater to the influx of diners.

In Zibo, the food on barbecue skewers is 70-80 percent precooked before it is brought to the table, where diners complete the cooking process on small stoves fueled by hot coals. In addition, pancakes, scallions and dressings are on the tables, so diners can assemble their own barbecue-filled packages, similar to the way in which Peking duck is eaten.

Zhang Hanzhe, 27, who visited Zibo with friends from Jinan, capital of Shandong, during the May Day holiday to try the city's barbecued food, said, "We prepared the food according to our own tastes, and it's also affordable."

The authorities in Zibo have been quick to capitalize on the sudden influx of visitors. The market supervision and public security authorities acted to ensure food safety and reasonable pricing in the barbecue sector, while the city's public transportation company launched bus routes especially for people visiting barbecue restaurants.

The city issued a notice ahead of the May Day holiday, warning that hotels in Zibo that raised their room rates by more than 50 percent during the holiday would be punished.

Fu Qiang, who runs a restaurant in the city, said, "Police officers have been patrolling the streets, and officials from the market supervision bureau monitored food quality to avoid health risks.

"Local people are friendly to visitors, and it seems that everyone in the city is working together to give them an enjoyable experience in Zibo."

Qu Chuang, a professor at Shandong University's School of Economics, doubted whether the barbecue craze in Zibo would last long, but said the city's biggest gain is that it is now known by more people.



Visitors enjoy barbecued food, pancakes and beer in Zibo, Shandong province

Inspection tour

On May 6, a meeting of the standing committee of the Zibo municipal Party committee decided that the industrial sector, particularly manufacturing, is still key to Zibo's high-quality development, and that the city must always prioritize development of the industrial sector. During an inspection tour of Linzi on May 9, Ma Xiaolei, Party secretary of Zibo, urged local authorities to seize the opportunities emerging from the city's reputation and influence, which have been enhanced recently by the barbecue trend. They should also continue to attract people and resources to woo high-end talent and lure innovation-oriented and manufacturing companies to the city, Ma said.

Ding Changfa, an associate professor in the Department of Economics at Xiamen University's School of Economics, was quoted by Time Weekly as saying, "In the long run, old industrial cities such as Zibo cannot rely solely on the barbecue, catering and cultural tourism sectors, because they don't have distinctive scenic spots. Such cities will continue to rely on innovation in the future."

Industrial projects have been developed in Zibo for more than 100 years since iron ore and coal were discovered in the city's Boshan district in the early 20th century.

The city was once an industrial hub for the chemical industry, with coal, iron, bauxite, silk, ceramics, glass, electricity and machinery the pillars of its economy.



Visitors enjoy barbecued food, pancakes and beer in Zibo, Shandong province.

About a decade ago, Zibo faced a series of problems, including resource depletion and environmental pollution, which forced the authorities to transform the local industrial structure. Since 2018, the city has shut down heavy industrial projects, while introducing sustainable and high-tech ventures. During this time, the local authorities have closed steel production businesses, and the production capacity for producing ceramics, cement and coal has been significantly reduced. Instead, high-tech and innovation enterprises have been introduced. To date, Zibo has attracted 65 national-level enterprises specializing in innovation and developing competitive products. A total of 20 enterprises in the city are recognized as single-product champions in manufacturing.

Qu said a digital economy, smart manufacturing and medical industries have been developed in Zibo in recent years, which will provide more jobs for young people.

The Zibo government said that in the past three years it has strived to create a working and living environment targeted especially at young people.

"Young people represent a major force driving this economic transformation," Qu said, adding that the city's performance during the craze for barbecue food will earn it a reputation among such an audience.

"When people come to Zibo for barbecue, they are impressed by the sincere attitude and considerate services provided by the local government and residents," Qu said.

He added that the attractive business environment and coordination among local authorities set an example for other industrial cities.



Visitors enjoy barbecued food, pancakes and beer in Zibo, Shandong province.

Field studies

Many other Chinese cities with heavy industry, such as Jinzhou, Liaoning province, also have barbecue areas. The trend in Zibo has encouraged the authorities in these cities to conduct field studies on ways in which barbecue food can be used to invigorate their economies.

A team of officials from Jinzhou, including those from the city's housing and construction, commerce, and market supervision and regulation bureaus, studied the barbecue business in Zibo from April 16-18.

Barbecue businesses emerged in Jinzhou in the 1980s, and flourished in the 1990s. In 2005, a barbecue association was founded in the city to promote development of this trade.

The local government worked to integrate the barbecue business with tourism development, but barbecued food in Jinzhou, which was promoted by the city's tourism sector, never became the viral sensation that it did in Zibo.

Li Zhi, director of the Jinzhou Barbecue Association, was quoted as saying by local media, "The point of the Zibo barbecue trend is the local people's sincere, hospitable, friendly and helpful attitude toward young people."

He added that the huge influx of visitors poses a challenge to the city. However, each sector in Zibo, from transportation and public security, to catering and accommodations, has coordinated well, enabling it to withstand such pressure.



However, analysts said the barbecue business alone is not sufficient to realize high-quality development in old industrial cities.

Zhou Mingqi, chief analyst at Jingjian Thinktank, a tourism marketing consulting company, was quoted by Caijing magazine as saying, "Barbecue can drive catering, hotels and tourism, but it cannot create bigger economic profits."

"It is impossible for old industrial cities to achieve quick success and instant benefits if they want to succeed in transformation. They still need to set up universities and train talent to drive urban innovation and development."

Ding, from Xiamen University, said such a transformation has been achieved in the city of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania, United States.

Once known as an industrial hub focused on steel production, Pittsburgh has successfully transitioned into a diversified economy driven by technology, education, healthcare and research.

In Zibo, with the barbecue trend showcasing local hospitality, it will be easier for the city to attract more talent.

Local media reports said officials in Zibo, including Ma, the Party secretary, have visited universities in the past two months to woo graduates.

"Once you have talent, you obtain the power of innovation, which will unleash new development momentum," Ding said.