

Chapter 6

Excellent Cuisine Worth a Detour: Dimensions of Luxury Dining Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Luxury restaurants are expected to offer outstanding culinary talent and expertise; be authentic, creative and consistent; and provide exciting quality food. Currently, culinary art discourses include a social dimension in which social networking sites are used to share gastronomic experiences and check recommendations. User-generated reviews are thus an intersection of participatory culture and 'foodie' discourses. This study's main objective was to examine this phenomenon by analysing web reviews to identify the expressive dimensions that describe guests' experiences. Mixed-method content analysis was selected for this research, using qualitative text interpretation to supplement quantitative word counts and factor analyses. Content analysis of reviews of the top three Michelin-starred restaurants (i.e., two stars) in Portugal identified concepts used to assess haute cuisine experiences from the client's perspective. The results include a concept map encompassing the following dimensions: 'food', 'restaurant', 'experience', 'menu', 'wine', 'special (dinner)', 'view', 'beautiful (food)', 'friendly (staff)', 'chef', 'visit' and 'dessert'.

INTRODUCTION

Restaurants provide experiences, and, because they operate in highly competitive business environments, a distinctive dining experience is often a critical factor for increasingly demanding customers (Johnson, Surlemont, Nicod and Revaz, 2005). High quality restaurants need to have outstanding culinary talent and expertise (Johnson et al., 2005); be authentic, creative and consistent; and offer exciting quality food to create a unique identity recognisable to customers and differentiated from the competition (Gehrels & Kristanto, 2007). According to Pizam (2010, p. 343), what drives guests' 'willingness to pay high prices for hospitality "products" is the quality of the experience'.

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The Michelin Guide is a gastronomy guide (Gehrels & Kristanto, 2007; Johnson et al., 2005; Surlemont & Johnson, 2005) that has mainly categorised the highest quality segment of restaurants since 1933. *The Michelin Guide* uses a star system ranging from one to three stars according to the quality of the food. This system's 'mystique' culture and clandestine nature are both its key features and essential elements, contributing to preserving creativity and individuality within the restaurant sector and avoiding standardisation (Johnson et al., 2005; Surlemont & Johnson, 2005). No guidelines or written criteria have been published regarding the quality required for the various levels in the Michelin star rating system (Johnson et al., 2005; Surlemont & Johnson, 2005). A selective, rigorously trained team of inspectors anonymously make unannounced visits and rate restaurants (Johnson et al., 2005).

The team's emphasis on consistent quality and – to some extent – tradition has attracted some criticism but has also contributed to making *The Michelin Guide* a reliable source of information (Johnson et al., 2005; Surlemont & Johnson, 2005) and an advertising channel for luxury restaurants (Hlee, Lee, Yang & Koo, 2019). It is widely accepted as the definitive reference book for gourmands and followers of haute cuisine in Europe, and its influence within the industry and with the dining-out public is unquestionable. Given this system's undisputed reputation, being awarded a Michelin star is viewed as duly deserved recognition of culinary achievement and excellence (Surlemont & Johnson, 2005). Thus, the Michelin Guide potentially has great influence on restaurant choices and a major impact on restaurants' seat occupancy, turnover and profitability (Surlemont & Johnson, 2005).

The luxury segment of the restaurant industry has grown rapidly over the last two decades (Han & Hyun, 2017). This segment of the restaurant industry is a niche market that attracts tourists and consumers with high levels of expenditure who demand high quality products (Johnson et al., 2005; Palmer, Cooper & Burns, 2010; Tommaso, Petruzzelli & Vito, 2017). Previous studies have analysed luxury restaurants from different perspectives. These have included the Michelin star system's characteristics and effects (e.g. Bóka & Kovács, 2015; Johnson et al., 2005; Surlemont & Johnson, 2005), marketing mechanisms (e.g. Gehrels & Kristanto, 2007; Miranda, Rubio & Chamorro, 2015), innovation processes in developing new food creations (e.g. Ottenbacher & Harrington, 2007). Other research has focused on culinary team composition (Tommaso et al., 2017) and social and cultural processes underpinning the formation of chefs' identities (e.g. Palmer et al., 2010).

In addition, studies have examined consumer behaviours in luxury restaurants, diners' consumption patterns and factors contributing to guests' loyalty (e.g. Peng & Chen, 2015) and online complaints (e.g. Vásquez & Chik, 2015). Researchers have also studied the type of information (e.g. utilitarian and hedonic) shared online by guests (Hlee et al., 2019) and consumers' willingness to pay premium prices (Kiatkawsin & Han, 2019). A trend observed in the luxury restaurant segment is an increase in information shared by consumers in Web reviews about their experiences, which has contributed to enhancing foodie discourse (Rousseau, 2012; Vásquez & Chik, 2015). Engaging in culinary discourses, therefore, includes a social dimension in which social networking sites are used to share gastronomic experiences.

These sites provide 'affinity spaces' (Gee, 2005) for people who want to reach an audience likely to have similar interests. Online restaurant review sites also provide the means for individuals to display their culinary capital as they demonstrate expertise in matters such as authenticity, taste and quality and discuss the perceived value of their dining experiences with those who share parallel interests (Vásquez & Chik, 2015). Naccarato and Lebesco (2012:) conceptualise culinary capital as engagement in 'food related practices that reflect a certain set of values that are privileged over others'.

A further trend towards democratisation can be observed in the circulation of information about food, especially for restaurant reviews. Food bloggers have made use of the full potential of participatory forms

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