



# The Importance of Aesthetic Experience in Fine Dining Restaurants

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**Abstract:** *The importance of aesthetic in fine dining restaurants has been recognized as an important factor in creating a perfect service and a memorable experience. The purpose of this study is to investigate guests' importance of certain aspects of aesthetic experience in fine dining restaurants in Croatia. Data were collected using an online self-administered questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data and determine the importance of different aesthetic components in fine dining restaurants. An independent sample t-test was performed to assess the perceived differences between those who have been in fine dining restaurants and those who have not been yet but have the intention to visit them in the future. The results of the study could serve as a guide for restaurant managers to improve the components of the aesthetic experience and enhance the overall guest experience and business performance in fine dining restaurants.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The question of aesthetic experience in restaurants is quite new and the results of this paper will provide insight into the importance of aesthetic guest experience in the fine dining industry. This research focuses on measuring the level of aesthetic experience in the restaurant, which determines the overall guest experience. In this case, the measurement was done from the guests' point of view and the results showed the needs and desires of guests when they visit fine dining restaurants. Trends are constantly changing, and therefore restaurants need to adapt certain aspects of their service to improve the final aesthetic experience that the guest feels, senses and tastes during the visit. The focus of the research was fine dining restaurants in the Republic of Croatia. Croatia is a small country, but rich in flavour diversity, local food and traditions. In addition, Croatia has a great potential for the development of gastro tourism, but so far it has not been sufficiently recognised, as in other countries, such as Italy, Spain and France (Skryl et al., 2018).

Although extensive research is being conducted in the measurement of restaurant service quality, little research has been performed regarding the measurement of aesthetic experience in restaurants. The main purpose of this study is to empirically investigate guests' importance of certain aspects of aesthetic experience in fine dining restaurants in Croatia. Specifically, the study intended to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the key components of aesthetic experience in fine dining restaurants?; (2) What is the level of guests' importance re-

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garding certain aspects of aesthetic experience in fine dining restaurants? and (3) What are the differences between the importance of aesthetic experience in fine dining restaurants for those who have been in fine dining restaurants and those who have not been yet, but have the intention to visit them in the future? The present study aims to contribute to the knowledge of aesthetic restaurant experience. The structure of this paper is divided into the theoretical background, methodology, results, and conclusion.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of fine dining restaurants, as part of the elite and limited market niche, is consisted of top-notch dining standards and represents the dining tradition in global cuisine (Kwun & Oh, 2007). The most important segment in fine dining restaurants is the guest experience, which is largely driven by hedonic, or emotional aspects of consumer behaviour, including the need for entertainment and emotional value (Ryu & Han, 2011).

Due to the constant battle in the market, fine dining restaurants try in all possible ways to highlight their company in the market and give their guests a complete restaurant experience. Ankor (2012) defined experiences as highly personal, subjectively perceived, intangible, ever fleeting and continuously on-going. Dishes and ambient invite aesthetic involvement by producers and consumers, and they demand judgments of both gustatory and metaphorical taste and may give rise to the emergence of taste makers (Lane, 2013).

Horng & Hsu (2020) stated that aesthetics is what makes an object beautiful and what humans feel when they encounter a beautiful object. Aesthetic experience is a process to perceive-feel-sense an object, represent active sensation, emotion, cognition and integrate the aesthetic pleasure appraisal (Di Dio and Vittorio, 2009).

The research applied in the context of the restaurant industry and directed to measuring aesthetic restaurant experience, mainly use the following dimensions in measurement: physical environment (Canny, 2014; Han & Ryu, 2009; Hanks & Line, 2018; Horng & Hsu, 2020; Hwang & Ok, 2013; Ryu et al., 2012; Ryu & Shawn Jang, 2008; Wu & Liang, 2009), food aesthetics (Campo et al., 2017) and aesthetic labor (Tsaour et al., 2015; Warhurst et al., 2000).

Before deciding to use the service of a restaurant, the guest encounters the physical appearance of the restaurant. To begin with, he encounters the exterior, then the interior, the appearance of the staff, and finally the appearance of the food. Han & Ryu (2009) state in their work that the physical environment contains facility aesthetics, ambience, lighting, layout, table settings and service staff.

Food has been studied by anthropologists, sociologists, historians and different cultural critics, all of who have focused on increasing understanding of the role that food plays in human affairs (Sweeny, 2017). Campo et al. (2017) define food aesthetics as an interaction between taste and sight that creates a certain influence on the customers' choices about food. There is a saying that eyes eat before the mouth.

The importance of aesthetic labour has significantly increased in the service industry during the last twenty years. Böhme (2003) artistically defined aesthetic labour as the integrity of those activities which aim to give an appearance to things and people, cities and landscapes, to endow

them with an aura, to lend them an atmosphere, or to generate an atmosphere in ensembles. What is more, Warhurst et al. (2000) defined aesthetic labour as an environmental stimulus in which employees exhibit the capacities and attributes for embodying an organization.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The instrument for collecting primary data in this study was a self-administered questionnaire which consisted of 3 parts. The first part of the questionnaire referred to the habits of visiting fine dining restaurants and included 7 items. The second part of the questionnaire contained 24 items to measure three aesthetic restaurant experience constructs: (1) aesthetic physical environment, (2) food aesthetic and (3) aesthetic labour. Each construct of aesthetic restaurant experience was measured using a 5-point Likert scale of importance (1 = extremely unimportant and 5 = extremely important). The last part of the questionnaire included additional questions on the socio-demographic profile of the respondents, such as age, gender, marital status, level of education, monthly income, working status, frequency of restaurant visits and the type of restaurant that respondents visit most often. The questionnaire was developed in English and then translated into the Croatian language.

The target population of the study were guests who are visiting or have the intention to visit fine dining restaurants in the future. Data were collected during March and April 2021. A convenient sampling method was utilized to collect data. Given the situation caused by the disease COVID-19, it was not possible to physically distribute the questionnaires in fine dining restaurants. Therefore, an online survey was created and distributed through social networks and the researcher's contacts.

### 4. RESULTS

Descriptive statistical analysis was run on respondents' demographic variables. The results are shown in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, the representation of women was higher (71.14%) compared to men (28.86%). In terms of age, the two most frequent groups of respondents were between 21-30 years old (28.41%), and respondents aged 50 and over (22.60%). The lowest number of respondents was in the age group less than 20 years (6.04%). Considering the marital status, the largest number of respondents were married (44.52%), but there was a significant number of unmarried respondents (38.26%). More than half of the respondents had a university degree (52.80%). Most of the respondents were full-time employees (70.69%) and almost a quarter of respondents (26.17%) have a monthly income of HRK 4,001.00-6,000.00. Most of the respondents visit restaurants for more than 10 times a year (48.10%), and only 7.61% of respondents go to restaurants once or twice a year.

Based on the obtained data, it was determined that out of the total number of respondents, 45.19% visit fine dining restaurants, while 54.81% of respondents stated that they have never visited this type of restaurant. However, 63.67% of respondents who have never been to a fine dining restaurant, have the intention to visit them in the future. For the rest of the respondents who do not have the intention to visit fine dining restaurants (36.33%), the main reason was too expensive services (57.30%). The primary motive for visiting fine dining restaurants was the enjoyment of food and drink (32.54%), while the secondary motive was trying new dishes (26.18%). The main criteria for choosing the right fine restaurant are the recommendations of friends (30.66%) and an interesting offer of food and drinks (23.21%).

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of respondents (N=447)

Items	<i>f</i>	%	Items	<i>f</i>	%
<i>Sex</i>			<i>Working status</i>		
Male	129	28.86	Employed or self-employed	316	70.69
Female	318	71.14	Unemployed	16	3.58
<i>Age</i>			Student	89	19.91
Less than 20	27	6.04	Others (e.g., retired persons, housewives)	26	5.82
21 – 30	127	28.41	<i>Monthly income</i>		
31 – 40	98	21.92	Less than 2.000,00 HRK	65	14.54
41 – 50	94	21.03	2.001,00-4.000,00 HRK	53	11.86
50 or more	101	22.60	4.001,00-6.000,00 HRK	117	26.17
<i>Marital status</i>			6.001,00-8.000,00 HRK	91	20.36
Unmarried	171	38.26	8.001,00-11.000,00 HRK	56	12.53
Married	199	44.52	11.000,00 HRK or more	65	14.54
Extramarital union	37	8.28	<i>Frequency of restaurant visits</i>		
Widow/widower	10	2.24	1-2 times a year	34	7.61
Divorced	30	6.71	3-4 times a year	47	10.51
<i>Education</i>			5-6 times a year	50	11.19
Elementary school	5	1.12	7-8 times a year	51	11.41
High school diploma	157	35.12	9-10 times a year	50	11.19
University degree	236	52.80	More than 10 times	215	48.10
M.Sc. / Ph.D.	49	10.96			

**Source:** Author's research

The results of descriptive and bivariate analyses are presented below. Table 2 reports the results for the respondents' importance perceptions of certain aesthetic experience attributes, as well as the significance of the difference in the mean scores between fine dining guests (N=202) and potential guests (N=156) of fine dining restaurants.

**Table 2.** The comparison of aesthetic experience attributes between fine dining guests and potential guests (N=358)

Attributes	Guests n=202 ( <i>M<sup>a</sup></i> , <i>SD</i> )	Potential guests n=156 ( <i>M<sup>a</sup></i> , <i>SD</i> )	Gap	Sig.
<b>PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AESTHETICS</b>	<b>3,99</b>	<b>3,82</b>		
<i>Restaurant exterior</i>				
This restaurant's architecture should have an attractive character.	3.74 (1.08)	3.57 (1.13)	0.17	0.14
The restaurant exterior should be visually appealing.	3.70 (1.02)	3,69 (1.05)	0.01	0.92
The restaurant landscape surrounding should be special and attractive.	3.49 (1.09)	3.54 (1.02)	-0.05	0.64
<i>Restaurant interior</i>				
The restaurant interior décor should be attractive.	4.13 (0.99)	3.92 (1.09)	0.21	0.06
The colours used in interior design should create a pleasant atmosphere.	4.16 (1.04)	3.91 (1.07)	0.25	0.03*
Furniture (tables and chairs) should be of high quality.	3.78 (1.04)	3.45 (1.06)	0.33	0.03*
The number of tables should not make restaurant environment difficult to navigate.	4.04 (1.00)	3.78 (1.12)	0.26	0.02*
It should be easy to move around the restaurant and find what you are looking for.	3.90 (1.08)	3.93 (1.04)	-0.03	0.77
<i>Ambience</i>				
The overall lighting level in the restaurant should be appropriate.	4.09 (0.96)	3.81 (1.07)	0.28	0,01*

The temperature in the restaurant should be comfortable.	4.22 (0.91)	3.99 (1.02)	0.24	0.02*
The smell in the restaurant should be pleasant.	4.40 (0.85)	4.19 (1.05)	0.21	0.04*
Background music should make the restaurant a more pleasant place.	4.19 (0.93)	4.05 (1.09)	0.14	0.19
<b>FOOD AESTHETIC</b>	<b>4,21</b>	<b>4,02</b>		
The food served by the restaurant should be delicious.	4.58 (0.80)	4.36 (1.03)	0.23	0.03*
The food in the restaurant should be unique.	3.79 (1.02)	3.56 (1.19)	0.23	0.06
The food in the restaurant should be made from fresh ingredients.	4.50 (0.88)	4.32 (1.02)	0.18	0.07
The food presentation should be visually appealing.	4.13 (1.00)	3.83 (1.16)	0.30	0.01*
Portion size should be appropriate.	4.07 (0.94)	4.03 (1.08)	0.05	0.65
<b>AESTHETIC LABOR</b>	<b>4,20</b>	<b>3,76</b>		
Restaurant staff should have an attractive appearance.	3.22 (1.13)	3.02 (1.12)	0.20	0.09
The appearance of the restaurant staff should match the corporate image of the restaurant.	3.66 (1.13)	3.49 (1.21)	0.17	0.17
Restaurant employees need to have a refined style of conversation.	3.79 (1.08)	3.43 (1.19)	0.36	0.00*
The restaurant should consider the physical appearance of its employees (uniform, hairstyle, makeup).	3.93 (1.03)	3.64 (1.12)	0.29	0.01*
Employees should be friendly to guests.	4.47 (0.85)	4.13 (1.09)	0.34	0.00*
Employees should treat guests well.	4.55 (0.79)	4.29 (1.02)	0.26	0.00*
The behaviour of restaurant staff towards guests should be pleasant.	4.52 (0.84)	4.29 (1.01)	0.23	0.02*

**Note:** <sup>a</sup> Importance mean ranges from 1 to 5; SD – standard deviation; \*  $p < 0.05$

**Source:** Author's research

The mean scores of guests who visit fine dining restaurants ranged from 3.22 to 4.58. The lowest mean score was for the attribute “restaurant staff should have an attractive appearance”. This implies that guests do not perceive very much important visual appeal of restaurant staff. The landscape is also less important to restaurant guests, as evidenced by the low mean score of the variable “the restaurant landscape surrounding should be special and attractive” (3.49). On the other hand, the highest mean score was for “the food served by the restaurant should be delicious” (4.58). This indicates that for the guests of fine dining restaurants, the central and most important factor is the food taste, even though the food in fine dining restaurants should be unique and visually appealing. Furthermore, the results show that the food aesthetic construct is the most important of three aesthetic restaurant experience constructs with the mean value of 4.21, followed by the construct aesthetic labour with a mean value of 4.20. The least important construct by the restaurant guests was the aesthetic physical environment with a mean score of 3.99. Based on the above, it is possible to conclude that guests who visit fine dining restaurants perceive food aesthetics as the most important in creating the overall aesthetic restaurant experience.

The means score of potential guests of fine dining restaurants (those who have not visited yet this type of restaurant) ranged from 3.09 to 4.56. As with fine dining guests, potential guests gave the lowest mean score for the variable “restaurant staff should have an attractive appearance”. Starting from that, it is possible to stipulate that for potential guests of a fine dining restaurant the attractive appearance of the staff is less important. Oppositely, the highest mean score was for “the food in the restaurant should be unique”. Fine dining restaurants are a type of restaurant that stands out with quality compared to other types of restaurants. Considering that, a high grade in terms of the uniqueness, that potential guests gave, was expected. Also, the results show that potential restaurant guests, as well as restaurant guests, evaluate food aesthetic with the highest average rating (4.02), followed by aesthetic physical environment (3.82) and



aesthetic labour (3.76). Thus, from all this, it is possible to determine that guests and potential guests of fine dining restaurants perceive food aesthetics as the most important segment in achieving the overall aesthetic restaurant experience.

The results of the independent sample t-test show that in 13 out of 24 aesthetic experience attributes, significant differences were found between regular fine dining guests and potential guests of fine dining restaurants. An independent sample t-test showed that regular fine dining guests rated higher on most of the attributes of aesthetic labour (5 of 7 attributes). Significant differences were also found on 6 attributes of physical environment aesthetics, including colours of interior design, quality of furniture, table arrangement, restaurant lighting, temperature, and smell. This implies that regular fine dining guests perceive physical environment of a restaurant more important and different than those who have never been in the restaurant. The importance of food aesthetic two groups of respondents mostly perceive the same. The differences were found in 2 out of 5 attributes. These attributes were “delicious food” and “visually appealing food presentation”.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The contribution of this research is very applicable in managerial aspects. The results have shown which components of aesthetic guest experience are the most important from the guest's perspective. What is more, the results are extremely important for restaurateurs and restaurant management because it is possible to gain insight into what guests need and perceive while they visit fine-dining restaurants. The insight could provide important information which could help the restaurant to make the reposition on the market.

The study has some limitations that offer opportunities for future research. Unfortunately, the effects of global pandemic COVID-19 limited the data collection which was conducted only through an online survey. What is more, the structure of respondents has shown the unequal distribution of responses by gender and age which consequently limited the results. Moreover, the results of respondents refer only to a small geographical area (Republic of Croatia) and therefore cannot be generalized. Lastly, the largest number of respondents are the personal contacts of authors. One of the proposals for future research is to investigate the perception of aesthetic restaurant experience immediately after dining experience. This could happen with collaboration with fine dining restaurants which would help in questionnaire distribution. Also, there is a possibility to investigate aesthetic restaurant experience from other aspects (professional point of view). Furthermore, other aspects of the aesthetic restaurant experience in fine dining restaurants could be identified and explored in order to gain a better understanding of this concept.

From a practical standpoint, this study helps Croatian restaurant managers better understand the guests' importance of certain aesthetic experience attributes in fine dining restaurants. The results of the study could help restaurateurs in designing service delivery and improving service quality.

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