

Quality assessment in small businesses: the case of Dutch culinary restaurants

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Research material on quality definitions in the specific small business segment of culinary restaurants is scarce. Defining quality in culinary restaurant small businesses deserves increased attention in order to further develop professionalism within this segment. For this research nine Dutch senior key-stakeholders were interviewed. The stakeholders held different viewpoints about quality but shared certain elements. Most important determinants of quality were 'product quality' and 'service quality'. Offering information to potential customers about these two factors are very important in customer decision-making. This research will stimulate discourse on quality in the relatively underexplored sector of culinary restaurant small businesses.

Keywords: culinary restaurants, quality assessment, service management, small business

Kwaliteitsbeoordeling bij kleinbedrijven: in dit geval Nederlandse restaurants

De beschikbaarheid van onderzoeksmateriaal met betrekking tot kwaliteitsdefinities binnen het specifieke segment van kleinbedrijf restaurants, is schaars. Het definiëren van kwaliteit in kleinbedrijf restaurants verdient uitgebreide aandacht om zo de verdere professionalisering binnen dit segment te ontwikkelen. Voor dit onderzoek zijn negen Nederlandse ervaren belanghebbende (Senior Key Stakeholders) geïnterviewd. Ze hebben verschillende standpunten over de kwaliteit, maar hebben ook bepaalde elementen met elkaar gemeen. De belangrijkste determinanten van kwaliteit zijn 'kwaliteit van het product' en 'kwaliteit van de dienstverlening'. Het aanbieden van informatie over deze twee determinanten aan potentiële klanten is erg belangrijk voor de besluitvorming van deze klanten. Dit onderzoek stimuleert de bespreking van kwaliteit in het relatief onderbelichte segment van kleinbedrijf restaurants.

Trefwoorden: culinaire restaurants, kleinbedrijf, kwaliteitsbeoordeling, service management

针对小企业的质量评估：以荷兰美食餐厅为例

目前，关于如何定义美食餐厅——这种特定类型小企业的质量问题，可供参考的研究资料实在不多。想评定此类型餐厅的质量，需要持久的关注，以期进一步提升其在此领域的专业性。本次研究对9家餐厅的主要负责人进行了采访：在何谓质量的问题上，被访者各抒己见，但自其中还是可以发现不少共通点——餐厅优劣=实物质量+服务质量——这是公认的核心。因此在客户决策这一环节中，有效地向潜在客户传达，宣传上述两项优势，就显得尤为重要。笔者诚愿做探路者，目的是能够抛砖引玉，引起关于质量问题的广泛讨论。毕竟，相对于其他门类，美食餐厅这种小企业经营一直都是不太受关注的小众。

关键词：小企业，质量评估，美食餐厅，服务监管

Background and justification

Several authors have given their opinion about quality measurement and the link with the service industry, whereas there is limited research into culinary restaurant small businesses. Opposing opinions can be recognised. On the one hand, authors stress the importance of increased control of *service variables*, whereas on the other hand, as the strengths of culinary restaurant small businesses, *individuality* and *creativity* are identified as essential to operate and

survive. Standardisation of service processes is a delicate concept in regard to culinary restaurant small businesses and deserves greater attention from researchers. In the mid 1990s, Johnson et al. (1995) expressed that service organisations are faced with uncertainty when trying to identify appropriate measures for service quality. In other research by Oh (1999), Soriano (2002), Johnson et al. (2005) and Hansen et al. (2005), this opinion is reconfirmed. These authors all agree

that organisational theories and (operational) processes in the service industry are in need of debate and refining to find a common basis, and acknowledge the need for appropriate, customised quality defining and measurement techniques.

Stierand and Sandt (2007) stress the need for clarification of culinary service processes as well when they state that guests visiting culinary restaurant small businesses regularly have a high degree of uncertainty as they often lack the experience of assessing quality in a culinary restaurant setting. It seems reasonable that standardisation of service processes should also be applicable to culinary restaurant small businesses. Most commonly, restaurant practitioners are expected to focus on their human potential, such as the soft skills, human resources and material potential, in order to increase process stability and quality of its resources (Wall and Berry, 2007). Soriano (2002) recommends identification of the influencing factors and their values to achieve quality service. However, Surlemont and Johnson (2005) address the 'danger' of explaining quality criteria for restaurants. There is a notion implicit in their argument that one has to be careful that the art of cooking remains and the more it is codified the more it might be seen to stifle and prevent creativity and discovery. Ottenbacher and Harrington (2007) suggest that because within the culinary industry the service production and consumption are in progress simultaneously, it will be important to develop quality standards as an organic model that is interdisciplinary in nature.

Relevance of the study

The aim of this research was to stress the importance of understanding basic theory about quality measurement systems in culinary restaurant small businesses. This research focuses on the possibility of mapping service quality concepts and dimensions into a *standard*. It will help students and restaurant practitioners to develop their thoughts about quality in culinary restaurant small businesses and is intended to generate practical applications. A discussion of standardisation and process-organisation within the culinary restaurant world is valuable. This research helps to clarify the potential of developing a more academic quality standard for culinary restaurant small businesses in The Netherlands other than the existing Michelin (Michelin, 2009), GaultMillau, Lekker (Nijsson, 2009; Mostert, 2010) and other popular quality guides.

Quality and culinary restaurant small businesses

Is it possible to describe the quality of restaurants? The culinary restaurant small businesses in which the four senses of people (touch, taste, hearing and scent) continuously adapt and change is probably one of the most difficult businesses to adopt an universal and specific explanation of quality. Within the restaurant industry in general several concepts are available, e.g. fast-food, snack bars and à la carte. The complexity of defining quality begins with the general belief that every concept is different in organising. Every concept 'designs' its own setting and presents itself in its own way, and is supported by certain companies and individuals that help, advise, control, influence and set rules regarding the 'healthiness' of the particular concept. The complexity of describing quality in restaurants continues because there is a

general belief that within every concept several *performing levels* can be recognised. These levels are created by, for example, the level of professionalism, design and assortment of products/services. It might be a cliché to believe that high prices stand for high quality or, from another perspective, high quality stands for luxurious products. Emotions and personal thoughts influence the perception of quality. Quality appears to be a 'mysterious' topic. This research tried as far as possible to present an objective explanation about quality within culinary restaurant small businesses.

Historical perspective

Within the restaurant industry there is a substantial amount of research available regarding service quality from a customer's perspective (Svensson, 2006). However, the service provider's perspective together with the perspective of stakeholders is ignored in research investigations. The research-based data on quality in culinary restaurant small businesses dealing with the diversity of multifaceted perspectives is underdeveloped. Several key stakeholders influence the discourse on quality in culinary restaurant small businesses directly and indirectly. These stakeholders are: culinary restaurant small businesses practitioners themselves (e.g. owners, chefs and service managers), culinary quality assessment organisations (e.g. Lekker, Gault Millau and Michelin), culinary associations (e.g. G 7), culinary journalists, hospitality and culinary educators, hospitality and culinary consultants, associations of professionals (e.g. Gastvrijheidsgilde) and other independent hospitality experts.

Culinary restaurant small businesses

It was in France that the first so-called 'culinary restaurant' was opened in 1765 (Surlemont and Johnson, 2005). Culinary restaurants are known as gastronomic, haute-cuisine, gourmet and fine-dining restaurants. This type of restaurant is (extremely) guest oriented and strives towards hospitality perfection in every way. The culinary restaurant-industry is characterised by a luxurious ambience in which the finest quality and most exclusive food and beverages are served according to hospitality and dinner etiquettes. Culinary restaurant small businesses sell experiences. Their objective is to create a 'show', a 'wow effect' and an 'unforgettable experience'. Within this sector, the higher the performance, the higher the expectations will be. Metaphors such as *moment of truth*, *critical incidents* and *added value* are often used to explain the most critical service situations in which expectations and perceptions are formed. Although only less than 1% of the Dutch restaurants are culinary restaurant small businesses, they play a vital role in the development of the restaurant industry as a whole (Surlemont and Johnson, 2005).

The ultimate goals of culinary restaurant small businesses are to produce product quality and excellent service. For this, information about guest expectations and perceptions is a prerequisite. The guest's subjective opinion about quality expectations and perceptions makes the operation of service processes difficult. However, guests are only one category of the interested and influencing parties of culinary restaurant small businesses. At this moment culinary restaurant small businesses (in The Netherlands) are defined by at least three major culinary quality assessment institutions: Michelin, Gault Millau and Lekker Top 100 (Gehrels, 2004). These culinary

quality assessment institutions are well known and respected by the restaurant industry in The Netherlands and have several decades of experience and special (skilled) inspectors. The institutions use strict rules and indicators (which are not accessible to the general public) in order to assess the quality of culinary restaurant small businesses.

Quality

Quality is a difficult topic to describe without referring to examples. Before the start of the Christian calendar, quality was known and used as a concept. Aristoteles (384–322 BC) stated 'quality is not a play, it's a habit'. Until the twenty-first century, numerous definitions and explanations of quality were created and most certainly this process will continue. In every industry a definition of quality regarding every specific output and process is designed. This can be concluded from the perspective of Garvin (1984), who presented five ways to approach the definition of quality: (1) the transcendent (philosophical) approach, (2) the manufacturing (technical) approach, (3) the user-based approach, (4) the product-based approach, and (5) the value-based approach. The philosophical approach is rather vague and abstract; quality is defined as something superior and desirable. The technical approach defines quality in an objective manner; quality is/should be evaluated with technical standards. The user-based approach defines quality as the opposite of the technical approach. Within this approach quality is seen as something subjective and is evaluated by individual perceptions. The product-based approach is seen as an objective approach that views quality as 'a measurable set of characteristics that is required to satisfy the customers'. The value-based approach defines quality in terms of costs. Definitions of quality quoted often are: 'conformance to agreed and fully understood requirements' (Crosby, 1979) and 'fitness for purpose/use' (Juran and Godfrey, 1999).

Both the concepts *quality* and *service* are interconnected. An explanation of *service quality* is just as complicated as the explanation of *quality* separately. Theory developed by Grönroos (2000) explores service quality from three approaches: 'technical quality/outcome', what the customer actually receives; 'functional quality/ outcome', the way service is delivered; and 'image quality', the image of the service provider. Lewis (2007) explains managing service quality as an understanding of what is *meant* with service quality. The explanation of service quality should describe which determinants are key and how they can be measured, as well as service quality pitfalls and its recovery processes. Literature offers a variety of (slightly) different definitions and explanations about service quality. Definitions of service quality that are often quoted include 'consumer's overall impression of relative superiority of the organisation and its services' (Bitner et al., 1990), and 'the gap between customers' expectations and perceptions. A customer will perceive quality positively only when the service provider exceeds his expectations' (Zeithaml et al., 2006).

Standardisation

Management and measuring service quality with the aid of independent models and systems have been adopted from quality-control systems used in the manufactory industry. Although the service industry developed around the 1920s,

the creation of measurement systems for service quality started several decades ago. Examples of service quality control systems are SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and ISO 9000 standards and DINESERV (Stevens et al., 1995). There are many more, relatively simple, quality control systems and quality assurance standards. It is concluded by several researchers (Seth et al., 2006; Ladhari, 2008) that there is no universal service quality control system. The content of systems varies according to the type of industry, company and location.

'Quality assurance' and 'quality systems' are concepts used often in quality management theory and hold a broad perspective. The definition of quality assurance and systems are open-ended. Quality assurance can be described as *the belief that quality goals are reached* because quality systems can be described as *the control of quality*. Quality systems set a norm for the organisation as a whole on how to operate. Lagrosen and Lagrosen (2006) explain more specifically *how* quality management can be organised. According to these authors, quality management theory consists of three layers: values, models and techniques that can be seen as 'steps', from values to models to techniques, and from broad to specific. Values and models are interrelated as well as models and techniques. Understanding the industry- and company-values is essential to create models. This is a difficult process. An objective point of view is needed and is reached only when all perspectives are heard and understood (Lagrosen and Lagrosen, 2006; Svensson, 2006; Ladhari, 2008). Values, in this context, are described as shared organisational principles. The development of models helps to 'implement' these values to create organisational quality by means of concrete ideas. Ideas can be described as points of attention, critical points or any other kind of criteria set by the company. The use of techniques will help in executing these critical points.

The connection between quality management and values is described in terms of (quality) *concepts and dimensions*. Discussing service quality in a particular sector as the culinary restaurant small businesses is in need of a structured specification of items. Many researchers have developed a set of items for discussion and measurement of service quality. Ladhari (2008) presented an overview of authors and researchers and their set of items (dimensions). In particular, Svensson (2006) and Wall and Berry (2007) specified service quality and connect to the restaurant industry very well. Svensson discussed service quality components and dimensions. Components can be defined as *tangibles, intangibles* and *outcomes*, whereby dimensions specify each component again in two subitems: *explicit and implicit* tangibles, *interactive and interfacial* intangibles, and *actual and interpreted* outcomes. According to Wall and Berry (2007), service quality is judged by the use of three 'clues': *functional* (technical quality of food and service), *mechanic* (the ambience, design and technical elements) and *humanic* (the performance, behaviour and appearance of the employees). All items within the set are essential for the discussion of quality. Namely, the items are interrelated and influence the evaluation of quality. For this research we chose to take Svensson's approach as the reference because it provided the possibility to interpret the output of the interviews and organise, categorise and structure it while being applicable both to the customers' and providers' perspectives.

Standardisation and culinary restaurant small businesses

Several parties influence, evaluate and show interest in the quality of culinary restaurant small businesses.

- (1) The customers (or 'guests'). Restaurants need customers to survive and they have a major impact on the financial situation by generating revenue. In addition, customers have a major impact on the reputation of chefs and their culinary restaurants by word-of-mouth communication (Gehrels and Kristanto 2006). Soriano (2002) states that 'dining out becomes an integral part of guests' lifestyle'. Their expectations towards quality and service rise after every service encounter.
- (2) Chefs, managers and owners of culinary restaurant small businesses themselves because they influence the customer while being in the restaurant.
- (3) Culinary quality (assessing) organisations (CQO). Several organisations operate within the hospitality industry that evaluate the quality of culinary restaurant small businesses. The most well-known and accepted CQOs in the hospitality industry and especially the culinary restaurant sector are Michelin, Gault Millau and Lekker. The first two operate in a variety of countries, whereas the latter is only active in The Netherlands. Restaurants positively appraised by Michelin, Gault Millau and Lekker have achieved an excellence in service performance, thereby creating unique culinary experiences. However, CQOs do not have publically shared standards for measuring quality; 'not using quality systems ensures creativity and individuality within the restaurant industry and avoids standardisation' (respondent's comment). The CQOs print and distribute restaurant guides every year. These guides function as a signalling device for guests, restaurants, suppliers as well as other parties involved to reduce uncertainty. The responsibility of CQOs is to present reliable and trustworthy advice. The influences and impact of the advice made by CQOs are noticeable for restaurants very quickly and affect several stakeholders. It influences guests' restaurant choices and restaurants' style of cuisine, reputation, price levels, motivation and working atmosphere.
- (4) The culinary associations. The so-called 'G 7' (Gastronomic 7) is an association of seven gastronomic associations based in The Netherlands. All associations together in 2008 had 172 culinary restaurant members. Their goal is to improve and develop the level of gastronomy in general. They promote themselves as a 'quality brand' for culinary experiences.
- (5) The culinary journalists. Culinary journalists have a tremendous impact on the definition of quality. Their perspective and perception of activities in culinary restaurant small businesses results in publications for the interested audience.
- (6) The hospitality and culinary educators. Their perspectives and thoughts are based on their own experiences as well as on what they read. Through educating future practitioners and hospitality management students in general, they influence the definition of quality.
- (7) The independent hospitality experts and hospitality consultants. Professionals in this category advise hospitality organisations about all kinds of service-related topics.

Despite the distinction between these different key-stakeholders, one of them – 'guests' – is linked to every other

target group. Everyone professionally involved in the culinary restaurant sector is also confronted with his/her own guest experiences. Although it is unrealistic to rank stakeholders by the level of importance, it must be mentioned that 'guests' point of view is critical in order to be successful as a culinary organisation. Furthermore, many culinary restaurant owners/chefs/managers have the motivation and interest to fulfil other functions such as culinary experts, culinary consultants and (board-) members of culinary associations. Again, this results in a combination of different stakeholders connected to one person. All parties mentioned above considered together provide an interesting, new and comprehensive picture of quality in culinary restaurant small businesses.

Research design

This research was organised within the qualitative research tradition being multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach of its subject matter as explained by authors such as Denzin and Lincoln (2005). The epistemological focus in this research is constructionist as defined by Flick (2006) and it informs a lot of qualitative research programs with the approach that the realities we study are social products of the actor, of interactions and institutions. Easterby-Smith et al. (2008) emphasise the connection between a constructionist approach and qualitative methods, whereas knowledge is constructed by the social interchange of the researcher and the objects to be researched.

Methodology and data collection

Grounded theory as defined by Corbin and Strauss (1990) is appropriate for this particular type of research where it serves a process of discovery that grounds theoretical implications in the data found. A qualitative research approach with a grounded theory methodology favours the use of semistructured interviews as an applicable research instrument. The research was performed in The Netherlands. The researchers were Dutch nationals and were able to travel about for data gathering without any difficulties while understanding the culture and history of the country as well as the professional background of the interviewees. The research concentrated on nine senior key-stakeholders who deal with the 'quality' of culinary restaurant small businesses located in The Netherlands. Each of the interviewees held very senior positions within or connected to the culinary restaurant world and can be considered as experts in their field who can speak with authority about the topic on behalf of the stakeholder category they were approached for.

Semistructured interviews were chosen because this method offers the opportunity to meet with the key stakeholders face-to-face. Burton and Bartlett (2005: 126) emphasise the strengths of this research method as: 'interviewing is a research method adaptable to different situations and respondents, non-verbal clues can be picked up (other than in questionnaire research), unexpected lines of inquiry can be followed which makes the method flexible, the qualitative data is expressed in the respondent's own words.'

Arksey and Knight (1999) confirm the value of interviewing as an important approach to social sciences research because face-to-face interviews can provide data on understandings, opinions, what people remember to have done, attitudes and

feelings. Given that in this research it was very important to hear the perceptions and opinions of the experts involved (Table 1) in this relatively under-researched field of small businesses, the choice of interviewing was justified. The interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder and transcribed by the researchers.

Results

Interview results

A summary of the interview outcomes is presented below with the main points discussed during the interviews.

The ultimate goal of culinary restaurant small businesses

The ultimate goal of culinary restaurant small businesses is multifaceted. There is a general belief that restaurant owners/entrepreneurs start and operate their business because of a financial reason. As one interviewee stated: 'there is no one who will start a culinary business just because of ideology'. Making money and profit is the most important goal of culinary restaurant small businesses. A second reason that is mentioned by many interviewees is: to increase and improve the ego of the 'artist'. The owner/entrepreneur hopes to gain respect and recognition from guests by presenting his/her passion. People start culinary restaurant small businesses because they like what they do and are good at it. A third reason is: giving something 'extra' to guests. Staff in culinary restaurant small businesses are trained and skilled in pampering guests, make them feel special, and amaze people with something that is unique and not easy to experience a second time. It is important to excite guests, entertain them and make them

happy, but in a different manner each time.

The meaning of quality in culinary restaurant small businesses

The meaning of quality in culinary restaurant small businesses is complex. The explanations about quality given by the interviewees derive from different perspectives. However, all interviewees agreed that quality is defined and judged both by guests and restaurant staff; both decide what they *perceive* as quality. Although restaurant staff *hope* their guests have some understanding of the culinary culture, the interviewees *expect* from owners to know what quality is and what is not. The interviewees agreed that quality is defined and judged by comparison and the level of consistency of the overall restaurant product. They agreed as well that explaining quality consists of several aspects, such as product (food and drinks), ambience and service. The overall opinion was that product and service are both most important as an expression of quality. The question of what constitutes quality prompts much debate.

Some aspects that define and express quality can be described in general and other aspects cannot. The interviewees shared the opinion that the aspect 'product' can be assessed according to quality standards but only as far as the product is handled by restaurant staff (kitchen and service staff). The remainder of the aspects cannot be assessed by applying quality standards because the interviewees agreed that the perspective of guests is crucial and cannot be standardised or categorised. The interviewees agree that the 'emotion' of guests and restaurant staff is unique and therefore assessing quality is difficult or even impossible within the culinary sector. Some interviewees state that the operation of culinary restaurant small businesses consists of creative, personal and 'one of

Table 1: Interviewees and their backgrounds

Stakeholder category	Organisation	Role of interviewee	Characteristics of interviewee background
1. Culinary association	Alliance Gastronomique	Important opinion leader	35 years as entrepreneur in small business (10 years two-star Michelin); twice chairperson of the leading association of culinary restaurant small businesses in The Netherlands
2. Culinary quality assessing organisation	Michelin Benelux	Management of publications	Over 20 years as Michelin inspector and since 2007 chief inspector of Michelin Benelux for culinary restaurant small businesses
3. Culinary restaurants	Restaurant De Librije (three-star Michelin)	Manager	Voted most talented hospitality professional in culinary restaurant business in 2009
4. Culinary catering	Van Eeghem Catering	Owner	Operated for 30 years a Michelin one-star restaurant business
5. Hospitality education	Stenden University	Lecturer – strategic management	10 years working in hospitality small business and since 1983 in hospitality management education
6. Culinary education	Stenden University	Lecturer – gastronomy and culinary consultant	Former two-star Michelin chef, worked for 20 years in culinary restaurant business before becoming lecturer gastronomy in 1986
7. Culinary education	Stenden University Hotel	Executive chef and culinary consultant	Former two-star Michelin chef, worked in a great diversity of culinary restaurant small businesses in the past 35 years
8. Culinary journalism	Bouillon Magazine	Journalist on culinary quality	Operated small business (cafe-bars) before starting career as culinary journalist in 2000. Since 2003 chief editor of culinary journal
9. Professional association	Gastvrijheidsgilde	Important opinion leader	50 years running small businesses in the hospitality industry, 5 years chairman of Association of Hospitality Professionals

a kind' processes. These processes are created by the interaction of all aspects (which define and express quality) interconnected all the time.

Some interviewees state that quality develops constantly and is in an ongoing state of development. On the one hand, the number of products that can be used is never as high as before, and on the other hand it is going to be more difficult to get top-quality products because everything is going to be more perceived as 'standard'. People get used to a certain 'taste' and that will become a norm or standard. As some believe this development will continue and increase, others believe the maximum quality has already been reached. There are different opinions about when quality is measured and judged. It is the dominant opinion that the guests' quality perspectives are set before arriving at the restaurant, and revisited and evaluated after the visit.

The values within the organisation of culinary restaurant small businesses

One interviewee stated that the level of quality one wants to reach and present depends on one's education, pride, personal and financial goals. From the interviewees' perspectives we identified two categories of values: personal/staff-related values and operational/business values. The interviewees shared the opinion that a particular attitude is crucial. As one interviewee stated: 'the restaurant industry is a people-profession in which social skills are key'. Within this people-profession the interviewees agree that *people skills*, showing emotion and being hospitable, are important factors. Therefore it is essential that staff members like the job they do. Showing passion and effort are critical to work in this environment. A certain level of personal pride to work within this sector is needed as well. The most important operational/business value is the understanding of the 'relationship' between price/quality.

The concepts of culinary restaurant small businesses

Interviewees unanimously agreed that all elements in the concepts of culinary restaurant small businesses must be in harmony and that the elements are dependent on each other to present the best 'product' possible. However, the individual concepts as explained by the interviewees showed variation and especially the hierarchical definition of 'most important concepts within culinary restaurant small businesses' differed among interviewees. The different concepts mentioned by the interviewees in random order were: product, service, interior, ambience, location, price/quality, and atmosphere. Some interviewees shared the opinion that the actual product (food and drinks) comes first. Other interviewees shared the opinion that service (staff) is just as important as product, referring to the opinion that one needs the other and that good service staff performance has an impact on the way customers perceive the products. Some interviewees stated that staff is the connecting factor between all other concepts. One interviewee stated that if both product and service are in harmony then ambience (another concept) is less important. Another interviewee stated that the core products are not only extremely important, but also the whole experience, referring to the combination of product (food and drinks), location, ambience and service. This latter opinion testifies of a more holistic approach towards the concepts of culinary restaurant small businesses.

The dimensions of culinary restaurant small businesses

The interviewees mentioned three dimensions of culinary restaurant small businesses and their attributes that were categorised as followed:

(1) Tangible dimensions:

- Fresh products
- Products of the season

(2) Intangible dimensions:

- Representative presentation
- Professional appearance
- Modesty in service behaviour
- Interactive mode of approaching the guest
- Communication skills of service staff
- Sympathising with the guest
- Friendly behaviour by the service staff
- Knowledge of products by all staff
- Passionate attitude towards the service by staff
- Ambitious managing of the restaurant by the entrepreneur/management

(3) Outcomes-related dimension:

- Price/quality balance as perceived by the guest

The opinion about quality standards

In general, the interviewees held a positive opinion about quality standards. Quality standards and the explicit process of them being assessed have a strong (positive) influence on the culinary sector and for interested parties. According to one interviewee quality standards will be more accepted generally in the near future. Quality standards will help to create a clear picture of the restaurants, but it should not make any judgment because that is something that should be reserved as a right for the customer. Not every interviewee held a positive opinion about the phenomenon, as one stated that:

setting quality standards in culinary organisations is almost impossible. Products (food and drinks) used are not standard and quality depends on the person who 'works' with it. Quality can be judged only as 'good' or 'not good'. Even if it was possible to standardise culinary processes, it would become too academic. Within this profession creativeness and personal influence are 'key'. As soon as one is going to work with products, one has to let go of the standardised quality norm and it becomes one's own quality norm, which is judged by the guest.

The latter opinion was expressed by a respondent with a 'kitchen background'.

Analysis

In order to describe quality management in culinary organisations and to present a logical structure of information about quality management, it is crucial to clarify the principles that form the foundation for quality standard systems. We mainly focused during the interviews on concepts, dimensions and values as developed by Svensson (2006). Interpretations of quality concepts and dimensions are based on the interviews with the seven stakeholder categories and the different perspectives (although sometimes interconnected) that they represent:

(1) customers (or 'guests')

(2) chefs, managers and owners of culinary restaurant small businesses

- (3) culinary quality (assessing) organisations
- (4) culinary associations
- (5) culinary journalists
- (6) hospitality and culinary educators
- (7) independent hospitality experts and hospitality consultants.

A definition or at least a description of quality is needed to obtain useful information. As can be concluded from the interview results a unified specific definition of quality could not be identified. However, the interviewees described *quality* in several ways. The interviewees described *who* assesses quality. All interviewees agreed that both guests and restaurant practitioners assess quality. The interviewees described *how* quality is being assessed. The interviewees agreed that quality is assessed by comparison and the level of offering the overall culinary restaurant small businesses produce consistently. Finally, the interviewees agreed that quality *consists* of several concepts and elements. Although the level of importance of each concept differs per interviewee, the interviewees agreed that all concepts should work in harmony to *produce* quality. As all interviewees only in a general sense agree about quality it must be concluded that providing a specific definition of quality in culinary restaurant small businesses will be challenging.

By approaching the findings from different perspectives, we tried to find which concepts were most important according to the different stakeholder categories. The concepts mentioned by the stakeholder categories were: product, service, interior, ambience, location, price/quality and atmosphere. Opinions on the hierarchy/rank ordering of the concepts were different among the interviewees. Nevertheless, the concepts *product* and *service* were seen as most important; some interviewees placed product as the most important, whereas others placed product and service as equally most important. Most attention during the restaurant experience was perceived as given to product and service. One interviewee stated that if product and service are in harmony, the ambience is not as important, whereas others still stressed the importance of ambience and other concepts. Assuming that other concepts might not be that important as product and service, the interviewees agreed that location, ambience, atmosphere and price/quality, even if they have a small share in the restaurant experience, can have a critical impact on the restaurant experience as a whole, both positively and negatively.

During the interviews many dimensions were mentioned. It may be concluded that the intangible dimension is the most important as most examples were presented in this dimension. This is not surprising if one realises that the concept 'service' is very important and usually strongly linked particularly with the intangible dimension. Linking to the literature on 'occupational behaviour' will help to categorise these dimensions even further. In comparison to Furnham's (1997) approach, which presented the main factors that predict occupational behaviour, it can be concluded that stakeholders add more value to the elements 'motivation', 'personality traits' and 'intelligence' than the elements 'ability' and 'demographic'. This makes sense as several interviewees shared the opinion that a 'hospitality attitude' cannot be learned and is critical to the quality experience of customers. Several interviewees share the opinion that social

background, grades and degrees of hospitality professionals (management and staff) are not that important as the *willingness to learn* actually is.

The interviewees shared the opinion about the tangible dimension and the outcome dimension. Within the tangible dimension, fresh and seasonal products are seen as most important. For the outcome dimension, price/quality is seen as most important. The connection and relation between concepts and dimensions is as follows; the intangible dimension is related to the service concept, the tangible dimension is related to the product concept, and the outcome dimension is related to all concepts. For the interviewees it is clear what needs to be done to focus and emphasise on the dimensions and concepts. They agreed that learning and improving the use of dimensions means gaining knowledge about psychology and empathy towards the customer whereby 'reading guests' and 'face reading' were mentioned. Interviewees stressed the importance of the need to try to adapt to the same level of how their guests think and act. It will help restaurant staff to know what guests really want and when and how. A method suggested by the interviewees is 'to engage in extensive interaction with guests'. The interviewees stress the importance for service providers in culinary restaurant small businesses to do their 'homework' regarding the marketing mix as well. The marketing mix was mentioned by the interviewees because of the general opinion that owners/entrepreneurs do not focus enough on the marketing mix and therefore ignore its essential value for 'survival'.

Finally, it is important to consider the personal aspect and motivation of the practitioners involved in culinary restaurant small businesses and where this connects to quality systems. A keyword that is related to practice and the possible standardisation of quality is *documentation*. Documentation of quality concepts and quality dimensions should be available for the culinary restaurant practice. The documentation should refer particularly to the subjects psychology and emotion, as was mentioned by the interviewees. Psychologists study human behaviour whereby the 'individual' is key. The behaviour of the people working in culinary restaurant small businesses and their personal characteristics are of great importance for the success and the way of making quality in culinary restaurant small businesses explicit. As for every other professional job, kitchen and service staff need several personal characteristics in order to influence positively the organisation and to deliver quality in the culinary restaurant. The personal involvement and responsibility for every operational and strategic decision is experienced continuously, particularly by the restaurant owner or chef, and the consequences of their decisions are noticeable directly by employees, guests and other parties involved.

Motivational factors and values differ per individual and will change with the individual's age, personal life and career phase. Defining characteristics for the 'ideal practitioner' is impossible or at least very difficult. Depending on the working situation, different personality traits and values are needed and expected. As Legohérel et al. (2004) suggest, 'personal values and objectives can not be dissociated from the organization's objectives and that behaviour and personality traits direct the organization and therefore the success or failure of the organization'. Attitudes and motives are interrelated but it would be incorrect to suggest that someone's behaviour can

be predicted if the attitude is known. The way one behaves is not always in line with one's motives. In the final section of this research paper, we formulate our conclusions.

Implications and conclusions

It was an important observation in this research that the amount of academic literature that can be found related to this specific topic of quality definition in culinary restaurant small businesses is rather limited, although the array of sources dealing with the subjects 'quality management' and 'restaurant industry' separately is much more extended. It would be fair to acknowledge that restaurant practitioners do not have the amount of written information and usable tools to implement quality management systems and standardise quality as may be needed. Several authors stress the importance to increase knowledge in this field and provide more useful and specific information and tools, which was also confirmed by the interviewees in this research. First, the general conclusions and recommendations are presented, followed by a discussion of the main research issues.

- The ultimate goal for culinary restaurant small businesses is diverse and consists of a combination of several subgoals. From speaking to the stakeholders the overall conclusion is that restaurant practitioners enjoy the work they do and see it as a logical effect to make money out of their passion.
- The meaning of quality remains multifaceted and a general unified definition is difficult to present. However, from different perspectives the definition of quality can be described in general. Quality is subjective; some parts of quality may be standardised, whereas others seem to be impossible to standardise.
- It is essential for restaurant practitioners to be consistent in their level of presentation and performance. At the same time restaurant practitioners have to be creative and innovative regarding their presentation and performance in order to continue to attract guests. Guests need to be attracted in a different way every time, which means that restaurant practitioners need to change their creative and innovative processes on a regular basis. Within the culinary restaurant industry, guests compare and expect a certain level of quality, which makes the way of presenting quality crucial.
- It becomes more difficult for restaurant practitioners to be creative with food products. The number of restaurants increases constantly, which means that competition grows rapidly. Therefore the 'uniqueness' of a restaurant (e.g. cooking style) does not sustain for long. The importance and consideration of hypes and restaurant themes by the practitioners becomes increasingly important to excite the customer.
- A good and appropriate 'hospitality attitude' is critical when working in the culinary restaurant business. It can be concluded that *people skills*, *showing emotion* and *being hospitable* are important factors within the hospitality attitude.
- Different restaurant practitioners have different thoughts about concepts. 'Product' and 'service' are valued as most important by most interviewees in the present study, but the level of importance of other concepts remains uncertain.
- It can be concluded that 'intangible dimensions' are valued as most important as all interviewees mentioned many

intangible dimensions in relation to other dimensions. Intangible dimensions are strongly associated with 'service concepts'.

- As guests compare quality, they are in need of information. From this research it can be concluded that informing guests with the aid of magazines and reports (e.g. Michelin, Lekker and Gaul Millau) is two-sided. On the one hand, several interviewees stated that the more information available to guests will help them to choose a restaurant, whereas some interviewees stated that a minimum amount of information is enough for guests to make decisions. There is a shared opinion that culinary restaurant small businesses are visited by guests 'just once in a while' and some restaurants more than others. Guests who have experienced a visit to a culinary restaurant previously are better able to create a picture of a culinary restaurant in advance with less information than guests who visit a culinary restaurant for the first time.

Discussion

To become unique as a culinary restaurant is one step, to remain unique is definitely another step. Being a prominent restaurant in the culinary segment is influenced by the opinion of several groups of interest. Their opinions are variable and change regularly. Situations during the actual restaurant experience, as well as pre-experiences formed by advertisements and word-to-mouth, create an impact on opinions. It is very hard to describe the level of impact. People are led by emotions. Emotions are influenced by others. It doesn't matter how one feels about a particular restaurant; there is always a chance to attract a person, because people are in need for confirmation. With the aid of written and verbal information, people can create a certain picture about a restaurant. Guests like to experience something mysterious, something new and exciting. The expectation is influenced by many factors and therefore is highly vulnerable for disappointment. As long as one is not 'fixed' towards service procedures and preformed thoughts, the experience can be more positive. An opinion about a restaurant cannot be ascribed to only one concept. The restaurant experience and its quality are shaped by all concepts and dimensions together. This conclusion is confirmed by previous research (Wall and Berry, 2007). These authors state that the concepts 'service', 'product' and 'location' are all important in influencing the expectation of interested parties. However, as stated in their research and confirmed through this research, focus is importantly on intangible dimensions regarding quality perceptions. All concepts should work in harmony and if they do not, it would be wise for the restaurant operator to focus on intangible dimensions.

A description of quality is personal and therefore always open for discussion. On the one hand, people like to describe their perception of quality and inform everyone who is interested. On the other hand, people know that different thoughts, emotions and situations mean different perceptions. So, why is the word 'quality' still used in the culinary industry? Is it necessary? As found from the literature, researchers state that culinary art is personal and in need for creative processes. This would mean that no-one is able to use comprehensively the word 'quality' in describing processes in culinary restaurant small businesses. This might indicate that no one is

actually *allowed* to use the word quality. Everyone who tries to give a description of *quality in culinary restaurant small businesses* will directly experience response from others that might add something useful or not at all. Describing quality in culinary restaurant small businesses in general is not possible but using dimensions and concepts will make it a lot more understandable. Therefore we suggest quality standards be looked at not only as a list of subjects that restaurant practitioners can check, but more importantly as a line of thought that practitioners in culinary restaurant small businesses should be aware of. The knowledge that restaurant practitioners can gain through this defining of quality will help in the operation of their business but not obstruct their own opinion, thoughts and creativity. Emotion will remain important at the centre of good culinary restaurant offering.

Suggestions for further research

As can be concluded from this research, the ‘culinary restaurant world’ will benefit from the provision of information regarding the subject ‘organisational and occupational behaviour’ and its link to psychology. More research is needed into this subject area in the future and topics from this perspective might be introduction of relevant literature for restaurant practitioners to study and make them more aware of the difficulty of occupational behaviour, and introduction of graphical models and useable tools from the research field of psychology that can assist to categorise and standardise personal behaviour and emotion.

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Appendix: Research instrument: interview questions

Questions asked to the entrepreneurs in the research to define the profile of their small businesses.

- (1) When did you start your business?
- (2) What are your ambitions for the future for your business?
- (3) What would you mark as special or significant in the development of your business?
- (4) Which work experience did you have before starting your business?

The next few questions were directly related to the research questions and were asked to identify the 'story line' of the different opinions about 'quality in the small businesses, i.e. culinary restaurants'. The intention was to see if a 'standard for defining quality' could be described.

- (5) Can you describe what the most important goal is of culinary restaurant small businesses?
- (6) How would you define 'quality in culinary restaurant small businesses'?
- (7) Is there in your opinion a relationship between 'quality' and 'organisational culture'?
- (8) Which values would you find to be important in operating culinary restaurant small businesses?

The next questions were about the 'concepts' and 'dimensions' of culinary restaurant small businesses.

- (9) Could you list and describe the most valuable concepts found in culinary restaurant small businesses?
 - (10) Can you describe the most valuable dimensions in culinary restaurant small businesses?
 - (11) How would you define the influence of quality standards for actors involved in experiencing culinary restaurant small businesses?
 - (12) Do you think it would be feasible to define a unified quality standard for culinary restaurant small businesses?
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