



Experience-oriented food design in a restaurant context: A study of guest reflections on a fine dining starter

Marta Merkl¹⁺

Dora Horvath²

Attila Cosovan³

¹Budapest University of Economics and Business, 1054 Budapest, Alkotmány u. 9-11, Hungary.

^{1,2,3}Corvinus University of Budapest, 1093 Budapest, Fővám tér 8, Hungary.

¹Email: merkl.marta@uni-bge.hu

²Email: dora.horvath@uni-corvinus.hu

³Email: attila.cosovan@uni-corvinus.hu



(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

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Experience plays a crucial role in our food choices and therefore deserves special attention in related tourism innovation. One possible approach to innovation is food design, a complex design activity aimed at creating different products and services related to food and dining. The area of food design in a restaurant has not been explored in depth. This study provides new insights into the experience design of a fine dining restaurant undergoing metamorphosis, particularly in one case, its opening dinners in Winter 2021/2022. The aim of the paper is to broaden our knowledge of dining experiences, for which ethnography and interactive menu cards as specific questionnaires (2261 responses from 20 dinners, with 303 entries specifically pertaining to the dish investigated) are effective methods. The paper introduces the restaurant context, furthermore the food design classification by Francesca Zampollo. The analysis considers the theory of experience economy by B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore and their followers, and the results reported here emphasize the importance of “customized” interactivity. The findings of this investigation underline the concept of flow by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi in terms of sensory perceptions. These results are not only relevant to the hospitality industry and the restaurant in question, but can also be utilized more widely in the design of other diets.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the literature by uniquely applying the theories of food design, the experience economy, and flow within a fine dining restaurant context, a topic that has been rarely investigated. The primary contribution of this paper is the finding that customized interactivity and sensory perceptions are crucial components of dining experiences. Additionally, this study documents the use of interactive menu cards as a novel research method, highlighting innovative approaches in hospitality research.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Metamorphoses: The Transformation of a Restaurant and its First Tasting Menu

The research territory is a restaurant in Budapest, the capital of Hungary, which, over its more than 15-year history, has been awarded two Michelin stars and won the European final of the Bocuse d'Or competition. In 2020, during the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic, which posed a significant challenge to the global food sector, a decision was made to completely redesign the restaurant, and the process was titled Metamorphosis. The restaurant was closed, and within the framework of a bold publicity stunt, demolished with a hammer in front of the camera. This was followed by several pop-up events that challenged the limits of fine dining (Merkl, 2022). In November 2021, the first of two restaurants was opened. The first tasting menu was titled META/MORPHOSIS, with the

motto: We believe that less is sometimes more. The name has two layers. Firstly, the menu conceptually narrates the restaurant's transformation, thereby integrating a narrative approach as a key characteristic. Secondly, individual dishes represent refined iterations of those presented at the events (milestones) of the Metamorphosis.

Becoming acquainted with the 12-step menu may serve as guidance in understanding the research results; therefore, its attributes are summarized in Table 1. The banners located in the reception space of the restaurant display short descriptions, whereas the menu contains a list of ingredients. The menus include illustrations, as well as space for guest reviews (see Chapter 4).

Table 1. 12 steps of the META/MORPHOSIS menu.

Name of the step	Category of dish	Short description
Foundation	Welcome snack & drink	Laying the foundation of a genial atmosphere.
Departure	Cottage cheese pie (as amuse bouche)	The beginning of a new chapter which we start with a clean slate.
Fracture	Bread & butter	Breaking the familiar and having a go at something new.
Decision	Black salsify	Every new path comes with decisions.
Comparison	Beet, carrot, saffron or trout	To improve, we need to account for our old and new selves.
Outlook	Lángos (Hungarian flatbread) & sturgeon sausage	Take a look at yourself from another perspective.
Highlight	Cauliflower or sterlet	Finding what really matters and focusing on it.
Turning point	Celery or wagyu	The most important part of the transformation, which happens right before your eyes.
Reaction	Return of celery or wagyu	Inspection and trying every possibility are vital.
Solution	Dessert	A calming finale.
Balance	Confection	A perfect bite paired with a perfect sip before we depart.
Travel	Gift	Take a sweet memory home with you.

Considering the space limitations, this paper focuses on a single step, the Departure dish, which served as the second starter or an amuse-bouche-like dish in the given tasting menu (Figure 4). The dish is a classic Hungarian food, a dill and cottage cheese pie enriched with elderflower and apricot. The dish (or an earlier version of it) was first prepared at a pop-up event called Relic Market, a previous milestone in the restaurant's metamorphosis. The event fused the worlds of fine dining and the market, as it was held on Sunday morning, traditionally the time for fairs in Hungary, putting the former restaurant's tabletop accessories on sale and offering "boosted" market food. Then, an improved version of this dish became the Departure step of the new restaurant's first tasting menu. It was paired with champagne, opened by two volunteer guests with the spectacular sabrage technique. This technique involves opening a champagne bottle by using a saber (in this case a hammer) to break the top of the bottle away. After opening the champagne, the staff pours it for all sixteen guests, so the dinner begins with a toast.

This study addresses a gap in the literature by exploring the specific roles of interaction, concept, and sensory perception within the restaurant dining experience. Our primary objective is to investigate these factors through a case study of the "Departure" step (dish) at the restaurant, providing a nuanced understanding of how they shape the guest's experience. To achieve this, we employ a mixed-methods approach combining ethnography and a dataset of 2,261 guest responses.

1.2. Food Design in the Restaurant Due to a Kind of HR Sustainability

From an environmental and human resource perspective, a significant element of the restaurant's transformation is the pursuit of sustainability. This endeavor is multifaceted, addressing environmental considerations, such as the restaurant's implementation of a short supply chain for locally sourced ingredients, as well as human resource management aspects. The latter is relevant to our subject, since concepts are created according to a decentralized model within the restaurant. This means that instead of a single chef, a so-called Creative Community is responsible

for research, development, and innovation, representing different areas of expertise, with e.g., a food designer among members from the catering industry. They believe the new model will be at least as effective as the “chef model,” yet more flexible in case personnel changes occur. The inclusion of designers has strengthened the design approach within the restaurant, and in terms of food design, restaurant activity has become more complex, embracing the subdisciplines of Design with Food, Design for Food, Food Space Design, Eating Design, and Food Service Design, as defined by the Zampollo (2016a) classification system (see Chapter 2).

2. CONCEPT OF FOOD DESIGN

There is no explicit answer to what food design means or what it encompasses. The most frequently cited theoretical framework within the discipline of design in relation to the definition and categorization of food design was established by Zampollo (2013); Zampollo (2016a), and Zampollo (2016b) in her doctoral research.

Table 2. Zampollo food design classification, edited by the author based on Zampollo (2016a).

Subdiscipline	Subject
Food product design	Food or beverages designated for industrial production
Design with Food	Food or beverages to be prepared and consumed on the spot.
Design for Food	Dining-related artefacts
Food space design	Environments designed for food or beverages preparation and consumption.
Eating design	Ephemeral eating or drinking contexts
Food service design	Services related to food and drink
Food system design	Broader Environmental Factors Influencing Food Consumption and Drinking Practices

She identifies food design as a discipline, and divides it into subdisciplines as shown in Table 2. Under the Zampollo classification system, the discipline's scope is extensively delineated (Merkl, 2019, 2022). It incorporates design activities pertaining to food and drink, as well as the conceptualization and implementation of eating locations, situations, accessories, services, and intricate systems. Searching the international scientific platform ScienceDirect for the term "food design" yields over 1,000,000 results (ScienceDirect, 1997). The diverse disciplinary classification of these publications may indicate the interdisciplinary potential of food design practices.

3. A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON THE EXPERIENCE

3.1. *The Theory of Experience Economy: The Offering's Evolution Toward Memorable Experiences and Beyond*

Pine and Gilmore (1998) argue that we are living in an age of the experience economy, where the expected consumer experience is more in demand than the attributes of products and services. An example worth mentioning in reference to food is the four-step “evolution” of birthday cake. During the agricultural economy, domestic production predominated, exemplified by mothers baking birthday cakes from fundamental raw ingredients (e.g., flour, sugar, butter, eggs). The industrial economy witnessed a shift towards mass production, simplifying home baking through the widespread availability of low-cost, pre-packaged cake mixes. In the service economy, the provision of such goods shifted to specialized providers, with consumers typically outsourcing cake acquisition from bakeries at an approximate cost of 10-15 USD. In the economic phase of experience economy, the focus shifts from product or service acquisition to the creation of memorable events, and parents increasingly engage specialized firms to orchestrate comprehensive birthday experiences for their children, with the cake becoming a supplementary component (often over 100 USD within a larger package) rather than the primary value driver. This exemplifies how experiential value directly inflates pricing.

Pine and Gilmore (1998) recommend that a memorable experience can be designed by, among others, a distinctive and coherent theme (concept) and different sensory effects. “The sensory stimulants that accompany an experience should support and enhance its theme. The more senses an experience engages, the more effective and memorable it can be”(Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

According to the 4E model experience can be characterized by customer participation and connection (Balderas-Cejudo, Gavilan, & Fernandez-Lores, 2022; Jászberényi & Bodnár, 2024; Lai, Lu, & Liu, 2020; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Rewtrakunphaiboon & Sawangdee, 2022). Figure 1 shows four realms of experience (entertainment, educational experience, aesthetic experience, escapism), where participation can be active or passive, and connection can be defined as absorption or immersion.

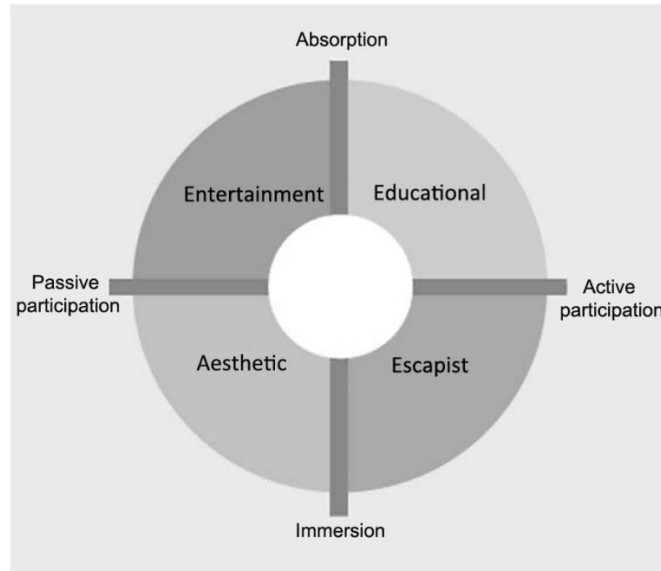


Figure 1. Four realms of experience according to Pine and Gilmore (1998).

Following the agricultural, industrial, service, and experience economies, the transformation economy will be the next economic phase (Kristensen & Horváth, 2012; Pine & Gilmore, 1999) which is founded upon consumers' desire to change their lives, and ultimately themselves, through experiences (Figure 2). Yet, the majority of offers do not have a lasting effect on the individual – after being consumed, even experiences start to fade. However, if the experience supply is customized, then everyone gets exactly what they desire, and transformation takes place – this is the last supply model.

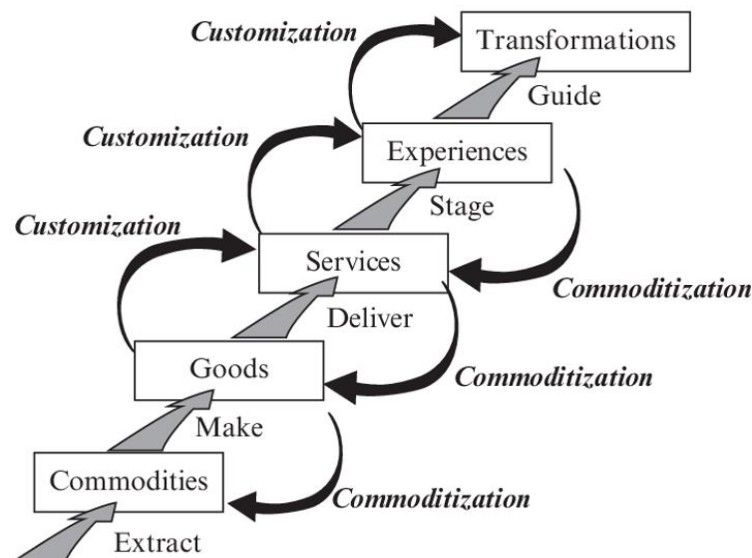


Figure 2. The progression of economic value in full (details) according to Pine and Gilmore (2011).

3.2. Interaction Perspectives and Experience Economy Reconciled

Interaction is a key component in relation to our subject matter. This is evident in the writings of Pine and Gilmore (1998) in reference to experience staging, where the consumer becomes the lead actor. However, according to Boswijk, Thijssen, and Peelen (2007), a new perspective opens up beyond or above experience economy: they refer to the second step as co-creation and the third as (communicative) self-direction. In accordance with the views of Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) they believe that the relationship between consumers or consumer communities and companies is no longer hierarchical with the company in a leadership role, but see them as equals who are both part of the value development process.

In reference to the concept of co-creation, Caru and Cova (2007) model defines experience design based on its subject. Thus, the first group is titled customer-driven experiences, where the experience is exclusively created by the customer. Company-driven experiences is the name of the second group, where the experience is greatly influenced by the service provider. Within the third group, co-driven experiences, the provider establishes the optimal conditions based on which the experience is created by the consumer. Within a company-driven experience, interaction contributes to the quality and intensity of the experience; conversely, in a co-driven experience, it serves as a foundational element (Zátori, 2014).

3.3. The Concept of Flow: The Role of Flow in Experience

The question of what precisely leads to an individual's experience and how that experience can be described elicits various answers that may differ across scientific disciplines (Kovács, 2014). Management studies tend to regard them as things existing in the external world, waiting to be “consumed” by the individual. However, psychologists such as Csikszentmihályi (2008) believe that experiences cannot be guaranteed results of external events, but greatly depend on the subject. According to the theory of Csikszentmihályi (2008), autotelic activity (activity lacking external goals) is the fundamental source of experience and is referred to as the optimal experience or flow. Csikszentmihályi (2008) defined the eight characteristics or conditions of flow, which were adopted by Boswijk, Thijssen, and Peelen (2007) and integrated into their new approach toward the experience industry. In reference to our subject matter, it is important to highlight one condition: the challenge produced by the activity should be in balance with the skills of the actor. If it is too difficult, the actor experiences anxiety instead of flow (see A3 in Figure 3), and boredom if it is too simple (A2).

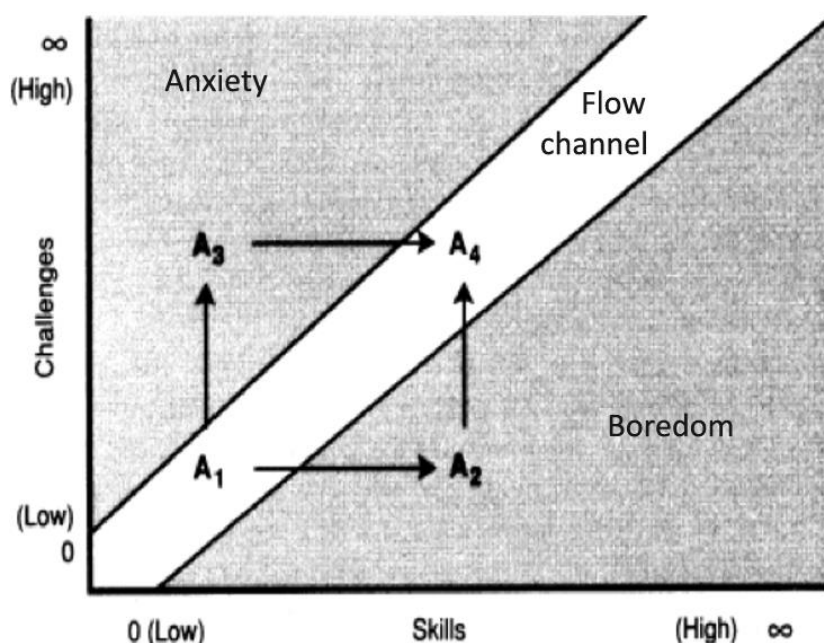


Figure 3. The complexity of consciousness is increased as a result of flow experiences according to Csikszentmihályi (2008).

4. METHODS

This research aimed to deepen the understanding of the restaurant experience through the lens of three key perspectives from experience economy theory:

- (1) Interaction.
- (2) Theme (Concept).
- (3) Sensory perception.

The analysis in this paper is limited to the Departure step (dish) (Figure 4) in order to present a complete picture of one stage of the guest experience.

A crucial aspect of this research was its embeddedness within and utilization by a corporate (restaurant) setting. Specifically, the food design activities contributed to the creation of the (restaurant) product, and the research results are expected to contribute to further food design activities. Therefore, the research question can be formulated as follows: What is the role of interaction, concept, and sensory perception in the restaurant dining experience, exemplified by the Departure step (dish) at the given restaurant?

A case study approach and mixed research methods were used for this research. Data were collected during opening dinners of the restaurant in the fall and winter of 2021/2022. During the dinners, guests were invited to record their impressions regarding food, beverages, serveware, and other aspects on special menu cards, which can be considered as questionnaires (Figure 4).

The resulting database includes 2,261 responses from 20 dinners and more than 300 respondents, with 303 entries specifically pertaining to the Departure step.

The research was complemented by ethnographic observation and interviews. To avoid disturbing the restaurant environment (and thus avoid alienation), the researcher wore the staff's uniforms, performed minor service tasks, and occasionally stepped aside to take notes. The study was conducted in full compliance with ethical guidelines. The study was open, since staff's introduction at the beginning of the dinners included information about the researcher's position and the ongoing research on the guest experience. Involvement was entirely voluntary and anonymous. The observation is unstructured, i.e., it is based on goals and criteria (in this case, regarding guest experience), but there are no predefined category systems (Szokolszky, 2004).

According to Gergen and Gergen (2000) it is important to describe the factors that originate from the researcher and may influence the research. At the beginning of the fieldwork, the researcher realized that her knowledge of the hospitality industry was not deep enough; it was necessary to fill in the missing knowledge because understanding the terminology and thought patterns was essential to comprehend the phenomena.

The subject pool consisted of guests who were booked for dinners within the selected time period. To gain insights into the restaurant experience without alienating guests, no personal or sociodemographic data were collected, which also ensured their privacy and anonymity. Although we know from the language of the feedback in the database that 97% of the guests were of Hungarian nationality, this conclusion is based on the use of Hungarian. The questionnaire (menu card) asked two types of questions for each dish: a four-point Likert scale (1 = "poor", 2 = "fair", 3 = "OK", 4 = "great") and free text responses.

Restaurant management preferred a Likert scale, specifically an even-numbered scale, which precluded the selection of a neutral midpoint, anticipating easily interpretable results. However, this analysis focuses on text responses, as a qualitative approach appears to have the potential to provide detailed insights into the guest experience.



Figure 4. Departure step.

Source: Restaurant.

In coding, main categories, such as sensory perceptions as potential sources of dining experience, were derived from the literature (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Topics identified in the data analysis (such as evaluations related to taste, touch, etc.) were linked to the main categories through constant comparison. The reliance on the literature is supported by the fact that a case study is suitable for testing theories (Horváth & Mitev, 2015). We also used a quantitative approach to the sensory evaluation of guests due to its complexity. We established a coding system to count how many guests were satisfied with a given category (code 2 = appropriate) and how many guests were dissatisfied due to a lack (code 1 = insufficient) or excess (code 3 = excessive). To ensure inter-coder reliability, the coding was performed by two independent researchers. They began with a joint workshop to establish coding rules. Following this, the researchers coded the data separately. The results were then compared, and any disagreements were resolved through shared discussion.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Interaction

The possibility for guests to contribute to the transformation of the restaurant through the menu cards (special questionnaires) can be seen as a form of interactivity, which guests actively embraced, as indicated by their high willingness to respond. Specifically, 85% of guests (259 individuals) provided free text responses, and 98% (298 individuals) filled in the Likert-scale section.

Based on ethnographic observation, the sabrage, as a spectacular, interactive, and communal activity, enjoyed great popularity. Ethnographic interviews revealed that the opportunity to try sabrage is perceived positively when it is voluntary and not forced. In Caru and Cova (2007) continuum, the sabrage program can be placed within the categories of company-driven and co-driven experiences, depending on whether the guest is an observer or a participant in the sabrage. After Pine and Gilmore (1998), If a guest observes sabrage, they experience it in the aesthetic realm of experience; if they participate in opening the champagne, they experience it in the escapist realm of experience.

Overall, the interactive menu cards and sabrage program, as part of the dish's accompanying wine pairing, were popular elements of the dining experience. Depending on their level of involvement, guests could experience the sabrage in either the Aesthetic or Escapist realms of experience. This program demonstrates how a company-driven activity can transform into a co-driven experience when guests move from observation to participation.

5.2. Theme

There were mixed results regarding the extent to which the concept or, as Pine and Gilmore (1998) term it, the theme was understandable to guests. Some guest reviews directly reflected the dinner's motto, for instance: "A real taste bomb, sometimes less really is more." Other guests recognized the metamorphosis logo on the plate, with one commenting: "Liked the plate in which it was served the symbol of metamorphosis." Conversely, some guests associated the food, rooted in Hungarian traditions, with nostalgic memories: "Homemade flavors, Hungarian roots, summer field, grandma's garden, cucumber harvest, elderflower syrup." Furthermore, one feedback indicated that the environmental sustainability elements of the restaurant concept might go unnoticed: "I would have tried mango instead of peach." Finally, some feedback showed a lack of understanding of the background and concept, such as: "It's a real challenge for the taste buds at the beginning it feels random, although obviously you have to start somehow, but why like this."

In summary, the research revealed mixed guest reception of the dinner's theme. While some guests connected with the concepts, others either misinterpreted the dishes or failed to understand the concept, thereby impacting their overall experience.

5.3. Sensory Perception

The pool of guests' sensory evaluation is very diverse and is illustrated in Table 3 and 4.

Table 3. The ingredients of the Departure step and guests' sensory evaluation.

Ingredient	Insufficient (Code 1)	Appropriate (Code 2)	Excessive (Code 3)	No mention
Apricot	28	45	0	230
Elderflower	22	19	1	261
Dill	4	49	23	227
Sour cream	1	5	4	293
Cottage cheese	2	14	6	281
Pastry layer	1	5	4	293
Salt	3	4	4	292

Table 3 shows the number of respondents who expressed positive feedback about a given ingredient, and the number who found it either excessive (too much or too strong) or insufficient (too little or too weak) in terms of quantity or intensity.

The highest number of comments concerned dill (76 respondents), followed by pickled apricot (73 respondents) and elderflower (42 respondents). Roughly half as many respondents found the presence of dill excessive (23 respondents) and the presence of apricot insufficient (28 respondents), compared to those who deemed them just right (49 and 45 respondents, respectively). The elderflower component was rated as appropriate (19 respondents) and as lacking (22 respondents) in roughly equal measure. These figures are further supported by the free-text responses, which confirm that guests perceived dill as a dominant ingredient in the dish. Dill, being a divisive raw material, was also noted for its surprising flavor combination when paired with fruit. The high number of non-mentions for individual ingredients could indicate that guests either did not consider them significant enough to highlight or were unable to detect them, as exemplified by one comment: "Unfortunately, I couldn't taste the elderflower, even though I was curious about it."

The transformation, identified by Pine and Gilmore (1999) as a higher level of offering/experience, is also discernible in guest feedback. Several guests initially expressed aversion to dill but reconsidered their opinion after tasting it.

For instance, one guest remarked: "I'm not a fan of dill, but it tasted delicious. I would gladly consume it again." However, there were also instances where this transformation did not occur: "Unfortunately, dill is not my favorite, and this bite did not change that."

Table 4. Selected guest reviews regarding the texture of the departure step.

Part of dish	Texture	Number of mentions	Citation
Upper part (Cottage cheese + sour cream)	Foamy, creamy	13	"I liked its foam."
	Too foamy, creamy	1	"I would have preferred a slightly denser consistency, but it tasted delicious."
	Not foamy, creamy enough	2	"It might be a little creamier."
Lower part (Pastry layer)	Crispy	7	"In a good way, the filling is very soft, and the pastry is deliciously crispy."
	Not crispy enough	6	"Yes, I know that the soft and crunchy texture make a whole. But for me, the bottom was a little dry, a little more crumbly."

Table 4 represents the contradictory nature of the guests' feedback on the texture of the food.

One notable piece of feedback highlighted the impact of post-COVID-19 smell and taste loss, leading a guest to focus solely on the visual, portion, and textural attributes of the dish rather than its flavor or aroma. This was exemplified by the comment: "With a strong lack of smell and taste after COVID, I would say: great appearance, right size, good texture."

The manner of consuming the amuse-bouche-like dish, which was intended to be eaten by hand, received negative feedback from eight individuals. Their concerns stemmed either from the absence of cutlery or the perception that the portion was too large to be consumed in a single bite. A representative comment stated: "By hand, one bite is a bit big for ladies." Interestingly, a returning guest compared their impressions based on the evolution of the bite, noting: "I tasted it for the second time, now in one go. It's great this way. It's worth suggesting that it be eaten in one bite."

To sum up, the sensory evaluation of the dish was highly diverse, highlighting both a wide range of perceptions and the divisive nature of key ingredients like dill. While some guests underwent a transformation by re-evaluating their preferences, others did not, suggesting that personal biases and even post-illness conditions can significantly influence the experience. The research also revealed that the manner of consumption and perceived portion size are key factors that can shape guests' feedback.

6. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The research question focused on the interaction, the role of theme (concept), and sensory perceptions in the dining experience, investigated within a realistic restaurant environment. The key point to note about interaction is that it also needs to be customized to the individual guest's needs. Individuals differ in their willingness to participate; therefore, over-encouraging interaction can be counterproductive. In the hospitality sector, a server's responsibility may therefore include assessing a consumer's openness, for which various tools can be employed, such as verbal narration or interactive cards. A design professional or a design-as-an-attitude approach can be utilized to implement these tools.

It is uncertain whether the quantitative approach used for the sensory perception of the guests truly contributed to the interpretation. Rephrased as a managerial implication, should a restaurant in a given category aim to be liked

by the majority of its guests? Furthermore, do all guests possess the necessary preparedness to correctly identify and evaluate food with their senses? A possible interpretive framework is provided by Csíkszentmihályi (2008) theory, which states that the flow state requires a direct proportionality between the individual's skill and the difficulty of the task. It is therefore worthwhile to offer consumers the opportunity for education at different levels and quantities, for example, in the form of in-situ written or verbal narration, programs, pop-up events, or online content.

Future research directions can be identified through further data collection and analysis, such as dinners treated as focus groups and/or follow-up guest in-depth interviews, which are expected to clarify debated issues, such as the interpretability of the concept or after Pine and Gilmore (1998) theme.

The results of this study on the dining experience may contribute to the conscious design of dining experiences in other contexts. This is not limited to the hospitality sector but could also be applied in areas such as healthcare. The experience-oriented design or redesign of treatments, in terms of diet adherence or hospital menus, can make them more effective, as a meal should not only fulfill its primary function of nourishment but also its function of providing an experience.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The Ethical Committee of the Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary has granted approval for this study on 18 August 2025 (Ref. No. KPH/196/2025).

Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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