
HOW IMPORTANT IS NUTRITION WITHIN THE 'IDEAL' EATING OUT EXPERIENCE? A DESCRIPTIVE COMPARISON AMONG SOUTHERN UNITED STATES CONSUMERS

Alonso Abel D.

Edith Cowan University, Western Australia

O'Neill Martin A.

Hotel and Restaurant Management, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama

Zizza Claire

R.D., Auburn University, Auburn Alabama

ABSTRACT

Eating out experiences can project different images, desires and expectations among consumers. Depending on the overall outcome of these experiences, consumers may have a positive impact on a business through continued patronage or word-of-mouth advertising, while in the case of dissatisfying experiences their response may even harm an establishment's image. From a group of 305 participants, this study explores consumers' viewpoint of the ideal eating out experience and in the process seeks to identify keywords that are evoked in their definition of this experience. This information could prove invaluable to restaurant professionals in better meeting the needs of consumers in terms of both product and service delivery. The importance of 'good food' is acknowledged as the major 'illustrator' of the eating out experience, followed by price concerns and the establishment's atmosphere. Overall, these findings are nothing new. However, interestingly, at times when people are encouraged, even urged to engage in healthy eating habits, respondents only marginally consider healthy food choices as part of their ideal eating out experience, while freshness of foods is almost totally unimportant to them. These last findings could have several implications for the hospitality industry. Moreover, despite consumers' apparent lack of interest or involvement in healthy food consumption, restaurateurs can contribute towards consumers' knowledge on healthier food alternatives, and in the process provide- and benefit from- pleasurable eating out experiences.

Keywords: Eating-out experience, consumers, ideal experience, keywords, Alabama.

Introduction – The Eating Out Experience

In their quest for excellence and success, hospitality operations, and restaurants in particular, face many challenges. Low profitability, high costs, finding and retaining ‘the right people,’ and the constant threat of competing against new or strongly established businesses can severely weaken a business’ structure, even lead to ruin. According to Ladhari et al. (2008), both competition “and the increasing importance of consumer patronage impose the need to provide better services and satisfy consumers” (p. 563). Arguably, core aspects that may help maximise a business’s potential success are a high quality product (the food) and outstanding labour (staff); together, these two elements can contribute to the value-for-money principle and as a result can also have a very positive influence on consumers:

Guests obtain a memorable experience when a company intentionally uses services as the stage and goods as props to engage individual customers in an inherently personal way (Gilmore & Pine, 2002, p. 88).

The key issue here is one of competitive differentiation and value adding the typical consumer eating out experience so that it becomes ‘memorable’ in the eyes of the consumer, which in turn drives consumer satisfaction, repeat business and positive referral word of mouth. The question that must logically be posted therefore is – what drives the consumer satisfaction and repeat patronage constructs? In this regard, a very long list of studies emphasize the importance of satisfaction and the role that the service staff play in providing memorable eating out experiences. In fact, much of the focus of contemporary research on restaurant experiences has focused on patrons’ overall satisfaction. Pratten (2003, p. 826), for example, emphasizes the delivery of food (service and product), provision of attractive surroundings (physical facility) and / or sensible prices as key aspects of a satisfying restaurant experience.

Similarly, Andaleeb and Conway (2006) found that responsiveness of frontline staff first, and then price and food quality can significantly contribute to customer satisfaction. An additional piece in the puzzle leading to a more satisfying restaurant experience or patronage also includes emotions. According to Ladhari et al. (2008, p. 563) the restaurant’s

atmosphere, such as its lighting, cleanliness, crowdedness or noise can have a significant impact on patrons' emotions and as a result influence their purchase decision or overall satisfaction.

While overwhelmingly food, service and to a much lesser extent emotions have all been identified as key ingredients in restaurant patronage situations, other elements that provide "very attractive targets for experiment" (Johns & Pine, 2002, p. 124) such as "the physical surroundings in which food is eaten" (p. 124) have not received much attention from academic researchers. To date the majority of these studies have been largely quantitative in nature, utilizing some pre-validated Likert-type scale to rate restaurant performance across a range of standardized variables. Little, if any contemporary research however has approached the issue from a richer and more qualitative perspective. In addition, contemporary research does not extensively discuss what consumers may find as part of their 'ideal' eating out experience in their own words, that is, words and thoughts that patrons use to define such experience. While to date missing, the richness of such information may be invaluable to the hospitality industry, as it may identify less obvious but nevertheless important aspects of the eating out experience, while at the same time identifying other consumer segments that may be of potential interest to restaurant operations.

Bahn et al. (2001) provide an illustration of this argument, stating: "The notion of people choosing a lifestyle like they would choose a product may be the very basis for developing segmentation strategies" (p. 57). Thus, there may be different groups of restaurant patrons whose desire when eating out may include, to name a few elements, the availability of nutritious food or that of entertainment. These and other elements may still significantly contribute towards restaurant patrons' ideal eating out experience.

The fundamental objective of this study is therefore to identify those features associated with restaurant patrons' 'ideal' eating out experience. To this end, the study seeks to have restaurant patrons define these features in their own words and in so doing to answer the following research questions:

- What elements do restaurant patrons consider most important in their definition of the 'ideal' eating out experience? Moreover,
- What words and / or statements are evoked among consumers that best illustrate this 'ideal' experience?

Recent Developments in the Context of the Eating Out Experience

Apart from impressive growth in the last decades and from increasingly becoming part of many destinations' tourism marketing (Sparks et al., 2003) the restaurant industry has gone a long way to adapt to a rapidly changing environment, particularly with regards to its consumers:

Since the 1960s, that period which marked the last gasp of post-war austerity, the "hospitality" industry has grown considerably and modern tastes in dining out established and entrenched (Wood, 1994, p. 11).

In some cases, the growth of dining and / or eating out has been associated to lifestyle, even as dubbed as being "embedded in culture" (Riley, 1994, p. 15). On a similar note, Mattila (2002) alludes to the importance of "the overall sequence of events that constitute the hotel stay or dining occasion rather than each individual feature of that experience" (p. 380) as reasons for consumers' purchase decisions in hospitality environments.

Today, the popularity and availability of deli, Halal, Kosher, vegan / vegetarian and other foods has crossed many boundaries and drawn new consumers to learn and experience such foods. In the United States, the growing popularity of farmers' markets (Griffin & Frongillo, 2003) has also contributed to 'converting' many consumers to more natural, fresher, healthier and more nutritious eating habits. According to Middleton (2000), "Health awareness is very much the phenomenon ... with the media, government, and retailers all sending messages about lifestyles and moral responsibilities towards health" (p. 399). In a survey among United States consumers, Palmer and Leontos (1995) "found that 82% ... rated nutrition as moderately to very important" (p. 1418), and 69% of these respondents "rated nutrition as important because of health concerns" (p. 1418). Given this apparent "shift in consumer thinking" (Palmer & Leontos, 1995, p. 1418), it could be argued that many consumers in the United States, as in other countries, may genuinely be willing to abandon old (unhealthier) eating habits.

To counter this optimistic view, recent reports on the already perennial dilemma of obesity that millions of individuals in the United States are confronted with (Reuters, 2009; The Western Australian, 2010) illustrate that there is a very long way ahead before significant goals can be achieved with regards to health related aspects, including volume,

nutrition and overall quality of food consumption. The reports above not only demonstrate the seriousness of the obesity epidemic and its ramifications, but also cast a shadow over the real nature of changes in “consumer thinking” Palmer and Leontos (1995, p. 1418) refer to. Such concerns are in many ways directly related to food providers and their stance on the standards, quality, as well as on the healthy component of foods they sell to consumers.

Controversy surrounding some fast food companies (Mills & Thomas, 2007) concerning consumers’ reactions towards unhealthy foods and the subsequent negative impact on the image of these companies may mean that increasing public pressure is being exercised on the fast food industry, often judged for selling unhealthy or ‘junk food.’ Ironically, however, the rise (Schlosser, 2001) and expansion (Yan & Li, 2009; Lafontaine & Leibsohn, 2004) of some of these fast-food establishments, even at times of apparent increasing consumer awareness on eating ‘healthy’ (Carange et al., 2004 and Thomas and Mills, 2006, in Mills & Thomas, 2007) has continued over the years. Such scenario clearly contradicts the notion, or desire among many individuals, that having more health-conscious consumers may eventually weaken the currently strong grip many fast food companies have on much of the dining / eating out sector.

Do hospitality operations, more precisely restaurateurs have a moral- if not necessarily a business motivation- to provide healthy options that can still be tasteful, not labour intensive or costly and contribute to the business’s bottom line? Also, would those proactive measures contribute to improving consumers’ health and in this process their overall satisfaction? Jeffery et al. (1994) explain that “increasing the number of nutritious food choices and making them more attractive economically may be important to changing food choice behaviour” (p. 788). Fitzpatrick et al. (1997) found that for some consumer segments, lower-fat menu items contributed towards greater satisfaction “than satisfaction with regular items, regardless of menu-item type, dining experience, or respondent characteristics” (p. 513). Arguably, the ability of serving fresher, healthier options may apply to many restaurants located near or in areas where the availability of fresh foods at a more affordable price may be more prevalent. However, in numerous other cases, restaurant establishments are limited in many ways ‘to do the right thing.’

Interestingly, one of the main obstacles of implementing a thorough strategy to provide consumers with healthier food options lies with consumers themselves. In a study conducted among kitchen chefs, Middleton (2000) cites previous research (Finkelstein, 1989; Roberts & Regan, 1991; Sneed & Burkhalter, 1991) to assert that restaurant chefs face several difficulties in providing healthy alternatives. The irony is that some of these difficulties are based on the fact that when eating out, many people tend to ignore “dietary guidelines” (Middleton, 2000, p. 404). Middleton’s (2000) justification for this phenomenon is that eating out is related to hedonic experiences, or special occasions; therefore, many consumers tend to ignore health when eating out. Instead, consumers use such experiences and occasions, as well as the frequent over-availability of foods to indulge themselves (Middleton, 2000).

When referring to consumers’ behaviour in engaging in unhealthy eating, Warshaw (1993) provides further support of the ‘indulgence’ notion using the term “restaurant industry’s catch-22” (p. 20). In essence, Warshaw (1993) argues that many consumers do exactly the opposite as they say regarding their eating habits when patronizing a restaurant; for example, they “talk about eating healthy, yet despite the fact that they may eat out four times a week, it’s still treated as a special occasion and a time to “blow the diet” ” (p. 20). In these scenarios, consumers’ ‘psychological’ commitment to ‘vindicate’ themselves after such opulence, that is, the promise to return to dietary sacrifices may be too little too late, as the excesses of over-eating may defeat the purpose of such constructive efforts of healthier eating.

Overall, the eating out experience cannot be summarised in only a few areas (e.g., food, service, atmosphere, emotions), as it encompasses a wide range of tangible, intangible and psychological elements that add to its complexity. The view of Koo et al. (1999) further supports this point, as they state that “Depending on the purpose of going out to dine, consumers subconsciously evaluate a complex set of attributes before making their “buying” decision” (p. 242).

In collecting data through questionnaire distribution among a group of Southern United States consumers, this study examines what the eating out experience entails from their perspective. Moreover, the study seeks to identify statements and / or keywords consumers use to visualise and define their ideal eating out experience.

Methodology

In the fall of 2009, data were collected from individuals tailgating at a university campus prior and during university (American) football games in the state of Alabama. Several aspects were taken into consideration prior to the data collection process. For example, the environment to collect data was chosen based on the fact that thousands of individuals gather prior and during the college football games to socialise, cook, and eat foods while they watch or wait for the game to kick off. Tailgating is a traditional leisure activity in much of the United States during the autumn season; prior, during and even after football games, this activity can range from only a morning or an afternoon to even several days. In many cases, attendees to tailgate parties drive themselves in their mobile homes and spend the night, or nights, near or on the university campus. Also, many of these individuals also patronize different restaurant facilities, including full-service and fast-food outlets.

The opportunity to approach hundreds of potential respondents within a limited period of time, that is, during the hours or days they were visiting the university campus, was a strong reason to choose both the tailgating visitors and data collection process (questionnaire distribution). In addition, given the fact that only individuals 19 years of age and above were eligible to participate in the study, it was believed that many among these individuals would have visited restaurants and / or other hospitality facilities in the past, or be patronizing these during their tailgate experience. Such belief further justified approaching the tailgating group as a potential data collection source.

The data were collected during five home games of the 2009 autumn season via the direct distribution of questionnaires. The researchers made a decision to design a questionnaire that would allow for gathering data of participants' views on their ideal eating out experience as well as their demographic characteristics. This last portion of the questionnaire consisted of space for participants to write in their own words what such experience entailed. This section included the following statement: "In the space provided below, please describe in a few words or sentences your ideal eating out experience as it relates to the food you consume."

Direct distribution of the questionnaire allowed for briefly introducing the study's objectives to prospective respondents; however, a letter thoroughly explaining the study's intent was also provided in the envel-

oped handed to prospective respondents. The envelope contained both the introductory letter and the one-page questionnaire; envelopes were then left with those individuals who accepted the invitation to partake in the study. The envelope served the purpose of keeping the completed questionnaire and allowed respondents to seal it. Envelopes were then collected approximately an hour after being distributed in a sealed box with a space on its top for respondents to drop the envelopes; this process was thought to be less intimidating for respondents and also allowed for both anonymity of participants and confidentiality regarding the information provided.

A total of 459 questionnaires were distributed during the five week-ends when the games took place. This effort allowed for collecting 305 usable responses, a 66.4% response rate. The qualitative data, that is, the comments respondents provided were read, then typed using Microsoft Word. Given that these comments were part of the same section that sought to learn what respondents' ideal eating out experience was, no data management software was considered. Instead, the data were analyzed using content analysis. Furthermore, the different threads that emerged from the comments concerning respondents' ideal eating out experience were grouped together. In this process, Microsoft Word was once again chosen for reasons of simplicity and user friendliness. Participants' comments are labelled 'R1' for Respondent 1, 'R2' for Respondent 2 and so forth."

Results

As respondents' demographic characteristics indicate (Table 1), in this study females clearly outnumber males. In addition, the bulk of the respondents are between the ages of 21 and 35 years, while the number of people between the ages of 36 and 50 years of age was 50 (16.4%), those between the ages of 51 and 65 25 (8.2%) with only five respondents (1.6%) being older than 65 years of age. Arguably, the more senior groups may enjoy more disposable income and a lifestyle that includes eating out; however, in this study these groups are visibly under-represented. At the same time, given the chosen environment to collect data, the predominance of university students, as well as other groups that tailgate and are part of 'younger' age groups seems unsurprising. Nevertheless, the study has a number of limitations in the composition of the respondent group that must be recognized.

Table 1
Basic demographic information about respondents

Gender	n	% of total respondents
Males	98	32.1
Females	193	63.3
Missing responses	14	4.6
Total	305	100.0
Age groups		
Age groups	n	% of total respondents
Below 21 years of age	71	23.3
Between 21 – 35 years of age	138	45.2
36+ years of age	80	26.2
Missing responses	16	5.2
Total	305	100.0
Educational level		
Educational level	n	% of total respondents
Primary / high school only	121	39.7
University degree	138	45.2
Other qualifications*	27	8.9
Missing responses	19	6.2
Total	305	100.0

* Due to its low respondent number, this group was not considered for subsequent analysis.

Respondents were asked to indicate in their own words what their ideal eating out experience was. In the following tables (Table 2, 3 and 4), participants' comments are separated in different groups and discussed. All respondents that provided comments in this study indicated patronising restaurants at least once a week. A decision was made to divide responses into three different categories: gender, age group and educational achievement. This descriptive comparison was believed to allow for identifying potential differences among these selected groups, and in the process providing more clarity of the findings. First, comparing the comments of males and females, 130 respondents, or 42.2% of all respondents provided comments; of these, 37 were males and 93 females. Table 2 shows that a higher percentage of males places more importance on the quality of food, as well as on the service component, dining with a companion,

and speed in being served a meal than females. Clearly, the quality of the food is the most illustrative expressional item of the ideal eating out experience. This finding is in line with Clark and Wood (1999) who identified the quality of the food as one of two primary determinants of restaurant choice and loyalty among consumers; the second determinant (choice of food), however, is not identified in this study.

In a study conducted among fast-food outlet patrons, Park (2004) noticed two main groups of consumers: those who place 'utilitarian value' in their eating out experience, that is, "the functional and economical aspects of eating-out" (p. 89), and those who value the hedonic aspect: "fun, entertainment, absorbing, and novelty" (p. 89). Overall, in the present study there is a mix of functional and hedonic values; however, other elements do not appear to belong to one or the other. For instance, the fact that some 16% of those who provided comments mentioned dining with a companion as part of their ideal eating out experience also illustrates the importance some groups of customers give to such an often ignored element. In this context, one respondent (R1) for instance noted: "I usually only eat out when I know exactly what I want and someone else wants to join me. I enjoy great food and great company." The finding regarding dining out with a companion suggests the need for restaurateurs to provide ideal / convenient conditions (e.g., more 'private' spots at the restaurant, partitions, design, etc.). Doing so may send a positive, inviting image to diners who partake of the eating out ritual as a special occasion to be with loved ones or who go out on a date.

In comparison, females clearly appear to be more price conscious than males, and they value the restaurant's atmosphere, healthy food choices, the food's taste and the establishment's cleanliness more than males do. Interestingly, only one male and 16 female respondents mentioned the cleanliness aspect as part of the ideal eating out experience. Of even more interest was that a very small percentage of respondents place value on the importance of the freshness of the foods. This finding is particularly significant at times when there is much information on the importance of healthier eating habits, including the importance of freshness of foods, as opposed to pre-cooked or packaged foods that may be of much less beneficial value health-wise to consumers.

Table 2
Gender comparisons in regards to their eating out experience

	Gender	n	Total	%
Importance of food quality (e.g., good food, etc.).	Males	19	37	51.4
	Females	41	93	44.1
	Totals	60	130	46.2
Price concerns: money spent dining versus food (e.g., value for money, affordable, etc.).	Males	13	37	35.1
	Females	42	93	45.2
	Totals	55	130	42.3
Importance of atmosphere (quiet environment, fun).	Males	9	37	24.3
	Females	34	93	36.6
	Totals	43	130	33.1
Importance of healthy foods and healthy choices.	Males	6	37	16.2
	Females	30	93	32.3
	Totals	36	130	27.7
Importance of service.	Males	14	37	37.8
	Females	22	93	23.7
	Totals	36	130	27.7
Dining with a companion, in company of others.	Males	8	37	21.6
	Females	13	93	14.0
	Totals	21	130	16.2
Importance of taste (e.g., good taste, tasty food).	Males	2	37	5.4
	Females	13	93	14.0
	Totals	15	130	11.5
Importance of cleanliness at the restaurant.	Males	1	37	2.7
	Females	16	93	17.2
	Totals	17	130	13.1
Quickness in receiving the meal.	Males	4	37	10.8
	Females	5	93	5.4
	Totals	9	130	6.9
Importance of freshness in foods.	Males	1	37	
	Females	5	93	5.4
	Totals	6	130	4.6

Note: 130 respondents of 305 (42.6%) provided comments; more than one answer per respondent possible.

When respondents' comments were separated by age groups, Table 3 illustrates that those over 35 years of age placed more importance on the food quality, the service component and the establishment's cleanliness. This group of respondents may not only have different priorities as compared to 'younger' age group, for instance, eating out more in a hedonic sense rather than as a need. Members of this older group have also more disposable income and time to spend and may therefore be more selective in their restaurant choices, or the reasons for their restaurant patronage.

Given that not even one respondent in the 35 and above years of age group indicated 'speed of food delivery' as part of their ideal eating out experience further confirms their more relaxed approach to such experience. In contrast, the fact that both groups below the age of 35 years place much higher importance on the (more affordable) price of the meal clearly demonstrates more obvious financial limitations on their ideal eating out experience. Members of the group of individuals of ages between 21 and 35 years value dining with a companion more than the other two age groups.

In turn, there appear to be close similarities between the youngest and the oldest groups, with their members seeking fun and a more 'entertaining' atmosphere when eating out. The importance of healthier foods or healthy food choices when eating out, while only a marginal 'illustrator' of the ideal eating out experience, was more important among those aged 35 and below. Such a finding is rather surprising in view of more health concerns associated with the more mature age groups, as opposed to those that, as is the case of college students, may be in a stage of experimenting or consuming foods that are considered more common of university environments. This finding may, however, also indicate that many members of the younger generations, particularly those more educated may be gaining awareness of healthier food habits and implementing these in their own lives (e.g., while purchasing foods and groceries, or while cooking at home).

Table 3
Age group comparisons in regards to their eating out experience

	Age group	n	Total	%
Importance of food quality (e.g., good food, etc.).	20 and below	15	36	41.7
	21 – 35	25	58	43.1
	36+	20	35	57.1
	Totals	60	129	46.5
Price concerns: money spent dining versus food (e.g., value for money, affordable, etc.).	20 and below	21	36	58.3
	21 – 35	27	58	46.6
	36+	7	35	20.0
	Totals	55	129	42.6
Importance of atmosphere (e.g., quiet environment, fun).	20 and below	16	36	44.4
	21 – 35	12	58	20.7
	36+	14	35	40.0
	Totals	42	129	32.6
Importance of healthy foods and healthy choices.	20 and below	11	36	30.6
	21 – 35	17	58	29.3
	36+	7	35	20.0
	Totals	35	129	27.1
Importance of service.	20 and below	7	36	19.4
	21 – 35	14	58	24.1
	36+	15	35	42.9
	Totals	36	129	27.9
Dining with a companion, in company of others.	20 and below	4	36	11.1
	21 – 35	11	58	19.0
	36+	6	35	17.1
	Totals	21	129	16.3
Importance of taste (e.g., good taste, tasty food).	20 and below	7	36	19.4
	21 – 35	6	58	10.3
	36+	2	35	5.7
	Totals	15	129	11.6
Importance of cleanliness at the restaurant.	20 and below	3	36	8.3
	21 – 35	6	58	10.3
	36+	8	35	22.9
	Totals	17	129	13.2

Quickness in receiving the meal.	20 and below	2	36	5.6
	21 – 35	7	58	12.1
	36+	0	35	0.0
	Totals	9	129	7.0
Importance of freshness in foods.	20 and below	3	36	8.3
	21 – 35	2	58	3.4
	36+	1	35	2.9
	Totals	6	129	4.7

Note: 129 respondents of 305 (42.3%) provided comments; more than one answer per respondent possible.

When groups were compared according to their educational level / achievement, it was noticed (Table 4) that those individuals that had completed a university degree considered the quality of the food, the availability of healthy foods and the service component more important than did those participants with no university degree completion. A larger number of this last group, however, considered the cleanliness of the restaurant more important than those participants with university achievement. Similarly, the group without university achievement considered the quickness of the food delivery more important than the group of respondents with a university degree. Only a very low percentage of respondents of either group chose ‘taste’ or similar words to indicate their preference for tasty food(s). While arguably the taste of food could in some ways be associated to the overall quality of the restaurant’s food, in this study this illustrator was believed to be an illustrator on its own and therefore kept apart.

In contrast, price concerns clearly divide the groups according to educational achievement. Respondents without university degree completion may have more restricted access to jobs or a level of income that might allow them to be more indulgent and be able to spend more money on their eating out experience. In addition, those participants with a university degree consider the availability of healthy choices only marginally more important than those without a university degree, while almost no differences exist between the two groups regarding the establishment’s atmosphere.

Table 4
Educational level groups and comparisons in regards to their eating out experience

	Education level	n	Total	%
Importance of food quality (e.g., including 'good food,' etc.).	High school	26	63	41.3
	University degree	30	60	50.0
	Totals	56	123	45.5
Price concerns: money spent dining versus food (e.g., value for money, affordable, etc.).	High school	32	63	50.8
	University degree	22	60	36.7
	Totals	54	123	43.9
Importance of atmosphere (quiet environment, fun).	High school	22	63	34.9
	University degree	17	60	28.3
	Totals	52	123	42.3
Importance of healthy foods and healthy choices.	High school	15	63	23.8
	University degree	20	60	33.3
	Totals	35	123	28.5
Importance of service.	High school	12	63	19.0
	University degree	20	60	33.3
	Totals	32	123	26.0
Dining with a companion, in company of others.	High school	8	63	12.7
	University degree	12	60	20.0
	Totals	20	123	16.3
Importance of taste (e.g., good taste, tasty food).	High school	7	63	11.1
	University degree	8	60	13.3
	Totals	15	123	12.2
Importance of cleanliness at the restaurant.	High school	11	63	17.5
	University degree	5	60	8.3
	Totals	16	123	13.0
Quickness in receiving the meal.	High school	7	63	11.1
	University degree	2	60	3.3
	Totals	9	123	7.3
Importance of freshness in foods.	High school	1	63	1.6
	University degree	4	60	6.7
	Totals	5	123	4.1

Note: 123 respondents of 305 (40.3%) provided comments; more than one answer per respondent possible.

While the previous tables illustrate in keywords and sentences what respondents' main thoughts of their ideal eating out experience were, many also provided comments denoting other aspects of their experience. One participant (R2), for instance hinted at the obvious budgetary limitations preventing her to eat out often, but also acknowledged reasons that suggested health-consciousness: "I enjoy eating out at nice restaurants, but can't do that every night, both for the money and for the nutritional purposes." Two respondents' visualization of the ideal eating experience clearly demonstrated concerns for the healthy component of such experience, as well as their preference for 'simpler' style of foods (R3): "Home cooking style with fresh local vegetables and good service."

For several other respondents, however, the ideal eating out experience was more about convenience:

R4: "Love to eat out and eat foods I don't prepare at home."

R5: "I don't like cooking at home or waiting for food to be cooked."

R6: "I enjoy eating out for the convenience. Having a glass of wine with dinner, with no clean up is the best part. Also, not having much time to cook."

R7: "Whatever fills me up for a few hours."

R8: "Low cost, convenience, filling."

R9: "...convenient food is easier to eat and get when my wife and I work late." However, this same respondent admitted a preference to home cooking and at the same time a conscious decision for maximising home-cooking: "We usually cook enough to last 3-4 days. If we don't get the opportunity to cook after the "leftovers" are gone we get something quick to eat. However, I prefer our cooking over any restaurant."

Finally, for other participants eating out also entailed changing the environment, if for a short time and meeting people (R10): "Usually if I eat out it is to get away from the stress around my home/everyday life, I am not at my house, or I won't be at my house for a while and I'm hungry." (R11): "Great way to socialize." This last comment is in line with some of the motivators of the eating out experience that Park (2004) identifies in a previous study.

Conclusions, Implications, Limitations and Future Research

Eating out and restaurant patronising can encompass situations that go beyond the basic need to consume foods. For example, the importance of memorable experiences can be an opportunity for restaurants to showcase the quality and originality of their product, the professionalism and knowledge of their service staff, as well as the restaurant's overall atmosphere. The contemporary hospitality literature often refers to these elements as triggers of satisfaction, loyalty and customer return. In this context, the importance of consumer feedback regarding their eating-out experience and what other aspects they may value could assist the restaurant sector in its intent to improve or at least maintain the 'memorable' aspect of such experience.

While the aspects above have been extensively discussed in the hospitality literature, others, including emotions (Ladhari et al., 2008), the nutritional aspect of the food, its freshness or locality are only marginally mentioned in research as key components of memorable or ideal eating out experience. Using questionnaires to gather participants' definition of their ideal eating out experience, this study sought to learn how consumers visualise their image of such experience, and express it in their own words. Overall, aspects such as the quality and price of the foods, as well as the restaurant's atmosphere are in line with many hospitality studies that identify these items as triggers of consumers' satisfaction.

In contrast, the healthy aspect of the experience (healthy food) is only marginally mentioned, suggesting that many consumers do not associate eating out with healthy eating. Moreover, the fact that an element such as dining with a companion appeared to be a more important factor in respondents' eating out experience than was the freshness of foods further support respondents' passiveness regarding the healthy aspect of their experience. The findings are also in line with some studies (Middleton, 2000; Warshaw, 1993) explaining that when consumers eat out a healthy diet and the nutritional aspect of foods are ignored and a more indulging behaviour prevails.

The pattern of responses emphasising convenience also illustrates consumers' disregard over such critical aspects of food consumption as nutrition or foods' freshness. At the same time, these responses clearly point at the need for food education and health consciousness, an element that, in view of the study's overall findings, appears to be unknown to many. In this regard, many hospitality businesses could play a critical

role, not only by providing fresh, nutritional foods, but also educating consumers to become involved in healthier food consumption practices. One example is that of restaurants located near farmers' markets. Some of these businesses that purchase their produce directly from farmers could also advertise such services and in this process 'convert' consumers to their healthier ways of preparing and serving foods. This view is also in line with Wansink et al. (2001) who explain that "By providing quality cues, such as descriptive labels, restaurateurs not only enhance the perceived attractiveness of menu items, they may also favourably influence diners' actual consumption experience" (p. 72). Finally, Palmer and Leontos (1995) suggest that a long-term, successful strategy to make changes in menus includes nutrition education among chefs. Thus, the restaurant sector could serve as an educational tool; in turn such efforts could also benefit the business's bottom line in the form of more consumer patronage and word-of-mouth.

As previously mentioned, the study is not free from limitations; therefore, it must be recognised that the findings of this study are not generalisable. However, the findings do provide opportunities for future research in areas related to eating out experiences, both from an industry as well as from a consumer perspective. First, future research could be conducted using a larger number of participants and a more balanced gender and age group population. An improvement in these areas could provide more clarity as to what differences may exist between different groups of consumers and the way they define their ideal eating out experience. In addition, future research could explore restaurateurs' point of view regarding the provision of ideal eating out experiences. Such studies could also seek to learn what potential opportunities, if any, restaurateurs may see in the provision of 'healthier' foods while at the same time providing memorable experiences. Also important would be the investigation of the challenges that restaurateurs may face in balancing healthier / more nutritional food offerings versus the business's bottom line. For example, to what extent is the cost of and effort in providing healthier foods preventing restaurateurs from doing so?

Data that help uncover these aspects related to food and service providers could be of valuable assistance to consumer groups and government agencies, leading to a consumer population that is more informed and better educated in food related aspects.

References

- Andaleeb, S.S., & Conway, C. (2006). *Customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry: an examination of the transaction-specific model*. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 20(1), 3-11.
- Bahn, K.D., Granzin, K.L., & Wright, N.D. (2001). *The health-oriented market: A lifestyle model, empirical test, and implications for market segmentation strategy*. *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal*, 5(1), 57-89.
- Cranage, D. A., Conklin, M. T., & Lambert, C. U. (2005). *Effect of nutritional information in perceptions of food quality, consumption behavior and purchase intentions*. *Journal of Foodservice Business Research*, 7(1), 43-61.
- Clark, M.A., & Wood, R.C. (1999). *Consumer loyalty in the restaurant industry – A preliminary exploration of the issues*. *British Food Journal*, 101(4), 317-327.
- Finkelstein, J. (1989). *Dining Out - A Sociology of Manners*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Fitzpatrick, M.P., Chapman, G.E., & Barr, S.I. (1997). *Lower-fat menu items in restaurants satisfy customer*. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 97(5), 510-514.
- Gilmore, J.H., & Pine III, B.J. (2002). *Differentiating hospitality operations via experiences: Why selling services is not enough*. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 43, 87-96.
- Griffin, M.R., & Frongillo, E.A. (2003). *Experiences and perspectives of farmers from Upstate New York farmers' markets*. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 20, 189-203.
- Jeffery, R.W., French, S.A., Raether, C., & Baxter, J.E. (1997). *An environmental intervention to increase fruit and salad purchases in a cafeteria*. *Preventive Medicine*, 23, 788-792.
- Johns, N., & Pine, R. (2002). *Consumer behaviour in the food service industry: a review*. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 21, 119-134.
- Koo, L.C., Tao, F.K.C., & Yeung, J.H.C. (1999). *Preferential segmentation of restaurant attributes through conjoint analysis*. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 15(5), 242-250.
- Ladhari, R., Brun, I., & Morales, M. (2008). *Determinants of dining satisfaction and post-dining behavioural intentions*. *International Journal*

of Hospitality Management, 27, 563-573.

- Lafontaine, F., & Leibsohn, D. (2004). *Beyond entry: Examining McDonald's expansion in international markets*, Mimeo, University of Michigan.
- Mattila, A.S. (2002). *The use of narrative appeals in promoting restaurant experiences*. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, 26, 379-395.
- Middleton, G. (2000). *A preliminary study of chefs' attitudes and knowledge of healthy eating in Edinburgh's restaurants*. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 19, 399-412.
- Mills, J.E., & Thomas, L. (2007). *Assessing customer expectations of information provided on restaurant menus: a confirmatory factor analysis approach*. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, 32(1), 62-88.
- Palmer, J., & Leontos, C. (1995). *Nutrition training for chefs: Taste as an essential determinant of choice*. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 95(12), 1418-1421.
- Park, C. (2004). *Efficient or enjoyable? Consumer values of eating-out and fast food restaurant consumption in Korea*. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 23, 87-94.
- Pratten, J.D. (2003). *The importance of waiting staff in restaurant service*. *British Food Journal*, 105(11), 826-834.
- Riley, M. (1994). *The influence of social culture and innovation*. *British Food Journal*, 96(10), 15-18.
- Reuters (2009). *Obesity causes 100,000 U.S. cancer cases a year*. Retrieved January 13 2010 from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/33683092/ns/health-cancer>
- Roberts, C.R., Regan, C., 1991. *Position of the American dietetic association in food service establishments*. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 91(4), 480-482.
- Schlosser, E. (2001). *Fast food nation – The dark side of the all-American meal*. Houghton Mifflin Company, New York.
- Sneed, J., Burkhalter, J.P. (1991). *Marketing nutrition in restaurants: a survey of current practices and attitudes*. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 91(4), 459-462.
- Sparks, B. (2003). *Restaurants and the tourist market*. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 15(1), 6-13.
- *The West Australian* (2010). *US obesity high, but rate holding steady*.
- Retrieved January 13 2010 from <http://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/a/>

world/6677084/us-obesity-high-but-rate-holding-steady/

- Thomas, L., & Mills, J. E. (2006). *Consumer knowledge and expectations of restaurant menus and their governing legislation: A qualitative assessment*. *Journal of Foodservice*, 17(1), 6-22.
- Wall, E.A., & Berry, L.L. (2007). *The combined effects of the physical environment and employee behaviour on customer perception of restaurant service quality*. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 48(1), 59-69.
- Wansink, B., Painter, J., & Van Ittersum, K. (2001). *Descriptive menu labels' effect on sales*. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 42, 68-72.
- Warshaw, H.S. (1993). *America eats out: nutrition in the chain and family restaurant industry*. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 93(1), 17-22.
- Wood, R.C. (1994). *Dining out on sociological neglect*. *British Food Journal*, 96(10), 10-14.
- Yan, F., & Li, H. (2009). *McDonald's eye 500 stores in China in 3 years: exec*. Retrieved January 12 2010 from <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE51H13F20090218>