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Service dimensions of service quality impacting customer satisfaction of fine dining restaurants in Singapore

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SERVICE DIMENSIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY IMPACTING
CUSTOMER SATISFACTION OF FINE DINING RESTAURANTS IN SINGAPORE

by

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ABSTRACT

Service dimensions of service quality impacting customer satisfaction of fine dining restaurants in Singapore

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This paper is an exploratory study of customer satisfaction of fine dining restaurants in Singapore. Since there is a causal relationship between customer satisfaction and service quality and services literature and studies have shown that service quality is an antecedent of customer satisfaction, this paper seeks to find out the service dimensions of service quality, which lead to higher levels of customer satisfaction. This study suggested that the service dimensions of assurance, empathy and tangibles are the most important to customers' evaluation of service quality, and thus, may have a positive influence customer satisfaction. The service aspects of each of these dimensions were discussed and recommendations were made for restaurateurs to improve their service to ensure higher levels of customer satisfaction.

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PART ONE

Introduction

In 1995, the Go-the-Extra-Mile-for-Service (GEMS) Movement was launched as a nationwide effort to encourage Singaporeans to take the initiative to improve their service levels and to promote a culture of service excellence in Singapore (Singapore Tourism Board, 2005). The Singapore government recognizes that this is vital if Singapore is to be transformed into a world-class city capable of attracting and hosting high-profile events such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in 2006 (Singapore Tourism Board, 2005). The objectives of the Movement are to enhance Singapore's attractiveness to visitors, stimulate the performance of the tourism sector and create more jobs and brighter business prospects for the tourism industry. Moreover, the Meetings, Incentives, Conventions & Exhibitions (MICE) sector is one of Singapore's fastest growing industries in the hospitality sector with the island republic consistently ranked among the top convention cities in Asia for 23 consecutive years (ICCA, 2006). To further boost its attractiveness as a MICE and tourism destination, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) is promoting Singapore as a leading city known for gourmet food and culinary skills in Asia for the last ten years (Teo, 2007). Thus, fine dining restaurateurs in Singapore should be aware of the service dimensions of service quality which have a causal relationship on customer satisfaction if this goal is to be achieved.

Purpose

This professional paper seeks to find out the service dimension(s) which has or have an impact on customer satisfaction of diners in Singapore, using the five service dimensions of service quality defined by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988). The service dimensions are responsiveness, reliability, assurance, empathy and tangibles. The paper will also explore the

service aspects of the dimensions which have an influence on customer satisfaction. At the end of this study, restaurant operators can utilize this information as a basis to improve their services, which may increase to higher levels of customer satisfaction.

Justifications

There are four main reasons why restaurateurs need to understand the service dimensions, which lead to customer satisfaction. Firstly, the knowledge would assist them to make the right decisions regarding the management of the restaurant operations and the positioning of the restaurant to their customers. Secondly, customer satisfaction tends to lead to customer loyalty (Jones & Sasser, 1995). Acquiring new customers costs the firm more than retaining them (Farber & Wycoff, 1991), a fact that restaurateurs need to take note of, as not many upscale restaurants which opened two decades ago, still exist today (Wong, 2007). Thirdly, unhappy customers tend to complain to other potential customers and thus discourage them from patronizing the restaurant (Hunt, Hunt, & Hunt, 1988). Finally, this study is also useful for those involved in service industries in Singapore. It has been established by STB that delivering good service stimulates local and tourist spending (Singapore Tourism Board, 2007).

Constraints

This study uses qualitative research methods and is based on two focus groups of eight people, in-depth interviews of 30 diners from five restaurants in Singapore, which were classified as fine dining establishments by STB in its publication “The best of Singapore in service excellence 2007”. In addition, in-depth interviews of three industry experts were conducted. While this study is limited by the sample size, some valuable insights into diner’s satisfaction can be gained from this study.

Definition of Fine Dining Restaurant

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary and MSN Encarta define “fine” to refer to “superior in kind, quality, and appearance; excellent; outstanding, very good to look at; showing special skill, detail, or intricacy, especially in artistic work; very subtle”; and “dining” to mean “to have the principal meal of the day or to eat the main meal of the day”. The dictionaries also define “restaurant” as “a business establishment where meals or refreshments can be purchased; a place where food and drinks are sold and served to customers”.

The definition of “fine dining restaurant” for the purpose of this paper refers to a business establishment where meals or refreshments are sold and served to customers. It has the following services and attributes:

1. Excellent food with emphasis on visual presentation. The taste of the food is outstanding and yet very subtle. The quality of the ingredients is superior and food preparation is by a chef who is reputed to have special culinary skills.
2. Good quality tableware and cutlery are used.
3. The atmosphere is refined. Staff and diners are well-dressed and semi-formal dressing is required. No beach wear, shorts and slippers will be allowed.
4. Staff and diners observe proper dining etiquette. Staffs are smartly attired as well.
5. The price implied for well-prepared food would be a premium
6. Reservations need to be made in advance.
7. Service is faultless, precise and exquisite.
8. The décor is tasteful and elegant.

PART TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

In part one, an overview of the development of the fine dining restaurant industry was made and the need for a greater understanding of the drivers of customer satisfaction for restaurant operators was discussed. In part two, a literature review was undertaken.

Fine Dining

Fine dining is usually associated with the long tradition of classic French dining with French-influenced menus and service (Rush, 2006). However, there is no fixed definition of fine dining; and it differs with the individual (Harden, 2007). From the literature review, the definition of a fine dining restaurant is implied to refer to a full service restaurant where customers pay a premium for fine food and impeccable service. It may have excellent views of the city or the sea, but this is not necessary.

Well-known industry experts define fine dining as one with the ambience, fine tableware and details in service that makes the dinner an event (Schneider, 2007, as cited in Harden, 2007). Thus, there is great emphasis on first-class cutlery, tableware (which could be silver), properly starched napkins, linens and table cloths, and service that is extremely attentive. The restaurant is tastefully designed and their staffs are trained at reputed culinary institutions. It follows a strict dress code for guests and formal clothes such as a jacket suit may be required. The dining atmosphere is formal with proper dining etiquette and service procedures observed by staff and customers. Thus, fish is cut and served in front of the guest and there are personalized table-side preparations, such as flambé. Fresh and fine ingredients are also used in the food preparation. Reservations need to be made in advance to ensure a table upon arrival.

However, the concept of fine dining has modernized and the trend is towards “great dining that is approachable” (Perry, 2007, ¶16) or what is defined as “fine-casual or serious-casual” (Wilden, 2007, ¶14) as guests these days do not feel comfortable with the stiff and formal atmosphere of traditional fine dining (Wilden, 2007, as cited in Harden, 2007). Fine dining also suggests re-creating traditional dishes to delight the customer (Spector, 2004, ¶7) or interesting restaurant concepts (Harden, 2007).

Customer Satisfaction

Service providers and scholars have long recognized the importance of customer satisfaction as contributing to market share and return on investment for companies. Several definitions and models of customer satisfaction have been proposed by various scholars. The focus of much of the research is on the “disconfirmation of expectations” theory which explains that “the customer is satisfied when he or she feels that the product’s performance is equal to or more than what was expected (confirmation). But if perceived performance falls short of his/her expectations (disconfirmation), then the customer is dissatisfied” (Oliver, 1980, p.13).

Expectations are defined as “beliefs about service delivery that serve as standards or reference points against which performance is judged” (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2006, p.81).

Furthermore, customer expectations come from consumption experiences which form personal benchmarks for him to assess customer satisfaction (Gilbert & Veloutsou, 2006). Thus, customer satisfaction can be highly personalized and therefore difficult to measure.

Oliver later built on his earlier definition and re-defined customer satisfaction as “the customer’s fulfillment response. It is a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment” (Oliver, 1997, p.13). Thus, an assessment of whether the product or service meets his or her needs and expectations is involved. The feeling of satisfaction is not at “comfort” level, which, according to

Andersson and Mossberg (2004), is defined as the level of satisfaction without the feeling of being excited. Oliver (1997) refers to this “comfort” level as contentment which is a passive response and the customer is not involved emotionally. However, the ambience and visual presentation of food might provide moderate to high arousal and result in joy or happiness. According to Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler (2006), satisfaction is often connected with the feeling of “delight” which is described as “being surprised in a positive way” or “relief” (p.110) when a negative feeling of a customer who had a bad experience is removed by service recovery.

However, the “disconfirmation of expectations” model fails to take into considerations the complexities of customer satisfaction. For instance, a purchaser of a cellular phone might be influenced by various components of the product - the experience of using the cellular phone, how he was treated by the salesperson, or the after-sales service. Thus, he could be satisfied with one aspect and yet dissatisfied with another aspect of the product, resulting in conflicting feelings regarding the overall product. Furthermore, the various components of the product affect the satisfaction of the customer in different ways. For example, “(1) some increase satisfaction when present but do not increase dissatisfaction when absent, (2) some increase dissatisfaction when absent but do not increase satisfaction when present, (3) some impact satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and negative evaluations to the extent it is present or absent, (4) and some have no impact on satisfaction or dissatisfaction” (Vargo, Nagao, He, & Morgan, 2007, p.1). Cadotte and Turgeon (1988) refer to the above antecedents to satisfaction as “satisfiers, dissatisfiers, criticals and neutrals” respectively. According to Vargo et al. 2007, satisfiers are concerned with the intrinsic needs of the customer while dissatisfiers meet the extrinsic needs of the customer or their functional requirements. This suggests that the basic needs of the customer must be taken care first, and intrinsic needs be provided subsequently, for him or her to experience customer satisfaction.

While this stream of research on customer satisfaction threw light on the multi-dimensional nature of antecedents, it is not clear how this model of satisfiers, dissatisfiers, criticals and neutrals can be integrated into models of customer satisfaction.

Another model of customer satisfaction defines it as “a complete evaluation of accumulated purchase and consumption experience, which reflects a comparison between the sacrifice experienced and the perceived rewards” (Iglesias & Guillen, 2004, p.375). The sacrifice here includes monetary costs of purchasing the service as well as intangible costs such as the time and energy expended to make reservations and arrangements to visit the restaurant. Thus, the premium that the customer has to pay at a fine dining restaurant is traded off against the perceived rewards he obtains. Thus, the level of satisfaction increases if the rewards are greater compared with the sacrifice.

Distinction Between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

There is much confusion regarding the concepts of customer satisfaction and service quality. The literature on services has made a distinction between service quality and customer satisfaction (Bitner, 1990; Bolton & Drew, 1991; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988). This distinction is critical for service providers to make so that they can focus on whether on improving their performance to satisfy customers or to deliver higher levels of service quality. The position of scholars characterized by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) is that service quality involves an attitude and is an evaluation over several service encounters over time. It is also thought to be an overall assessment about a service category or an organization (Parasuraman et al., 1988). In support of this, respondents in Parasuraman et al. (1988)’s study demonstrated satisfaction with specific service encounters but were not happy with the service quality of the firm.

On the other hand, current thinking on customer satisfaction is summarized in the following definition of satisfaction by Oliver 1981 as “a psychological state resulting when the emotion surrounding disconfirmed expectations is coupled with the consumer’s prior feelings about the consumption experience” (p. 27). Furthermore, definitions by other scholars (Howard & Sheth 1969; Hunt, 1979) support the thinking that it relates to a specific service encounter. Oliver (1981) further differentiated customer satisfaction from service quality in his definition of attitude as “the consumer’s relatively enduring affective orientation for a product, store, or process while satisfaction is the emotional reaction following a disconfirmation experience which acts on the base attitude level and is consumption-specific” (Oliver, 1981, p. 42). Thus, service quality is more stable and is “situationally oriented” (Oliver, 1981, p. 42). The two constructs are related in that service encounters of customer satisfaction over time result in perceptions of service quality (Oliver, 1981; Parasuraman et al., 1988).

There is also much debate about whether customer satisfaction is the antecedent of service quality or the result of service quality. Initially, scholars take the position that satisfaction is an antecedent of service quality since to reach an overall attitude (service quality) implies an accumulation of satisfactory encounters (Bitner, 1990; Bolton & Drew, 1991). However, other scholars take the opposite view that service quality is the antecedent of customer satisfaction (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Ekinici, 2004; Rust & Oliver, 1994; Swan & Bowers, 1998). Empirical research by Cronin & Taylor (1992) showed that service quality has a significant effect on customer satisfaction. Similarly, recent studies by González and Brea (2005) and Ekinici (2004) using recursive structural models provided empirical support that service quality results in customer satisfaction. According to Zeithaml et al. (2006), customer satisfaction is a broader concept than service quality which “focuses specifically on dimensions of service” (p. 106). Service quality is just one component of the customer satisfaction concept. It is also influenced

by customers' perceptions of product quality, and price, personal factors (such as the emotional state of the customer) and uncontrollable situational factors (weather conditions).

Measurement of Customer Satisfaction and Service Quality

Given the nebulous and complex nature of customer satisfaction, its measurement is not an exact science and research in this area seems rather exploratory (Gilbert & Veloutsou, 2007). There is no commonly agreed method of measuring the concept and several theories of measuring customer satisfaction have been proposed by scholars. Among the most well-known are the confirmation-disconfirmation approach, the performance-only approach and the overall satisfaction approach.

Generally, it is agreed that customer satisfaction is an evaluation by a user of a product or service after consumption (Yuksel & Rimmington, 1998). In addition, it should be measured as close to the day of the service transaction for greater accuracy. Multi-item scales rather than single items are used because the customer satisfaction construct is complex to measure.

The confirmation-disconfirmation approach compares the expectations of a user of a product or service with what he experienced (Yuksel & Rimmington, 1998). The Customer Satisfaction Index (CSI) is commonly used to monitor the financial health of companies and industries (Anderson & Fornell, 2000). It uses predictive models based on customer expectations, post-consumption perceptions of quality and value. Generally, the assessments are made over the telephone, and the product or service is evaluated for service quality, reliability and whether it meets the needs of the customer.

The performance-only approach measures transactional-specific satisfaction (Nicholls, Gilbert, & Roslow, 1998). A method widely reported in research of the performance-only approach is the customer satisfaction survey. This instrument assesses satisfaction after a service encounter using measures of service quality and customer satisfaction. In particular, the survey

measures satisfaction concerning personal service (SatPers) and service setting (SatSett) empirically. Each of these measures of satisfaction was tested across a wide range of industries in America and held to be reliable. Essentially, the method measures the customer's response to how the service was delivered and the setting of the service delivery (Cronin & Taylor, 1992).

The SERVQUAL framework developed by Parasuraman et al. in 1988 is a method of evaluating service quality for service industries and came about from research which suggests that customer satisfaction is based on multiple factors rather than one factor. Parasuraman et al. (1988) came up with five dimensions which cut across various industries. The five dimensions identified to measure service quality are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Using a five-dimension scale composed of 21 service attributes, the SERVQUAL survey measures the gaps between customer perceptions and expectations.

SERVQUAL was first conceptualized by Parasuraman et al. to evaluate the service quality of four types of companies- a bank, a credit card company, a repair and maintenance firm, and a phone service carrier. However, the above companies provide services rather than products while production and consumption are intertwined in the restaurant industry and there is an intangible element in the offering. Nevertheless, the SERVQUAL survey is used all over the world in various cultures and industries and is widely regarded as a reliable method of measuring service quality, which in turn leads to a measurement of customer satisfaction.

Service Dimensions

Assurance. Assurance is defined as “the employees’ knowledge and courtesy and the service provider’s ability to inspire trust and confidence” (Zeithaml et al., 2006, p. 119).

According to Andaleeb and Conway (2006), assurance may not be so important relative to other industries where the risk is higher and the outcome of using the service is uncertain. Thus, for the

medical and healthcare industry, assurance is an important dimension that customers look at in assessing a hospital or a surgeon for an operation. The trust and confidence may be represented in the personnel who links the customer to the organization (Zeithaml et al., 2006).

Empathy. Empathy is defined as the “caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customer (Zeithaml et al., 2006, p. 120). The customer is treated as if he is unique and special. There are several ways that empathy can be provided: knowing the customer’s name, his preferences and his needs. Many small companies use this ability to provide customized services as a competitive advantage over the larger firms (Zeithaml et al., 2006). This dimension is also more suitable in industries where building relationships with customers ensures the firm’s survival as opposed to “transaction marketing” (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006). Thus, in the context of quick service restaurant, empathy may not be so applicable where customers look for quick service and the queues at the counters are long. However, in a fine dining restaurant, empathy may be important to ensure customer loyalty as the server knows how the customer likes his or her food prepared. On the other hand, some customers may just want to be left alone to enjoy their food and may not want someone giving them too much attention. Empathy in the context of fine dining can be demonstrated through showing concern in times of service failure and providing service recovery or going out of the way to meet a customer’s special requirements, for instance, providing vegetarian food.

Reliability. Reliability is defined as “the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately” or “delivering on its promises” (Zeithaml et al., 2006, p. 117). This dimension is critical as all customers want to deal with firms that keep their promises and this is generally implicitly communicated to the firm’s customers. Some companies such as FedEx may make it an explicit service positioning. For the food & beverage industry, reliability can be

interpreted to mean fresh food delivered at the correct temperature and accurately the first time (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006).

Responsiveness. Responsiveness “is the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service” (Zeithaml et al., 2006, p. 117). This dimension is concerned with dealing with the customer’s requests, questions and complaints promptly and attentively. A firm is known to be responsive when it communicates to its customers how long it would take to get answers or have their problems dealt with. To be successful, companies need to look at responsiveness from the view point of the customer rather than the company’s perspective (Zeithaml et al., 2006).

Tangibles. This dimension, which is defined as the physical appearance of facilities, equipment, staff, and written materials. It translates to the restaurant’s interiors, the appearance and condition of the cutlery, tableware, and uniform of the staff, the appearance and design of the menu, restaurant signage and advertisements (Zeithamal et al., 2006). Tangibles are used by firms to convey image and signal quality (Zeithaml et al., 2006).

Overall Satisfaction

Bitner and Hubbert (1994) and Jones and Suh (2000) made a distinction between transaction-specific satisfaction and overall satisfaction. The former is defined as “the consumer dis/satisfaction with a discrete service encounter” while the latter satisfaction is defined as “the consumer’s overall dis/satisfaction with the organization based on all the encounters and experiences with that particular organization” (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994, p.76-77). Thus, transaction-specific satisfaction is concerned with a specific service event with the organization while overall satisfaction is the result of all the service encounters with the organization (Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). Overall satisfaction is more like a general evaluation from past encounters rather than an instant assessment of an individual service encounter. Since it is accumulated over time, overall customer satisfaction is held to be a more reliable measure of

customer satisfaction. It is also less sensitive to question order effects or other transaction specific reactions on the part of the customer (Auh, Court-Salisbury, & Johnson, 2003).

Overall satisfaction can be based on a few service encounters or many service encounters. Moreover, it is updated after each transaction-specific encounter the consumer has with the organization. Generally, there may not a correlation between transaction-specific satisfaction and overall satisfaction as service quality vary from encounter to encounter; causing fluctuations in transaction-specific satisfaction levels (Jones & Suh, 2000). Thus, a passenger on a Singapore Airlines flight may have low transaction-specific satisfaction because of the stewardess on the flight was not attentive. However, his overall satisfaction may still be high because all his previous encounters with the airline have been pleasant.

Consumers also view the two types of satisfaction differently. When asked whether they are satisfied with a specific service encounter, they tend to relate specific actions and behaviors of an employee. In contrast, questions about satisfaction levels on an overall basis tend to draw comments on their overall impression of the firm and generalizations about their experiences of the firm (Jones & Suh, 2000). For example, customers may voice their opinions regarding the reliability of the firm or the trustworthiness of its staff. Overall satisfaction is almost seen as an attitude towards the product or service (Parasuraman et al., 1994).

Previous research focused on the measurement of satisfaction on either the transaction-specific level (Bitner, 1990; Gotlieb, Grewal, & Brown, 1994) or the overall satisfaction (Taylor & Baker, 1994) but not both at the same time. It is also not clear whether the two types of satisfaction can be distinguished from each other if the same scale is used. Moreover, little research has been done to establish whether transaction-specific satisfaction or overall satisfaction will lead to intentions to repurchase for consumers. However, research by Parasuraman et al. suggests that transaction-specific satisfaction and overall satisfaction are

related as the consumer's latest service encounter or transaction-specific satisfaction has a strong influence on overall satisfaction.

Summary to Literature Review

There is general agreement by scholars that the concepts of customer satisfaction and service quality are highly interrelated and recent research by scholars give empirical support for the view that Zeithaml et al. typify that service quality is an antecedent of customer satisfaction and high service quality generally leads to high levels of customer satisfaction.

However, customer satisfaction is also influenced by several factors such as personal, situational factors, product quality as well. Furthermore, it was established that the SERVQUAL model is a widely used and reliable method of measuring service quality.

PART THREE

Introduction

Methodology

Since the paper is an exploratory study of the drivers behind customer satisfaction in fine dining restaurants and its purpose is to gain insights into an experience, the methodology felt to be most appropriate to assess customer satisfaction is qualitative research (Zikmund & Babin, 2007). Data were collected through focus groups as suggested by Zikmund and Babin (2007). Furthermore, focus groups are suitable for finding out consumers' perceptions, preferences and behavior and "how a person's behavior is shaped by the relationship he or she has with the physical environment, objects, people, and situations" (Zikmund & Babin, 2007, p. 81; Malhotra, Hall, Shaw, & Oppenheim, 2006). This study of customer satisfaction also seeks to describe, reflect upon and interpret experiences of diners.

The focus groups were also employed as they allow people to discuss their true feelings and frustrations. Furthermore, they are found to be a reliable and valuable source of information because they are based on specific events or experiences and not on generalizations. Moreover, creative insights and multiple perspectives are gained through the interaction of respondents who stimulates each other with their ideas. The focus group method is found to be a reliable and valid method because the categories identified by respondents are consistent and the contents identified important to making the dining experience satisfying or dissatisfying (Zikmund & Babin, 2007).

In line with research by Zikmund (2003) who suggested that the ideal size for a focus group is between six and ten, the focus groups in the study consisted of two groups of eight individuals who had dinner at fine dining restaurants from October to November 2007. The participants were selected on a random basis from databases of five fine dining restaurants in

Singapore and asked by a moderator in an unstructured, free-flowing interview to discuss their experiences of fine dining restaurants in the past two months and to comment on the aspects of the service and the environment that which were satisfying or dissatisfying.

Another qualitative method adopted by the study is the in-depth interview. The advantage of in-depth interviews is that a more detailed exploration of issues is possible than in a group setting. They also provide more insights into sensitive issues or unusual phenomena (Zikmund & Babin, 2007). Thirty respondents, who frequent fine dining restaurants on a regular basis of once or twice a month, were selected from five fine dining restaurants in Singapore on a random basis and interviewed on their latest service encounter at a fine dining restaurant (See Appendix A for the in-depth interview questionnaire). In addition, three industry experts were interviewed on their definitions and views on fine dining in Singapore.

Results

Definition of Fine Dining. According to all three industry experts interviewed, in the 1980-90s, fine dining in Singapore was defined as formal dining involving strict adherence to formal dress code and elaborate service with great emphasis on fine china and fine details in the 1990s (R.Lim, personal communication, December 10, 2007; I. Chan, personal communication, December 10, 2007; H.W. Tan, personal communication, Dec 10, 2007). Ignatius Chan, Chef at Iggy's Restaurant, defined fine dining then to mean providing the highest level of food and service with attention paid to "meaningless details" (I. Chan, personal communication, December 10, 2007). For example, providing very high quality china or soup bowls with three or four underliners, starched napkins, and crystal chandeliers in the restaurant. Fine dining then also included personalized table-side food preparation, according to Tan Hsien Wei, Course Manager, Culinary and Catering Management Diploma, Temasek Polytechnic (personal communication,

December 10, 2007). According to him, there are now only four restaurants in Singapore that meet this definition of fine dining i.e. Raffles Grill, Les Amis Au Jardin, Aoki and Shiraishi.

According to industry experts interviewed, fine dining in the present context in Singapore refers to dining at a well-appointed restaurant with excellent food and service and paying a premium for the food and service (R.Lim, personal communication, December 10, 2007; I.Chan, personal communication, December 10, 2007; H.W. Tan, personal communication, December 10, 2007). The emphasis now is on providing high quality food and service, and not tangibles such as best china and cutlery and décor; and service which involves elaborate serving procedures. The industry experts also agreed that customers nowadays prefer more casual atmosphere. Restaurants are not strict with dress code and will accept customers dressed with branded jeans and T-shirts. However, shorts and slippers are still not permitted. Moreover, with the time pressure of modern living, there is less time for leisurely dining. Service needs to be quick and attentive service and there is no longer a necessity to provide the highest quality of china or elaborate food service.

The definitions of fine dining in the present Singapore context by the industry experts were generally supported by the focus group and in-depth interview findings. Although definitions of fine dining varied from member to member and ranged from fine dining in the traditional French style to dining in an expensive restaurant with excellent food and attentive service, the majority of the members of the two focus groups and the in-depth interviews are in agreement that fine dining in Singapore in the traditional sense no longer exist. It is being replaced by the modern concept of fine dining these days in Singapore, which is defined as dining at a well-designed restaurant with excellent food and service, a more casual atmosphere and paying a premium. Another important point brought up by members of the two focus groups was the purpose of selecting a fine dining restaurant was to enjoy a memorable experience. For

focus group members, this could be the physical environment of the restaurant, for instance, its location on a hill or a cliff while for others, this could come in the form of personal touches of the server such as providing the menu in Japanese calligraphy as a farewell token.

Customer Expectations. Customer expectation is defined as the “desires or wants of consumers i.e. what they feel the service should offer rather than would offer” (Teas, 1993). Focus group and in-depth interview participants all had high expectations of the service of fine dining restaurants. This can be gleaned from their definitions of fine dining. All respondents mentioned excellent service and ambience. Service was defined by most respondents as attentive but unobtrusive. However, the meaning of service varies with the individual and range from the server’s ability to recommend or advice on food choices, good product knowledge to the ability to anticipate the diner’s needs.

The interviews also suggested that “assurance” and “empathy” are the most important dimensions of service quality expectations as consistently, knowledge of food and wine and ability to anticipate the needs of the customer were mentioned. However, expectations varied among the respondents in terms of the elements of assurance and empathy. For some, “the ability to inspire confidence” (Zeithaml et al, 2006, p. 119), means the ability to parlay with the customer or to relate to him on the same footing as a professional and not someone who needs to be instructed or demonstrating professional pride in work.

Again, respondents mentioned that high food quality is expected of fine dining. This again varies with the individual. For some, this refers to fresh ingredients or ingredients from special regions of France, excellent taste with right temperature, while others expect this to mean special recipes of the chef. This includes a comprehensive wine list for some as well.

There were also expectations of high quality décor, tableware and cutlery, table arrangement that gives privacy to the customer, quiet environment, and breath-taking views (sea

views or elevated views of the city). The company of sophisticated and well-mannered customers was important to respondents interviewed and members in the focus groups. For some respondents, observation of dress code by the restaurant is an important part of their expectations of a fine dining environment.

For most of the respondents, the expectations came from explicit service promises from advertisements, newspaper reports, reviews by food critics, implicit service promises from the interiors and recommendations of friends. For instance, respondents who visited Iggy's, a modern European restaurant, had high expectations because it was listed 95th top restaurant by British-based Restaurant magazine in 2006 and the only Singapore restaurant in the world to make it to the list (Wong, 2007). Respondents also had high expectations when the fine dining restaurant is well-known for fine food and good service or has a brand name. For example, Les Amis is regarded in Singapore as one of the best fine dining restaurant chain in Singapore. This is crucial for those who came for a memorable dining experience.

Expectations also came from the high price that diners have to pay at the restaurant as price is an indicator of quality (Lewis & Shoemaker, 1997). What is regarded as high price varies with the individual and ranged from S\$60 -200 per head. Customers' expectations of the service, food and the environment were raised with the price they paid (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006). Respondents who were dissatisfied with the restaurant had a feeling that they were being "ripped off" and expected better service for the price they are paying.

Some respondents' expectations were high because the restaurant was considered a fine dining restaurant and his past experiences of the restaurant, which have all been satisfying, may have influenced his expectations. This was affirmed by the findings of Teas (1993) who mentioned that the customers' expectations are established by norms as well as shaped by past experiences.

The purpose of the visit also plays a part in shaping customers' expectations of the restaurant. For some respondents, an impressive interior décor and ambience are the first consideration in the selection of a restaurant because their purpose was to impress a girlfriend, to celebrate an occasion and for business. Service was also a close consideration for those respondents who were there to entertain a client and need to be assured of quick and attentive service.

Food was also another important consideration in the selection of a restaurant for some respondents. It is the main reason why they go to the restaurant and this finding finds support in the work of Andersson and Mossberg (2004) that the primary reason for visiting a restaurant is food and the others are the supporting elements around it.

Service Dimensions

Empathy. Respondents in the focus groups and in-depth interviews mentioned that the concern and personalized attention, the personal touches, the ability to anticipate the needs of the customer and the willingness to go the extra mile by the service staff were the main reasons for their perceptions of high levels of service quality of these fine dining restaurants. For instance, concern was demonstrated by a restaurant with an outdoor setting when a server removed mosquito coils near the respondent's table without being prompted when he observed the respondent reacting adversely to the smell.

Respondents also mentioned the service staff's personalized attention in the following ways contributed to their satisfaction with the service of the restaurant. The chef or the restaurant owner took the time to develop a relationship with respondents by dropping by their tables to give a personal introduction of himself to the guest and talking to guests. Some servers demonstrated concern and personalized attention by providing warm water or suggesting food that was more suitable for his or her health condition when they sense that the respondent was

not feeling well. Respondents also experienced feelings of delight when the restaurant remembered to celebrate their birthday or anniversary without being prompted or spontaneously provided more desserts without charging when the respondent expressed to the server that he liked the dessert. According to Steadman (1991), people go to fine dining restaurants because they want to be made to feel special. Respondents in the study also evaluated the service quality of a restaurant high when the service staff provided personal touches to make them feel special. These could be in the form of highly personalized gifts such as presenting the menu written in Chinese calligraphy to the guest as a parting gift.

In particular, respondents' satisfaction with the service quality of the restaurant was also enhanced by the service recovery efforts of the service staff. One important point mentioned by a respondent is the prompt action taken by the restaurant to rectify a service failure. For example, respondents were impressed when service staff was able to find tables quickly on a busy day despite a reservation mix-up. Prompt handling of a complaint can help a firm retain 95% of dissatisfied customers compared to only 64% of its customers when a complaint is not successfully handled (Albrecht & Zemke, 1985). The quicker service recovery takes place, the more successful the service provider is in customer retention. For instance, the respondent who visited Raffles Grill was quite impressed with the way the service staff at Raffles Grill reacted swiftly to service failure and mentioned that he would certainly return to the restaurant.

The above aspects of service affirmed the importance of the service dimension of empathy for fine dining restaurant as respondents cited that the service they received met their expectation of "caring, individualized attention" of a fine dining restaurant (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2006, p.120).

Assurance. Good knowledge of food and wine and the ability to recommend food from the menu were mentioned by respondents as aspects of service that increased their satisfaction of

the service quality of the restaurant. These were seen by respondents to be essential aspects of service to be expected of a fine dining restaurant. In addition, the brand name and reputation of the chef or the restaurant were able to inspire confidence in the restaurant. This service aspect is important for diners who deliberately chose the fine restaurant because they have heard of the reputation of the chef or the restaurant for fine food and excellent service. This feedback from respondents affirmed the importance of the “assurance” dimension in fine dining.

Tangibles. From the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, tangibles emerged as an important reason for selecting a particular fine dining restaurant as opposed to a good family restaurant. For some respondents, décor and ambience were the main reasons for visiting a fine dining restaurant. This is especially important for respondents whose purpose of dining at the restaurant is to celebrate a special occasion or to entertain their clients. The above concurred with the focus groups’ findings. Focus group members also mentioned that good service and high food quality are expected of a fine dining restaurant and are already provided by good family restaurants (Andaleeb, & Conway, 2006). Thus, for these respondents, the critical difference between a fine dining restaurant and a family restaurant is the environment that a fine dining restaurant provides in terms of privacy, peaceful and quiet surroundings, well-dressed and well-behaved diners, and well-designed décor. These respondents rate the service quality of a restaurant high when these aspects of service which come under the dimension of tangibles were provided. They rated the service quality of the restaurant low when it did not provide enough privacy for diners by putting tables too close together; and when the other diners in the restaurant were not appropriately dressed.

Company of Other Diners. Respondents also mentioned that the presence of other diners such as famous personages, top civil servants and well-dressed professionals contributed to their satisfaction with the service quality of the restaurant. This is supported by Gustafsson’s findings

that customers do not mind paying a premium for the company of “other customers visiting the restaurant at the same time” (Gustafsson, 2004, p.11) and Andersson and Mossberg’s study that people go to restaurants to satisfy their social needs. Social needs are defined by Andersson and Mossberg as “those needs based partly on our sense of belonging to groups that we wish to belong to, and partly to our self-esteem based on our ranking in the hierarchy of those groups” (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004, p.122).

Dress Code. An important characteristic of fine dining is the observance of dress code by fellow diners. Focus group members were pleased that the atmosphere of fine dining restaurant has become more casual than previously. However, they felt that it might have become too casual in terms of dress code as fine dining restaurants in Singapore nowadays also welcome diners wearing jeans and T-shirts, leading to lower levels of satisfaction of the service quality of the restaurant for some respondents. However, the focus group varies in their views of the formality of dress code the restaurant should adopt. Members above 40 years of age mentioned semi-formal dressing clothes while those below 30 years of age said that branded T-shirts and jeans were acceptable. Expectations of this aspect of service were high because respondents mentioned that the dress code was part of their definition of a fine dining restaurant. As dress code and the company of diners form part of the physical environment of the restaurant, this affirms the importance of the tangibles dimension in contributing to customer satisfaction.

Reliability and responsiveness. These service dimensions were relatively less important to the respondents as they were not cited by respondents as reasons for satisfaction with service quality of the restaurant. This suggests that fine dining restaurants have high standards of reliability and responsiveness and this is expected of this type of restaurant.

Overall satisfaction

An interesting finding that emerged from the in-depth interviews was that the respondents who were neutral or not satisfied with one or two service dimensions were still satisfied on an overall basis. For instance, respondents, who were not satisfied with the service dimension of tangibles but gave a high rating for the empathy dimension, still perceived the restaurant as having high service quality.

Recommendations

The results of this study suggests that the definition of fine dining has changed from the one associated with the French fine dining style to one of a more relaxed atmosphere. However, dress code is still important to diners in Singapore. Most customers defined this as appropriate business, semi-formal attire or smart casual attire appropriate to the occasion they are celebrating. Dress code is not widely observed in Singapore and there is a tendency towards casual dressing such as branded T-shirts and jeans, lowering satisfaction of a fine dining experience. Restaurants in Singapore need to enforce dress code more rigorously here to enhance service quality of the restaurant, which leads to higher customer satisfaction.

The study also suggests that empathy, assurance and tangibles were important service dimensions of service quality for fine dining restaurants in Singapore, which could contribute to raising the level of customer satisfaction. Diners perceived the service quality of the restaurant to be high when service staff makes the effort to understand and anticipate their customers' needs and to delight them with personal touches. Fine dining restaurants should thus pay more attention to training and empowering their service staff to look for ways to make the dining experience a memorable one for their customers.

Diners also felt that the restaurants provided high service quality when servers had good knowledge of food and wine and were able to recommend appropriate food or wine as expected of fine dining restaurants. This suggests that restaurateurs should emphasize food and wine knowledge in their staff training.

Tangibles were another important dimension mentioned by diners as contributing to their satisfaction with the service quality of the restaurant. This suggests that restaurateurs should be more conscious of the customer's need of privacy in the design and layout of their restaurants. Tables should be placed further apart. Diners also mentioned that they rated the restaurant high

in service quality for originality in the theme or interior décor of the restaurant. Restaurateurs should bear in mind that the décor is part of the fine dining experience, and indeed one of the differentiating factors between a good quality family restaurant and a fine dining restaurant. Thus, before opening a restaurant, a restaurant operator should engage a reputable design consultant to come up with a unique design. Dynamism in the design is preferred so that the customer would feel a sense of expectancy when he visits the restaurant during the year. Restaurateurs could also revamp the design of their restaurants on a regular basis to provide freshness to the diner.

Conclusion

Restaurateurs need to pay special attention to service processes and service recovery because of the high expectations customers have of this classification of restaurants. The study suggests that empathy, assurance and tangibles are important service dimensions of service quality, which could lead to high customer satisfaction in fine dining restaurants in Singapore. The aspects of empathy, which could bring about higher levels of customer satisfaction, are providing personalized care and concern, the ability to anticipate a customer's need and make him or her feel special. The aspects of assurance that could lead to customer satisfaction are the server's knowledge of food and wine and the ability to make recommendations. The fine diner has high expectations of these aspects of service and more staff training in this area is required.

The aspects of the "tangibles" dimension which are important to diners in Singapore are the interior design of the restaurant, dress code, privacy and the company of other diners. While more emphasis is placed on food and service by restaurateurs in Singapore, the environment should not be ignored by restaurateurs as fine dining adopts a more casual atmosphere. This finding is a reminder that diners choose to go to fine dining restaurants because of the luxurious and well-designed interiors, ambience and the company of other diners. Thus, it is suggested that

restaurants should pay more attention to the physical environment and be mindful that providing privacy, ambience, unique and outstanding interiors could lead to higher levels of customer satisfaction. The study also suggests that diners in Singapore prefer a more formal dress code to be observed and this merits some attention from restaurant owners.

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Appendix A

In-depth Interview Questionnaire
Service Dimensionsfaction of Fine Dining restaurants in Singapore

1. How often do you eat out for dinner in an average month?
2. What is your definition of fine dining?
3. Think of your latest fine dining experience. Name the restaurant.
4. Why did you choose to go to this restaurant?
5. What is the purpose of your visit?
6. Describe your experience in terms of service.
7. What aspects of service are important to you?
8. On a scale of 1 (Very Dissatisfied) to 5 (Very Satisfied), how would you rate the restaurant in terms of service. Give reasons for your answer.
9. Overall, on a scale of 1 (Very Dissatisfied) to 5 (Very Satisfied), how would you rate the restaurant in terms of the dining experience. Give reasons for your answer.
10. What suggestions do you have for improving the quality of service?