

Secret Ingredients: A Comparative Analysis of Fine-Dining  
Experience Design for Selected Michelin Star Restaurants

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## ABSTRACT

### SECRET INGREDIENTS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FINE-DINING EXPERIENCE DESIGN FOR SELECTED MICHELIN STAR RESTAURANTS

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The elevated nature and intentional design of fine dining set it apart from the normalcy of eating food and create an environment where guests are valued. The purpose of this study was to compare the fine-dining experience design practices of selected Michelin star restaurants. Restaurants Azurmendi and Per Se were selected for examination in this study. Both restaurants' Yelp and Tripadvisor reviews were analyzed using an instrument developed by the researcher. Conclusions were drawn from the findings, indicating that Azurmendi and Per Se have well-executed experience design practices with few areas for improvement in customer service, atmosphere, and food and beverage. Industry, restaurant, and future research recommendations were made from these conclusions. One industry recommendation is to stimulate all five senses to prompt the creation of memories and a willingness to return or recommend an experience.

Keywords: experience design, fine dining, restaurant, service, food, guest

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Background of Study

Dining – the act of consuming a meal – is customary in the day-to-day life of all humans. Though dining is an ordinary activity, there are various forms of dining that provide uncommon and even unique experiences to participants. One such form is fine dining. Fine dining is a formal eating experience, emphasizing gourmet food in an elevated environment (Cambridge University Press, 2020). While the focus lies on the food, the food must work in conjunction with a multitude of external aspects to provide participants with memorable experiences that surpass expectations. The attention to detail in experience design is what sets fine dining apart from simply eating a meal. Experience design involves the intentional planning of various environmental and stylistic elements that encapsulate an event from start to finish with the purpose of satisfying and surprising participants (Echelon Design, 2019). In one way or another, experience design has impacted United States’ diners as, “The annual change in fine-dining restaurant traffic in the United States [increased by 18%] from 2009 to 2013” (NPD Group & Nation's Restaurant News, 2014).

Successful fine-dining experience design fosters a feeling of importance among guests through the unique and precise care taken in the food as well as the service with which it is delivered to each guest. Additionally, fine dining establishments are intended to offer an opportunity “to slow down and enjoy the privilege of an exceptional meal,” which guests perceive as well-deserved in the present fast-paced society (DiRōNA, 2020,

para. 9). With numerous factors for restaurants to consider in achieving fine-dining status, there are industry best practices generally used to guide their experiential design. The purpose of this study was to compare the fine-dining experience design practices of selected Michelin star restaurants.

### Review of Literature

Research for this review of literature was conducted at Robert E. Kennedy Library on the campus of California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. In addition to books and other resources, the following online databases were utilized: Academic Search Premier, Gale Academic OneFile, Hospitality & Tourism Complete, ProQuest, Sage Journals, ScienceDirect, and Wiley Online Library. This review of literature includes the following subsections: experience design in the experience industry, experience design in restaurants, and experience design in fine dining restaurants.

Experience design practices within the experience industry may vary depending on the field in which the design is applied. Thus, the literature addresses a variety of fields. One such field is restaurants, which may also be further divided into sections with more specific design practices, including fine-dining restaurants.

In the experience industry, experience-design best practices stem from various theories and guides, some of which include experience design principles, touchpoints along the customer journey, senses, and emotions. From the literature, five main principles have been developed to reference when designing experiences: theme the experience, implement positive cues, eliminate negative cues, incorporate memorabilia,

and engage the senses (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). The first principle is to apply a theme to the experience; “the theme must drive all the design elements and staged events of the experience toward a unified storyline that wholly captivates the customer” (Pine & Gilmore, p. 102). In support of this principle, Rebholz (2019) analyzed how retail stores design experiences, concluding that the main takeaway is to have a defined theme or mood for the desired atmosphere to be achieved. For example, the owners of PlantShed, a hybrid coffee and plant shop, worked alongside coffee roasters to develop food and beverages inspired by their floral theme, creating coherency among the space, the services, and the products (Rebholz). Themes also allow customers to set expectations of the kind of experience they will engage in (Pine & Gilmore).

Building upon theme, Pine and Gilmore’s (1998) second principle is to “harmonize impressions with positive cues” that support the theme (p. 102). The impressions are the key, memorable aspects of an experience and they consist of multiple cues, which should combine to form the participants’ desired experience (Pine & Gilmore). Elsewhere in the literature cues are referred to as touchpoints. Touchpoints make up the customer journey, and together they “reinforce the emergence of experience-centric services as a distinct strategic initiative with accompanying operational principles” (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010, p. 77). Additionally, it is important to note that the perspective of the customer journey and touchpoints differentiates service design from product design by interpreting it as “the dynamic and ongoing process of contact between customers and the service organization” rather than as “individual service elements” (Zomerdijk & Voss, p. 77). Voss et al. (2008) similarly discuss touchpoints and cues by separating the designed service-experience into stageware (the physical environment that

signals customer expectations and behaviors), orgware (the organization and training of employees who deliver experiences and engage customers), and customerware (the strategized interactions between employees and customers). Focusing on positive touchpoints in these three dimensions can enhance any designed experience.

Returning to the experience design principles, the third expands upon the previous two by suggesting eliminating negative cues or anything that refutes or takes away from the theme (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Rebholtz (2019) states that no matter the type of designed experience, success “relies on memorable experiences at every touchpoint of the customer journey” (p. 95). While this may be true, there is a caveat. Both positive and negative cues result in memorable experiences, yet only the positive cues are desired (Pine & Gilmore). Therefore, success is derived from providing positive cues and eliminating negative ones along the customer journey. Both actions are essential.

Moving forward with the design principles, the remaining two are to incorporate memorabilia and engage the senses. Memorabilia should be incorporated at the end of any designed experience to remind participants of their experience, and participants should want to purchase and depart with a memento of their experience if all the prior principles were met (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Finally, Pine & Gilmore’s last principle is to engage all the senses per the theme to make an experience truly memorable. Meacci & Liberatore (2018) support the idea to engage all the senses in claiming that “it is not a single sensorial stimulus but the interaction between all the senses that makes the experience process” (p. 12). Moreover, designers must plan “experiential points with a comprehensive and holistic multisensory approach” (Meacci & Liberatore, p.10). A study conducted on tourist experiences upholds the multisensory approach, particularly in

relation to its impact on memorability, finding that tourists who “perceived diversified sensory impressions were more likely to recommend and return to the destination”

(Meacci & Liberatore, p. 9).

Finally, the literature covered in this work on experience design in the experience industry is the emotion-based theory. This theory identifies three levels in which emotions are expressed: “subjective experience (how people “feel” them), expressive behavior (how people act them out), and physiology (the bodily changes that accompany emotions, such as increased heart rate and blood pressure and hormonal changes)” (Bastiaansen et al., 2019, p. 654). In this model, it is important to focus on the emotions evoked at each stage of an experience because emotions are believed to be the determining factor in the evaluation and memory of experiences. Bastiaansen et al. conclude that an evidence-based approach to managing experiences requires defining the desired emotional reactions of customers at each touchpoint, designing each touchpoint to those specifications, testing the design’s effectiveness, “redesigning and optimizing the experience, and measuring the impact of the redesign through several iterations” until refined to meet the intended outcome (p. 662). As discussed, there are several sets of practices found in the literature that may be applied to the experience industry to effectively design unique and memorable experiences.

Concerning restaurants, experience design practices shift focus further toward service, using the SERVQUAL and DINESERV models, as well as insight from the Five Aspects Meal Model (FAMM) and the Customer Meal Experience Model (CMEM). The tool, DINESERV, was adapted from its predecessor, SERVQUAL, measuring restaurant guests’ perceptions of service quality in restaurants through five dimensions: reliability,

assurance, responsiveness, tangibles, and empathy (Stevens et al., 1995). These five dimensions have been studied extensively among restaurant patrons of fine-dining, casual-dining, and quick-service establishments, to create the model, and deduced that restaurant consumers value reliability most, followed by tangibles, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy (Stevens et al.). The DINESERV dimensions allow for a comparison between customer expectations and perceptions of service quality in restaurants that can be identified to close gaps and improve customer experiences (Stevens et al.). Similar to SERVQUAL and DINESERV, the Five Aspects Meal Model (FAMM) contains five dimensions; product (food and beverage in relation to other elements), room (layout, interior, and functionality of the dining space), meeting (interaction between customers and others in the space), overall atmosphere (created by both tangible and intangible items), and management control system (rules that allow restaurants to stay in business and increase customer satisfaction) (Gustafsson, 2004; Gustafsson et al., 2006; Hansen, 2014). The Customer Meal Experience Model (CMEM) contains the same conceptual elements as the FAMM, simply differentiated by alternative terminology.

Hansen has combined the SERVQUAL and DINESERV dimensions of service quality with the FAMM and the CMEM to develop an all-encompassing meal-experience instrument, Meal Eating Establishment Experience Instrument (MEEEI). Through this multi-model analysis, MEEEI was modified to reflect the customers' perspective of meal experiences, incorporating a greater emphasis on the company (guests in a party, gathered to share a meal) and atmosphere, which were missing in the former materials (Hansen, 2014). The rationale for this new instrument is to understand as many aspects of the

customer dining experience as possible to capture the different elements that create the whole experience (Hansen, p. 129). With the integration of various models, service, atmosphere and environment, food and beverages, and their interactions with each other, are accounted for in restaurant experience-design.

Existing literature does not outline best practices, standards, or models specifically for fine-dining experience design. It does, however, identify the factors that influence the satisfaction of fine-dining customers, which can be used to guide experience design within fine-dining restaurants. Harrington et al. (2011) found price/value, expectations of quality, and variety/innovation to be ranked among all respondents as the most important considerations when selecting fine-dining establishments. The data was then segmented to analyze potential differences based on gender, age, and dining frequency. Differences in levels of importance were discovered in each segment, including results among females rating “price/value attributes, quality expectation attributes, and dietary attributes as substantially more important than their male counterparts” (Harrington et al., p. 286). Results among senior consumers rated “promotion (ratings, reviews, and advertising), quality expectation (atmosphere, design, reputation, and recommendations), setting (private and low noise), and [diet] (healthy options and menu flexibility to meet special diet needs)” higher than younger consumers. The younger group favored pricing and “maximizing value in the experience” (Harrington et al., p. 286). Results among frequent diners prioritized menu variety and innovation (Harrington et al.). This knowledge can direct experience design in fine dining establishments, especially those with distinct demographics, by ensuring that essential attributes to customer satisfaction are met. In any case, managers should understand guest

preferences so they can gain a competitive advantage by integrating those preferences in their products and services (Harrington et al.). Furthermore, “each restaurant experience can be thought of as a unique bundle of tangible and intangible products and services provided to the consumer,” particularly in fine-dining restaurants, with atmosphere, service, image, etc. impacting customer satisfaction (Harrington et al., p. 273). Although experience-design specific models or theories are not yet available in the literature for fine dining, understanding determining factors of customer satisfaction in this restaurant segment is a great starting point for designing effective experiences.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to compare the fine-dining experience design practices of selected Michelin star restaurants.

### Research Questions

This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the service standards being employed by the selected Michelin star restaurants?
2. What practices of atmosphere design are utilized by the selected Michelin star restaurants?
3. What food and beverage standards are implemented by the selected Michelin star restaurants?
4. How effective are the service standards being employed by the selected Michelin star restaurants?

5. How effective are the practices of atmosphere design being utilized by the selected Michelin star restaurants?
6. How effective are the food and beverage standards being implemented by the selected Michelin star restaurants?

## Chapter 2

### METHODS

The purpose of this study was to compare the fine-dining experience design practices of selected Michelin star restaurants. This chapter includes the following sections: description of organizations, description of instrument, and description of procedures.

#### Description of Organizations

A comparative analysis was conducted on Azurmendi and Per Se. Azurmendi (2020b) is a fine dining restaurant that opened in 2005 in Larrabetzu, Biscay, Spain. It serves “two unique gastronomic experiences,” highlighting seasonal ingredients titled Addarak and Erroak, meaning the branches and the roots, respectively (Azurmendi, 2020c). The restaurant was awarded its first Michelin star in 2007, its second in 2010, and its third in 2012, recognizing the exceptional quality of its food (Azurmendi, 2020b). Azurmendi is also committed to practicing sustainability. Both its food and sustainability practices are reflected in its awards and ratings. Additional accolades include the “Most Sustainable Restaurant Award by The World’s 50 Best Restaurants” in 2014 and 2018, the “Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Silver Certification [in] design and construction” in 2015, the “second best restaurant in the world [rating] according to Elite Traveler Magazine” in 2016 and 2018, and the “14th at the world ranking by The World’s 50 Best Restaurants. Azurmendi’s head chef, Eneko Atxa, is responsible for the aforementioned accolades and has received several himself, including

the “National Gastronomy Award 2015 for Best Head Chef” and the “Best Chef Award 2019 in Europe by Madrid Fusion” being among them (Azurmendi, 2020b). There is also a multitude of customer reviews on Yelp and Tripadvisor. As far as facilities, Azurmendi consists of a glass-paneled, sustainable building overlooking the vineyard grounds (Greenwald, 2018). The restaurant itself includes a greeting room, main dining room, and kitchen. Elsewhere on the property, guests may visit the innovation room, indoor garden, event space, and vineyard (Greenwald, 2018). Although Azurmendi (2020a) primarily provides a dining experience, it also offers guests tours of the innovation room and garden, catering services, and weddings/events hosting. Finally, the main demographic served at this restaurant is largely people with enough disposable income for a 220€ or an approximately \$260 meal (Azurmendi, 2020c).

Per Se (2020d) is a Michelin three-star, fine dining restaurant located in the Time Warner Center at Columbus Circle in Manhattan, New York. The restaurant was established in 2004 by chef Thomas Keller, serving French cuisine inspired by that of his Napa Valley restaurant (Per Se, 2020d). The meals at Per Se (2020b) change daily, however, they continually follow the format of a nine-course chef’s tasting menu, a nine-course vegetable tasting menu, and a five-course chef’s tasting menu offered in The Salon. Each meal is created using French techniques and quality, seasonal ingredients (Per Se, 2020d). An extensive list of wines and cocktails is also available each day, including the service of a sommelier for pairing drinks with the food. This list spans 130 pages, incorporating wines and cocktails from around the globe, catering to a wide range of demographics (Per Se, 2020a). A unique aspect of this restaurant is that the chefs never repeat ingredients throughout a meal’s entire nine courses (Per Se, 2020b). Another

unique feature Per Se offers is offsite event service with a customized menu of four to nine courses and assistance from a sommelier (Per Se, 2020c). Per Se's routine service facilities encompass the kitchen, the main dining room, two private rooms for larger parties, and the salon area where views of Columbus Circle, Central Park, and the Manhattan skyline can be enjoyed by guests (2020c). The total number of employees is unknown, although there are four managers/directors and four main chefs (head chef, chef de cuisine, executive head baker, and pastry chef) (Per Se, 2020e).

### Description of Instrument

The instrument utilized in this study was a best-practices guide developed by the researcher (see Appendix A). The instrument aims to examine customers perceptions of Azurmendi's and Per Se's experience design practices in three areas: customer service, atmosphere, and food.

A pilot test was conducted on Providence, a Michelin two-star fine dining seafood restaurant in Los Angeles, California, on May 6, 2020. During the pilot test, evoked emotions replaced cues/touchpoints in the atmosphere category of the instrument, and sound was eliminated from the assessment in the food category.

### Description of Procedures

A comparative analysis was conducted on Azurmendi and Per Se. The instrument utilized in this study was a best-practices guide developed by the researcher. The approach to finding and describing the restaurants' experience design practices was by analyzing each of their 30 most recent, English comments from both Yelp and

Tripadvisor review websites. All the comments analyzed for this study were posted between October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020. The researcher read each comment and made notes in the instrument of important features mentioned by each reviewer. This comparative analysis research took two weeks.

## Chapter 3

### PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to compare the fine-dining experience design practices of selected Michelin star restaurants. A comparative analysis was utilized to examine Azurmendi and Per Se. This chapter includes the following sections: customer service, atmosphere, and food and beverage.

#### Customer Service

This category will be reviewed based on elements from DINESERV (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy), and cues/touchpoints. According to Azurmendi's 30 most recent Yelp reviews evaluated for this study, its service standards are impeccable. The restaurant's reliability is described as perfect throughout the experience because every request is met nearly instantly. The responsiveness is overall positive as well, only generating two poor reviews out of 30. Customers claim that the servers have strong English skills and can even speak other languages. Among Azurmendi's 2019 Yelp reviews, two service flaws are documented both pertaining to responsiveness: one guest's meal in the greenhouse felt rushed and another guest had to wait for their check. Aside from these faults, the speed of service is quick as servers are proactive and provide diners with an aperitif immediately upon entrance. Additionally, the staff members are knowledgeable, and inform guests during the kitchen portion of the tour of each kitchen station's purpose, the preparation process of herbs, and the chefs' creative process for developing dishes. The sommeliers are also knowledgeable of unique wines and

thoughtful in their pairings. Azurmendi's staff members are professional, approachable, courteous, and attentive, yet not tense. They meet high assurance standards when serving customers by waiting until each person in a company is finished eating before clearing the table and presenting the next course. The staff is accommodating as well, allowing guests to mix and match course offerings between the two tasting menus. Standards of empathy are met as servers are open and personable with customers as well as able to laugh with them. Lastly, a variety of touchpoints are created through Azurmendi's interactive tour, and highlights include greeting guests upon arrival, the chefs' signature dish demonstration that exposes the energy of the staff, and meeting head chef Eneko Atxa at the end of the meal. In each of these touchpoints, guests get a sense of the chefs' and staff's passion for food and sustainability. According to the instrument used in this study, Azurmendi is comprehensively rated well in the DINESERV categories and touchpoints.

Similar to Azurmendi's reviews on Yelp, those on Tripadvisor suggest that the restaurant's service is unparalleled. Reliability is rarely mentioned among the Tripadvisor comments. Only one guest reported an issue with being served wine incorrectly, as well as having to ask for water and milk multiple times. Responsiveness is, once again, divided in terms of speed of service. During the main tasting, new items arrive as soon as the previous plates are finished, but servers kept one guest waiting for their drink in the entry room. The knowledge of the servers, on the other hand, is amazing. Servers can provide detailed explanations of every dish in flawless English and Spanish. For the most part, Tripadvisor reviewers agree with those on Yelp that the servers are attentive but not overwhelming, professional, accommodating, and welcoming. Highlights of the

restaurant's assurance are that the servers promptly attend to guests, chefs greet guests even while working, and chef Atxa takes time to thank guests for their visit. Servers show their care toward guests through customized service and personability. Moreover, one standout cue/touchpoint is the fantastic service of the sommelier. Customer service is Azurmendi's area (atmosphere and food and beverage being the others) with the most mixed reviews, although it is generally rated exceptionally.

Per Se's service is largely described as amazing and memorable. The reliability of the service staff is not explicitly stated in the Yelp reviews, although reviewers have much to say about the responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and cues/touchpoints. The speed of service received varying views from being too quick (questioning worth), slightly delayed, and impeccably timed. Assurance is highly praised, with only one complaint of a server annoying a guest with unsuitable questions and comments. Otherwise, the staff is professional, respectful of privacy, attentive yet not assertive, friendly, and accommodating to allergies and guests' preferences (willing to adjust dishes to suit customer needs/preferences). Furthermore, the staff is caring toward customers through crafting genuine and customized interactions with guests and remaining aware of any celebrations. Finally, the cues of the Per Se Yelp reviewers' service include meeting the executive chef, seeing the kitchen, and receiving personalized menu cards and gifts commemorating celebrations, all of which make special additions to the service experience.

The excellent customer service at Per Se is detailed throughout the Tripadvisor comments as well. In contrast to those on Yelp, customers call attention to reliability with flawless attention to detail, such as a perfectly made, off-the-menu cocktail that was

mixed upon request. In another example of the staff's accommodation, a pregnant woman's requests to avoid alcohol and raw/undercooked meat were met and exceeded when she received a Per Se onesie after her meal. Further, the staff is attentive, gracious, and conversational without being intrusive. Both the sommelier and the hostess were acknowledged for being collaborative and graceful, respectively. The staff's knowledge of the menu stood out due to their informative detailing of each course and their ability to answer any question asked of them. Their speed is efficient and not rushed. Despite the majority of positive reviews, it should be noted that the Salon service is claimed to be at a lower bar than that of the main dining area. Much like the Yelp reviews suggest, customers are served with genuine smiles and thoughtful touches of personalized menu cards and parting gifts. The touchpoints mentioned were the same as those on Yelp with the addition of servers offering restaurant recommendations to guests when informed of their future travels and the unique gift of Tom Keller's cookbook.

In comparison, both fine dining, Michelin three-star restaurants have strong touchpoints, few comments regarding reliability, and lack consistency in responsiveness. Azurmendi, specifically, exceeds in assurance, whereas Per Se exceeds in empathy.

### Atmosphere

The atmosphere was assessed by looking at theme, tangibles, senses, and evoked emotions. Azurmendi's atmosphere is themed to be modern, minimalistic, and natural. The simple and sophisticated design elements complement the surrounding nature to reflect the innovative dishes based on traditional Basque cuisine and remind guests of the restaurant's sustainability. The theme is enhanced by prominent tangibles, including

dishware, furniture, and the building's materials. For dishware, the restaurant uses simplistic glasses and a variety of plates or containers to present the food, many made of earthy materials such as wood and stone. One such container that nearly all 30 Yelp reviewers took note of is the picnic baskets in which the first set of bites are served. The furniture adheres to the modern theme and uses neutral colors of black, white, and grey. The natural materials continue throughout the building, with the dining room exterior constructed of glass and metal. Of the four senses (excluding taste, which will be discussed in food and beverage), sight and sound are mentioned. Sight is emphasized by guests as they describe the venue, beginning with the lush greenery and panoramic view of the hills, vineyard, and countless fig trees. The floor to ceiling windows of the dining room and modern decor enhance the breathtaking scenery as guests dine, and evoke an appreciation of the natural beauty. The garden and greenhouse also bring nature indoors with herbs, fruits, vegetables, and flowers accentuated by high ceilings and fountains. In the kitchen, guests are entertained and amazed by the energetic cooking staff, leaving them feeling special for witnessing this unique sight. The sound of the experience is indicated to be quiet, where guests cannot hear the conversations of others due to the spacious room and appropriate table spacing. On the other hand, the sound within the dining room is noted to be filled with laughter, which is rare in such an elevated restaurant setting. Finally, touchpoints of the experience include the oak tree dedicated to Basque cultural heritage outside the entrance, seeing the activity of the kitchen, and having the autonomy to explore the grounds and upper-level greenhouse after dining.

The reviewers on Tripadvisor rated Azurmendi similarly, emphasizing the beauty of the surrounding nature and spacious dining area with large glass windows. The main

difference is that sound played a role in Tripadvisor reviewers' experiences, from the background music to the buzzing sound of the chefs in the kitchen, along with an additional tangible: screens set up for private dining. The guests felt enjoyment and warmth from all the smiling faces in the restaurant as well as relaxation during the experience. The design of the atmosphere is utilized effectively within the restaurant. The tangibles and senses correlate with the theme and derive pleasant, engaging, and fun emotions from guests.

Per Se's atmosphere garnered few reviews on Yelp, but the data available were useful. There is no clear design theme, however, the restaurant is described to be romantic and have a nice ambiance. The windows in the restaurant offer great views of Columbus Circle and a portion of Central Park. Contrastingly, there are negative visual elements as well, such as the disappointing cleanliness and quality of the restroom. Among the other senses covered in the Yelp reviews, the sound of chefs chanting can be heard in the dining room when the last dish of each course is served. The tangible décor is described, noting detailed menu cards and, in one case, dated décor, wilted flowers, and white film on glasses, which annoyed this guest. Despite this review, the space, as a whole, is reviewed as inviting and peaceful due to the style and table spacing.

Greater insight on Per Se's atmosphere is gained through the analysis of its Tripadvisor reviews, which indicate that the restaurant's dining area encompasses a modern yet classic elegance, perfect for celebrating important occasions. This elegance is not carried over to the Salon, however, where there is no view and, according to one reviewer, there are no tablecloths over the leather-topped, riveted tables that are cold to the touch. Aside from the unsatisfactory emotion evoked from the Salon, the main dining

room is tastefully decorated and beautifully designed with an open fireplace and delightful views of Central Park, Columbus Circle, and Columbus' statue from the windows. Additional items contributing to the atmosphere are the printed – and often customized – menu cards as well as the sight of the busy kitchen.

Between the two restaurants, both have remarkable views, multiple spaces for guests to explore, and a lack of reviews on scent and touch. Where the two differ is in the theme and quality of all the spaces available to guests. Azurmendi outshines Per Se in this respect.

### Food and Beverage

The structure of this section will again follow the instrument, including theme, senses (translated to food and beverage as presentation, smell, taste/flavor, and texture), and evoked emotions. Azurmendi's food and beverages are by far the most popular topics in both its Yelp and Tripadvisor reviews. Its food from start to finish is a delicious culinary journey, thoughtfully curated to represent the theme of an innovative approach to Basque cuisine that is enhanced with creative and well-executed pairings. The food experience incorporates dozens of unique, mouthwatering, filling, and memorable bites. The visual presentation of the meals is artistic and beautifully crafted, and the size of the small bites are described as cute. The smell is only noted once, detailing herb oil as aromatic. Taste and flavor are the most prominent food and beverage features, yielding the greatest variety in opinions. The vast majority of guests agree that the food tastes delicious and fresh, packed with complex and well-balanced flavors (briny v. sweet, decadent v. refreshing, etc.) reminiscent of Basque and influenced by other regions of the

world. The outliers claim the flavors of some dishes to be good but not mind-blowing, flat rather than inventive, and too salty. Some guests also pointed out that certain dishes did not appeal to their personal preferences, yet were appreciated, nonetheless. The flavors, in combination with texture, are said to be harmonious and unexpected, such as avocado mousse and anchovy Mille-Feuille (French pastry). A variety of textures are utilized through ingredients and cooking techniques, including creamy, foamy, crunchy, icy, tender, and gelatinous textures. Guests' impressions from the food and beverage offerings ranged from impressed (with layered food and wine flavors and the number of courses) to dissatisfied (with certain courses and improper cleaning of lobster).

Comparatively, Tripadvisor reviews observe the inventive nature of the food and the skill of its execution and identify the amazing and delicious quality. The theme, again, is said to be a balance between traditional Basque cuisine and cutting-edge creations of chef Atxa's unique style. The presentation is stunning and artful; the taste is unique, fresh, and alternating (i.e. bitter and sweet); the flavors are playful, intense, and focused; and the textures are widespread. As previously noted, few reviewers expressed complaints, but those who did felt as though there were no stand-out courses and there was a disappointing quantity of wine in the tasting. Additionally, those with negative comments on food mainly disliked food items due to personal preference. These Tripadvisor reviewers acknowledge several new emotions evoked from the food and beverages: joy, appreciation, surprise, fascination, as well as overwhelming options, exhaustion from so many courses, and sadness of the meal's end. Overall, Azurmendi's food and beverages are the stars of the dining experience at Azurmendi, as they are the

most praised elements of the dining experience at this establishment. Thus, the food and beverage standards that Azurmendi has implemented are effective.

Per Se's food and beverages received ambivalent Yelp reviews. The tasting menus, overall, are recounted as outstanding and delicious, yet there are several criticisms in this category as well. The food is presented well, displaying skill and detail, and while smell is only mentioned once, it is notable to point out the delightful aroma of a box of truffles received by a guest. The taste, flavor, and texture are where customer opinions differ. Flavors range from rich to tender and are generally complementary. One reviewer described one of the dessert courses as too sweet and two reviewers noted different dishes as boring or nothing special. As far as texture, most concur that each dish is perfectly cooked, such as the moist fish, although there have been complaints about having grains of sand in a vegetable dish, a hard brownie, and an unpleasant gooey texture of persimmons. The overarching emotions of the customer reviewers are delight, satisfaction (especially of the wine offerings and pairings), a pleasant sense of being overwhelmed with options, sadness when courses end, and dissatisfaction of portion sizes (considered small portions by several and filling portions by others). Also, French cuisine is served but there is no documented theme to the food and beverages otherwise.

Similar to the Yelp reviews, Per Se's Tripadvisor reviews portray widespread opinions: some say Per Se's food and beverages are overrated, and others say they are worth the hype. Once again, no consistent theme can be determined by the reviews. Positive remarks about the food and drink include the "memorable," "delicious," and "heavenly" combination of taste and texture enhanced by gorgeous execution. The flavors of the dishes, such as smoky, sweet, and citrusy, are both subtle and assertive,

surprising customers, and they are progressive, each dish complimenting the one prior. A handful of customers claimed certain dishes to be bland or not appealing to their preferences. Regardless, the signature Oyster & Pearl dish is highlighted as a favorite among many reviewers, along with the wines. Descriptions of texture are given for some food items, including buttery bread and flowy truffle macaroni and cheese. Presentation is also explained as graceful and artful, and one comment is made for smell: truffles lacked aroma. As previously discussed, Per Se's portions are small, leaving some customers dissatisfied while others find the portions to be ample. Likewise, a few Tripadvisor reviewers felt disappointed and unimpressed with their meals, though the vast majority of reviewers felt joyful, gratified, celebrated, and wishing for more lovely flavors.

In comparing Azurmendi and Per Se, the former is perceived as innovative, whereas the latter is traditional. Both restaurants have great flavor profiles in addition to well-executed textures and presentations, according to most of the analyzed customer reviews. The primary difference between the two restaurants is the portion sizes. Azurmendi's portion sizes are larger than Per Se's.

In conclusion, both Azurmendi and Per Se are close competitors. On Yelp, Azurmendi (31 reviews) outranks Per Se (1,653 reviews) by an average of half a star, out of a five-star system. On Tripadvisor, Azurmendi (1,211 reviews) and Per Se (1,829 reviews) have four and a half points each on a five-point scale.

## Chapter 4

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Through elevated experience design, Azurmendi and Per Se deliver unique, fine dining experiences that provide guests with opportunities to relax, indulge, and create delightful memories. This concluding chapter includes the following: a discussion of the findings, limitations of the research, conclusions based on research questions, and recommendations for the future.

#### Discussion

Azurmendi and Per Se are quite effective in employing service standards with consideration of DINESERV and cues and touchpoints. It is important to note that the reliability of service at each restaurant is not largely commented on because both restaurants have pre-set menus, which usually do not require altering, so the food is almost-always served accurately. Azurmendi's serving staff is recognized for strong assurance, exceeding guests' expectations by not only being professional but also affable – a quality typically found in more relaxing work environments, like diners. Interestingly, even though Azurmendi's service is excellent, it is the least effective category of its experience design. This says a lot about how well the restaurant meets the standards for atmosphere and food and beverage. At Per Se, the service is personalized, influencing its guests' willingness to return. Both restaurants implement a variety of cues along the customer journey, such as meeting the chefs, that ultimately make the experiences worthwhile and memorable for guests.

Despite the general effectiveness of service, both fine-dining, Michelin star restaurants waiver in responsiveness due to mixed reviews on the timing of service. There were multiple complaints about each restaurant stating that some courses were rushed while others were too slow. These comments, though few, significantly impact the effectiveness of the service at these restaurants. Fine dining establishments are held to high standards where guests expect perfection, especially considering the price they pay. In the DINESERV model, the difference between the customer expectations and perceptions of responsiveness is a gap. Since this gap has been identified, it can be addressed and closed in order to improve customer experiences (Stevens et al., 1995). The dining industry can improve by analyzing what customer expectations are and designing around those expectations to create successful experiences. The industry may similarly implement Bastiaansen et al.'s (2019) emotion-based theory by designing each touchpoint of an experience around desired emotions of the customers. It is recommended that Azurmendi and Per Se further develop systems that ensure precisely timed service every time to eliminate responsiveness gaps and achieve desired emotional responses from customers.

The atmospheric design practices of the two fine dining restaurants in this study achieve different levels of effectiveness. Azurmendi's use of tangibles and appeal to sight throughout the property are successful because they are representative of the restaurant's theme and are engaging to guests, respectively, evoking enjoyment among guests. Azurmendi also maintains a consistent theme and level of quality throughout its various spaces, which is important to achieve the desired atmosphere (Rebholz, 2019). Per Se's main dining room also attains its desired, peaceful atmosphere with the décor following

the modern elegance theme, and the aspects of sight enhancing the romantic mood of the restaurant. Unfortunately, Per Se does not uphold the theme, engagement through sight, and level of quality in its Salon and restrooms, leaving guests dissatisfied and therefore leaving room for improvement on this front. The engagement of the remaining senses was lesser discussed for both restaurants, the sound receiving a few mentions (primarily from kitchen activity in both restaurants) and smell and touch receiving even scarcer discourse. According to Meacci and Liberatore (2018), experiences are constructed by the interaction of all the senses, having the greatest impact on memorability. This underlines the significance of designing experiences to engage all the senses. The broader industry can learn from this that it takes more than stimulating one or two senses to leave an impression on guests' memories and impact their willingness to return for or recommend an experience. With this knowledge, it is recommended that Azurmendi and Per Se enhance their use of sound, smell, and touch to truly capture a multisensory experience that their guests will never forget. Additionally, Per Se is recommended to upgrade its Salon décor and restroom maintenance to match the quality of its dining room to better satisfy customers.

The food and beverage standards at Azurmendi and Per Se are similarly and, overall, effectively implemented. The presentation, smell, taste/texture, and textures, though different between the two eateries, received mostly positive feedback and delighted emotions from reviewers, although a handful of negative remarks about taste and texture resulted in dissatisfaction. The skewed reviews of taste and texture were primarily due to personal preference which, given the restaurants' willingness to change menu items to accommodate guests, can be easily avoided by guests asking servers to

alter dishes to their preferences. Despite the taste and texture complaints, Azurmendi and Per Se were complimented for the harmonious combination of the two senses. The main difference between Azurmendi and Per Se was in relation to portion size; a few of Per Se's guests were dissatisfied by the small portion sizes. This experience design aspect may be improved by adding a course to each of the menus or increasing the portion sizes of each of the savory, dinner dishes (dessert is apparently large). The food and beverage at both restaurants are based around specific themes, yet in comparison to their corresponding atmospheric design themes, they are vaguely related. As mentioned in the literature, the theme should be consistent in all elements of design to unify the experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). The industry can continue to excel by implementing this standard into all restaurants and their events. The restaurants are recommended to strengthen the relationship of their atmosphere and food and beverage, unifying the overarching theme to improve their customer experiences. It is also recommended that Azurmendi and Per Se regularly analyze customer responses to the senses that they engage, through focus groups or questionnaires, to ensure they maintain elevated sensorial standards of their food and beverage offerings.

With any study comes limitations. A couple of limitations that may have impacted the outcomes of this study are the use of strictly online materials and the personal biases of Azurmendi and Per Se's reviewers on Yelp and Tripadvisor, which the results are based on. Additionally, the researcher has a few biases that may have impacted the study as well. First, the researcher's work in food service may have impacted their opinion of the service aspect of fine dining because they understand that working with customers and meeting their expectations can be difficult at times. Second, the researcher has a

curiosity and love for food that may have impacted their view of the menu offerings because they are inclined to think more highly of food items that are unique or new to them. Finally, due to the economic status of the researcher, the pricing of the fine dining restaurants may have influenced their perspective of them since the restaurants are not affordable to the researcher. Pricing, however, is not an element of the experience design discussed in this study, so the researcher did not focus on price as a contributing factor to the restaurants' experience design. To avoid implementing these biases, the researcher took the data at face value and checked their work to ensure there was no misinterpretation.

The fine dining, three-Michelin star restaurants, Azurmendi and Per Se, boast various accolades due to their experience design practices that set them apart from their competitors. These two restaurants are committed to shaping experiences that are thoroughly enjoyed by guests and are cherished as memories for years to follow. Despite already achieving considerable standards, this study has identified areas for improvement in experience design for both restaurants. The standard practices of Azurmendi and Per Se, as well as the recommendations provided for their improvement, may be applied to the industry for benefit throughout the field.

## Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Azurmendi and Per Se's service standards are reliability, timeliness, and personalization with expectations of staff to be knowledgeable and courteous.

2. Azurmendi and Per Se utilize principles of sight and sound engagement and design themes.
3. Azurmendi and Per Se implement presentation, taste/texture, and texture standards of their food and beverages.
4. The service standards of Azurmendi and Per Se ensure that guests are cared for, that guests' needs are met, and that guests leave with a positive impression; however, both have an inconsistent speed of service.
5. Azurmendi and Per Se's views, dining décor, and sounds evoke positive emotions among guests (while their smell and touch are underplayed), and Azurmendi exclusively maintains a consistent theme and quality of design elements.
6. The food and beverages at Azurmendi and Per Se stimulate the senses and positive emotions through beautiful, delicious, well-prepared, and balanced dishes.

### Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The dining industry should identify customer expectations and intentionally design experiences to meet/exceed those expectations.
2. The broader industry should stimulate all five senses of each guest to prompt the creation of memories that lead guests to return for or recommend the experience.

3. The industry should set a standard of cohesion among all experience design elements relating to a single, unifying theme.
4. Azurmendi and Per Se should develop tailored service systems to ensure precisely timed service for all guests and eliminate their responsiveness gaps.
5. Azurmendi and Per Se should enhance their use of sound, smell, and touch to capitalize on the benefits of multisensory experiences and provide guests with unforgettable experiences.
6. Per Se should upgrade its Salon décor and restroom maintenance to match the quality of its dining room to better satisfy customers.
7. Azurmendi and Per Se should strengthen the relationships of their atmospheres and food and beverages, unifying the overarching theme to each improve their customer experiences.
8. Azurmendi and Per Se should regularly examine customer responses to the senses of their food and beverages to ensure that they maintain sensory engagement.
9. For future research, it is recommended to analyze a variety of materials, aside from online review websites (such as articles or interviews).

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## APPENDIXES

Appendix A

Instrument

<b>Category</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b><u>Service</u></b>		
Reliability (Accuracy)		
Responsiveness (Speed & Knowledge)		
Assurance (Courtesy)		
Empathy (Care)		
Cues/Touchpoints		
<b><u>Atmosphere</u></b>		
Tangibles		
Theme		
5 Senses		
Evoked Emotions		
<b><u>Food</u></b>		
Theme		
Senses (Presentation, Smell, Taste/Flavor, & Texture)		
Evoked Emotions		