Searching For the Extraordinary Meal Experience

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To deliver or experience high quality food and outstanding service in a restaurant is important for both restaurateur and guest, but today this is not enough. While a restaurant's reality often includes fierce competition and poor economic conditions, many of its guests expect an extraordinary experience in the restaurant. It is not clear what makes up such an experience. With a multi-disciplinary approach, we studied strategically chosen meals and restaurants in order to identify significant factors. The findings suggest five interrelated dimensions along which an extraordinary meal experience can be characterized and distinguished from, for example, other meal experiences such as fast food and canteen meals—motivation, expectation, interaction, involvement, and satisfaction.

To many people nowadays, a restaurant is not only "a place where, for a fee, one may dine away from home" (Pillsbury, 1990, p. 225), but much more than that. High quality food and outstanding service are generally thought to be two important elements of someone's pleasurable dining out experience (e.g., Baker, 1986; Campbell-Smith, 1967; MacLaurin & MacLaurin, 2000). This is no longer enough, however, especially not for those who perceive their dining out meal to be an experience out of the ordinary. McAlexander and Schouten suggested that such an extraordinary experience to the restaurant guest is "one that yields feelings of personal growth or triumph, involves emotional intensity, [and] is uniquely memorable ..." (1998, p. 381).

Even so, many restaurant establishments go bankrupt—nothing they do seems to guarantee success. To increase attraction, many try to develop a position in the market based on something unique. Often this competitive advantage is hard to keep, but some enterprises have been extremely successful, such as the ones highly ranked in Guide Rouge because of their outstanding food quality, or those with excellent locations, either geographic or man-made, including The Peak restaurants in Hong Kong (see www.thepeak.com.hk/dining.htm), or the one in the Eiffel Tower in Paris (www.tour-eiffel.fr), neither of which is famous for its food. There are establishments built on a celebrity reputation, such as Robert De Niro's chain of several restaurants, Jennifer Lopez' Cuban style restaurant in California, or Michael Jordan's restaurants in Chicago and Washington. Some other victorious restaurants are famous because of their restaurateur, chef and/or design. "Japan goes crazy over its Iron chefs, the United States boils over with the likes of Bobby Flay, Ming Tsai, Wolfgang Puck and Jean-Georges Vongerichten, while Britons worship wok-wizard Ken Hom and the mockney cockney 'Naked chef', aka James Oliver" (South China Morning Post, 2002, p. 1). Many Americans have heard about, or visited, the exclusive and probably most expensive US restaurant, Ginza Suchi-Ko, or are familiar with the names of chef and restaurateur Alain Ducasse (www.alain-ducasse.com), or restaurateur and designer Terence Conran (www.conran.com/eat).

Imitators can copy certain restaurants that try to differentiate themselves from others in a major way. For example, certain thematic restaurants like the nature-based Rainforest café (www.rainforestcafe.com), or those inspired by music and film—Hard Rock Café (www.hardrockcafe.com) and Planet Hollywood (www.planethollywood.com). Similarly replicable are restaurants with other themes, such as the Singapore-based Houses of Mao (e.g., www.poole-associates.com.house-of-mao1.htm) with a political theme, and futuristic MARS 2112 (www.mars2112.com) in New York. Or there are restaurants with no particular theme, such as the Canadian bistro Chives, located in a former bank, which just claimed that it offers "extraordinary casual dining" (ATV World, 2002a), or The Naked Oyster in London, Ontario, that has been described as "a little more unique—now we have a good concept, a great chef, and something unique" (ATV World, 2002c). A third example is the Indian restaurateur in Vancouver who claimed that his new restaurant meant not only food but a kind of entertainment—"being inside will give a feeling of being outside" (ATV World, 2002b).

Despite their reputations, none of these examples present the customer with what Pine and Gilmore (1999, p. 35) would call "the richest experience," that is, the combination of educational, escapist, entertainment, and esthetical experience aspects. "While guests partaking of an educational experience may want to *learn*, of an escapist experience to *do*, of an entertainment experience want to—well, *sense* might be the best term—those partaking of an esthetic experience just want to *be* there" (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, p. 35). However, to capitalize solely on the notion of an experience without having a deeper understanding of what an experience is about can be an expensive lesson. Many have misjudged the nature of experiences, which has resulted in failures, soon after the novelty of the concept wore off (Gupta & Vajic, 2000). Indeed, "Many operators seem to have a scant idea of what a good restaurant experience is" (Graham, 2002, p. 3).

It is argued here that it is not enough to focus on satisfaction when assessing customers' meal experiences. Customers may be satisfied with a Happy Meal at McDonald's but only a few would call it an experience. It is merely a matter of contentment. The customers do not really think much about it and are not very involved. They passively respond to what is on offer and their visit to this fast food establishment can be characterized as a functional service with focus on the result (satisfied hunger). Preferably, a meal experience should be associated with feelings of pleasure and ought to be remembered; it could be something new or something extra which surprises and makes the customer say "WOW!"

Pine and Gilmore (1999) suggested that companies stage an experience whenever they try to engage customers. Other defines an experience as the "take-away impression formed by people's encounters with products, services, and businesses—a perception produced when humans consolidate sensory information" (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994, p. 8). One can also experience something extraordinary when it offers absorption, personal control, joy and value, a spontaneous letting-be, and a newness of perception and process (Czikszentmihalyi, 1991). According to Arnould and Price (1993) an extraordinary experience is characterized by high levels of emotional intensity, and is triggered by unusual event. Due to this novelty and the desired intense emotional outcomes the customers have vague expectations (Arnould & Price) as they do not know what consumption alternatives produce them.

It is hard to predict behavior in an extraordinary context. The individual customer may expect high service quality, excellent food and beverage quality together with quality interpersonal interactions in a nice atmosphere. The performance of the personnel, the behavior of the dining company as well as of other customers are all important for the atmosphere (Baker, 1986), but emotions are subjective and fluctuate across individuals and social situations; it is hard to forecast if a visit to a restaurant will result in an extra-ordinary experience or not. It has also been argued that all depends on the customer's interactions with different elements of the setting created by the service provider as the customers and the service provider together create a unique and memorable experience (Gupta & Vajic, 2000). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to find what salient features of services make up an extraordinary meal experience for a customer. This will be done by comparison of the characteristics of expedient meal experiences with extraordinary ones. The empirical basis for the study is constituted by eighteen commercial lunch and dinner meals experienced during nine days in Hong Kong—the culinary capital of Asia (Sinclair, 2002). Following Finkelstein (1989) most of the restaurant settings where these meals were experienced can be categorized as either amusement, fête spéciale, or convenience establishments.

THE MEAL EXPERIENCE

The Offering

Any meal experience is the outcome of a co-production between restaurateur and customer, that is, the offer is as vital as the individual who receives it. Below we will first briefly discuss various meal experiences based on the offer and economic value and, second, concentrate on identifying certain consumer behavior characteristics proven to be of relevance in other studies on extraordinary experiences, but equally interesting in the present context.

Economic Function

The lines between goods and services in general and between functional meals and extraordinary meals in particular are blurry when it comes to the offer. The offer at a fast food establishment and the offer at a special occasion can differ in fundamental ways, for example, in economic value and in customers' responses. Pine and Gilmore (1999) made valuable distinctions between commodities, goods, services, and experiences and showed how successive offering creates greater economic value. They argued that "even though every restaurant delivers tangible food, offerings are not standardized but rather delivered on demand in response to an individual patron's order. While fast-food restaurants lie closer to the realm of goods than others, economists are not mistaken when they count those employed at MacDonald's, for instance, in the service sector" (Pine & Gilmore, 1999, p. 8).

Nature of Offering

Services are characterized by their intangible nature. A main function is the delivery of food and beverage. This feature is particularly shown in fast food restaurants where the service component is marginal, especially in take-away and drive-through situations. Thus, the aim of fast food restaurants is to deliver a high quality standardized and mass-customized meal. The establishments that try to offer extraordinary meals and experiences have to offer something more. For example, a good memory: "A dish should be remembered.... If a guest

doesn't remember anything, then I have gone wrong" (http://www.alain-ducasse.com/accueilus.htm). Service quality, price, the guest's company, and atmosphere are other essential factors, according to Andersson (1990).

TABLE 1
The Offering and the Customer

	Expedient Meal Experience	⟺	Extraordinary Meal Experience
Offering			
Economic function	Deliver		Stage
Nature of offering	Tangible and intangible		Memorable
Key Attribute	Standardized or customized		Personal
Method of supply	Served on demand		Revealed over a duration
Factors of demand	Benefit		Sensation
Customer			
Nature of occasion	Frequent/common		Infrequent/unusual
Main motive	To satisfy hunger		Mental stimulus processing
Expectations	Well-developed expectations. Scripts based on experience guide actions		No clear expectations No distinctive scripts can guide actions
Emotions	Low emotional intensity		High emotional intensity
Involvement	Non-absorption, low involvement, Familiarity and low degree of challenge		Absorption, high involvement, High degree of challenge
Social context	Interpersonal interaction unnecessary		High degree of interpersonal interaction
Satisfaction	Contentment		Delight

Key Attributes

Customization is often mentioned as a key attribute for services but standardization is probably a more correct way to describe some of the fast food or canteen meals. An offer is standardized when the outcome is consistent from provider to provider, from customer to customer and even from one time period to the next (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). A Big Mac is a standardized meal while a customer-tailored pizza or hamburger is a mass-customized one. Due to its standardization, the value of a Big Mac can be compared across the world with the help of the *Economist*'s Big Mac Index. When the offering is mass customized, the establishment prepares individually designed products on a mass basis to meet each customer's requirements (Pine, 1993). To offer an extraordinary meal experience, on the other hand, is to go one step further compared to standardization or a customization. These experiences are events that engage individuals in a personal way (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

The Method of Supply and Factors of Demand

The method of supply varies between different meals. Fast food and canteen meals are delivered on demand. The customer knows exactly what to pay and often know what to get based on previous experiences. An extraordinary experience is revealed over duration. The customer is never sure what the outcome will be due to context, behavior of other customers, and unclear expectations (Arnould & Price, 1993).

The factors of demand look different when comparing fast food and canteen meals with experience oriented meals. Fast food and canteen meals give the customer benefits—it is quicker, more convenient, and cheap. An experience meal is a matter of sensation. According to Pine and Gilmore (1999) it is not enough to wrap experiences around a restaurant's existing offering; instead experiences have to be staged. Also they have to be refreshed continuously. Staged meal experiences, such as those in Planet Hollywood and Rain Forest Café have problems to get loyal customers. The first visit can be delightful with surprises and result in something memorable, but after revisits the customer knows exactly what to expect.

THE CUSTOMER AND THE NATURE OF THE OCCASION

According to Arnould and Price (1993), hedonic consumption such as experienced by customers in a restaurant has been largely ignored by consumer researchers. However, other researchers have discussed extraordinary experiences, and it is commonly agreed that these are defined partly by their opposition to what is ordinary and part of everyday life. Prominent among the researchers who typically discussed the relationship between extraordinary experiences and ritual are van Gennep (1960 [1909]) and Turner (e.g., 1967, 1969, 1974a, b). Their work provides a useful basis for understanding also the meal experience. Similarly, it is helpful to borrow the discussion from more recent research with the same emphasis but with focus on tourism, for example, Graburn (1983), Jafari (1986, 1987), Lett (1983), Moore (1980), Passariello, (1983), and Wagner (1977).

Following van Gennep's classic work, Graburn characterized tourism not only as someone's physical movement away from home, but as a way for human beings to get necessary breaks from their ordinary lives in a 'non-ordinary' world. He claimed that tourism is a kind of modern ritual, and its structure is "basically identical with the structures of all ritual behavior" (1983, p. 12), meaning that tourism is structured into three phases: the first being 'separation,' which signifies the individual's detachment from everyday routine life, and second is the 'margin,' where the individual has left his or her ordered world behind and crossed over the threshold to something else, and the third 'aggregation,' when the passage is already consummated.

The liminal phase means that a structured everyday life becomes transformed into an undifferentiated state of communitas—"a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state [and] no status, property, insignia … indicating rank or role. Liminal entities are not here nor there; they are betwixt and between" (Turner, 1969, 94f.). The spirit of communitas surfaces from shared experiences, which act as proofs that man does not live by bread alone—communitas involves a shared flow (Turner, 1977).

Likewise, Jafari discussed the differences between everyday life and tourist life—not between 'structure and anti-structure' as was done earlier, but between the 'ordinary' and the 'non-ordinary.' "The ordinary is comprised of the mundane, profane, daily life whose procession loses strength due to its ordained rhythmic course; while the nonordinary is the heightened position resulting from the departure from the ordinary ranks" (1986, p. 4). Jafari leaned upon Turner's discussions about ritual and integrated two additional components in the model he presented, instead of the three previously discussed by Turner, Graburn and others – Jafari identified five important phases of the experience: 'corporation,' 'emancipation,' 'animation,' 'repatriation,' and 'incorporation.'

The first component, 'corporation,' is composed by "substances and conditions which incubates the motivation for travel to an outer zone" (Jafari, 1987, p. 152). Together with the next component, 'emancipation,' the basis for the tourists' mobility is formed—the tourists are distancing themselves from the ordinary. According to Jafari, the 'animation' phase, that is, when the tourists have reached their destination, means "a life of nonordinary flotation" (1987, p. 153), where the 'non-ordinary' becomes the new reality for the tourists. Crick called this "to be without commitment, to be anywhere rather than somewhere" (1989, p. 332; see also e.g., Pfaffenberger, 1983). The tourists are outside social time and space in an "archetypal free area … in which a different time and a different kind of social life are experienced" (Wagner, 1977, p. 46). The fourth phase of Jafari's model is the 'repatriation'—the return to the ordinary platform. 'Incorporation,' the fifth and last phase, signifies the total absorption into 'ordinary' life again.

In the above discussion there seems to be a common agreement about a clear distinction between everyday and leisure, home and away, structure and anti-structure, the familiar and the unknown, as well as between what is ordinary and not. This division is based on temporal and spatial notions, and therefore the discussion is easy to resemble a tourist's experience with the meal experience. The expedient kind of meal experiences represents the ordinary, while any extraordinary meal experiences take place in an outer zone away from everyday life.

Main Motive

Closely related to the above arguments is the debate around travel motives. Therefore, when it comes to the restaurant customer's motive, again the basis for the discussion is borrowed from tourism research. Already in 1977, Dann argued that tourists' reasons for traveling primarily are reactions to anomie (i.e., escape from feelings of isolation and meaninglessness), and ego-enhancement (i.e., desire for higher social position). Four years later Dann also ensured that the 'escape' motivation dealt "with tourist motivation per se" (1981, p. 191). This was supported by the thoughts of, for example, Cohen and Taylor (1992), Leiper (1984), and Turner and Ash (1975).

Iso-Ahola (e.g., 1980, 1982, 1983, 1989; see also Dunn Ross & Iso-Ahola, 1991; Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987) examined pleasure and recreation travel as psychological experiences and has influenced the discussion around travel motivation in a major way. In 1980 he suggested that "both approach (seeking) and avoidance (escaping) components are present in leisure motivation in general." The escaping and seeking that Iso-Ahola continuously discusses are "two motivational forces…: (1) the desire to leave the everyday environment behind

oneself, and (2) the desire to obtain psychological (intrinsic) rewards through travel in a contrasting (new or old) environment." Iso-Ahola explains that tourists go on holiday because this behavior "provides certain intrinsic rewards, such as feelings of mastery and competence, and helps them leave the routine environment behind themselves" (1980, p. 258).

It is possible to conclude two important things from this short review of the early debate. First of all, the importance of the escape motives which means that the tour constitutes a necessary break from everyday life for the tourist, while the seeking motives imply that tourists look for something they have not got at home. Second, it seems reasonable to assume that the motive for a meal experience is not only a matter of either/or, but is more complex than that. This is also noted by Ryan (2000), who claimed more recent research that follows Ragheb and Beard (1983) suggests that motives also have intellectual, social, competence-mastery, and stimulus-avoidance components, all of which may be regarded as continua between high or low level of need.

Expectations

Motivation is linked to expectation. All can agree upon that restaurants are delivering food and beverage and the customers evaluate whether the products and services have met their motives and expectations. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) described different types of expectations in terms of restaurants and showed a continuum, ranging from high to low. They illustrated five types or levels of expectations, named each and demonstrated what it might mean in terms of what restaurant the customer is considering. At the highest level, the customer holds "ideal expectations or desires" (e.g., everyone says this restaurant is as good as one in France and I want to go somewhere very special for my anniversary). Next, the customer has normative "should" expectations when, for example, declaring the restaurant's high prices and says, "It ought to have excellent food and service." Another type of expectations is experience-based norms. In this case the customer can compare with earlier visits and know what, for example, the service is like when it is busy. The fourth type is acceptable expectations when, for instance, the customer expects to be served in an adequate manner. Low expectations at the bottom in the continuum are the fifth type called minimum tolerable expectations. In this case the customer might expect terrible service but come because the price is low and the location is good.

In fast food and canteen meal experiences a customer often knows what to expect and the performance of the product and service is normally within expectations. The customer has a script, which means the customer's knowledge structure, and that is associated with the visit to the restaurant in this case. For example, the customer expects to queue up, wait, order, pay, carry a tray, take a seat, put away trash, and leave the establishment quite quickly. Another sort of knowledge structure is a schema that includes organized collections of beliefs and feelings that a person has about objects, ideas, people, or situations. Most people have a schema for an à la carte restaurant that includes beliefs, feelings, and attributes of such an establishment. In the case of an extraordinary meal experience the customer probably has neither script and nor schema. The customer does not know what to expect, or something surprising happens that the customer did not imagine beforehand.

Emotions

Momentary mood was one of the particularly persistent factors in relation to consumption of services, early pointed out by Belk (1975). It has not been discussed as an explicit consumer behavior variable for long, but according to Gabbott and Hogg (1998) mood is both a volatile and dynamic consumer characteristic, which can hold the key to understanding the variation in guest behavior—when someone enters a restaurant both the state of the environment and his or her state can affect behavior (see e.g., Bell & Meiselman, 1995, p. 293). Finkelstein (1989) claimed that there are different restaurants for different moods, and various fashions of dining out. Various moods may be, for instance, feelings of frustration, anger, harmony, arousal, or pleasure—all feelings that can be positive or negative and, or course, positive and negative within the same experience.

There can be various reasons for being in the mood for an extraordinary experience, but "simply being with other people generally improves a person's mood significantly, regardless of what else is happening" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, p. 251). Gabbott and Hogg claimed that, "we can surmise that consumers in positive mood would seek to engage in congruent behavior" (1998, p. 89). This is in line with Bitner (1990), who suggested that due to discrete incidents in the service encounter someone's mood changes. For example, details of décor become the representation of human emotions— "they summarize the mood we expect to enjoy while dining out" (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 3).

Involvement

Involvement refers to someone's perception of importance or personal relevance (Antil, 1984), or interest and pleasure evoked within a situation (Gabott & Hogg, 1998). One can distinguish between cognitive and affective involvement. The former is "heightened thinking and processing information about the goal object," while the latter means "heightened feelings and emotional energy" (Arnould et al., 2002, p. 400). Both cognitive and affective involvement can be viewed as key factors for reaching an extraordinary experience.

Czikszentimihalyi (1997) maintained that in a flow experience a person's attention is completely absorbed by the activity or the goal object, that is, a complete involvement of the actor during his activity. To achieve flow, the individual must have a clear goal and a sense of whether progress is made, as well as skilled performance. The two dimensions that distinguish flow experiences are level of skill and challenge. When both dimensions are low the experience is perceived as boring but when both are high the customer perceives the experiences as relaxed. Thus, for most people fast food and canteen meals are probably not flow experiences since the level of challenge as well of required skill are low, while extraordinary meal experiences instead can be associated with flow since they are activities that fully engage the individual.

Social Context

It has been suggested that an experience is the outcome of participation in a set of activities within a social context, and as such, it needs to be conceptualized and studied in relation to these activities and the social context in which it occurs (Gupta & Vajic, 2000). According to the same authors, the "context stands for the physical setting, particular selection and

arrangement of products, the world of objects and social actors, and the rules and procedures for social interactions with other customers and service facilitators" (Gupta & Vajic, 2000, p. 34).

Many have argued the importance of other customers in the experience (e.g., Peter et al., 1999; Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). This is particularly so when the individual's motive is pleasure or indulgence, and when considerable time is spent in the restaurant environment (e.g., Mossberg, 2001). According to Aubert-Gamet (1997) the environment has both physical and psychological dimensions (see also e.g., Baker, 1986; Belk, 1975; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). The latter dimension can be divided into two parts that both affect the experience—the macro (concerning culture, subculture or class) and the micro, including social interaction between smaller groups of people, such as, family and other reference groups. Likewise, the importance of social context in the meal experience is acknowledged, that is, "food is never 'just food' and its significance can never be purely nutritional" (Caplan, 1997, p. 3).

Restaurant personnel often play a significant role in any meal experience. In a similar vein, Peter et al. (1999) recognized the importance of eventual companions in the experience. The companions can be intimate friends and family with whom someone dine, or other unknown customers in the same restaurant. "Sharing a meal is a pleasurable leisure activity but it is also a performative act through which diners both construct a narrative of their individual identities and are able to develop contingent knowledge about each other" (Valentine, 1999, p. 169). Mennell et al. even claimed that a joint meal creates and maintains social relations, and signifies togetherness (1992, p. 115). However, food and meals are not only self-relevant in this particular way, but important parts of general socializing. Askegard and Madsen (1998) argued that food possibly defines social situations. Eating "may be a means of facilitating inter- or intra-group socialization" (Crompton & MacKay, 1997, p. 426). Lockwood and Jones claimed that the food itself may be of "less importance and the restaurant has become a place of entertainment and to be seen" (2000, p. 172; see also Beardsworth & Bryman, 1999).

Satisfaction

Baker and Crompton (2000) suggested that the degree of satisfaction is related to if expectations are correctly or better met by experience or if its outcome is worse than expected. This suggestion echoes Oliver (1996) who said that, "satisfaction is the consumer'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" (p. 13).

In general, today's research points out that customer satisfaction is influenced by specific product or service features (fulfillment of expectations) as well as by customers' emotional responses, attributions, and perceptions of equity (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). Different emotional response modes, such as contentment, pleasure, delight, and relief might all be described as satisfaction (Oliver, 1996). Contentment is a passive response and is characterized by low levels of emotional arousal (Arnould et al., 2002). This type of response is common when customers are not particularly involved, which is often the case when consuming fast food meals. When customers have a pleasing sensory experience at a restaurant they may have a pleasure response—the situation makes them happy. In this case, the customer confirms

expectations and has moderate to high arousal, and most likely high to moderate involvement as well. Satisfaction as delight occurs when expectations are not only met but exceeded, or has another positive outcome that the customer did not expect. Delight is often the result of discovering pleasurable surprises (Rust & Oliver, 2000), like when the presentation of the food and drinks is fantastic, the dining company is something else, or the atmosphere is fabulous.

METHOD

To further pursue the objectives of and questions raised in this research, we studied some of Hong Kong's numerous restaurants. The reason for the approach is simple. Not only is the best Chinese food eaten in Hong Kong's restaurants (South China Morning Post, 2002), but there are establishments of various sizes and popularity. The many types of restaurants include the Hong Kong ones, other Chinese or Asian, Western, and themed ones, not counting the endless numbers of fish-ball stalls, alleyway 'daipaidongs,' and takeout joints (Dewald, 2002; see also e.g., Andersson, 1988; Andersson & Andersson, 1979).

Finkelstein (1989) suggested three main categories in which she placed various types of restaurants—(a) the 'parodic' and 'bistro mondain' type of restaurants of the amusement category, (b) the 'formal' and 'informal' fête spéciale establishments, and (c) the 'café mundane,' the 'fast food chain,' and the 'local ethnic' in the convenience category. She also discussed their respective atmospheres. For example, in the 'parodic' kind of establishment the guest will be "lifted out of the ordinary and deposited in the stylized atmosphere and theatrical setting ... designed in such a way that it requires the patron the enact a theatrical role ... there are no authentic artefact displays in these mock ups, rather, one commonly finds iconic representations of recent manufacture, such as imitation pewter tankards, imitation brass fitting, polymer-brick walls, nylon fish nets hanging from the ceiling and so on" (Finkelstein, 1989, pp. 77f.). The other kind of restaurant in the same category (the 'bistro mondain') shows a décor that is "fancy and delicate: the light fitting is Venetian glass, the wallpaper is embossed with an elaborate pattern, there are massive gilt mirrors on the walls, the tablecloths are stiff and white" (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 81).

The 'informal' and 'formal' restaurants are characterized by cost and reputation. To dine in an informal fête spéciale restaurant is not necessarily to savor the foodstuffs "but to satisfy other social aspirations—it is to use the restaurant's reputation and status as a means for self-enhancement" (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 72f.). The formal fête spéciale establishment is often smaller, usually with an impressive interior, and it earns its reputation more directly from its cuisine even though style seems more important at times.

In the convenience category Finkelstein put three kinds of restaurants—the 'café mundane,' the 'fast food chain,' and the 'local ethnic.' The first claims a higher status that the others, but compared to many other restaurants both status and cost is much lower. Finkelstein claimed that often décor and food do not correspond in a 'café mundane,' and its cuisine can be advertised in a hybrid menu (1989, p. 85). The 'fast food' chain' type of restaurant is easily recognizable because of décor and architecture. The most common type has a single or limited menu. The 'local ethnic' restaurant is usually small in size with only a few tables.

According to Finkelstein, it does not offer a distinctive décor, but still the customer perceives the atmosphere as friendly.

The study was undertaken during a period of nine days in September 2002, during which nine lunches and nine dinners were eaten. The basic reason for our meals was that we needed to eat two meals a day beside breakfast. In this respect we were daily consumers (Wang, 2002). However, we were also day-off consumers, since our eighteen meal experiences included a free choice of both food and restaurants. In this sense the meals were de-routinized—some of them took place in restaurants, others were merely take-away, or snacks eaten in a hotel room. Also no distinction was made between meals during weekdays and weekends, or between work and leisure, which meant that any meal could have happened during any of the nine days. When, where and what were merely a matter of coincidence. Parallel to this we could be considered to be vacation consumers, since our meals were free from constraints (Wang, 2002)—for example, neither time nor cost of each meal was important.

The final choice of food and/or establishment was influenced either by recommendation (8), invitation (2), or convenience (8). Colleagues and friends stood behind both recommendation and invitation therefore it was reason to trust their quality, while convenience was a choice of our own. Table 2 shows that most meals were eaten in Kowloon (14), only three in Hong Kong island and one in New Territories. The cost and social context for each meal is also revealed in the same table. The cost per meal and person ranged from HK$ 15 to 280—an average of around $70. Most meals were eaten together with colleagues of various nationalities. The chosen restaurants have been categorized following Finkelstein's suggestion (1989), even though a new category recently was heard of—"casual chic" (ATV World, 2002d). Beside the two snack meals in the hotel room, nine were eaten in what she considered to be convenience establishments ('local ethnic' [5], 'fast food chain' [2], and 'café mundane' [2]), four in amusement restaurants ('parodic' [2], and 'bistro mondaine' [2], and three meals in restaurant of the fête spéciale type ('formal' [1], and 'informal' [2]).

THE TWO EXTRAORDINARY MEAL EXPEREINCES

Two meals out of the eighteen in this study were perceived as extraordinary experiences. Wang suggested that for consumption to reach that level, "either the object of consumption or the mode of consumption must be unusual, atypical in the sense that the object and the mode of consumption are new or scarce in daily reality" (2002, p. 290).

The first of the two was a lunch that happened during day four. The choice of restaurant was based on recommendation from a Chinese colleague. This colleague told nothing more than that it was a question about having lunch in a "Japanese restaurant alley" in Kowloon; therefore, we had no special expectations. Upon arrival, it became clear that the food that was served in the several 'bistro mondaine' types of establishments was a fusion between Chinese and Japanese kitchens. The same Chinese restaurateur owns other such restaurants. Typically the customer did not know in which of the restaurants he or she would end up—the main issue would be to find the alley. Then the customer will be advised (based on a queue number system) where to sit. The menu is identical in every restaurant, and the same two kitchens— one warm and one cool—serve all of them.

TABLE 2
The Eighteen Meals of the Study

	Reason for Choice	Location	Type of Setting (after Finkelstein, 1989)
1. lunch	convenience	Dai pa dong, Mong Kok, Kowloon	'local ethnic'
2. dinner	recommendation	Restaurant, Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon	'local ethnic'
3. lunch	recommendation	Floating restaurant, Aberdeen, HK Island	'parodic'
4. dinner	convenience	Food court restaurant, Mong Kok, Kowloon	'café mundane'
5. lunch	recommendation	Campus restaurant, Hung Hom, Kowloon	'local ethnic'
6. dinner	invitation	Hotel restaurant, Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon	'informal'
7. lunch	recommendation	Restaurant street, Tsim Sha Tsui East, Kowloon	'bistro mondaine'
8. dinner	invitation	Hotel restaurant, Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon	'formal'
9. lunch	convenience	Hotel restaurant, Shenzhen, Lo Wu	'informal'
10. dinner	convenience	Restaurant/take-away, Mong Kok, Kowloon	'fast-food chain'
11. lunch	recommendation	Restaurant, Tsim Sha Tsui East, Kowloon	'local ethnic'
12. dinner	recommendation	Restaurant, Central, HK Island	'bistro mondaine'
13. lunch	recommendation	Restaurant, Hung Hom, Kowloon	'parodic'
14. dinner	convenience	Restaurant/take-away, Mong Kok, Kowloon	'fast-food chain'
15. lunch	convenience	Restaurant, Stanley, HK Island	'café mundane'
16. dinner	convenience	Supermarket, Mong Kok, Kowloon	
17. lunch	recommendation	Restaurant, Hung Hom, Kowloon	'local ethnic'
18. dinner	convenience	Supermarket, Mong Kok, Kowloon	

Each restaurant seemed to give the same intimate feeling, even though some of them have several rooms. The many small square tables (often put two or three together) and diminutive stools were wooden and brown, not too comfortable. There were no table clothes, but instead simple paper plate mats printed with Japanese cartoons decorated the tables. Further decoration around the restaurant included various trinkets of no particular theme and numerous brown sake bottles on shelves, and hundreds of hand-written red rectangular paper menus with one side dish written on each (as a complement to the more detailed menu we were presented at the table) hanging everywhere, as well as framed and glassed newspaper

TABLE 2 (continued)
The Eighteen Meals of the Study

	Menu	Social Context	Price HK$/pp
1. lunch	Unknown		18
2. dinner	Vietnamese	HK Chinese colleague	60
3. lunch	Dim sum	HK Chinese colleague	43
4. dinner	Japanese		70
5. lunch	Dim sum	HK Chinese colleague	52
6. dinner	International Birdsnest	25 international colleagues	-
7. lunch	Japanese	HK Chinese & Japanese colleagues	80
8. dinner	13 courses wedding meal	Approx. 300 guests, mixed nationalities (incl. HK Chinese)	-
9. lunch	International		202
10. dinner	Hamburger		20
11. lunch	Korean	Japanese colleague	50
12. dinner	Sichuan		280
13. lunch	Japanese/ Cantonese	Japanese & HK Chinese colleagues	100
14. dinner	Pizza		43
15. lunch	Italian/American		168
16. dinner	Snack		25
17. lunch	Japanese/ seafood/ Cantonese	Philippine, Japanese & Sri Lankan colleagues (+ family of the latter)	115
18. dinner	Snack		15

clippings all over the walls. Fishnet covered the ceiling. In the net there were hundreds of paper fish on which earlier customers had written messages and their names. We did the same. It did not take long to decide about what to eat, nor for the food to arrive to the table. The porcelain was all beige; only the sushi and sashimi were served from a pale wood tray. The food was really good, and the portions were abundant. Therefore, doggy bags were required and delivered without objection. The cost for this lunch was approximately HK$ 80 per person. The atmosphere in the restaurant was relaxed and a bit noisy, which is usual in Hong Kong.

Likewise, the second extraordinary meal experience (day six) was in a 'bistro mondaine' establishment according to Finkelstein's typology (1989). But it was quite a different kind of meal experience that started even before we reached the restaurant. By word-of-mouth we heard about this restaurant that had no name outside, no signs at all, a hidden entrance in a small street, a long waiting list for a table, and no choice of menu. Since the time for study was limited, there was no chance of waiting, but after a pleading phone call we were able to make

a reservation for a couple of days later. The dinner cost HK$ 280 per person, of which 250 must be paid via bank beforehand to ensure our participation—a demand that we willingly accepted. Right from this start we felt chosen by the restaurant.

A waiter outside the restaurant door met us upon arrival. He checked our names against a list and the door opened. A few steps led to the small restaurant (a total of 2,500 square feet) floor where we could see six tables with white linen table cloths—two round and four rectangular—and black uncomplicated chairs. Altogether there was room for approximately 40 eating guests. Some modern lamps and spotlight were enough to give a pleasant and subdued atmosphere. The walls were painted gray. On one of them there were three huge oil paintings, whereas another wall was decorated with four lithographs. The décor on a third wall was four large framed photos.

The restaurateur, the chef, and the waiters, were from the Chinese province of Sichuan, as was the cuisine. It is the combination of flavors that makes Sichuan food so complex and fascinating— "sour, sweet, fresh and the amazing combination of hot and mouth-numbing specialties" (Nelson, 2002, p. 3). The dishes rely on Sichuan peppercorns that grow in the mountains in the western part of the province. In combining them with hot chilies your mouth becomes both numbed and blasted—"making vindaloo taste like nursery food" (Nelson, 2002, p. 3). Thirteen courses were served on white porcelain; four starters, eight main courses, and one dessert. The four first courses like the last were tasteful and well presented, while the eight in between were extremely hot.

A physical menu is a key factor in any food-service establishment. For example, Kreck (1984) argued that regardless of the status of a restaurant the menu must always be the focal point. It also serves as a vital link between the operation and the guest, that is, a well designed menu can lead someone to the items that the restaurant prefer to sell. In a similar vein, Kivela (1994) claimed that the menu is a tool for communication, marketing and merchandising, as well as for business and production. Equally, Miller (1992) suggested that the menu is the ultimate profit center of the restaurant (see also e.g., Loman Scanlon, 1999). In the Sichuan restaurant a rather impressive wine list was distributed before the meal, but no physical menu presented the various dishes. Instead, the waiters did this orally; however, not until the dish appeared on the table and was tried. This kept us curious—we kept waiting for the explanation. Most of the guests preferred beer or water with their meal, and a few had brought their own wine—the corkage fee was HK$ 150. When the meal was over, the chef, who is a trained opera singer, came out of the kitchen to socialize with the guests. Thereafter, she entertained by singing melodramatic Chinese opera during which the waiters quietly distributed the bills. Soon after, all guests left at the same time because the restaurant expected 40 new ones later the same evening. In all, this meal experience was not allowed to last longer than 2.5 hours.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to define the salient features that constitute an extraordinary meal experience for a customer, through comparing the distinctiveness of expedient experiences with those that are extraordinary. On the basis on eighteen meal experiences it is concluded that five inter-related dimensions best distinguish the extraordinary experience from the expedient one—motivation, expectation, interaction, involvement, and satisfaction. The two first are

related to the stage before the actual experience, the two next to the phase when it is taking place, and the fifth dimension to the outcome. In Table 3 these dimensions and the characteristics of the two extraordinary meal experiences are set forth. Both experiences were perceived as extraordinary but as such were also different. If we use a continuum with the expedient meal as one pole and the extraordinary meal as the other, the two experiences that we categorized as extraordinary are located near that pole—close to each other but not entirely overlapping.

TABLE 3
The Dimensions of the Extraordinary Meal Experience

Dimensions	The Extraordinary Meal Experience
Pre-consumption	
Motivation	De-routinization of consumption (i.e., atypical object and mode)
	Seeking/Escape
Expectation	No script
	Curiosity
	Capacity to act
Consumption	
Interaction	Being part of the production
	Opportunities for action
	Recognition
Involvement	Absorption
	Familiarity
	Emotion
Post-consumption	
Satisfaction	Surprise
	Pleasure
	Enjoyment
	Memorable

Pre-consumption

Seeking to satisfy hunger may be a sufficient description for an expedient meal experience, such as the quick snacks and the take-way meals that were included among the eighteen meals in the study. At the lunch and the dinner that resulted in extraordinary experiences, the main motive to satisfy hunger faded away rather quickly and was at least in part replaced by a wish to escape from ordinary routine for a while. Hunger constituted but one element in the two extraordinary meal experiences. More important was that the consumption was atypical. "Peak consumption is in a sense characterized by surplus consumption. ... what people consume exceeds their level of survival function ... its orientation, a tendency that is linked not to the functions of the satisfaction of elementary needs but to the quest for peak experiences" (Wang, 2002, p. 287).

Earlier in the text the nature of occasion was discussed based on ritual theory—a discussion that is intimately linked to the one about escape motivation. Not only did the two of us find our experience atypical and out of the ordinary such as for tourists, but also Finkelstein recognized the resemblance between the characteristics of the tourist experience and the nature of the extraordinary meal experiences. As an example, she argued that in the restaurant "the individual need feel no sense of accountability nor of personal history ... the restaurant as an institution offers all its patrons a sheltered anonymity within which there is ample opportunity to assume whatever roles and postures the individual may desire" (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 14).

The Sichuan restaurant was an attraction due to its different concept with the absence of marketing, including no outdoor signs except the discrete waiter, even though this restaurant has a name. The matter of not only prior reservation but also advance payment made us curious, as we had never come across that before in a restaurant context, even though it is a common procedure when making bookings for lodging and transport.

After the payment we got a confirmation and information that we had to be there at 7:00 pm and leave at the latest 9:30 pm. At this moment we felt ourselves "selected" customers, but also talked about the risk of being cheated. We wondered about who the other customers might be, and about the design of the restaurant. This is what Arnould and Price (1993) described as expectations and feelings about the experience, the personnel, other people, safety, comfort, emotions, and the setting. Before arriving to the restaurant we were psyched but also little worried, as we had no distinctive script to guide our actions. One of us said: "In the worst case we can always leave."

Two colleagues suggested and accompanied us to the Japanese place, where we encountered the other extraordinary experience. Also this restaurant was a challenge, as we could not choose which of the restaurants in the alley to be seated and served in. We were curious when going for lunch in this different setting but at this time not so worried, compared to the Sichuan place. Still, we did not have scripts about how to behave but we were able to ask our accompanying colleagues about non-anticipated matters. In both cases we did not know what to expect, but due to these challenges our expectations were high.

Consumption

Scapp and Seitz (1998) suggested that eating out could serve the leisure function of seeing and being seen in public, perhaps also being entertained by others. The other customers present in the two restaurants affected the outcome of our visits in this respect—there was no room for feeling misplaced.

In the Sichuan restaurant we felt like being invited to someone's home, as it was neither possible to choose from a menu nor possible to combine ingredients our own way. Instead, like every guest in the restaurant we were served the multiple-course dinner. All the activities enhanced a sense of belonging and helped every guest to create a feeling of being a recognized family member, which in turn made our experience personal.

The personnel provided the service by explaining the procedures and encouraged customers to engage in both activities and social interactions. They helped all customers to learn by doing during dinner, which enabled us to acquire the appropriate norms for this particular setting. The way the personnel took care of the bill was unusual; it seemed like money was something unnecessary as we were "almost their private guests." The restaurateur did not want be involved with any direct money transaction himself, which he accomplished first, by asking for certain advanced payment, and, second, by telling us to "just leave money on the table."

Gupta and Vajic (2000) claimed that an experience involves learning during the consumption time when the customer interacts with different elements of a setting created by the service provider. During these interactions the customer and service provider jointly create the unique and memorable experience. In the case of most themed restaurants, design stimulates senses of smell, sights, and sounds, but the customer does not participate in the context creation. This means that the restaurants entertain in various ways while the customers eat and drink, but due to the lack of customer participation they have problems to get repeat visitors. The Japanese and Sichuan restaurants had a detailed understanding of the nature of all activities that possibly could engage a customer during visit.

All the Japanese restaurants in the alley are usually extremely crowded. Our perception of these establishments goes in line with what Tse et al. found (2002) about crowdedness. Tse et al. showed that when customers perceive a restaurant as very crowded, they would attribute the high level of crowding to superior food quality, good restaurant image, and low food price. The alley area and its Japanese restaurants were intended to cater for large crowds. If the customer was aiming for a particular one of the many restaurants and another was relatively empty, the customer was immediately escorted there instead. If all of them were full the customer would be entertained in a comfortable reception area with bar and television while waiting for a table. The Japanese setting as a whole was designed to engage the customers by learning (e.g., by putting the menu together), interacting with others, and taking active part in decorating the restaurant.

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1997), effort is required to accomplish a goal and that effort demands the individual's capacity. We were fully occupied with eating, discussing the various courses, comparing previous experiences with Japanese and Sichuan food, and analyzing the concept during our meal experiences. Both of them meant that we were highly involved, both cognitively and affectively, and both were so-called flow experiences. The involvement peaked; our attention was completely absorbed by the activity. Skills and challenges were at their maximum and we felt a high degree of pleasure during these activities. Flow experiences are normally associated with extreme sports (Celsi et al., 1993) but these meal activities equally engaged us 100 per cent during the consumption time. This echoes Cohen (1983) who argued that involvement is similar to an individual's activation level at a particular moment of time.

Post-consumption

Even though both experiences are difficult to copy by others or somewhere else, they were quite different from each other. Beside the respective restaurant's particular location, size

and décor, also the service and the food in each were special. In the small Sichuan restaurant the food was perceived as being exceptional; too much and too hot even for a trained stomach. Thus, the meal itself, which was the most expensive of them all, did not create the extraordinary experience for any of us, but the perceived secrecy, the familiar interaction with the personnel, and the tasteful integration of different elements in the restaurant generated the experience. In the alleyway Japanese restaurant the food was excellent with its cross-cooking style, innovative presentation, and overwhelming portions. The service was perceived as good, but not remarkably so. Despite having the same menus and kitchens, the setting was unique with several restaurants in one alley—obviously trying to attract a lot of customers. The meal was perceived as good value for money.

Eating experiences brings excitement to life and is considered a means of improving oneself (Lupton, 1996). In both restaurants the performance evoked a combination of joy and surprise, that is, what has been called delight (Oliver, 1996). In the two settings the delight response involved outcomes that we as customers did not have any, or very vague expectations about. Both of the meal experiences included mixed, strong feelings of excitement, curiosity, joy, and surprise. These feelings were not isolated to any special phase of the experience, but developed first during the pre-consumption phase to blow up later during consumption. In the evaluating post-consumption stage these feelings added to our contentment and were drivers of delight. This supports Price and Arnould's (1995) argument that feelings of happiness, pleasure, and a sense of warm-heartedness enhance customers' satisfaction. The satisfaction that we felt due to our unexpected or surprisingly pleasant extraordinary meal experiences both had the capacity to delight and were able to add beyond what was expected (see Rust & Oliver, 2000, p. 87).

Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2000) used the concept 'memorable experiences' in their book about new service development. Due to high involvement in our two experiences, our attention will increase to what Arnould et al. (2002) called 'the stimulus object,' that is, the particular restaurant setting, and our memory is therefore further enhanced, even though we will not return to either restaurant. Maybe it is just as well, because "experiences fade with repetition … self-illusory hedonism is always seeking novelty, uniqueness and adventure" (Gabriel & Lang, 1995, p. 107). For the restaurateur, our lack of interest in return patronage may be unimportant, because in retrospect we keep talking to others about our two extraordinary meal experiences.

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