

Contemporary dining room professionals: towards a “hip” style of hospitality identity

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ABSTRACT: Interest in having an occupation that connects with consumption practices of taste has increased in the contemporary creative economy. In addition, the restaurant scene in Sweden as well as globally has recently been moving towards a casualisation of high-quality restaurants, which presents new questions about how to understand and practise the work in restaurant dining rooms. The study focuses on dining room professionals working in an evolving culinary restaurant scene, with the purpose of investigating them and their search for sense in contemporary restaurant venues. We use identity perspectives and hospitality as concepts to understand how the professionals create meaning in their work through interviews with professionals working in a subset of restaurants in Sweden. With such an emphasis, this study identifies a certain culinary hospitality identity that needs creative spaces, social exchanges and the idea of authentic materiality to make sense of the restaurant work. In contrast to the way dining room work has traditionally been pictured, this article shows that the industry needs to understand hospitality professionals who put their own authenticity in the foreground, which also guides their choices about where to work and how to perform in these contexts. This also helps the industry to become more attractive, as it is in a vulnerable position after the coronavirus pandemic.

KEYWORDS: authenticity, creative economy, culinary identity, restaurant work, service work, taste

Introduction

In the last decade, interest in having a job as a waiter/sommelier (Scander et al., 2019; Wilson, 2019), cocktail bartender (Ocejo, 2012), artisan barista (Lee & Ruck, 2022), café professional (Cameron, 2018), or nightlife worker (Threadgold et al., 2021) has increased. This is partly because interest in the consumption of food and drink has increased as a lifestyle and identity project (Johnston & Baumann, 2010) and because individuals want to work with something close to their own interests (Wilson, 2019). In the creative economy, service professionals not only serve guests, but also contribute to the ambiance and the cultural and aesthetic production through their interest in the work subjects (Ocejo, 2012; Farrugia et al., 2018; Threadgold et al., 2021). More precisely, these jobs often have meaning beyond earning a salary, as they allow individuals to be part of a social context that supports both the production and consumption of cultural and aesthetic properties (Featherstone, 2007; Ocejo, 2017; Scott, 2017). While these service positions contribute to a growth of economies, the workers “contribute to the creative economy by reinterpreting traditionally low-status occupations as respectable professions” (Ocejo, 2010, p. 184).

This study's context of inquiry is the Swedish restaurant industry, which has increased in prestige since the 1980s, when a Swedish restaurant was mentioned in the *Michelin Guide* for the first time (Jönsson, 2012), and due to political investments in branding Sweden as a culinary nation (Neuman, 2018). Gourmet restaurants in both urban and rural areas have improved

their offerings to attract visitors through skilful networking with related businesses (Manniche & Sæther, 2017; Walter et al., 2022). Before COVID-19, the hospitality industry in Sweden was evolving, and pointed to the development of small-scale restaurants that specialised in certain products, and to a need that the professionals' knowledge provided through hospitality be prioritised to meet the guests' curiosity and knowledge (R&D Fund of the Swedish Tourism and Hospitality Industry, 2018; VisitSweden, 2020). Despite industry developments, there is still only a limited amount of research related to Swedish gastronomy from the perspective of dining room professionals and their sense-making practices of hospitality. This study's ambition is to contribute to narrowing this gap in knowledge by looking into restaurant dining room work in an evolving culinary area.

In this article, we focus on the professionals' sense-making processes of restaurant dining room work in contemporary restaurant settings. These venues offer cultural and aesthetic experiences that differs from the way it is set out in traditional high-end restaurants (Muller & Woods, 1994; Canziani et al., 2016; Parsa et al., 2020). While high-end Michelin-starred restaurants have been seen to lead gastronomic development and have had a high impact as cultural “taste makers” (Lane, 2010, p. 494), a new group of restaurants has started to grow. These restaurants, while casual in dining style, serve high quality products and employ professionals that are passionate and informed about culinary knowledge. As such, they also have the purpose of being tastemakers (Pearlman, 2015; Ocejo, 2017). This has been described as a casualisation of high-end restaurants, where the

ambiance is less formal and communicated through the décor in the room, the food served and the relaxed dress codes and service interactions (Fine & Demetry, 2012; Finkelstein, 2014; Pearlman, 2015). From a dining room perspective, while being up-to-date and knowledgeable, the professionals tend to utilise relaxed but logical service styles to maintain the casual ambiance (Halawa & Parasecoli, 2019). These restaurants serve simple, easy-to-share menus and charge lower average bills (Del Moral, 2019).

In this "hip" environment (Lloyd, 2010), Threadgold et al. (2021) have called for the importance of studying the work in these venues as it differs from the traditional service work that has been examined before. Instead of being scripted and routinised (Seymour, 2000), the critical point in these settings is to express authenticity and for the professionals to "be themselves" (Threadgold et al., 2021, p. 1017). This raises new questions about hospitality as a dining room work practice. While hospitality studies tend to focus on the transaction of food, drink, or accommodation, or the logical hospitality interactions between host and guest (Lashley, 2017), we would rather follow Lugosi (2008) and Hemmington (2007), who call attention to the social settings in the creation of hospitality experiences. We argue that, in these contemporary restaurant venues, there are specific ways in which the dining room practices are presented, and they thus require a certain personality to embody this "vibe" (Poulston, 2015; Telfer, 2017).

While this contemporary restaurant culture is starting to become established, reflections regarding the provision of service and hospitality have been overlooked, which is what this study seeks to partially rectify. Thus, the purpose of this article is, from a hospitality and identity perspective, to explore dining room professionals and their search for sense-making and meaning in their work in contemporary restaurant venues. The focus is on hospitality expressed through the professionals' own beliefs, not primarily the historic hospitality of reciprocity, but hospitality conditioned on self-realizations and pleasure.

This article first positions hospitality in restaurants and then briefly reviews hospitality studies about genuine hospitality practices. Thereafter, identity in relation to gastronomy and taste is described. The methodology part is described, followed by a discussion of results. The article then argues for the existence of a certain culinary hospitality identity that has an important role in the understanding of dining room work and for the development of the restaurant industry.

Finding hospitality in restaurant service

On a general note, restaurant work could be portrayed as a practical and technical craft (Eriksson et al., 2020) where emotions need to be well managed (Leidner, 1999; Seymour, 2000; Genc & Akoglan Kozak, 2020) and hospitality expressed through one's heart (Poulston, 2015). Yet, hospitality in general tends to be conflated with the process of service, although these concepts diverge in the sense that the former relates to a philosophy, or spirit, embodied in a person, while the latter corresponds to a process that values the commercial transaction (Hemmington, 2007; Golubovskaya et al., 2017; Telfer, 2017). From that perspective, dining room professionals provide hospitality if their actions are genuine; if they are hospitable (Lashley, 2015); and if they are not forced, scripted and routinised with the only intention being to make profit (Ritzer, 2007; Pezzotti,

2011). However, as dining room work involves guests paying for the meal experience, the act of hospitality is to some degree always built on an exchange. This kind of hospitality is defined by Derrida (2000) as conditional hospitality, meaning that a kind gesture is given with an expectation of reciprocity. From that stance, hospitality can be genuinely acted even though it is paid for, yet it might be difficult to provide it in every moment, as these establishments often experience rush hours, which might force the workers to focus only on the service delivery (Lee & Ruck, 2022).

The meaning of genuine hospitality practices

Everyday mundane service interactions have the potential to be hospitable experiences if the professionals' agency is genuine (Poulston, 2015; Telfer, 2017). For example, in the case of third-wave coffee baristas (Lee & Ruck, 2022), knowing what kind of coffee the regulars usually order, prioritising conversations with regular guests and recognising them shows genuine interest in others and thus adds hospitality to the casual interaction. However, having the time and commitment to be genuine presumes a work environment that allows for this to take place. Tomasella and Ali (2019) underpinned this in their study of small family restaurants, showing that the size of the restaurants and employing workers with like-minded values had an impact on how the hospitality could take place. Prioritising the passion for gastronomy together with others, both colleagues and guests, rather than the economic exchange, fostered an unpretentious "vibe" in these study restaurants. Having colleagues with similar beliefs was also identified as important in a study of hospitality artisans working with culinary products (Stansfield et al., 2020). In this study, the provision of hospitality was shown to go beyond the delivery of food, drink and/or accommodation, to instead highlight the sharing of knowledge and visions about sustainable development by questioning irresponsible exploitation of human capital and food waste (Stansfield et al., 2020). The value of the context, such as the restaurant, the products sold or the professionals' work, seems to be important in the creation of hospitality. Not directly linked to the concept of hospitality, but related to the interest of giving genuine service, is a study of cocktail bartenders showing how deeply rooted interests in the craft shape sincere interactions that are about teaching others about "good taste" (Ocejo, 2012). In this study, the work was argued to bridge a gap between production and consumption as the workers "communicate their values to customers, learn about their tastes and aim to influence them" (Ocejo, 2012, p. 656).

Understanding the context or agreeing to learn seems to be common to these studies, but this also means that the hospitality is conditional on these prerequisites. If one does not understand or want to learn to understand the social context, there is a risk that the hospitality cannot be experienced. Cameron (2018), in her ethnographical study of the café and bar culture in Melbourne, defines this selective way of acting as *hipster service*. She found that different service interactions were given to different kinds of guests because of the way the guests introduced themselves. For example, if a guest expressed knowledge about the restaurant culture, they would be met in a more genuine way. This way of interacting was argued to be an inhospitable hospitality, as the professionals behaved differently with different guests. Nonetheless, it could also be understood

as a conditional hospitality (Derrida, 2000) where the reciprocity is not about money, but about enjoying a sense of recognition as a professional and taking value in the fact that professional and guest share an understanding of the socially constructed idea of good taste.

Self-identity in the context of gastronomy

The actions that we undertake, which, for instance, could be about consumption practices and tastes, are performed in day-to-day living and give substance to the narrative of self-identity. From this stance, identity is social and lies in the individual's own hands to construct, yet is influenced by societal structures of socio-economic arrangements (Giddens, 1991). Self-identity, according to Giddens (1991), means that the interactions and choices are made as symbolic statements, to portray an image of ourselves. For example, making decisions about what to eat, whom to socialise with, or how to be at work is not a matter of how to act, but of who to be in the creation of our identities. For Giddens (1991), this view of understanding humans as a social phenomenon is a result of societal changes, where traditional social structures have been swept aside by new, fluid, globalised and institutionalised conventions. This means that we continuously construct our identities in reflexive projects between institutional changes and our own agency.

In hospitality venues, Lugosi (2014) has argued that the construction of identity is valuable both for hospitality organisations and for consumers in their performances of their own selves. Likewise, in terms of consuming taste, individuals surround themselves with specific people, specific food and beverages and specific settings to maintain a particular identity (Lugosi, 2013). In a study of sommeliers, for example, identity was argued to be created in relation to engagement in professional food and beverage pairings (Scander et al., 2019). Thus, as consumption of taste plays a central role in the formation of belonging of social groups (Bourdieu, 1984; Sloan, 2004) and in the creation of self-identity (Warde, 1994), restaurants are archetypical venues for the analysis of identities (Beriss & Sutton, 2007; Finkelstein, 2014). The symbolic values embedded in materiality, places and people are thus elements of the construction of identity, and therefore carry value for the analysis in this study.

Methods

Based on the purpose of this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted. This section describes the different parts of the methodological approach in this study.

Sample selection

The purposive sampling method was used with the inclusion criteria of professionals (i.e. waiters and sommeliers) working at restaurants in Sweden that followed the ongoing trend of valuing local, small-scale and organic ideas (Leer, 2016; Del Moral, 2019). The restaurants could be described as gastro pubs, wine bars, or bistros. Seven of these were in cities in the southern and middle parts of Sweden, and two restaurants were located in the countryside. These are restaurants that some researchers would refer to as hipster venues (Lapiņa & Leer, 2016; Scott, 2017; Murray, 2020; Threadgold et al., 2021).

The purposive sampling selection of respondents followed the principles of snowballing (Moser & Korstjens, 2018), which enabled us to recruit participants based on recommendations from previous participants. As the first author in this study is a dining room professional herself, the first respondent was recruited using her own network in the restaurant industry. The interviews captured conversations on hospitality stories, which facilitated the dialogue on relevant topics related to this study's purpose (Kitzinger, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This method of recruiting was inspired by the analysis of objectification practices by Liberman (2016), and studying participants with shared practices and their connoisseurship of taste (Manzo, 2010).

The interviews

A total of nine interviews were conducted between November 2020 and January 2022 during the period of the coronavirus pandemic. The interviews were done face-to-face and so the data collection process was drawn out. To direct the interviews on sense-making aspects, the interview focus was kept on the professionals' own experiences of restaurant work. This led us to use in-depth semi-structured interviews, since this method allows for an interpretative approach, but also enables the participants to elaborate on their own narratives (Mooney et al., 2016; Golubovskaya et al., 2017). In addition, this method gave the participants the leading role in the conversations and the first author then followed up with questions (Silverman, 2015). A semi-structured interview guide was established to support the conversations in different themes. Prior to the data collection, one pilot interview was conducted to test the design of the interviews and the relevance of the interview guide. After some adjustments, the interview guide was set with four themes related to the aim of the study and structured to emphasise the research context (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). The interviews started with the question "Describe your first entrance in the restaurant industry and how it has evolved" which captured the first theme of *work life experiences*. The conversation then proceeded, depending on their stories, and was guided by the interviewer to touch upon the following themes: *attractive characteristics of workplaces, ideas of service and thoughts about the future*.

After seven interviews were conducted, some saturation in the material was reached (Slevitch, 2011). Therefore, another two interviews were conducted to ensure that they did not provide any substantial new information that had not been uncovered before (Edwards, 2013).

Three of the participants identified as women and six as men. All the participants had been working in the restaurant industry for 10 years or more; two had started as chefs and then changed position, while seven of the nine had qualifications as sommeliers and worked in restaurant dining rooms. The participants were 25–36 years old. The conversations lasted for 70 minutes on average, were audio-recorded, and took place in a setting suggested by the participant, most often at their jobs or at a café. The audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim in Swedish and then translated into English by the first author.

Ethical considerations

Before the interviews started, the participants were informed about the research project, that their participation was voluntary and confidential, that they could cancel the interview at any time

and that privacy and confidentiality would be maintained by using pseudonyms and excluding information that could reveal their identities (Tracy, 2010). All participants gave informed written consent to participate and to be recorded.

Thematic analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted and was supported by the qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA 2020. In line with Braun and Clarke (2006), the aim was to search for patterns in the material, which led us to move backwards and forwards during the entire analysis process to ensure that identified codes, subthemes and themes correlated with each other and with the data set. We followed five of the steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), which meant that we first became familiar with the interview transcriptions, by reading and taking notes of ideas. In the second step, we approached initial coding and related the extracts to the codes and compared them with other codes and extracts. Third, the codes were classified into potential themes. In step four, we reviewed the themes with codes and the entire set of data (Table 1 for an example of the steps from code to theme), and thereafter, we started to shape a thematic map.

Finally, in step five, the themes were checked in relation to each other, and an overall story was identified by putting the themes together. This resulted in three themes with two subgroups each — a total of six themes — and the overall theme became *Culinary hospitality identity*. Figure 1 shows

TABLE 1. Example of the process from codes to theme

Codes	Subtheme	Theme
Regulars		
Conscious guests	Conscious guests	
Cultural clientele		Social exchange
Reading the guest		
Guests are not always right	Performing genuineness	
Service give and take		

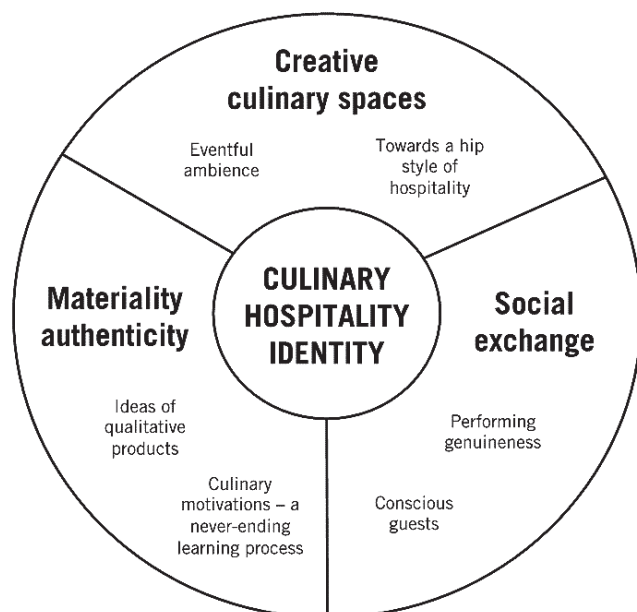


FIGURE 1. Map of the codes, subthemes and overall theme

the thematic map. The first author of this article performed the analysis, and the co-authors, to ensure trustworthiness, contributed insights, questions and discussions regarding the codes and themes, which then were repeatedly reorganised until we could all see a connection between the themes and the interview transcriptions. The co-authors contributed relevant and broad insights regarding the phenomenon based on their backgrounds in sociology, service marketing and culinary arts and meal science.

Results and discussion

The dining room professionals' sense-making in a contemporary restaurant context is represented by three central themes: *Creative culinary spaces*, *Social exchange and Materiality authenticity*, with the overarching theme being *Culinary hospitality identity*. These three themes are important for the professionals in their search for sense in restaurant work and are, as such, of value in the creation of identity. The themes interlink with each other, and together they give insights into how professionals in this contemporary restaurant culture can be understood. In this section, the results from the analysis are described with quotes from the interviews linking the themes to the data. The themes and related subthemes will be explained and discussed with theoretical perspectives presented in support.

Creative culinary spaces

The first identified theme is the spaces in which the hospitality interactions take place. As previously argued, the atmosphere plays a central role in the provision of hospitality, as it signals a certain "vibe" and thus the restaurant's style (Hemmington, 2007; Lugosi, 2014; Cameron, 2018). In this part, we will discuss how an *eventful ambience* and a *"hip" style of hospitality* are significant aspects for the professionals' choices of where to work.

Eventful ambience

An eventful ambience came to be important for the professionals' sense-making in their professional roles. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Olle got so bored with his current position as head sommelier at a restaurant with an older guest clientele (who due to COVID stayed home in quarantine) that he resigned. At the same time, a friend from another restaurant with a younger clientele offered him a position. This restaurant, which he described as lively and with good circumstances during the pandemic, gave him more room for creativity through the number of guests. The changing "vibe" during the pandemic also affected Anton's workplace. For him, the presence of the guests was a crucial factor in the atmosphere of the restaurant:

Like those simple bars where it's supposed to be fun rather than polished. There's not a large amount of cutlery being polished, but there is a lot of time and energy spent on creating a nice atmosphere. And then I think that it's crucial that it's at a suitable address. It probably doesn't work everywhere. A place like this isn't too nice if it's half empty — it's supposed to be full.

As shown in the quote above, a certain focus is placed on the "vibe", the atmosphere in the restaurant. As with Hemmington (2007), these "eventful ambiances" capture an understanding of where hospitality takes place — in vibrant spaces. It is not in the formal transactional service settings, where the value is put

on predictable service rituals like polishing cutlery or decanting in a traditional way, but rather in creative spaces where the guests and the professionals together contribute to a vibrant environment that welcomes unpredictable interactions. This differs from earlier arguments regarding restaurant atmosphere, for example, the Five Aspects Meal Model, which states that the ambiance is created based on four additional aspects (see Gustafsson et al., 2006). While this appreciation of working in restaurants with a more eventful ambiance was valuable for the professionals in this study, they also said that such environments were not manageable for everyone. Hence, it is shown that these culinary creative venues are suited for certain professional identities that emphasise the socialisation processes with the guests. Another aspect that created the eventful ambiance was described by Victor. In his workplace, the restaurant was structured without formal roles, which meant that the workers were simultaneously plating food, taking orders from guests and pouring beverages. He stated that this approach contributed to a relaxed ambiance where it was possible as a professional to "drift around" and "help others out when needed". Following the ideas of Giddens' (1991) understanding of identity, this relaxed approach of providing hospitality on the restaurant floor is characterised by the individuals' ideas of whom to socialise with and who to be at the job, which varies from interaction to interaction. Yet, this restaurant structure took time to get used to because of the absence of a formal manual to follow. As understood, the creative spaces facilitated an eventful ambiance and were reasons for professionals to apply for a job. In contrast to Victor's previous workplaces, and in line with the growing style of restaurants becoming relaxed (Pearlman, 2015; Halawa & Parasecoli, 2019), the hospitality in these locations could be acted out without strict service scripts (Gibbs & Ritchie, 2010). As will be described in the subtheme below, the dining room professionals were no longer interested in traditional or formal service manuals, as in the case of traditional fine dining.

Towards a "hip" style of hospitality

When the participants were asked to describe the concept at their current workplace, it often turned out to be a description of what the restaurant was not like. It was that of a restaurant with neither formal service, nor set menus, nor wine pairings. Frequently, the term *fine dining* was used disparagingly, as it was seen as limiting the freedom of interactions. One participant described fine dining restaurants and restaurants with Michelin stars as the "top of the pyramid" and as "the upper class" and noted that these restaurants governed the entire development of the restaurant industry. It was said that the traditional hierarchical system was maintained in these restaurants, which also fosters an identity that is built upon rituals of violence (Cooper et al., 2017). Several participants found this neither inspiring nor creative. Most of the participants had worked at fine dining restaurants, but got bored after a while, due in part to the predictable and restricted service framework (Halawa & Parasecoli, 2019). It was described as limited freedom in the profession, which Matilda expressed as a sold-out play at the theatre where you know exactly what your character is supposed to do during the entire serving. This shows how the professionals want their identities to be differentiated from the conventional service identity. The absence of scripts and predictable roles was thus valuable to the workers, as it invited expressions of their identities (Giddens, 1991) and was a means of self-actualisation

(Tomasella & Ali, 2019; Stansfield et al., 2020). This did not mean that the hospitality ambitions in the restaurant were secondary, but rather that they created a personal touch in the interactions (Poulston, 2015; Telfer, 2017). In contrast to the recurring mantra "to please the guests' needs", Annie described how she used her own preferences of taste to "perform" hospitality (Lugosi, 2013; 2014; Scander et al., 2019). At that time, she worked at a restaurant frequented by a lot of men in suits who behaved arrogantly and unpleasantly, and when they wanted to drink Chateaufort-du-Pape, she responded:

Why the hell would you drink south Rhône? It's much nicer with northern Rhône, I'd take a Côte-Rôtie instead." So, you kind of have to put them in their places a bit, as they then will listen to me better. We'll find a better wine, they'll have more fun and I'll have more fun.

This statement shows an unconventional way of providing hospitality by taking command over a situation using her knowledge of a specific wine district in a region. The hospitality becomes conditional (Derrida, 2000) on the workers' ideas of good taste. This has similarities to other studies showing how professionals want to learn and shape others' tastes (Ocejo, 2012; Cameron, 2018; Stansfield et al., 2020). As such, creative spaces constitute new ways of understanding the craft of being and working as a dining room professional. It is this expression of a genuine sense of service that has permeated the "hip" sense of hospitality (Cameron, 2018; Lee & Ruck, 2022), like searching for solutions that feel true to the professional and which in many cases violate the conventional rules of pleasing the guests' needs. Despite this (traditional) norm-breaking way of taking care of guests, these actions are driven by a passion regarding the products and the work in general and could therefore be understood as a kind of genuine hospitality (Poulston, 2015), perhaps with a more contemporary influence. This shows an expression of how precisely the breaking of traditional service style rules can increase the sense of hospitality by making the service more practical and more logical, so that it is simply more efficient, both for the guest and the dining room professional.

Social exchange

The restaurant guests were very important in the hospitality interactions, and what the professionals gave and took while meeting guests. This theme was informed by the subtheme *performing genuineness*, which shows how the interactions took form, and in the second subtheme, the value of interacting with *conscious guests* is reflected. Together the categories highlight the importance of social exchanges.

Performing genuineness

The first subtheme, *performing genuineness* has similarities to the previous subtheme, "hip" hospitality, but is here directed more to the social interactions. Rather than strictly following the dining room craft by the book, it turns out that the professionals performed in ways that felt genuine and practical. For example, Olle preferred to be outspoken, saying and doing what felt good in each situation, which he exemplified with the craft of decanting:

I've always been quite alternative in my language... which a lot of people aren't, and it isn't anything you're taught at restaurant schools. There...you're supposed to decant in a certain way, while there are many ways to decant. And whether you do it with a flashlight/torch

with the cell phone on the table, or if you're by the pizza oven, as the light is the best there, there aren't really any rules.

As illustrated by the quote above, rather than decanting in a more traditional way in front of the guests by pouring the wine into a decanter, Olle does what he feels is most impactful in the situation. This way of approaching the work duties has similarities to Lee and Ruck (2022), arguing that service transforms into hospitality when there are genuine feelings related to the practices. While this might break norms in the traditional craft, previous research regarding the sommelier's craft have shown that this kind of breaking of common rules gives space to be more creative and thus is a means of self-realisation (Scander et al., 2019). The example given in the quote above is time-saving in the work performance and thus gives more time for guest interactions and creates new ways of understanding the craft of being and working as a dining room professional. It is this expression of a genuine sense of service that permeates the contemporary sense of hospitality, like searching for solutions that feel authentic, which in many cases violate the conventional rules for good hospitality. This does not mean that the final product will decrease in quality, instead it can be understood as genuine behaviour, since the participant does what they feel is the most practical, given the situation (Lashley, 2015; Poulston, 2015).

However, being too passionate about the craft was also understood by the participants as a kind of inhospitableness. As described by Petter, dining room professionals sometimes tend to talk over the heads of guests by using pretentious and overqualified words to explain a particular wine. This is a manifestation of professionals being committed to the traditional practices of the waiters' craft as they do what is "right" according to the "textbook". Yet, instead of genuineness, it might be about impressing with service skills, which can risk reducing the hospitableness of the act (Lee & Ruck, 2022). Petter describes it as a maintenance of the distance between the host and the guest:

The formal script explanations for wine, injecting facts for the guest who then — you manipulate the guest with...and sometimes you have to do it, since you have a problematic guest, yeah — but then do it to avoid trouble. But maybe not talking too much about this wine tasting like forest berries, acidity or minerality, things that are hard for a normal guest to understand what the hell you're talking about. Instead, go more personal, personal references, and as I said, it's personal but the majority of the guests I've had think it's pretty nice. Having it more casual, and it leads to a more relaxed and better experience.

A genuine performance for Petter is using personal references as it gives recognition to the guest and reduces the distance between the guest and the professional. This demonstrates the ability to make knowledge easily accessible, which also emphasises genuineness. This was described as an important aspect to succeed in delivering hospitality and was achievable through reading the guests' levels of engagement and interest. For a professional to take command of a service situation and minimise the risk of pouring several different tasting glasses to a picky guest, the key was to use the "right" language and to scan the guest's commitment. The social exchange is thus important for the professionals to be able to carry out the work.

Conscious guests

Sharing values and beliefs with like-minded people was something that characterised the social exchange, and thus, guests who were conscious about food, beverages and dining experiences overall were more interesting for the workers. As will be described below, this shows that the interaction is conditional on mutual interest, and in Derrida's view, hospitality is also conditional on this premise. In the same way as Stansfield et al. (2020) argue that like-minded individuals are important for culinary creators' sense-making, the professionals in this study valued guests who were informed about food ethics and issues of sustainability, as it was easier to establish a social exchange with people with similar interests. For instance, when the guests knew what they were ordering and how to behave with, for example, sharing food, they also would have a better experience. This shows a desire for guests to be more knowledgeable about the dining experience, possibly having some kind of culinary capital (Naccarato & LeBesco, 2012) to be met in a hospitable way by the waiting professionals. As such, like Derrida (2000) argues, hospitality here becomes conditional, as guests who express commitment, knowledge or pre-understanding will receive better hospitality. This means also that professionals, in their actions, exclude a group of guests with less familiarity to the anticipated culinary rules. Thus, professionals act as a like-minded community, which enables them to produce their own taste preferences while meeting guests (Ocejo, 2012; Scander et al., 2019).

Regulars, too, gave meaning to the professionals, not only because of their genuine interest in what the restaurant had to offer, but in the sense that they share stories from each other's lives and follow their respective developments in life. Some interactions turned into friendships, and in one case a participant attended the funeral of a former regular. The "vibe" of the regulars was noted as one of the reasons to apply for a job. Several of the restaurants were in high-income urban areas with celebrities and people interested in culture, which was expressed as a strategic move to make valuable social contacts. This can be seen as a matter of belonging, as when there are interests in aesthetics and tastes that correlate between the professionals and the guests, it creates meaning in their jobs (Johnston & Baumann, 2010; Wilson, 2019). The social exchange is here expressed as being due to a kind of status, that what you as a worker get in return from the guest is recognition and a closer contact with this cultural world. As a result, there were some social codes that the guest needed to know to have a good experience:

I'm always tired of adapting to the guest; the guest also has to contribute a bit — it's a two-way street there. Some guests don't adapt at all. We've got people coming to us after we got a bib in the Michelin guide, and when we came first in Svenska Dagbladet [a Swedish newspaper]...and people come here and think it's a white-cloth restaurant. And then it can be quite satisfying putting them in their place. Kind of saying, "Welcome, now you're here, this is how it works," and if they don't want to adapt, they won't have a nice experience.

In the quote above, Olle points at the paradigm shift of what good hospitality at these restaurants is (Del Moral, 2019). Having been awarded with good reviews in influential guides and newspapers does not, for instance, mean that the restaurant style should be formal or traditional, or put the guest's satisfaction as

paramount. Instead, the guests must be more accommodating to the actual style of the restaurant. While a related case has been described as a "clichéd inhospitable snobbery of hipster [Melbourne] hospitality service" (Cameron, 2018, p. 45), it can also be understood as a conditional hospitality (Derrida, 2000). What the professionals in this study want to get in return is not primarily the monetary exchanges, but rather the exchanges of symbolic value to maintain identities and perform as the self (Warde, 1994; Sloan, 2004; Lugosi, 2014). As such, it is visible in this study that there is a process of change in how dining room professionals are expected to behave, where the reoccurring mantra "the guest is always right" loses power.

As for Annie, even though she acknowledges that to literally start fighting with guests is not pleasant for either party, it was important for her not to "grovel" for the guests. It is therefore possible to argue that hospitality does not come first for these professionals; rather, it is about gaining credibility for the professional role, which in turn will create authenticity. This form of judgement of how to provide hospitality is therefore understood to be identity driven. With recognition of the products, the guests' mutuality and the atmosphere, the dining room professionals make sense of their work duties. Therefore, the interconnection with the guests is of great importance. As shown previously, the guest of today is more experienced and more interested in gastronomy (Johnston & Baumann, 2010), and as such, we see how knowledge and recognition are more important than acting by the conventional rules of traditional dining room service.

Materiality authenticity

We assume authenticity in this study, like Smith Maguire (2018b, p. 60) saying that authenticity is negotiated through judgements of taste and, related to fine wine, authenticity is about "where a thing was made, how, by whom, when, under what conditions". From this perspective, the products used by the restaurants were noted to be significant for the professionals as this related to ideologies of a sustainable development. This was illustrated both by the professionals' choice of restaurants in which to work and in relation to interactions with guests. Knowledge and awareness of the products that the restaurants worked with was understood to be a good strategy for self-actualisation by teaching the guests about the products served. It was also described as a way for the professionals to develop their own knowledge, for example, by working with wide and varied wine lists. Restaurants having specific philosophies regarding the food and wine were among the reasons why the dining room professionals chose to work at certain restaurants.

Ideas for qualitative products

The selection of products to use in the creation of meals was important to the participants. That could be in the sense of an environmental sustainability, depending on which raw materials were used in the dishes or in the production of wine. The participants spent time describing the value of locally grown, eco-friendly products and small-scale production of food that worked to support a sustainable future. This can be seen as an expression of distance from conventional mass production and as conscious actions of consumption and production of specific cultural and aesthetic tastes (Featherstone, 2007; Ocejo, 2017; Scott, 2017). As such, the hospitality identity is here influenced by a vision of supporting sustainable alternatives. For instance,

the philosophy of wine followed the idea of natural wine by being small-scale production with as few additives in the wine production process as possible (Smith Maguire, 2018a), which Matilda described in terms of "lively" and "fun" wines:

So, we've worked with natural wine, as it's colloquially known, since the start, since it came to Sweden. It goes hand in hand with our food philosophy of trying to work on a small scale, close to the food producers, then also working as close as possible with the wine, but it isn't always fully possible. But still, having a wine list where we know who produces the wine, we know what methods they use. And wines we ourselves want to drink firstly. The Wave [name of the restaurant] is a bit punkier in that way, a bit more noise and party.

In the quote above, there is a kind of status expressed when describing natural wine. Using the words "since the start" when declaring the wine style preferred in the restaurant could be understood as a marking of consciousness of what was fresh and new in the market. Additionally, as examined by Smith Maguire (2018a), consuming and working with natural wine is an expression of taste that is distinguished from the masses, which is visible here when Matilda promotes working with wine that she herself wants to drink and be identified with. As such, being passionately into this wine world shows an expression of a certain culinary identity that creates a hospitality that is educative (Ocejo, 2012; Lee & Ruck, 2022). As expressed in the quote below, to teach others while working, it was important to be familiar with the components of the meals. In addition, to succeed in the performance of hospitality, it was important to know every detail of the components of the meals as well as of the wine. Even though all the information was not given to the guests in the first instance, it was important to have the knowledge if the situation called for it:

Being present is the most important thing, learning your stuff because you get, we've got a lot of weird stuff on the menu, and to know what it is. Menu briefing each day, regardless if it's the same menu. And the first weeks I needed to write down things about what the hell is on the menu. What's a vadouvan-butter? What's sumac? What's colatura? What is it on the menu? You're supposed to know it and know if it's gluten or lactose, know all the things like that.

In the quote above, Olle explicitly expresses how hard it is to know all there is to know, which exemplifies the need to articulate that working at these kinds of restaurants is not just about serving people. This emphasises the need for engagement and willingness of the dining room professionals to learn when working, and if they are in it for real, having to be committed to the products.

Culinary motivations — a never-ending learning process

Food, wine and other things related to meal creation were described as a reason to take the next step in the restaurant career and to choose where to work, with an additional emphasis on the wine. In terms of self-fulfilment, the restaurant's selection of wine was understood as a motivation and reason, like working at a restaurant with beliefs similar to one's own (Lugosi, 2014; Farrugia et al., 2018). One participant expressly declared that their current restaurant was chosen because of the collection of only natural wines that the restaurant had. This shows how culinary materials are symbols that form a part of a social

context (Rössel & Pape, 2016). In another case, the wine became a revelation of what the work as a dining room professional could include, which was also a reason why the next step in the career was made. Another participant started his career as a dishwasher in a champagne bar and then advanced to the dining room. Without any knowledge, he found champagne interesting and decided to dedicate his future to the world of wine by educating himself. In this case, the engagement and knowledge of wine became a part of his professional role and the formation of identity.

This identity formation through wine knowledge was noticeable among several participants and described as self-development. The endless amount of knowledge regarding wine in general was also understood as a driving force in learning more. Moving on, changing workplaces, drinking new wines and continuing to learn were consistent themes in several of the interviews. Likewise, the food had a great impact in the learning process, for instance, for Ebba, who had changed workplaces several times because of the differences in how to work with wine and what kind of wine was the restaurant's focus. From a restaurant with a winery, to set drinking menus, to being head sommelier, her current position was, however, as a dining room professional at a restaurant with a focus on locally produced meat. As with Ocejó (2012), we see how Ebba's interest builds on a process of learning, including through educating others in what she believes in, and how her narrative constructs her self-identity:

So, now, I'm back to the food part a bit more. Of course, the interest in wine is always there, they're connected in a way. I guess it's partly because I have a belief that I can be a part and contribute, or here I can learn something, or I want to be a part of this, and this feels so fantastic to be a part of bringing [this] to the guests.

Moreover, Ebba's genuine expression of wanting to learn, teach others and be a part of a community she believes in shows how this commitment and passion transforms into hospitableness (Lashley, 2015; Telfer, 2017; Tomasella & Ali, 2019). This illustrates how identity formation is an ongoing project, because when the participants learned more by exploring new restaurants, they also kept on forming their own contemporary hospitality identities (Warde, 1994; Lugosi, 2013; 2014).

To sum up, the discussion of results outlined above frames a current picture of what it means to work in an evolving restaurant scene, from the perspective of a dining room professional. The "vibe" in the venue, the social interactions and the materiality have been shown to be the most important aspects for the professionals in their own identity creation, which further responds to unconventional ways of understanding and practising hospitality.

Strengths and limitations

The methods applied in this study facilitate capturing beliefs by allowing a targeted sampling process that also relates to a specific restaurant context (Carter & Little, 2007). The Swedish restaurant industry, especially this contemporary restaurant culture, is quite small, which yielded a low number of participants, who in a number of cases were familiar to the interviewer. This could, of course, imply a biased sample, but we argue that this is mostly an advantage, since it simplified getting close and gaining trustful interactions with the interviewees (Choudhry,

2001). The small number of participants showed code saturation after seven interviews (Hennink et al., 2017). Two additional interviews were conducted to ensure saturation of the findings during the analysis (Tracy, 2010). Furthermore, the sample criteria for the professionals in this study facilitated investigating this evolving segment of the restaurant industry. This would not have been possible with a more general sample (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Etikan et al., 2016) of several types of restaurants, as all restaurant styles have different operational structures. The participants in this study work in different parts of Sweden, and at the same time work in similar types of restaurants. We regard the results from the interviews as representative for these types of restaurants independent of the restaurants' geographical locations. Moreover, this study's findings allow transferability into other restaurant segments (Tracy, 2010; Miles et al., 2014), as all restaurants include material, spaces and social aspects. Lastly, to avoid the biases of being an insider, as in the case of the first author (Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014), continuous discussions between the researchers were held. This helped the first author to be self-reflexive in her own interpretations and pre-understandings, by describing her readings and following up with input from the other authors. This was especially important during the analysis to gain trustworthiness and credibility in the process (Tracy, 2010). The insider perspective should also be seen as an advantage, as it allowed for gaining easy access and for a deeper understanding of the context, the participants and the industry language used by the professionals.

Conclusion

The culinary hospitality identity identified in this study is driven by three subthemes that show how the professionals' own interests and beliefs guide their choices about where to work and how to perform in a certain context. *Creative culinary venues*, as the first subtheme, shows the need for creativity and events to enhance sense-making in combination with the opportunity to approach the guest interactions in a leisurely way. *Social exchange*, as the second subtheme, highlights the importance of connecting with guests and expressing interest in the interactions. The third subtheme, *materiality authenticity*, puts the focus on the material resources and the belief in using products that correspond with a sustainable vision, and was a driver for the choice of restaurant work. These subthemes highlight how the professionals' taste preferences are important in the work performance, as means of sense-making in their creation of identity. In this way, a new form of hospitality professional arises, a reconstruction of the traditional view of the restaurant professional. It is a profession characterised by choices and actions related to taste preferences to maintain the narrative of self-identity (Giddens, 1991; Lugosi, 2013), rather than to, in every single moment, please the guests and express hospitableness. These findings bring important understanding to the questions of why people remain in the restaurant industry and how hospitality is or is not taking place during service interactions. We argue that the hospitality is conditional on what the guests give the professionals in return in the interactions. It is not a matter of repayment; rather, it is about a common agreement of what amounts to good taste, which creates opportunities to express and maintain certain identities in the creation of meaning in work.

As such, this study has shown that the dining room professionals examined seek to work at restaurants where they can share and develop their identities together with others with similar interests, as shown in the subtheme of *social exchange*, together with products reflecting their idea of the "right" quality, identified in the subtheme *materiality authenticity*, and working in creative culinary spaces where trust is put in their professional abilities. This was especially apparent in the transition from preferring to work in fine dining restaurants to choosing this vibrant contemporary restaurant context. As illustrated in other hospitality-related contexts, the creation of meaning occurs in constellations with like-minded people where thoughts and actions are shared (Ocejo, 2012; Cameron, 2018; Wilson, 2019; Threadgold et al., 2021; Lee & Ruck, 2022).

The study also showed that working in contemporary restaurant venues gave the professionals room to educate others and themselves. This is important to highlight, since it brings new understandings of what attracts the workers to stay or move on in their careers, as well as why professionals leave the industry in general. Based on that, the dining room professionals are convinced that certain kinds of consumption are better than others, which makes them seek out restaurants with similar ideas, and while they possess this belief in their professional roles, they also produce the image of themselves as a part of their self-identity. As such, the professionals interviewed hold or strive for a particular culinary identity that creates their identities (Warde, 1994; Naccarato & LeBesco, 2012; Lugosi, 2014). In addition, the change of workplaces is driven by the idea of learning more about new culinary-related subjects. As such, the dining room professionals in this study go their own ways, choosing their own ways to learn and develop, as long as there is a relatable community, which makes it difficult for educators as well as for industry organisations to unite and decide which is the best way for professionals to progress. Instead, we need to consider that self-actualisation is of great value for workers and, according to the participants in this study, contributes to the sustainable development of the restaurant industry, the gastronomy and the culinary society at large.

We conclude that paying attention to a category of identity-driven culinary hospitality highlights the industry's needs for a future sustainable working environment. For this reason, we suggest that future studies should continue to deepen the understanding of restaurant professionals, also in relation to other countries and contexts. To understand how the culinary hospitality identity is acted out in these restaurants, we welcome further research that puts a focus on ethnographic analysis of how restaurant work is practised.

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