

RESTAURANT QUALITY: THE CASE OF CENTRAL SLOVENIAN REGION

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Review

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Abstract

The purpose – This study has two key goals. The first part presents and compares different expert systems for assessing quality in the restaurants alongside the Ljubljana Quality Selection assessment methodology - LQS. In the second part, this study presents the results of a restaurant assessment in the Central Slovenian region using the LQS methodology.

Design/methodology – In the first part of the study, we compare restaurant assessment systems through different criteria. In the second part, the research focuses on a restaurant assessment system in the Central Slovenian region. Anonymous experts collected data based on the LQS methodology. The main research questions are on how experts assess restaurants, and whether there are statistically significant differences in the quality of offers between urban and rural restaurants in the Central Slovenian region, as assessed by the LQS methodology.

Findings – The results of the comparison show that in the expert restaurant assessment systems, restaurants are assessed anonymously, at least twice a year, with results published in printed form and online, the most respectable do not disclose their criteria of assessment and mainly select the best restaurants to be assessed. The second part is a quantitative study. The survey covered 64 urban and 26 rural restaurants. The results indicated no statistically significant differences in the quality offers between urban and rural restaurants. No significant differences were found between the four key groups of quality elements (food quality, service quality, ambience quality and value for money), nor the of overall restaurant quality. This study has shown, that according to an independent evaluation process, restaurant quality in the Central Slovenian region is high and there are no differences in the quality of offers between restaurants operating in rural and urban settings. There results also showed that food is the key element for restaurant to be assessed high.

Originality of the research – This is the first study to investigate differences between expert restaurant assessment systems. The key contribution of this research lies in the fact that an independent new methodology for assessing restaurant quality was developed and implemented for the purpose of regional restaurant quality assessment.

Keywords service quality, guest satisfaction, restaurants reviews, Ljubljana Quality Selection, restaurant assessments, Michelin stars

INTRODUCTION

Globally, there are many restaurants and an endless number of guests to pay them a visit. Due to the large number of providers, it is difficult to discern which are good and offer quality, especially if the guest is in an unfamiliar setting. In such cases, one looks for references to help in choosing a suitable restaurant. Academic literature refers to gastronomy guidebooks, reviews and rankings as reference sources (Mak, Lumbers &

Eves, 2012; Johnston, Surlemont, Nicod & Revaz, 2005; Levine, 2007; Uran Maravić, Gračan & Zadel, 2014; Tiagoa, Amaral & Tiagoa, 2015; Gergaud, Storchmann & Verardi, 2015; Stierand & Sandt, 2007). The problem arises for how to recognize and promote the quality of those locations that are not covered by such guides and rankings. This problem mainly refers to locations in outlying areas. Reference sources in this case might be local tourism organizations and TIC (Tourist Information Centres), which distribute information on the offers. Certainly, some meaningful system of evaluating these providers is required, in order to avoid abuse and misleading guests.

In the literature, reference sources mentioned include restaurant reviews, restaurant assessments, restaurant ratings and similar (Ferguson, 2008; Levine, 2007; Hickman, 2008; Davis, 2009; Goodsir, Neill, Williamson and Brown, 2014; Gergaud et al., 2015). For the purpose of this paper, the term - restaurant assessment system - will be used.

This paper presents the best-known expert-rated restaurant assessment systems. The aim is to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each system. On one hand, the paper includes those systems that are internationally recognised and on the other hand, it presents the Ljubljana Quality Selection - LQS as a new regional system, whose methodology is based on these international systems. In 2000, the Municipality of Ljubljana and Tourism Ljubljana, the local tourism organization, launched a restaurant assessment system with a mission to promote quality restaurants in the city, and more recently also in the Ljubljana region (Uran Maravić, 2014).

There are limited scientific resources on the topic of different expert restaurant assessment systems (such as Michelin, Gault Millau, and Zagat) therefore, internet pages have been chosen as resources to describe them. In the case of LQS, the case is presented based on experience of the author, since she has been involved in the project since its foundation in 2000.

This paper represents an attempt to answer the following research questions:

- how do experts assess restaurants,
- what are the elements and standards of assessment,
- how can restaurant quality be assessed in the locations that are not covered by the renowned international assessment systems, and
- whether there are statistically significant differences between restaurants in urban and rural areas of Central Slovenian region.

This paper consists of four completed parts. The first discusses a variety of expert restaurant assessment systems. The following parts describe the methodology of restaurant assessment according to LQS, and a presentation of the research results. The conclusion presents comparisons, limitations and suggestions for further research.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Attempts at food, wine and restaurant criticism are said to have begun with Grimod de la Reyniere (1758–1837) with his publications entitled *Jury Degustateur* and *Almanachs des Gourmands* (Williamson, Tregidga, Harris & Keen, 2009). Marković, Raspor and Šegarić (2010) say that restaurant quality is difficult to assess because it covers both food as well as service. Difficult but not impossible. Uran Maravić et al. (2014) state that restaurant assessments systems can be classified on the basis who rates the restaurants. Therefore, restaurants have usually been rated by:

- experts (such as Michelin, Gault Millau and AAA Diamonds)
- visitors on the internet (such as Yelp, Zagat and Trip Advisor)
- journalists and/or gastronomy/food critics with such assessments being published in the press, and
- academics based on several academic models and instruments (such as SERVQUAL, DINESERV).

Different authors (Tiagoa et al., 2015; Goodsir et al., 2014) also confirm such classification. Tiagoa et al. (2015) suggest that, traditionally, the perceived quality of a restaurant was measured with one or both models: service quality (SERVQUAL) and dining service (DINESERV). Food quality has also been measured by experts who gave their independent opinions, or by guest testimonials collected at the end of a meal, using feedback questionnaires. They stated that the equation has suffered significant changes over the last few years, with client-consumers assuming a position similar to food critics, using user-generated content and social network sites to spread their opinion of the restaurants.

Goodsir et al. (2014) suggested three types of assessment system, which are quite similar to those described above. They classified reviews as follows: connoisseurial (expert), procedural and Web-based reviews. According to Goodsir et al. (2014), the key to the success of the connoisseurial review is that the audience accepts the expertise of the reviewer, because they are particularly well informed, experienced, and knowledgeable. In contrast, procedural reviews quantitatively rate restaurant experiences. Often the rating awarded to the restaurant is displayed by the use of symbols, for example, stars, dollar signs or other iconography used to denote quality, or lack of. At its most basic, a simple number rating provides the ranking. The benefit of using quantitative ranking is that the procedural review uses impersonal processes in providing objective assessments that reflect a more technical reviewing approach (Goodsir et al., 2014). Goodsir et al. (2014) also emphasize that while connoisseurial and procedural reviews, or a blend of the two, dominate mainstream commercial media, specifically newspapers and magazines, the internet has created opportunities for 'almost anyone' to become an instant restaurant reviewer. In their view, the opportunity for 'almost anyone' to become a restaurant reviewer is realized within the widespread use of food blogs, websites and video server sites, as well as through the internet's ability to facilitate live online interaction. Web-based review sites usually offer a combination of narrative and rating mediums where 'almost anyone' can upload an opinion or provide a rating.

In this paper, the primarily focus is on the expert approach, as it is considered the most influential approach for assessing restaurant quality (Stierand & Sandt, 2007; Davis, 2009; Lane, 2013; Goodsir et al., 2014; Gergaud et al., 2015).

Although rare, several authors have addressed the topic of expert restaurant reviews (Ferguson, 2008; Levine, 2007; Hickman, 2008; Davis, 2009; Goodsir et al., 2014). In Ferguson's (2008) taxonomy of restaurant reviewers, Zagat is a plebiscite and Michelin is a tribunal. An alternative to the Zagat plebiscite, both in physical form and in ideology, hit the bookshelves in 2006 when the first Michelin Guide to restaurants arrived in America (Davis, 2009).

Although other restaurant assessment systems had at one time held some sway in America, such as the Mobil Travel Guides and the AAA Tour Book series, due to poor management, inconsistent ratings, antiquated criteria and changes in the field of gastronomy. Over the last 20 years or so, these assessment systems lost favour among the dining public and lost respect in the eyes of professionals in the industry. In New York City, one of the Meccas of the world's foodies, these American systems were never paid much attention to anyway (Davis, 2009).

The following section is dedicated to in-depth analysis, presentation and description of the expert-rated restaurant assessment systems, where the assessors are usually trained and professional experts.

1.1. Michelin

In Europe, quality gastronomy is synonymous with the Michelin Guide. Johnson et al. (2005) and Lane (2013) define a Michelin star as the most recognisable and long-established international system of categorisation of *haute cuisine* restaurants and superior quality.

Restaurants with at least one Michelin star are presented in the Guide Rouge, for gourmet travellers and culinary experts (Johnson et al., 2005). In 1900, Michelin, otherwise engaged in the manufacture of tires, first announced the so-called Guide Rouge. According to Michelin (2013) the first guidebook intended to boost the demand for car tyres, almost 35,000 copies were published and were distributed for free to motorists and car owners as the guide included maps, instructions to repair and change tyres, pit stops, hotels and petrol stations around France. It initially contained mostly technical information about the nearest car service stations along the way, but in 1930 tourism and culinary information prevailed (Johnson et al., 2005).

A qualified and experienced team of strict reviewers carries out restaurant assessments for a Michelin star and ranking in the Guide Rouge. They visit restaurants anonymously. They analyse the service quality based on different unpublished and unknown criteria. According to Michelin (2013), such an assessment enables the independence of the Guide Rouge and encourages the chefs' creativity and individuality.

According to critics (Johnson et al., 2005; Hickman, 2007; Levine, 2008), culinary professionals and the public appreciate the information contained in the Guide Rouge; its main downside would be the absence of written quality criteria for each star.

1.2. Gault Millau

Gault Millau is, alongside the Michelin guide, the second most influential guide in Europe (Uran Maravić et al., 2014; Lane, 2013). In March 1969, Henry Gault, Christian Millau and André Gayot established a monthly magazine devoted to food and wine. It quickly became the most influential French restaurant guide. It has been taken very seriously in the restaurant business (Fine Dining Explorer, 2014). Later, it developed to include Germany, Benelux, Austria and Switzerland (Swiss Holiday Company, 2014). No payment is required for restaurants to register in Gault Millau. Their reviewers also assess restaurants anonymously.

This rating system is strictly based on the quality of the food. Service, price and ambience are commented on separately. There are just a few written descriptions on what is being assessed (Gault Millau Österreich, 2014). Gault Millau accepts any style of cooking; it does not matter if someone cooks classic, modern, regional, cross-cultural, vegetarian or exotic cuisine (Gault Millau Österreich, 2014).

The rating is on a scale of 1 to 20 and restaurants below 10 points are never listed. Since 2010, Gault Millau France restaurants are recognised by a chef's toque with a maximum of five toques (Fine Dining Explorer, 2014). Toques are also used in Austria. Only a select few restaurants receive a high Gault Millau rating. Out of 5,000 reviewed restaurants in Gault Millau France 2013, only 15 received five chef's toques (Fine Dining Explorer, 2014). The Swiss guide was established in 1982 and the 2014 guide features 800 restaurants and 80 hotel restaurants throughout Switzerland that have been awarded between 12 to 20 points (Swiss Holiday Company, 2014).

Gault Millau assessors are trained gourmet experts. They are not professionals in the sense that the job is their profession, but they are professional in terms of their own experience. They assess restaurants for appropriate compensation. They (may) often revisit a restaurant until they are sure of their judgment. They behave as regular guests and do not identify themselves as Gault Millau employees (Gault Millau Österreich, 2014).

1.3. AAA Diamond Ratings

Since its inception in 1902 as a federation of independent motor clubs, the American Automobile Association - AAA has existed to provide information, safety, security and peace of mind to its now more than 51 million members (AAA, 2009). They assess properties in United States, Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean, and according to their newsletter besides accommodations more than 27000 restaurants (AAA, 2009). AAA diamond ratings represent a combination of the overall quality, the range of facilities and the level of hospitality offered by an establishment (AAA, 2009).

AAA inspectors are responsible for determining a restaurant's Diamond Rating based on established standards that are developed with input from trained professionals, AAA members and various restaurant industry professionals. AAA inspectors visit and anonymously dine to observe the basic foundation of the establishment. The inspectors check how well the restaurant performs in terms of a set of Diamond Rating guidelines that represent objective criteria prevalent throughout the restaurant industry. This evaluation process includes the review of key dining essentials pertaining to the following five areas: food, service, décor and ambiance, cleanliness and the condition and management and staff (AAA, 2009).

Diamonds are assigned based on the average of all restaurant characteristics, with a focus on overall guest impression rather than on individual elements. Therefore, not meeting a guideline (in one area) may not necessarily affect the overall Diamond Rating (AAA, 2009).

1.4. Ljubljana Quality Selection

The City of Ljubljana and its local tourism destination organisation, Tourism Ljubljana, assembled the majority of Ljubljana's tourism experts to prepare the criteria for measuring service quality in Ljubljana's restaurants. The project is known as the Ljubljana Quality Selection – LQS. As the basis and starting point, the AAA diamond methodology was chosen and adapted to the local characteristics. The current methodology and criteria were set in 2010.

In the following section, the LQS system is briefly described. The Commission for Quality in Tourism in Ljubljana Tourism (the Commission), which is a professional body consisting of experts from various disciplines (food, catering, hospitality, design, architecture, marketing ...), submits a list of nominee establishments. Altogether, there are around 1000 in Ljubljana's restaurant and bar sector, so not all can be assessed. The Commission suggests the list of nominees that are considered the best and for each assessment adds a few new ones. From 2008 to 2014, every two years, around 150 restaurants were assessed.

Experts anonymously assess the nominated restaurants in each category at least twice. Tourism Ljubljana covers all costs of the LQS project. Each establishment is visited by at least two assessors, with the exception of fine dining restaurants, which have an additional assessor.

Although assessors are trained professionals, workshops for assessors are organised to refresh their knowledge of the criteria prior to each assessment season. The Commission approves the list of assessors. Assessors are only approved for the current year. The assessments are carried out within a six-month period. After completing the assessments, the Commission confirms the winners of the Ljubljana Quality Selection. The winners in each category are officially celebrated and recognised. This activity is followed by promotional activities (promotion in print media, mentions in the Top Ljubljana restaurant guide and on the Tourism Ljubljana's website).

Nominated restaurants are anonymously visited by mystery-guest assessors and assessed according to criteria-based evaluation sheets. Each restaurant can get a maximum 100 points. The score includes restaurant quality in four basic groups: food (50 points), service (25 points), design /ambiance (15 points), and price (10 points).

During assessment, the assessors are instructed to order a different appetizer, main dish and dessert. Between them the assessors are required to order a meat dish or a vegetarian dish as a main course. Assessors are also instructed to limit their behaviour to what is considered usual, and to otherwise behave as regular guests.

The two (or more) attending assessors jointly complete the evaluation sheet soon after visiting the establishment. In this way, subjective assessment is minimised. At the end of the evaluation sheet, assessors are also given the opportunity to include a descriptive assessment.

LQS is an example of such a local restaurant assessment. Over a period of 15 years, the team of authors has closely evaluated and monitored its progress in order to complete the system. As a demonstration of the LQS system potential use, results from LQS 2014 will be presented.

2. METHODOLOGY

In the first part of the study, we compare systems according to the set of criteria, such as visibility, scope, ratings, method of assessment, instrument for assessment, publishing ratings, how often restaurants are assessed and how to apply for assessment by using different secondary data.

Methodology for the second part refers to a quantitative study. Data was collected based on the LQS methodology for assessing restaurants. Assessment of restaurants took place from March to September 2014. The study covered 64 urban restaurants and 26 rural restaurants, a total of 90 restaurants.

Each rated element within the LQS instrument is assessed on a scale of 1 to 5. The purpose of this research was not to establish whether there were differences in the point totals between rural and urban restaurants, but rather whether there were statistically significant differences between groups of elements and the individual elements. Due to the large number of elements, new group variables were created - food, service and ambience. For each group we created a table, representing the mean and standard deviation for each element in the group. We used the standard SPSS 21.0 package for data processing. We first tested all variables for normal distribution, and did not perform other tests, as standardized measurement scales were used.

According to the research question, we developed one general and three supporting hypotheses, to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in the quality of the restaurants in the rural and urban environment. The hypotheses are:

H1: Food quality in urban restaurants is not the same as in rural restaurants.
H2: Service quality in urban restaurants is not the same as in rural restaurants.
H3: Ambience quality in urban restaurants is not the same as in rural restaurants.
H: Quality in urban restaurant is not the same as in rural restaurants.

3. RESULTS OF THE COMPARISON

A detailed overview of the main features of presented restaurant assessment systems allows us to make a comparison of these systems. Through comparison (Table 1), we will be able to draw some conclusions.

Table 1: Comparison of expert restaurant assessing systems

| ELEMENT OF COMPARISON/SYSTEM | MICHELIN GUIDE | GAULT MILLAU | AAA DIAMOND | LQS |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| VISIBILITY | Known worldwide, popular in Europe | Known in Europe | Known in North America | Known regionally |
| SCOPE | Only top quality restaurants for fine dining | Top to casual | All restaurants that are members of AAA | Selection of restaurants by region (up to 150) |
| RATINGS | 3 stars 2 stars 1 star | 20,19 points: 4 toques 18,17 points: 3 toques 16,15 points: 2 toques 14,13 points: 1 toques | 5 diamonds 4 diamonds 3 diamonds 2 diamonds 1 diamond | 100-0 points |
| METHOD OF ASSESSMENT | Mystery guest-inspectors | Mystery guest-inspectors | Mystery guest-inspectors | Mystery guest-inspectors |
| INSTRUMENT FOR ASSESSMENT/ STANDARDS | Not known | None known, according to their web page oriented towards food quality, services and decor are commented on | Fully known and published standards | Fully known and published standards |

| ELEMENT OF COMPARISON/SYSTEM | MICHELIN GUIDE | GAULT MILLAU | AAA DIAMOND | LQS |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | | separately. Limited knowledge – just groups of criteria | | |
| PUBLISHING RATINGS | In printed guide and online | In printed guide and online | In printed guide and online | In printed guide and online |
| HOW OFTEN RESTAURANT ARE ASSESSED | Annually at least once, more known restaurant several times | Annually at least once | Annually at least once | Biannually at least twice |
| HOW TO APPLY FOR BASEMENT | Restaurants do not apply | Restaurants do not apply | Members apply for assessment. | Restaurants do not apply |
| WHO PAYS FOR ASSESSMENT? | Michelin company | Gault Millau | Members pay a fee to be assessed | Destination organisation |

This comparison presents a variety of restaurant assessment systems with their elements and standards of assessment, from which it can be concluded such systems assess anonymously, at least twice a year, with results published in printed form and online, the most respectable do not disclose their criteria of assessment and mainly select the best restaurants to be assessed.

Not every assessment is relevant. It takes tradition and time for restaurant guests to adopt a single system of restaurant assessment. While it is true that Michelin remains the most respectable restaurant assessment system, it is unfortunately the least transparent and accessible; it is inaccessible in the sense that its guides cover a minority of countries and destinations. Elsewhere, guests are left at the mercy of restaurateurs. Through this prism, however, it makes sense to develop and support local/regional assessment as well.

4. RESULTS OF THE RESTAURANT ASSESSMENT

Tables 2 - 4 represent descriptive statistics for all elements in the group. All variables are normally distributed. We compared the average value of the individual elements for urban and rural restaurants.

Table 2: Food quality assessment in urban and rural restaurants

| | PLACE | N | M | SD | SEM |
|---------------------------------|-------|----|------|------|------|
| VARIETY OF FOOD | URBAN | 64 | 3.83 | 0.83 | 0.10 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 2.96 | 1.08 | 0.21 |
| INGREDIENTS | URBAN | 64 | 3.53 | 0.93 | 0.12 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.58 | 0.81 | 0.16 |
| PRESENTATION | URBAN | 64 | 3.30 | 1.08 | 0.13 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 2.88 | 1.21 | 0.24 |
| PORTION SIZE | URBAN | 64 | 3.86 | 0.85 | 0.11 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.62 | 1.17 | 0.23 |
| CONDIMENTS | URBAN | 64 | 3.31 | 0.99 | 0.12 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.00 | 0.94 | 0.18 |
| TASTE AND CONSISTENCY | URBAN | 64 | 3.44 | 0.85 | 0.11 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.42 | 0.76 | 0.15 |
| SEASONAL OFFER | URBAN | 64 | 3.13 | 1.39 | 0.17 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 2.92 | 1.41 | 0.28 |
| FRESHNESS | URBAN | 64 | 3.52 | 1.05 | 0.13 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.77 | 0.99 | 0.19 |
| TEMPERATURE | URBAN | 64 | 3.98 | 0.90 | 0.11 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 4.04 | 0.82 | 0.16 |
| AUTHENTICITY IN THE PREPARATION | URBAN | 64 | 3.45 | 0.97 | 0.12 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.81 | 1.02 | 0.20 |
| DRINK | URBAN | 64 | 3.80 | 0.93 | 0.12 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.54 | 0.76 | 0.15 |
| QUALITY OF STARTERS | URBAN | 64 | 3.45 | 0.89 | 0.11 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.46 | 0.95 | 0.19 |
| QUALITY OF MAIN DISHES | URBAN | 64 | 3.42 | 0.89 | 0.11 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.42 | 0.81 | 0.16 |
| QUALITY OF DESERTS | URBAN | 64 | 3.20 | 1.14 | 0.14 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.04 | 0.92 | 0.18 |

N - Number of restaurants M - mean SD - standard deviation, SEM - standard error of the mean

In the group of elements related to food quality, major differences between urban and rural restaurants were not noticeable, apart for the element dealing with the variety of dishes. The results also show that all quality-related elements were evaluated relatively

highly (the average mean value for urban restaurants is 3.51 and 3.39 for rural restaurants). Interestingly, the highest rated element was food temperature for both, urban (mean value 3.98) and rural restaurants (mean value 4.04). The lowest food quality evaluations for urban restaurants are related to their seasonal offers (mean value 3.13) and for presentation (mean value 2.88) in rural restaurants.

Table 3: Service quality assessment in urban and rural restaurants

| | PLACE | N | M | SD | SEM |
|-------------------------------|-------|----|------|------|------|
| PHONE RESERVATIONS | URBAN | 64 | 3.19 | 1.44 | 0.18 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.31 | 1.32 | 0.26 |
| ARRIVAL | URBAN | 64 | 3.27 | 1.00 | 0.12 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.04 | 0.96 | 0.19 |
| TABLE PREPARATION | URBAN | 64 | 3.63 | 1.09 | 0.14 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.00 | 0.98 | 0.19 |
| RECOMMENDED OFFERS | URBAN | 64 | 3.25 | 1.04 | 0.13 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 2.65 | 1.20 | 0.23 |
| FOOD AND BEVERAGE SERVICE | URBAN | 64 | 3.59 | 0.97 | 0.12 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.08 | 0.84 | 0.17 |
| CLEARING THE TABLE | URBAN | 64 | 3.45 | 1.07 | 0.13 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.19 | 0.90 | 0.18 |
| RESPONDING TO GUEST COMPLAINT | URBAN | 64 | 2.73 | 1.52 | 0.19 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 2.46 | 1.48 | 0.29 |
| GUEST DEPARTURE | URBAN | 64 | 3.39 | 1.09 | 0.14 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.04 | 0.92 | 0.18 |
| STAFF PRESENTATION | URBAN | 64 | 3.91 | 0.95 | 0.12 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.50 | 0.91 | 0.18 |
| STAFF ATTITUDE | URBAN | 64 | 4.02 | 0.86 | 0.11 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.88 | 0.82 | 0.16 |
| STAFF RESPONSIVENESS | URBAN | 64 | 3.39 | 1.08 | 0.13 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.12 | 1.11 | 0.22 |
| STAFF KNOWLEDGE | URBAN | 64 | 3.56 | 0.99 | 0.12 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.42 | 1.06 | 0.21 |
| RESPONDING TO GUEST NEEDS | URBAN | 64 | 3.61 | 1.02 | 0.13 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.27 | 1.00 | 0.20 |
| COMMUNICATING WITH GUESTS | URBAN | 64 | 3.52 | 1.07 | 0.13 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.04 | 1.18 | 0.23 |
| PERSONAL INTERACTIONS | URBAN | 64 | 3.27 | 1.16 | 0.14 |

| | PLACE | N | M | SD | SEM |
|---------------------------------------|-------|----|------|------|------|
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.12 | 1.03 | 0.20 |
| OVERALL IMPRESSION OF SERVICE QUALITY | URBAN | 64 | 3.41 | 0.89 | 0.11 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.04 | 0.77 | 0.15 |

N - Number of restaurants M - mean SD - standard deviation, SEM - standard error of the mean

In the group of elements relating to service provision there were no major noticeable differences between the restaurants in urban and rural areas. As can be seen from Table 3, all service quality elements were evaluated relatively highly (the average mean value for urban restaurants is 3.44 and 3.13 for rural restaurants). The highest rated element for urban restaurants was staff attitude (mean value 4.02), and staff presentation for rural restaurants (mean value 3.50). The lowest service quality evaluations for urban and rural restaurants concern the response to guests' complaints - mean value for urban restaurants is 2.73 and 2.46 for rural restaurants. The results of this quality dimension indicate a definite need for improvement in terms of handling guest complaints.

Table 4: **Ambience quality assessment in urban and rural restaurants**

| | PLACE | N | M | SD | SEM |
|--------------------------|-------|----|------|------|------|
| RESTAURANT ACCESS | URBAN | 64 | 3.72 | 1.13 | 0.14 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 4.15 | 1.01 | 0.20 |
| TIDINESS OF SURROUNDINGS | URBAN | 64 | 3.66 | 1.10 | 0.14 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.46 | 1.21 | 0.24 |
| BAR | URBAN | 64 | 3.11 | 1.24 | 0.15 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.04 | 1.04 | 0.20 |
| RESTAURANT INTERIOR | URBAN | 64 | 3.77 | 0.92 | 0.12 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 2.81 | 1.17 | 0.23 |
| FURNITURE | URBAN | 64 | 3.63 | 0.92 | 0.11 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.12 | 1.07 | 0.21 |
| FLOWERS | URBAN | 64 | 2.50 | 1.40 | 0.18 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 2.38 | 1.36 | 0.27 |
| PRINTED MATERIALS | URBAN | 64 | 3.23 | 1.08 | 0.14 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 2.50 | 1.27 | 0.25 |
| TABLE LINEN | URBAN | 64 | 3.23 | 1.22 | 0.15 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 2.92 | 0.98 | 0.19 |
| ACCESSORIES | URBAN | 64 | 3.47 | 1.08 | 0.14 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.04 | 0.87 | 0.17 |
| GLASSWARE | URBAN | 64 | 3.77 | 0.90 | 0.11 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.31 | 0.74 | 0.14 |

| | PLACE | N | M | SD | SEM |
|---|-------|----|------|------|------|
| TABLE ACCESSIBILITY | URBAN | 64 | 3.77 | 1.00 | 0.13 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.46 | 0.99 | 0.19 |
| TEMPERATURE AND VENTILATION | URBAN | 64 | 3.75 | 1.10 | 0.14 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.50 | 0.91 | 0.18 |
| LIGHTING | URBAN | 64 | 3.75 | 1.08 | 0.14 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.58 | 0.70 | 0.14 |
| MUSIC | URBAN | 64 | 3.31 | 1.31 | 0.16 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 2.81 | 1.20 | 0.24 |
| OCCUPANCY | URBAN | 64 | 3.20 | 1.25 | 0.16 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.31 | 1.29 | 0.25 |
| WASHROOM AREAS | URBAN | 64 | 3.22 | 1.09 | 0.14 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 2.73 | 1.12 | 0.22 |
| CHILDREN'S OFFERS | URBAN | 64 | 1.97 | 1.19 | 0.15 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 2.92 | 1.16 | 0.23 |
| PARKING | URBAN | 64 | 2.33 | 1.70 | 0.21 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 4.58 | 0.58 | 0.11 |
| DISABLED ACCESS | URBAN | 64 | 2.66 | 1.46 | 0.18 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.58 | 1.36 | 0.27 |
| WEBSITE | URBAN | 64 | 3.41 | 1.09 | 0.14 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.15 | 1.41 | 0.28 |
| OVERALL IMPRESSION OF RESTAURANT TIDINESS | URBAN | 64 | 3.53 | 0.78 | 0.10 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.12 | 0.77 | 0.15 |

N - Number of restaurants M - mean SD - standard deviation, SEM - standard error of the mean

The group of elements relating to the ambience highlight significant differences between urban and rural restaurants. The differences are especially evident concerning the interior and furnishings of the restaurants. As Table 4 shows, there are significant differences in the assessments of quality elements in urban and rural restaurants. The average mean value for urban restaurants is 3.28, and 3.21 for rural restaurants. The highest rated elements for urban restaurants were for the restaurant interior, glassware, and table accessibility (mean values for all three elements are 3.77), and for parking in rural restaurants (mean value 4.58). The lowest quality assessments relate to children's offers in urban restaurants (mean value 1.97) and for table flower arrangement in rural restaurants (mean value 2.38). This last finding was unexpected, considering the fact that rural restaurants operate in countryside and should have little problem locating appropriate materials.

Testing the hypothesis

We subsequently wanted to test the hypothesis. For this purpose, we created a new variable, calculated using SPSS, as the average value for each group of elements. The T-test for independent samples was used to confirm the hypothesis.

Table 5: **Assessment of quality by groups of elements in urban and rural restaurants**

| | PLACE | N | M | SD | SEM |
|------------------------------------|-------|----|--------|--------|--------|
| FOOD | URBAN | 64 | 3.5156 | .63385 | .07923 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.3901 | .64878 | .12724 |
| SERVICES | URBAN | 64 | 3.4482 | .72968 | .09121 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.1346 | .66042 | .12952 |
| AMBIENCE | URBAN | 64 | 3.2842 | .65170 | .08146 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.2125 | .54465 | .10681 |
| VALUE FOR MONEY QUALITY ASSESSMENT | URBAN | 64 | 3.2969 | .84852 | .10607 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.5385 | .81146 | .15914 |
| Total: | URBAN | 64 | 3.3886 | .62694 | .07837 |
| | RURAL | 26 | 3.3243 | .51907 | .10180 |

N - number of restaurants M - arithmetic mean SD - standard deviation, standard error of the arithmetic SEM - standard error of the mean

No significant differences between urban and rural restaurants are observed when reviewing the mean values for each group of elements in Table 5.

Table 6: **T-test results**

| | t | Sig. (2-tailed) | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
|------------------------------------|-------|-----------------|---|-------|
| | | | lower | upper |
| FOOD | .846 | .400 | -.169 | .420 |
| SERVICES | 1.898 | .061 | -.014 | .642 |
| AMBIENCE | .495 | .622 | -.216 | .359 |
| VALUE FOR MONEY QUALITY ASSESSMENT | -1.23 | .219 | -.628 | .145 |
| Total: | .463 | .645 | -.212 | .340 |

Table 6 shows that there is no statistically significant difference between the groups of elements and we therefore conclude that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, and therefore the set of hypotheses cannot be confirmed. Since this result was a surprise, we conducted further tests on the data. For this purpose, we performed T-tests on all 52 elements. Of the 52 elements, there were significant differences in 12 of them. These elements are: the variety of dishes, table arrangement, recommended offers, restaurant

interiors, furniture, printed materials, cutlery, glasses, children's equipment and playground, parking, access for people with disabilities and the general impression of restaurant tidiness. These differences were readily visible in the descriptive statistics.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Frequently, information on restaurants, particular about their quality, is inadequate and misleading. The first problem occurs because restaurants in outlying areas are not (usually) included in the various world-renowned gastronomic guides, the second because assessment methodologies are not transparent. Criticism of such expert systems is well documented and argued (Johnson et al., 2005; Levine, 2007; Hickman, 2008; Williamson et al., 2009).

This study has two key contributions. The first presents and compares different expert systems for assessing quality in the restaurants. Johnson et al. (2005), Davis (2009), Gergaud et al. (2015) and Goodsir et al. (2014) have made similar attempts to demonstrated scope and content of different expert systems, with varying degrees of clarity on the subject.

While Johnson et al. (2005) conducted one of the rare studies aimed at unravelling a little of the mystique of the Michelin system, their research focus was on the financial success of Michelin star-rated restaurants. From a small sample, they concluded that, there seems to be no single "recipe" for financial success among star-rated operations. The factors that the chefs saw as contributing to their success were rigor and attention to the quality of their culinary creations, developing and maintaining effective working teams, and managing the costs and finances of the operation.

Gergaud et al. (2015) tried to gain information on how different ratings affect restaurant success. Their results suggest that expert opinion on the New York City restaurant market revealed only two areas for restaurants to tackle; improving food quality or improving décor. Both strategies are costly and bring the possibility raising prices. However, that market is more likely to accept food-induced price increases than non-food-induced ones. All other things being equal, décor- and service-oriented restaurants exhibit lower survival rates than food-focused venues.

The Goodsir et al. (2014) study highlights the critical perspective of Peter Calder, one of New Zealand's most well-known restaurant reviewers, with an attempt to reveal his style of reviewing. Davis (2009) focused on restaurant reviews and their discursive relationship to taste. He explores the field of gastronomy that has developed in America over the past 50 years.

All the presented studies conducted research on just one, or a limited number of, aspects of expert rated restaurant assessments, but they did not research the methodology or the process behind the assessments, as we have done.

In the second part, this study presents the results of restaurant assessments throughout the Central Slovenian region. The results show that there were no statistically

significant differences between urban and rural restaurants. On closer examination of 52 elements, only 12 had statistically significant differences. The differences in these elements can be explained by the higher levels of capital investment in the tangible elements of the (restaurant) offers, especially interior design, with greater architect involvement and owner awareness of the importance of décor found in the city-based restaurants.

The research also shows that the scores are the highest in the food group of elements for all establishments. These findings can be supported by those presented in Williamson et al. (2009) paper. Namely, a collection of studies (Schroeder, 1985; Barrows et al., 1989; Clark & Wood, 1998; Steintrager, 2002; Titz et al., 2004), where the reviewers concluded that food, followed by service and ambience, are the most important criteria. The findings of Williamson et al. (2009) broadly support this idea, in that they clearly place food at the top of the reviewers concerns, but differ in that ambience is considered more often than is service. Food, as prevailing factor, is also confirmed by other studies (Ha and Jang, 2010; Namkung and Jang, 2007; Ryu and Han, 2010). Although, Tiagoa et al. (2015) focused more on internet-based reviews, they also found that food is the most decisive criteria. In contrast to other studies, they support the notion that the overall quality of the meal is reflected by much more than the flavour or taste of the food.

Although location does matter in terms of restaurant popularity and success (Zhaia, Xu, Yang, Zhou, Zhang & Qiu, 2015), all demonstrated findings give comfort to restaurateurs (both urban and rural), that what counts in the end, is good food.

In addition, studies presenting practical expert systems for assessing restaurants are rare. The aim of this paper was not just to discuss results of LQS project. It was also to demonstrate a comprehensive and complex restaurant assessment process that can be used in destinations not selected by the Michelin or other renowned guides - of which there are many.

The limitations of this research were the currently small number of participating restaurants and the project's implementation solely in the Central Slovenian region. It is proposed to extend research into other regions of Slovenia, another direction is to investigate differences among different classes and types, for example, evaluating restaurant quality for operations within accommodation establishments versus restaurant-only establishments and, of course, on further validating the LQS assessment instrument.

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