

The Role of the Food Service Industry for the Tourism Destination Development

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Abstract

Tourism destinations' development is a difficult process which requires positive evolutions among all the companies involved in meeting visitors' needs. Out of these companies, the food service units have a special role, as they satisfy basic physiological needs and also offer a wide range of opportunities to spend a pleasant leisure time and to entertain.

In this article, the food service units from Braşov city are analyzed. The results confirm the important steps and in the right direction made by the local entrepreneurs who contribute, on a large scale, to the development of the tourism destination Braşov city.

Key words: food service industry, restaurants, online reviews, tourism destination, Braşov city
J.E.L. classification: Z32, Z33

1. Introduction

Trips for tourism purposes generate the consumption of a variety of tourist services and products. Restaurants offer specific services which meet basic needs, thus being indispensable for satisfying visitors' demands at a tourism destination. On the other hand, restaurants' services also address to residents, as a result of several changes in lifestyle. The contemporary life in Romania has undergone many changes within the last period. Spending more and more time at work, prolonged mental and physical effort to fulfill professional duties, the unprecedented development of the electronic universe and many other factors generated numerous changes with significant influences for the food sector development. Eating out is becoming a usual habit in order to meet physiological needs, to socialize and to spend the free time as pleasant as possible, with an important impact on the development of restaurants' sector.

Braşov city is one of the most famous tourist destinations in our country. The number of Romanian and foreign tourists is constantly increasing and food services are amongst the most requested tourist services. All these elements generated the expansion of this activity, the steps taken in this direction being significant, and the concerns of local entrepreneurs involved in the restaurant businesses deserve closer analysis and assessments.

This article has two objectives. The first objective is to present the statistical analysis of the restaurant industry in Braşov city. The aim is to identify the types of restaurants in Braşov city and to assess their comfort levels. The second objective consists in identifying the level of customers' satisfaction following the consumption in restaurant locations from Braşov city. To this end, the evaluations carried out by the Gault & Millau guide, a certification system with wide international recognition, were presented. Restaurants' assessments based on visitors' online reviews on Google Maps and Tripadvisor were also analyzed.

2. Theoretical background

Food service plays an important role in all environments, including tourism destinations (Barrows *et al*, 2012, p.69). From the tourism perspective, food service offers at a tourism destination represent an essential element with a defining contribution to shape tourists' experiences (Băltescu, 2016).

The food service activity is considered an advanced stage of food preparation for citizens, being a sector highly influenced by the level of the economic development, living and working conditions, demographic structure, occupational profile and the mentality of the inhabitants (Minciuc, 2004, p.272). The consumption in food service locations is analyzed in the light of the main motivations which correspond to the functions performed by these activities. Food service performs four functions: the feeding function, the leisure function, the social function, and the business function (Lupu, 2010, pp.27-28).

Food away from home may be purchased in a variety of locations and this wide availability speaks to the size and scope of the food service industry (Barrows *et al*, 2012, p.68). Restaurants are the best-known locations and are often considered gastronomic units that fulfill all the specific functions. Recently, the term "green restaurant" is being used more and more often. The green restaurant is individualized by deep anchoring in the application of "green" principles and practices which are based on the three pillars of sustainable development, namely the environment, the social environment and the economic environment (Moon, 2021, p.2). The major concerns of green restaurants are to achieve three coordinates, namely the health coordinate (ensuring healthy, organic, nutritionally balanced meals), the environmental coordinate (applying practices that do not affect the environment, including recycling, energy conservation and pollution reduction), and the social coordinate (involvement in the life of the community and the application of correct staffing practices) (Choi *et al*, 2007, p.43).

Nowadays, in the digital era, more than ever communication is a major decision which can make the difference between success and failure. The same thing is valid for the food service industry. A restaurant which does not function in a favorable location but highlights a constant concern for adapting menus, practicing affordable prices, creating a pleasant atmosphere and so on, has little chances to succeed in the absence of a sustained communication. In the tourism sector, the most widespread form of communication and also with the greatest impact is developed in the online environment (Grosseck, 2006, p.195). Today, searching online tourist information is a habit, a "must" for the modern tourist (Băltescu, 2018, p.58).

Obtaining a large volume of tourist information is the basis for taking the best decisions, and therefore tourists use several information channels (Ho *et al*, 2012, p.1469). Online presence is the key point of the communication process and the website is considered the cornerstone of any Internet marketing activity (Băltescu, 2010, p.166). A valuable website can contribute to the development of the brand identity, direct marketing, e-commerce, customers' assistance, content publishing (regularly publishes content of specialized interest in order to bring visitors to the site) (Kotler *et al*, 2006, p.699). Fast and easy development of e-commerce has also led to the necessity of consumer protection in cyberspace, where trade takes place, so as to ensure consumer safety and security matters (Neacșu, 2016, p.301). On the other hand, the need to obtain as much relevant information as possible in the shortest possible time, has generated the development of new information technologies, known as smart technologies, among which a special place is occupied by the mobile applications.

Selecting a restaurant has become an increasingly complex and difficult process, mainly due to the unprecedented development of the food service industry (Băltescu, 2020, p.42). Studies have shown that the use of information technology to search for restaurant information is widespread (Rodríguez-López *et al*, 2020, p.2), and the use of online platforms to access customer reviews which describe consumers' experiences is a common practice (Zhang *et al*, 2018, p.116). Online evaluations fulfill two functions: they provide information about products/companies and contain recommendations (Park *et al*, 2007, p.140). Electronic verbal communication includes a variety of forms, websites, social media, mobile applications, and so on, but it has been found that online reviews have the greatest influence on the consumer choices (Zhang *et al*, 2010, p.696). On the other hand, it is recognized the constant increase in the number of customers at restaurants with

many positive reviews, but over time, the effects will be negative, in the sense of excessive congestion of restaurants and increased waiting time (Fernandes *et al*, 2021, p.9).

The most accessed online platforms which contain a significant number of customer reviews on their dining experience in restaurants are: Google Maps, Tripadvisor.com and Booking.com. Google Maps, for example, has a predominant position in the search options of the potential consumers, providing a huge amount of information, including: opening hours, addresses, location, images, reviews, along with additional services such as the possibility of making reservations for meals, orders for the distribution of food outside the restaurant, etc. (Hawley, 2019). Analyses performed in Romania to highlight the degree of trust of potential consumers in the information posted online showed that on the first place in the hierarchy is Booking.com followed by Google Maps and Tripadvisor (Băltescu, 2020, pp.45-46).

3. Research methodology

The article presents numerous analyses carried out with the final goals to assess the development of the food service industry in Braşov city and to highlight the major ratings for the food service industry performed by visitors and specialized entities. To this end, the author used official governmental data and public information provided by the Gault & Millau guide and by the tourism online platforms.

The Romanian Ministry of Economy, Energy and Business Environment – Tourism Direction, communicates frequently which are the food service units in function in our country, by counties, towns and villages. Based on this information, the author performed several analyses on the types of food service locations in Braşov city, emphasizing which is the number of the food service units, which are the types of the food service units in function and also their comfort levels.

The food service units' evaluations were presented from two points of view. First, restaurants and bars were analyzed based on the evaluations carried out by the Gault & Millau guide. Internationally, several classification systems are applied to food service units, many of them enjoying high levels of recognition amongst consumers. Among these, there are two with utmost trust, namely the Michelin star classification and the Gault & Millau classification. Secondly, evaluations performed by Google Maps and Tripadvisor were analyzed.

4. Findings

In Braşov city there are 181 food service locations. One of the main remarks following the analysis presented in table no.1 is the diversity of food service units which are in function in Braşov city. The best represented units are the fine-dining and upscale dining restaurants (64 units) with a percentage of 35.4% of the total of classified units, followed by day bars (32 units, 17.7% of the total) and coffee-bars (13 units, 7.2% of the total). At the same time, fast-food restaurants, cafeterias and pizza restaurants, units with a common characteristic, i.e. the quick-service concept, represent 12.2% out of the total (22 units).

Table no. 1 Food service units by type and comfort level in Braşov city

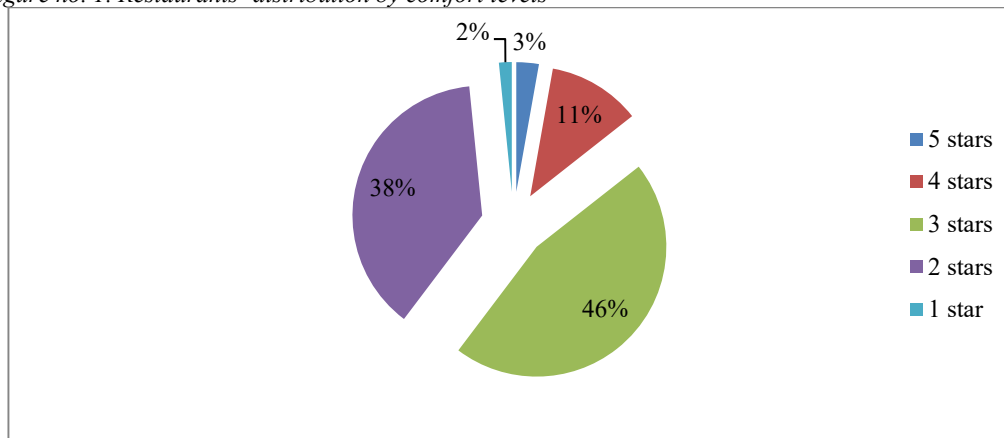
Types of restaurants/Comfort level	5 stars	4 stars	3 stars	2 stars	1 star	TOTAL
Fine-dining and upscale dining restaurants	1	9	32	22	-	64
Local type restaurants	-	1	2	1	-	4
Wine cellars	-	-	2	-	-	2
National type restaurants	-	-	2	-	-	2
Italian restaurants	-	-	2	-	-	2
Lebanese restaurants	-	-	-	1	-	1
Chinese restaurants	-	1	-	-	-	1
Family restaurants	-	-	8	1	-	9
Brasseries	1	-	4	1	-	6

Bistros	-	1	1	2	-	4
Breweries	-	-	2	1	-	3
Terraces	-	-	-	3	-	3
Day bars	2	7	11	12	-	32
Night bars	1	-	-	-	-	1
Coffee-bars	-	1	7	4	1	13
Disco-bars	-	1	1	2	-	4
Buffets	-	-	2	4	1	7
Cafeterias	-	-	1	5	-	6
Fast-food restaurants	-	-	5	5	1	11
Pizza restaurants	-	-	1	4	-	5
Snack-bars	-	-	-	1	-	1
TOTAL	5	21	83	69	3	181

Source: Ministry of Economy, Energy and Business Environment, 2021, Authorized units. Available at: <http://turism.gov.ro/web/autorizare-turism/> (Accessed 20 February 2021)

Another relevant analysis is the distribution of these restaurants by comfort categories (figure no. 1).

Figure no. 1. Restaurants' distribution by comfort levels



Source: Ministry of Economy, Energy and Business Environment, 2021, Authorized units. Available at: <http://turism.gov.ro/web/autorizare-turism/> (Accessed 20 February 2021)

The analysis by comfort levels highlight that the best represented fine-dining and upscale dining restaurants are included into the 3-stars comfort level (32 units, respectively 50% of the total of this restaurants). They are followed by the 2-stars locations (22 units, 34.4%), 9 of these locations are 4-stars restaurants (14%) and in Braşov city there is only one 5-stars restaurant (Club Belvedere restaurant). As for bars' classification, the most numerous are included in the 2-stars category (12 units, 37.5%), followed by the 3-stars locations (11 units, 34.4%), the 4-stars bars (7 units, 21.9%), and the 5-stars category which includes 2 day bars (6.2%), respectively Club Belvedere Bar and Aro-Palace day bar. The quick-service restaurants are classified in low comfort categories, respectively 3, 2 and 1 stars.

In Braşov city, according to the latest edition of the Gault & Millau guide (the 2019 edition), there are 16 locations, out of which 13 are restaurants and 3 are included into the POP bars category. These locations are evaluated with scores between 12.5 points and 10 points (which is the minimum score required for a restaurant to be included into this guide). These units are presented in figure no. 2.

Another analysis refers to the restaurants' assessments based on the online reviews posted by visitors. It is important to note that only restaurants with a significant number of ratings were considered in order to avoid those well-known situations when customers are motivated by various means to conduct favorable reviews. The article comprises two distinct assessments which are available on Google Maps and on Tripadvisor.

Figure no. 2. Restaurants and POP bars from Braşov city included in the Gault & Millau guide



Source: The Yellow Guide Gault & Millau, 2019, *Restaurants guide - Romania*

Following the assessments available through the Google Maps application, it is further presented the hierarchy according to the average score based on customers' appreciations obtained by the restaurants in Braşov city. The analysis includes only the restaurants with an average score of 4.5 or more. It is important to note that in this application the maximum average score is 5.0. The results are shown in table no. 2.

Table no. 2 Restaurants from Braşov city evaluated by Google Maps application listed based on the average assessment of registered reviews

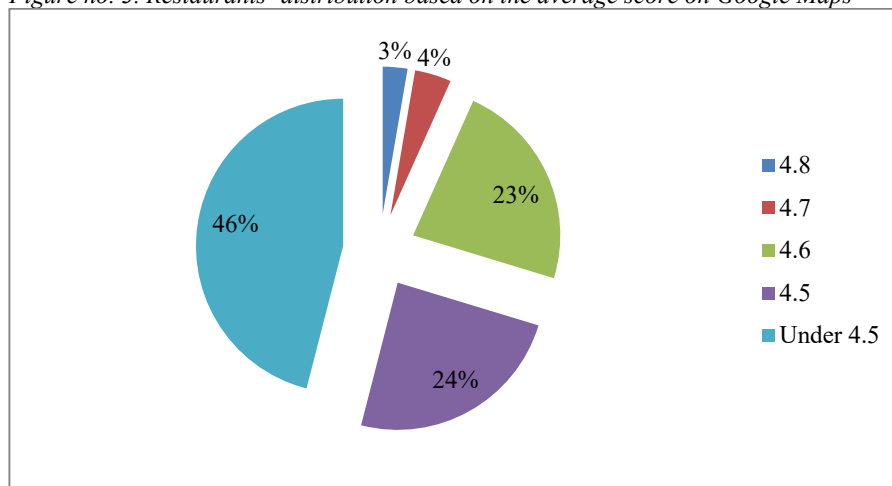
No.	Restaurant	Average score
1	Croitorea de Cafea	4.8
2	Pizzeria Da Mario	4.8
3	Restaurantul Dei Frati	4.7
4	Café-bar Tipografia	4.7
5	Restaurant Belvedere (Events)	4.7
6	Restaurant Sergiana (Str. Mureşenilor)	4.6
7	Restaurant Casa Tudor	4.6
8	Restaurant La Ceaun (Piaţa Sfatului)	4.6
9	Restaurant Sub Tâmpa	4.6
10	Pizzeria della Nonna	4.6
11	Restaurant Hopaa	4.6
12	Restaurant Grătar Urban	4.6
13	Bistro Aha	4.6
14	Restaurant Athanasios	4.6
15	Restaurant Poarta Schei 4	4.6
16	Millenium Pub & Cafe	4.6
17	La Strada Bistronomie	4.6
18	Berăria Aftăr Stube	4.6
19	Restaurant Addicton The Ranch	4.6
20	Restaurant Cucinino Pasta Bar	4.6
21	Keller Steak House	4.6
22	Restaurant Massimo	4.6
23	Restaurant La Ceaun Str M. Weiss	4.5
24	Restaurant Bistro de l'Arte	4.5
25	Restaurant Festival 39	4.5
26	Trattoria Del Chianti	4.5

27	Restaurant Prato	4.5
28	Pizza Hot	4.5
29	Restaurant Casa Hirscher	4.5
30	Pizzeria L'Altra Idea	4.5
31	Restaurant Trattorian Artisan Food	4.5
32	Restaurant Four Roses	4.5
33	Restaurant Am Rosenangen	4.5
34	Restaurant Pilvax	4.5
35	Grand Restaurant	4.5
36	Restaurant Platinum	4.5
37	Zorba the Greek	4.5
38	Restaurant Chef's Boutique	4.5
39	Restaurant Vîno e Sapori	4.5
40	Restaurant Tassi	4.5

Source: Google Maps (accessed 2.02.2021)

These results underline the fact that the restaurants from Braşov city meet customers' expectations and are highly appreciated. Continuing this idea, it could be observed that the share of restaurants with average scores greater than or equal to 4.5 (out of a possible maximum of 5 points) is 54%. The distribution of all restaurants assessed from Braşov city through Google Maps application is presented in figure no. 3.

Figure no. 3. Restaurants' distribution based on the average score on Google Maps



Source: Author's own research

Tripadvisor website includes 314 restaurants which have been evaluated in Braşov city and these locations are presented both according to the average scores based on customers' reviews and also, according to the number of reviews. The hierarchy of the first 30 restaurants is presented in table no. 3.

Table no. 3 Restaurants' assessments on Tripadvisor based on the average scores and number of reviews

No.	Restaurant	Average score	Number of reviews
1	La Birou Bistro	5,0	475
2	Dei Frati	4,5	1156
3	Addiction The Ranch	5,0	297
4	La Ceaun – Piaţa Sfatului	4,5	1346
5	Mediterra	5,0	184
6	Grătar Urban	4,5	575
7	Restaurant Athanasios	4,5	177

8	Casa Hirscher	4,5	880
9	Sub Tâmpa	4,5	576
10	Cucinino Pasta & Pizza	4,5	275
11	Restaurantul Vino e Sapori	4,5	226
12	La Ceau – Str M. Weiss	4,5	2124
13	Pizzeria della Nonna	4,5	323
14	Keller Steak House	4,5	481
15	Restaurant Belvedere	4,5	512
16	Home Cocktail Bar	5,0	72
17	Albert Bistro	4,5	433
18	Viva la Vida Bistro-Hostel	4,5	234
19	Prato	4,5	882
20	Simone Bistro	4,5	259
21	Bella Musica	4,0	978
22	Casa Tudor	4,5	246
23	Restaurant Sergiana	4,0	2553
24	Trattorian Artisan Food	4,5	521
25	Bistro de l'Arte	4,0	789
26	Poarta Schei 4	4,5	186
27	Pilvax	4,5	380
28	Terroirs Boutique du Vin	4,5	263
29	Restaurant Transilvania	4,0	392
30	Deane's Irish Pub and Grill	4,0	470

Source: Tripadvisor (accessed 4.02.2021)

The hierarchy of the most appreciated restaurants according to Tripadvisor ratings also includes sponsored units which do not meet the average marks or the number of reviews, being presented as preferential locations on the platform. Thus, on the list of the 30 best rated restaurants in Braşov, there are two locations, namely La Gustări (average rating of 3.5 with a total of 210 reviews) and Meatica (a newly opened unit, without any reviews) which are included in this list.

5. Conclusions

The paper aimed to analyze the current state of development of the food service industry in Braşov city. This approach was justified on one hand by the reputation of Braşov as an important Romanian tourism destination, but also by the changes of residents' consumption behavior, which consider eating out in a restaurant as a usual way to satisfy their basic needs and also a pleasant way to spend their leisure time.

The food service activities in Braşov city have experienced a positive evolution, both in terms of increasing the number of units, increasing the interest of local entrepreneurs for the development of specialized businesses, but also in terms of diversity and quality of the services. An essential aspect is the managers' increased concerns to adapt the entire activity to the wishes and expectations of contemporary customers, as well as to ensure a pleasant consumer experience, the pillar for the customer loyalty.

The presence of the well-known Gault & Millau guide in Romania and in Braşov city in particular, the evaluations performed by their own specialists, confirm the positive evolution of this tourism sector and confirm the interest of the foreign visitors for Romanian tourism destinations. At the same time, the large number of reviews recorded for the Braşov restaurants reinforces the idea that this assessment procedure is widely recognized by the customers and their ratings represent a real barometer for the food service activities.

The analyses focused on the idea that the progress in the food service industry is noticeable and it is a real and important step for the development of the tourism destination Braşov city. The prospects are promising, and enable the implementation of new ideas meant to contribute to further expansions of these activities.

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