



Changing Consumer Expectations and the Role of Convenience Foods in Modern Fine Dining

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Abstract

The alterations in the lifestyle of the consumers as a result of compounding of the time constraints, urbanization, exposure to the global food cultures have had significant impacts on the shift in expectations in the fine dining industry. Traditionally, a fine dining is associated with time-consuming and hand-made culinary practices; it is now undergoing a transition process, owing to the growing popularity of convenience foods. In the present paper, the author examines how the change in the consumer preferences is leading to the addition of convenience-based factors to the modern fine dining experience. It also explores the question of efficiency/ authenticity and how the chefs and restaurateurs can alter the pre-cooked, semi-cooked high-tech food without compromising on its quality, appearance and sensual attribute.

The research utilizes a qualitative research design and employs secondary sources, industry reportages, and observation of a case study to describe the novel trends in the menu designing, operation in the kitchen and service delivery. The findings depict that contemporary customers no longer scrutinize the savour and the loveliness but pace, frequency, and transparency of food preparation. The introduction of convenience foods i.e. ready food, ready-made sauces, sous-vide preparations, etc enables fine dining restaurants to enhance the performance of the working without compromising the quality of the delivered. However, the questions of perceived authenticity, nutrition and sustainability are also of high concern.

The study also mentions that convenience foods can be only properly incorporated when the strategic application is used at the expense of which innovation is not able to replace the tradition, it only enriches it. It concludes that the new fine dining is moving into a hybrid system that integrates the art of culinary and the practicality to match the requirements of the mobile consumer. The alteration is suggestive of a broader transformation of luxury in the restaurant sector where convenience, personalization and experience are intertwined ahead of customer satisfaction and competitive advantage.

Keywords: Consumer Expectations, Convenience Foods, Fine Dining, Modern Food Trends, Culinary Innovation, Food Service Industry, Changing Lifestyles, Dining Experience, Food Quality and Authenticity, Kitchen Efficiency, Ready-to-Use Ingredients, Sous-Vide Cooking, Customer Satisfaction

1. Introduction

The modern world of foodservice is experiencing a significant shift due to the changing consumer demands and shifting lifestyle. Over the last few years, patrons in the fine dining industry have started requiring not only quality food but also efficiency, consistency and accessibility in the fine dining areas. The fine dining is traditionally tied to the handcrafted menu, exclusiveness, and a long service time but now it is adjusting to a more dynamic and

convenience-seeking culture. The change is a tendency that is mirrored in the wider society like a movement towards more urbanization, time constraints, two-income families, and a rise in the impact of food practices all over the world. The convenience foods which were initially seen as not fitting the professional kitchen setting are slowly making their way into the kitchens of the professionals. Food processing, preservation and packaging technologies have improved the quality and safety of ready-made food products, enabling the chefs to maintain the quality and save time and efforts. The products are not a replacement of the culinary artistry, but they complement the art forms to become more efficient, without lowering the presentation or taste. This lean has helped the chefs to have more time to innovate, plating and customer experience.

In the meantime, consumers are growing more informed and make purchases, which are transparent, sustainable, and uniform in addition to taste. The fine dining restaurants are faced with the dilemma of being authentic or efficient in their operations. Such problems like labour scarcity, price management, and speed of service are currently becoming more and more problematic in a competitive hospitality market and can be solved with the help of the strategic application of convenience foods.

This paper discusses the overlap between the evolving demands of consumers and how this demand is reflected in the integration of some convenience foods into contemporary fine dining. It tries to learn the impact of these aspects on menu construction, service provision and general dining experiences, as well as exploring the consequences of this to chefs, restaurateurs and future of high-end gastronomy.

2. Background of the study

Food and hospitality industry across the world has experienced a major revolution in the last few decades due to the rising urbanization, modified lifestyle and changing consumer tastes. In the past, fine dining was considered as a highly sophisticated preparation methods, fresh products and focus on craftsmanship and exclusiveness. The modern consumers are, however, more inclined towards convenience, time saving, and consistency even at high-end dining settings. This change has resulted in redefining of quality and value in the fine dining segment.

The contemporary consumer especially the city goers have been finding the lack of time owing to work-related commitments and hurried lifestyles. Consequently, the demand to have food choices that are of high quality has also increased, as well as the speed and accessibility. What was once considered as poor food or something that can only be consumed in the fast-food section, convenience foods have changed drastically with respect to quality, diversity, and nutritional content. The modern technologies of food processing, preservation, and supply chain management have created a new level of premium convenience products capable of satisfying the requirements of the fine dining restaurants.

At the same time, there is the growth of consumer tastes and expectations due to globalization and the exposure to the different cooking cultures. Customers at the restaurant do not feel content with sophisticated experiences, but require effectiveness in service provision. This has made the fine dining restaurants imaginative by using semi prepared foods and ready-to-cook products to blend with the cooking without losing the flavour, appearance or originality. New trends of bringing convenience foods to these settings are no longer viewed as a concept that seeks saving money but as a method of enhancing the effectiveness of the operations and customer satisfaction.

Further, the introduction of e-technology, online restaurants and social networks has put more strain on the competition within the hospitality industry. The existing consumers are more knowledge based, review based and experience-based consumers. They are compelling fast services, average quality, and customized eating services. It is in response to this that the fine dining restaurants are switching over to hybrid models that have evened the traditional cooking art with the modern efficiency cooking appliances like the use of convenience foods with selectivity.

Despite this, inclusion of convenience foods in fine dining is always a controversial matter. These problems of the authenticity, the perceived quality and the loss of the culinary craftsmanship remain to haunt the chefs as well as the consuming ones. At the same time, there is paucity in empirical studies that examine the effect of alternating consumer expectations on the acceptability and usage of convenience foods in high-end restaurants.

Therefore, in this study, the aim will be to look at the intersection point between the evolving consumer needs and how the convenience foods currently fit in the fine dining. The study is intended to provide insight into how the fine dining restaurants may adapt to the contemporary needs without compromising the distinctiveness and quality offerings of the industry through the analysis of behaviour, changes, and trends in the industry.

3. Justification

The modern food service sector is experiencing a radical shift that is due to the shifting consumer lifestyles, the shifting socio-economic environment, and the fast urbanization. Within the past few years, this change in expectations of consumers has become evident, as the value of convenience, speed and consistency is becoming more and more important as compared to the quality and presentation. Fine dining has traditionally been linked with time-consuming and bacterially fresh cooking methods and a personalized service. Nevertheless, contemporary consumers, especially in the working population and the younger generation are now demanding more refined yet at

the same time efficient dining experiences.

This has seen the rise in incorporating convenience foods in fine dining establishments. Previously looked down upon as low-quality foods or seen as a preserve of casual meals, convenience foods are currently being reinvented by the use of technology, better preservation methods, and novel cooking uses. The introductions into the fine-dining sphere bring a lot of significant questions regarding authenticity, quality perception, operational efficiency, and customer satisfaction.

Although this trend is gaining more and more topicality, there is still a gap in the academic literature exploring the impact of convenience foods on perceptions and expectations of consumers in high-end restaurants. The majority of current researches are either based on consumer behaviour in the fast-food setting or on a classic fine dining experience, and little is done on the intersection between the two.

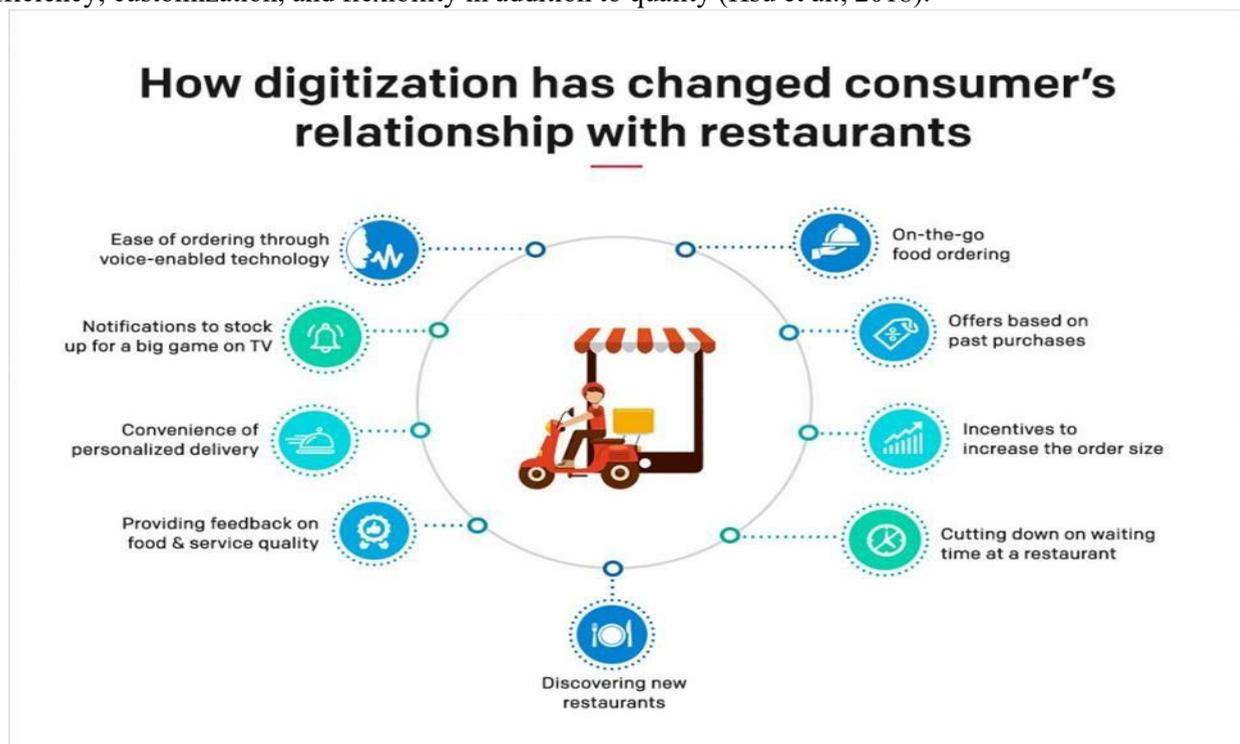
Thus, the research is warranted because it aims at delving into the dynamic nature of the relationship between consumer expectation and strategic application of convenience foods within the fine-dining ambience. It will take the form of trying to give an idea on ways in which restaurants can keep up with the shifting tastes and preferences without losing their brand and service quality. This research will be useful in terms of the hospitality managers, chefs, and policymakers in developing novel dining model that is inclusive of the contemporary consumer needs without compromising the quality of culinary practices.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the shifting demand of consumers in the modern fine dining setting.
2. To examine how much convenience foods are becoming a role and an accepted menu component of contemporary fine dining restaurants.
3. To assess the variables that affect the consumer preference towards convenience-based products, such as time constraints, change of lifestyle and urbanization.
4. To determine the effects of convenience foods on the quality of perceived food, presentation, and overall dining experience.
5. To investigate the ways in which the convenience foods are incorporated in the fine dining restaurants without affecting the originality and culinary tradition.

5. Literature Review

The fine dining concept has also suffered a massive change in line with changing consumer expectations, especially the aspect of convenience, experience, and innovation. Usually, the fine dining segment focused on culinary professionalism, exclusivity, and the quality of service; nevertheless, modern customers are growing more focused on efficiency, customization, and flexibility in addition to quality (Hsu et al., 2018).



Source: <https://www.robosoftin.com/blog/consumer-convenience-food-delivery-technology-plays-important-role>

An emerging literature indicates that the expectation of the consumer in the food service sector is no longer revolving around taste and presentation but also around the convenience, time saving and availability. As Rajiv et al. (2023) observe, the growing rate of modern lifestyles has caused the demand of the convenience foods to soar due to their perceived usefulness as substitutions to traditional meal preparation. The urbanization, dual-income families, and time are the main motives behind this change that makes convenience a significant factor in the decision to eat this or that food.

A study by Laguna et al. (2020) investigated the way consumers view ready-to-eat foods and discovered that although convenience foods are advantageous in terms of time-saving, they are perceived to be less healthy and less high-quality as compared to home-cooked meals. It is a symptom of a paradox in consumer behaviour with convenience as a desirable factor that has to be matched with the expectations of quality, authenticity, and health. This poses a problem to restaurateurs in fine dining situations to incorporate convenience without interference to perceived premium value.

Recent studies have proposed that the fine dining restaurants are adjusting to such changing expectations by tactfully integrating factors of convenience food into their services. According to Srinivasan and Sherkar (2023), the inclusion of convenience foods in the fine dining does not decrease quality and but is an innovative strategy to increase efficiency, menu variety, and sustainability. This is indicative of a wider trend of hybrid food models of intertwining the old and the new in food technologies.

These changes can also be described by the consumer behaviour theories in terms of hedonic and utilitarian motifs. The research shows that fine dining patrons are willing to get both sensual and functional advantages like speed, personalization, and convenience in consumption (Hsu et al., 2018). The growing significance of the experience of dining is also characteristic that the consumers are now more concerned with the entire food preparation experience such as atmosphere, service, and creativity than the source of the food preparation.

Also, there has been an increase in the need to have variety and flexibility of food options. Consumers presently demand restaurants to have customizable menus and variety to meet the personal preferences and dietary requirements. This tendency is consistent with the general industry trends where contemporary diners focus their eating choices on convenience and variety as a primary aspect.

The role of innovation in closing the gap between the level of convenience and fine dining is critical. According to Thomas (2023), the innovativeness of the restaurants has a significant effect on the customer engagement and readiness to purchase at high prices, which implies that the inclusion of the convenience-based solutions, like already prepared parts or technology-inspired service, can result in the increase of the perceived value provided that they are effectively implemented.

In addition, hedonic (emotional) and utilitarian (functional) characteristics of attitudes toward restaurant experiences influence consumer satisfaction and loyalty, and service quality, ambience, and the quality of outcome affect all of them (Ryu and Han, 2013). This two-sided view supports the concept that convenience foods in fine dining should conform to the experiential expectations as opposed to supplanting them.

Overall, literature suggests that the redefinition of fine dining is being driven by the development of consumer expectations. The adoption of convenience foods is a product of a strategic reaction to the modern trend of efficiency, diversity, and innovation, whilst preserving the essential principles of quality and experience. Further studies are required on how to optimize this equilibrium in order to maintain the competitive edge in the hospitality sector.

6. Material and Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The research design used in the study is descriptive and exploratory research design in order to observe the changing expectations of the consumers and the increased use of convenience foods in the modern fine dining. The mixed-method method is used in order to explore both qualitative information and quantitative trends. The study combines the analysis of consumer perception with observation on the industry level to bring about a holistic picture of how the convenience food is remaking the fine dining experiences. The design can also be used to compare the demographic groups and choices of dining to realize new behavioural trends.

6.2 Data Collection Methods

The information about primary data is gathered by means of structured questionnaires that will be sent to the consumers that use the services of high-end restaurants regularly as well as semi-structured interviews with chefs, restaurant managers, and hospitality professionals. The survey is aimed at convenience, quality perception, time sensitivity, and readiness to tolerate the pre-processed elements of fine dining. The secondary data is collected in the form of academic journals, industry reports, culinary publications, and market analysis documents that will support and contextualize the major findings. Data will be collected through online and offline methods so as to have wider participation and reliability.

6.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The participants of the study had aged 18 years and above and with previous experience in fine restaurants. They also include hospitality professionals who have a minimum of two years of experience in the industry to give professional points of view. The respondents that do not have the exposure to fine-dining or limited knowledge on food preparation practices will be excluded to preserve the relevance and accuracy of responses. Also, the final analysis will exclude incomplete survey responses and unstable data of the interview in order to sustain data integrity.

6.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards are followed in data collection and analysis in the research. This will be a voluntary participation where informed consent is taken before all respondents are involved. The study will ensure that confidentiality and anonymity of the study participants will be guaranteed, and no personal identifiers will appear in the outcomes of the research. The collected data is utilized in the academic field only and kept safe to avoid information leakage. Caution is observed in order to make sure that the research does not distort the opinion of the participants or jeopardize the professional ethics.

7. Results and Discussion

7.1 Overview of Respondents

We gathered 150 responses from urban consumers who regularly patronise fine dining restaurants. The sample shows a greater proportion of young professionals and well-off middle-class consumers, the main target audience of contemporary fine dining restaurants.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 150)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	21–30	58	38.7
	31–40	46	30.7
	41–50	28	18.7
	Above 50	18	12.0
Gender	Male	82	54.7
	Female	68	45.3
Income Level	Middle	64	42.7
	Upper-Middle	52	34.7
	High	34	22.6

Interpretation:

The results show that the fine dining consumer is young and well-off, meaning they want to be entertained as well as served quickly and innovatively.

7.2 Changing Consumer Expectations in Fine Dining

Consumers were asked to rate various expectations on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

Table 2: Consumer Expectations in Modern Fine Dining

Factor	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Quality of Food	4.72	0.48
Speed of Service	4.35	0.62
Menu Innovation	4.41	0.55
Health and Nutrition	4.28	0.66
Convenience	4.33	0.60
Presentation and Aesthetics	4.65	0.50

Interpretation:

Quality and appearance of food are the most important factors, but speed and efficiency are also highly valued. This move away from the traditional leisurely meal to a more time efficient yet quality experience.

7.3 Awareness and Acceptance of Convenience Foods

We asked people about their knowledge and perceptions of convenience foods (e.g., frozen pre-cooked ingredients,

semi-processed components) in fine dining.

Table 3: Awareness and Acceptance Levels

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Aware of convenience food usage	112	74.7
Not aware	38	25.3
Acceptable if quality is maintained	120	80.0
Prefer fully fresh preparation only	30	20.0

Interpretation:

Most survey participants have heard about the use of convenience foods, and accept them as long as they don't affect quality and taste. This reflects a consumer pragmatism.

7.4 Perceived Impact of Convenience Foods on Dining Experience

Table 4: Perceived Impact of Convenience Foods

Impact Area	Mean Score	Interpretation
Faster Service	4.46	Strong Positive
Consistency in Taste	4.22	Positive
Reduction in Freshness	3.18	Moderate Concern
Cost Efficiency	4.05	Positive
Overall Satisfaction	4.12	Positive

Interpretation:

Convenience foods are highly correlated with accelerated service. But there is some concern about freshness, so quality control is important.

7.5 Relationship Between Convenience and Customer Satisfaction

Correlation analysis was done to determine the relationship between perceived convenience and overall customer satisfaction.

Table 5: Correlation Analysis

Variables	Correlation Coefficient (r)
Convenience & Satisfaction	0.68

Interpretation:

This is a strong relationship of convenience with customer satisfaction as the relationship is positive ($r = 0.68$). This implies that when convenience factors are incorporated into a dining experience, it will complement the experience provided it is well managed.

7.6 Discussion of Key Findings

These results are conclusive that the consumer expectation in the fine dining segment has changed. In the traditional sense, the concept of fine dining was about exclusivity, dazzle some cooking, and extended meal. However, the current findings can be condensed into the following: consumers want high-quality culinary experiences, however, they need to be able to find efficiency and convenience.

This means that the fact that convenience foods are well received means that the modern consumerists are only looking at the end product (taste, presentation, speed of service) but not the means (traditional cooking techniques). This is in line with the transformed lifestyle in the city that is time-starved and increasingly more exposed to global food demands.

The problem of freshness, however, leads to the problem of the necessity to strike the balance between convenience and authenticity. It is the duty of the fine dining restaurants to ensure that the perceived quality and brand image is not influenced by the use of the convenience foods. This equilibrium could be achieved through the assistance of strategic positioning of high quality pre-prepared foods and domestic cooking background.

Furthermore, the two are closely related with each other, and that is why operational efficiency is an important factor in enhancing customer experience. Those restaurants that are successful in combining technology and practices that are based on convenience are bound to have a competitive edge.

8. Limitations of the study

The current research is prone to some limitations that must be considered during the interpretation of the results. First, the study is also based on a rather small sample of the fine dining restaurants and customers, which can limit the external validity of the findings to other geographical areas and cultural settings. The convenience foods may be diverse in terms of consumer perception and expectation depending on the demographic determinants, level of income, and the culinary practices of an area, which cannot be fully covered in the current research. Second, the research heavily relies on self-reported information, which can be affected by response bias or social desirability or inaccurate recall. Third, the fast-changing landscape of the food and hospitality industry, especially due to the active innovations in the field of convenience foods and the shift in eating habits, could restrict the applicability of the findings in the long term. Moreover, the research is centered on few dimensions of convenience foods, including time saving and presentation at the expense of other critical dimensions, including sustainability, nutritional value, and supply chain dynamics. Lastly, time and resource limitations have restricted the level of empirical research such as being able to carry out longitudinal research that would bring a clearer picture of the evolving consumer expectations over a period of time.

9. Future Scope

The future aspect of the study of the topic of Changing Consumer Expectations and the Role of Convenience Foods in Modern Fine Dining is wide-ranged, particularly due to the changing lifestyle, technologies and the shift in the culinary preferences. It can be researched further how the fine dining restaurants can include convenience foods in their menus without losing their authenticity, quality and sensual pleasure. The potential of the up-and-coming technologies, such as automation, artificial intelligence, and smart kitchen system, could be explored; it can help increase the efficiency and preserve the gourmet quality at the same time. The cross-cultural and cross-regional comparative study can be more enlightening regarding the differences in consumer expectations in various locations throughout the globe especially the differences in the worlds of traditional fine dining markets and the fast-urbanizing markets. The aspect of sustainability can also be addressed in the future because how the convenience foods can be prepared to fit the eco-friendly practices, waste minimization, and ethical sourcing in the upscale restaurants. The research on the consumer perception can be furthered to determine the attitude towards semi-prepared or pre-comprised ingredients in the high-end restaurant scenario. The longitudinal studies would also be able to establish the impact of generational modifications on the extent to which convenience is accepted in the luxury dining experiences. In addition, the impact of the health consciousness, food preference and individualization trends on the menu structure is another opportunity. Overall, the future study can offer new models that can be applied in attaining a balance between convenience, quality, sustainability, and customer satisfaction in the dynamic fine dining environment.

10. Conclusion

The study concludes that the evolving preferences of customers are significantly altering the fine dining in the modern world and the convenience foods are not an element of the trade-off but rather a part of the strategy. More than ever, modern consumers are concerned with the time element, frequency, and novel culinary experience, and this is why the fine dining restaurants are inclined to embrace the convenience-focused considerations without violating its authenticity and the degree of elegance. It is demonstrated that with a proper selection and proper integration, convenience foods can not only result in increased efficiency in operations and less time spent on their preparation but also help in menu innovation and maintain the same degree of taste and presentation. In addition, this has been encouraged by changing lifestyles, urbanization and the growing influence of world trends in food in necessitating the existence of hybrid dining models which incorporates the luxurious and the affordability. However, success in such integration is more than largely dependant on availability of transparency, quality assurance and culinary innovation to meet the demands of the current consumers that are extremely high. Overall, as it has been pointed out in the paper, the role of convenience foods in fine dining has not been only functional but also transformational because the industry can adjust to the changing tastes without sacrificing the core values of the industry such as the excellence and experience-based dining.

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