La Locanda:

Customers' perception

of a *årets spot* winning restaurant

Master Thesis

Supervisor: Birthe Mousten

Student: Marco Noto

31/07/2017

To my family

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Abstract

The Italian independent restaurant *La Locanda* has been active in Aalborg since 2015. In November 2016, the *Danske Spiseguide*, an official Danish dining guide has rewarded *La Locanda* with the *årets spot* prize (the place of the year). The aim of this study is to explore customer's perception, to question the influence that the prize might have on customers, and to discover whether the latter agree or not with the *Danske Spiseguide's* criterion used to assign the award.

A qualitative case study research methodology was adopted. The research was conducted using self-administered hand-delivered questionnaires. These questionnaires were divided into two parts (or dimensions). The first focused on customers' experience, questioning several aspects of the restaurant's offerings, and allowing participants to evaluate elements like food, wine, or service quality. The second dimension focused instead on the *Danske Spiseguide* by presenting the guide-related question. At the end of the questionnaire, the contributors also had the option to leave an open comment so to express their opinion freely. Questionnaires were distributed to customers at *La Locanda*.

The findings of the study suggest that the role played by the assigned prize in influencing customers by making them choosing *La Locanda* was limited compared to other factors which participants took more into considerations. The main factor that positively influenced restaurant's awareness was represented by the suggestions clients received from friends or family members.
By the results gathered and the subsequent analysis, the final claim is that the clients' gratification represents the most valuable reward for La Locanda.

Chapter I: Introduction

1.1 Scope of the study

The approach of the researcher to the topic that will be discussed started several months before even deciding to make *La Locanda* the main subject of the thesis. In fact, there existed a professional "bond" between the owner of the restaurant, Carlo Liberati, and the student who started this investigation. The latter worked at the Italian restaurant *La Locanda* for an entire year and witnessed the changes that took place.

Nevertheless, the interest that made the research compelling was the award that the restaurant received from the *Danske Spiseguide*, an official guide which professionally reviews restaurants in Denmark since 1978.

In fall 2016, *La Locanda* was awarded the *årets spot* prize from the *Spiseguide*, a recognition that is visible both at the restaurant's entrance and on the *Danske spiseguide* website. The attention the restaurant received increased the amount of visiting customers, although the restaurant was already successful. The clients coming at *La Locanda* were not only from Denmark but also from Norway, Sweden and other countries. Therefore, the researcher wondered if the *årets spot* was the main influencing element that convinced an increasing number of people to come and spend lunch or dinner time enjoying Italian food. There could be multiple factors relying on clients' opinions, which are in turn affected by incalculable variables. The perception starts with the expectation, and the latter can also be affected by other elements, like external suggestions, past experiences or personal needs. The final aim is to have a comprehensive overview circa the customers' experience, their opinion about the restaurant and the services provided. The level of influence of the *årets spot* towards clients will be questioned, and also customers' agreement towards the *Danske Spiseguide* criterion will be examined. The study will expose participants' opinions through delivered questionnaires, and results can also be used by the restaurant to raise or keep high the quality standards eventually.

1.2 Background – What is an independent restaurant?

Aalborg municipality has undoubtedly grown in the past decade, and the increasing demand for different goods and services has also influenced the will of many restaurateurs to invest their potential in the restaurant sector. It is easy to find a variety of food places which cover a broad range of tastes, from the most traditional Danish meal, till different international dishes.

Parsa (2005) describes several establishment styles and most restaurants can be classified into one of four major restaurant types. These include casual dining restaurant (e.g., family restaurants), formal dining (e.g., Michelin starred restaurants), fast-casual (e.g., cafès) and quick service restaurants (e.g., fast foods). Each one of them offers different services, prices, structure atmosphere, and experience. Plus, restaurants can be classified into different management and ownership structures, like chain restaurants, franchised restaurants and independent restaurants (Parsa, 2005). Chain and franchised restaurants have in common a central management, which usually controls and handles the restaurants' needs; independent restaurants can be managed by a single or small group of people, and that results in structures, styles, experience and general concept that cannot easily be replicated by other competitors (Budhwar, 2004). However, Mandabach Siddiqui, Blanch and Van Leeuwen (2011) state that of all the above-described restaurant ownerships structures, independent restaurants face a higher risk of failure.

Independent restaurants tend to lose market share especially during an economic downturn, when people avoid spending money on dining out (Parsa, Self, Sydnor-Busso, & Yoon, 2011). Finally, Parsa's study (2005) states that within the first three years of operation, the failures rate of independent restaurants is two to three per cent higher than of chain restaurants.

Chapter II: Literature review

2.1 The hospitality industry

Throughout this research, it felt necessary to have an overall idea about the general restaurant business sector, and former researchers gave the possibility to watch through diversified perspectives, enriching the understanding on this subject.

Recently Chen (2014) has brought to his study multiple points of views regarding the restaurant sector, starting from the hospitality industry. Of course, there exist numerous studies on hospitality, which evolved the research field from an economic perspective to a different one. For example, by putting the accent on people; Wagen (2003) defines hospitality as a "people's industry," in which the human "factor" cannot be ignored or lightly put in consideration. "Hospitality" comes from Latin *hospitare,* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it generally as something through which somebody caters the needs. The website beyond.com, which deals with professional networks, defines hospitality by encircling that into the tourism field, stating that "Hospitality professionals work in administrative or management positions in a service-based environment, and they are responsible for overseeing the operations and success of an establishment, such as a hotel or restaurant." While the first definition seems to be too general, the second one provided by the website assigns a professional perspective into it. Another definition by O'Gorman & Cousins (2010) finely suggests hospitality as representing "the cordial reception, welcome and entertainment of guests or strangers of diverse social backgrounds and cultures charitably, socially or commercially with kind and generous liberality."

As we keep reading, we can see that the definition of hospitality can differ based on scholars and the perspective from which they start. Context and situation may change in accordance with the situation and the context to which is being applied (Chen, 2014). There are even social implications in hospitality; Lashley & Morrison (2000) view hospitality as falling into three domains: social, private and commercial. According to them, the social domain encompasses social activities as acts of hospitableness that take place together with the impacts of social forces on the production and consumption of food, drink, and accommodation. Also, they consider that hospitality activities create social bonds between people and can satisfy social needs. Finally, they also suggest that the commercial aspect of hospitality needs to recognise the emotional experience provided through service and address the connection between the guest and host.

This relationship has been criticised by Slattery (2002), although he agrees with the inclusion of social aspects in the definition of hospitality. Slattery (2002) states that the host-guest relationship proposed by Lashley and Morrison's (2000) social and private domains overlooks the business concept in hospitality and that most hospitality activities involve monetary exchange for products and services.

The hospitality industry and its human perspective have been supported not only by Wagen (2003) as I stated in the beginning but also by O'Gorman (2008), who identifies hospitality as a key factor of human endeavour that involves human behaviour and affects the development of societies.

The hospitality that will be focused on this research deals with the commercial context. Of course, the commercial purpose is not deepened just as a matter of "selling products" for monetary gain, neither is inquired in its social relationships under various context. It will deepen multiple perspectives which contribute to the final customer "experience." The product sold is just a single element, yet important, but not the one that solely matters. Service, like the product itself, requires high customers' involvement where the quality of the product is measured against customers' experience and expectations (Gronroos, 2001). Gronroos also states that the clients are in fact searching for a complete package: it is not just the product itself they receive, but also the way the latter is being delivered (like in this case, food and beverage) influences and possibly decides their level of satisfaction.

Although the hospitality industry comprises of multiple sub-categories (like leisure or travel), this study focuses on the restaurant sector, which will be examined in the next paragraph.

2.2 The restaurant sector

The restaurant sector provides food and beverages to customers (Ninemeier, 2010). In literature, restaurants are defined as organisations providing food, beverages, and services at a specific location in return for monetary gain (Brotherton, 2002; Ottenbacher & Harrington, 2007). Also, Schmidgall et al. (2002) define a restaurant as a for-profit food service operation whose primary business involves the sale of food/beverage products to individuals and small groups of guests. Chen (2014), by quoting Parsa (2005), states that most restaurants can be classified into one of four major restaurant types: fine/formal-dining (e.g. Michelin-starred restaurants), casual dining (e.g. family restaurants), fast-casual (e.g. cafés) and quick-service restaurants (e.g. fast-food restaurants), which offer different price structures, service styles, atmospheres, and experiences.

In this study the focus will be on a formal restaurant since *La Locanda* respects the higher standards that are described for this category: it uses higher quality-ingredients, enhanced cooking techniques, resulting in higher-priced menu items. Dittmer (2003) also specifies that since higher quality food is being served in a better presentation, also the personal service is provided by a well-trained wait staff.

As it was stated in the beginning, different types of restaurants can be described, but in this research, the attention is given to a unique type of the latter: independent restaurant. Budhwar (2004) defines an independent restaurant as one owned by an individual, family or a private group, where the restaurant concept, menu and experience are hard to replicate by other competitors within the industry.

Also, Walker (2007) describes the independent restaurant owner-operator as one who decides on the restaurant location, recruitment, and management issues. At the same time, Walker (2007) describes independent restaurants as typically owned and run by locals, and the owner is also working as the host, chef or in other positions. The both descriptions above coincide with the case of "La Locanda," which the owner, Carlo Liberati, owns and runs the restaurant with his family working also as a chef and manager.

Another analysis of Litz and Stewart (1998) explains that the cost of opening an independent restaurant is lower since the owner can freely choose the operational factors like location, purchasing and ordering, but these low barriers to entry and business freedom influences the rate of failure for these type of restaurants negatively (Budhwar, 2004; Parsa, 2005).

Parsa (2005) also found that within the first three years of operation, the failure rates of independent restaurants are higher than for chain restaurants, which have support for most operational needs, such as marketing strategy, concept and menu design, costing control, and brand reputation (Lesonsky, 2012; Parsa et al., 2011).

The information about restaurants types and failure rates allow the researcher to deepen another concept within the literature review, the idea of successfulness. This is to understand if and how is possible to define the restaurant *La Locanda* successful and by which means.

2.3 What makes a good restaurant?

Within this research, customer experience perspective is the first thing analysed. Before deepening this point, it is important to note some observations for a successful restaurant which have been proposed in multiple published studies. For example, Kim and Gu (2006), so as Olsen et al. (2004), consider restaurant successfulness from a financial perspective, that is the capacity of a restaurant of staying operational avoiding bankruptcy. Also Camillo et al. (2008), by adopting Dunn and Bradstreet's reports (1996) states that a restaurant which avoids closure with losses to creditors and shareholders can be defined as successful.

Different perspectives can be found in Power (2005) and Goode (2013). The latter defines in his restaurant management website various parameters a restaurant should keep working on to be successful; a first observation is made about the implicit social experience that comes with dining out: "It doesn't need to be crammed so full that the noise level becomes intolerable, but equally there's nothing quite as bad as being the only diners in an eerily silent room. And the tables need to be spaced far enough apart that you don't feel you are being eavesdropped on your conversation. What creates the buzz or mood of a place is indefinable, but it is an important factor" (Goode, 2013). A second point, described as a key issue, is the service quality: "Again, it is a question of balance, and it's another area where you tend to notice it more if it is bad. Good service is unselfconscious, it's unfussy, and it's appropriately attentive. I do not want wait staff hovering around, anxious to interrupt at the slightest nod, but then again I don't want to have to sit there for 20 minutes before I can get someone to bring another bottle of fizzy water. I appreciate friendly service, but I don't want wait staff to engage me in too much conversation, or be ingratiating" (Goode, 2013).

Notes are also for waiting times ("Restaurants have a frustrating knack of slowing things down too much towards the end of the meal, when it can take an epoch to order coffee, and even longer to get the bill") and especially for the wine, defined as a "contentious subject" (Goode, 2013).

"For me, a good restaurant is one where the wine list is imaginative, with a well-chosen selection of wines, and where the pricing is not too rapacious. Credit to any restaurateur who has a sliding scale of markups, with a smaller percentage of pricier bottles, so that people are not put off drinking more expensive wines. Many restaurants buy just from one merchant. As a result, the list has a rather formulaic feel, with a few hits and lots of misses. It is rare to find a restaurant where much thought and work has gone into the wine list where wines have been carefully sourced from a variety of

suppliers, but these are the restaurants I tend to award with my custom. I'm happy to pay a decent markup where I feel the owner has taken some care in choosing decent wines that match her cooking." (Goode, 2013).

Financial aspects are also overlooked according to Power (2005), who states that successfulness can be fragmented into six different categories: personal success (satisfaction and personal progression); financial success, that includes substantial return on the investment and monetary reward; social success, that is the relationship established between the business and society and environment; longevity success, which represents the business's ability to sustain success in the fast-changing industry environment; employee success, which considers the commitment of employees to the organization and the turnover rate; finally, the customer success, which is the satisfaction level of clients and the number of loyal customers; The latter category is specifically the point which will be investigated throughout this research.

Surely, there have been many other different types of research that studied restaurant success apart from the financial perspective, focusing more on the insurgent forces that may influence the goals of any restaurateurs (Hua & Templeton, 2010). For example, Nyheim et al. (2005) studied the influence of the development of technologies may affect the operability/efficiency of a restaurant, like for example the online ordering system. Although technologies can surely influence clients' overall perception, the choice made within the research is to investigate insights regarding a sphere that mainly deals with food experience.

As it was written before, this study investigates the customers' perception regarding "La Locanda," by focusing on their opinions regarding their dining experience. After making a point about the "success" term and its implications within the restaurant sector, it is now possible to introduce to the study the "*Danske Spiseguide*," the organisation responsible for awarding the considered restaurant.

2.4 *Den Danske Spiseguide*

Bent Ole Christensen drove around Denmark to eat at restaurants, but could not find a place where he could discover and share suggestions for nice places. Therefore, he contacted the French Michelin Guide and asked if they did want to implement a rating for Danish restaurants. However, the French rejected, as they did not think that the gastronomic level in Denmark was justified in the guide. Therefore, he contacted Japan's Toyo Tire & Rubber Company, a competing tire manufacturer for Michelin, and they helped create the Toyo guide.

The first guide was published in 1978 and was listing 100 Danish restaurants evaluated in the same way as in the Michelin Guide (Haar, 2015).

By entering "La Locanda" restaurant, it is almost impossible not to note, hanging on the wall next to the main door, several certificates of Italian authenticity and also Danish acknowledgements of quality. The ones that most probably catch the eye of the guests are the awards given from the Danish *Spiseguide*. It is possible to read further information about Spiseguide on their website (and also their Facebook page, "*Den Danske Spiseguide*").

On the "Press" section on their official web page it is possible to obtain some information regarding the organisation, which is here reported after being translated from the Danish language:

"A guide for the cuisine experience in all Denmark.

Bent Christensen published in 1978 the first Danske Spiseguide, and from then on has been published every year. The guide contains the best of the Danish gastronomy, food and wine, all types of restaurants, all characterised by their high-quality standards.

He is (Bent Christensen, t/n) a severe critic within the Danish restaurant world, and being inserted in the spiseguide can be considered a great honour all over the restaurant sector."

The description above can, in researcher's opinion, explain why the owner, Carlo Liberati, cared about showing the Danske spiseguide award prize (which consisted of a printed recognition of quality, by collocating the restaurant in the so-called "*årets spot*," literally, "the place of the year").

The Danske Spiseguide site also provides information regarding the prize assigning method. Again, the following information has been translated, as the site is integrally in Danish language and does not provide an English version of the content:

"Before admission, there are tests, always anonymous (though with a little exception, the editor can no longer know for sure that are unknown).

We always pay for our test meals. The guide often receives invitations to sample restaurants as restaurant guests. We're sorry we cannot accept these invitations as they don't comply with our principles.
For those same reasons, we cannot say yes to advertise the restaurants and all other branches, like hotels, which have not been included in the guide."

This is an important point, as the guide itself want to specify its criterion of objectivity towards the award assignation, by stating that no restaurant can offer meals during the "sampling days" so to exclude any attempt of "buying" any particular considerations in one's restaurant regards.

The history of *La Locanda* has always been braided with the Danske Spiseguide: as the restaurant opened in 2015, during the first winter season it already achieved a nominee for the "*årets spot"* prize in the *Danske Spiseguide*. That nominee directly brought La Locanda to the second place among the other candidates.

The year following (31 October 2016), after receiving for the second time the candidacy, the restaurant won the first prize among other four other candidates restaurants: Italo Disco, in Copenhagen; Italy and Italy, in Ringsted, and Ravello, in Herning; this information can be checked on the Danske Spiseguide site ("La Locanda, Aalborg," 2016).

Three research questions are proposed and being followed:

• What are the customers' perceptions towards the restaurant "La Locanda"?
• Is the restaurant's *årets spot* award influencing customers in choosing the restaurant?
• Do customers agree with the *årets spot* evaluation criterion?

A first prize award can surely increase a restaurant's visibility, but what's the client personal perception once there?

The first step was to make contact with *den Danske Spiseguide* throughout the messaging form present in their website. After several weeks without receiving an answer, it was decided to find other means so to get in touch. Thanks to *Den Danske Spiseguide* Facebook page, the researcher could firstly contact their staff, asking through the messenger system if it was possible to know which criterion did the restaurant "La Locanda" fit to win the *årets spot* prize. The message was this time answered, but they suggested to write to Bent Christensen directly.

The e-mail that followed briefly answered the question regarding the criterion. Bent Christensen wrote:

"*The key words is Creativity changes raw materials to tasteful enjoyment. That's our key point.*" (Christensen, 2017)

Every restaurant has its concept, and independent restaurants, especially if *gourmet*, tend to build their *caractèr* by respecting that principle. For example, Noma restaurant in Copenhagen has the basic concepts of *genuine* and *Nordic*. "Genuine" (and "raw") refers to wild products from nature, not

grown artificially. The chef René Redzepi refers to the Danish *Dogma* movie ideas, refusing artificial light, added sound, and optical filters. The Nordic refers to the products, which all come from the Scandinavian area (Notaker, 2009).

2.5 Eating out in Denmark and considerations on *La Locanda*

As it was stated before, it appears to be a great honour to be inserted within the *Danske Spiseguide* as a suggested restaurant. If normally a recognition would increase and satisfy every restaurant owner's visibility within the market, recognition within the Danish restaurants seems to have an even greater impact. The reasons behind this observation come out thanks to Notaker (2009), who dedicates an entire chapter in his book to the social and historical meanings of "eating out" as a Scandinavian. The act of selecting and eating out is not something to be taken for granted.
"Eating out is not an important part of Scandinavian food consumption or social life. Historical factors may partly explain this. Scandinavia never had the broad restaurant tradition, as in many European countries from the early nineteenth century, with a strong urban culture and a wealthy bourgeoisie. Apart from a few big cities, Scandinavia was for a long time dominated by a sparsely populated countryside, villages, and small provincial towns, where the clientele for the restaurant was too small. The elite in these places rather arranged dinner parties for each other in their homes" Notaker (2009).

The Author also reports of an American visitor in the 1960s who observed: "Generally speaking, the Scandinavians do not eat out the way we so often do (to avoid cooking, or because it is quicker). When they eat out, they do so for a treat, and they expect their restaurants to be tops. Consequently, there are few open eating places, compared to the many in America, but there are a good number of superb restaurants that rank among the finest of Europe" Notaker (2009).

Launch represents a time of the day in which, according to Notaker (2009), for working reasons most professionals eat out, while dinner time is mostly perceived as a time in which families and friends are more prone to spend time together and celebrate. Thus the restaurant represents a "treat".

One reason for this that "restaurants are expensive, with a combination of expensive ingredients, good wages to staff, and high taxes and the service tips that are included in the total amount on the bill. This applies especially to the finest and more exclusive restaurants (Notaker, 2009).

Gourmet restaurants can be easily distinguished from the rest, for they have a well-planned concept with design and décor, professional waiters and sommeliers, a representative wine list, and top or near-the-top cuisine. According to Notaker (2009) the expression *gourmet restaurant* just came in the last two decades, when Scandinavian cooks have won prizes and awards in Europe. In the 1960s the cuisine practised was mostly in the classic French tradition. During the 1970s and the 1980s, many Scandinavian cooks picked up new trends, working as apprentices in French restaurants.

Being the researcher also employed at *La Locanda*, it was observed that the restaurant coincides with the above definition of *gourmet*: the well-planned menu, the professional waiters and sommeliers, as well as the representative wine list, are all elements that can be found as a guest.

Besides the *gourmet* definition, *La Locanda* is also considered as an ethnic restaurant. Ethnic restaurants were set up in Scandinavia around 1950 by Chinese immigrants, not only in the major cities but also in small localities. This started a new international restaurant tradition in the culturally and ethnically homogeneous Scandinavian societies (Notaker, 2009).

Italian influence came later, in the 1960s, when tourism to southern Europe brought thousands of Scandinavians into contact with Mediterranean food, and in the following years, Italian and Greek restaurants were established in many cities. The ethnic cuisine has been an inspiration for many Scandinavians cooks, who have experimented with different influences in fusion, or crossover, cooking (Notaker, 2009).

Nevertheless, Notaker (2009) adds that "instead of classification based on objective characteristics of the restaurants, it is possible to work out a typology based on people's perception of different restaurants and the parts they play in their lives." Simply, he breaks down different types of customers that chose this or that restaurant in accordance to their *needs*. For example, when people have the *basic* biological need of eating and don't have too much time to spend for that, they'll probably choose fast foods and kiosks; when instead people feel the necessity to meet and spend time in company, there's a *social* frame added, and different chains of cafés, pizza restaurants, and ethnic restaurants meet this need. For other people social frame is not enough, as they want something more in terms of experience, *innovative*, thus the choice of a unique eating: the gourmet restaurants answer this kind of need, "where a complete break with everyday life and food is expected, and price is subordinated to the desire of an extraordinary experience" (Notaker, 2009).

Chapter III: Theory

3.1 Quality

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) gives a world-class specification for products, services and systems, to ensure quality, safety and efficiency. Regarding quality, they provide a definition of that which is also reported on the business dictionary: ISO 8402-1986 standard defines quality as "the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bears its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs" (retrieved from www.businessdictionary.com). Thus, the definition of quality covers almost an infinite range of products and services that customers pay for and can evaluate, even way before the act of buying. In the latter case, people's mind may work differently, and the same evaluation comes after also considering aspects that might not have something to do with objective or calculable fact. In other terms, people are affected by their perception.

Kureemum and Fantina (2011) report in their book an unknown quote and a definition of perception.

Perception

1. To become aware of, know, or identify by means of the senses.

2. To recognise, discern, envision, or understand.

Perception is not reality, but it might as well be.

—Author unknown

3.1.1 Perception of quality

Kureemun and Fantina (2011), by dealing with the customer's perception element, state: "Perceived quality, much like truth, is in the mind of the believer, and is a poor offspring because our methods of today are all focusing attention on the business and not to the customer outside of it."

When talking about quality, it is important to state the difference between the *actual quality* and the *perceived quality*.

The first one relates to an objective value that can be "calculated" or stated. The latter corresponds more directly with the customer's experience.

Kureemun & Fantina (2011) bring and suggest a pyramidal model which illustrates the position of perceived quality *vis-à-vis* actual quality.

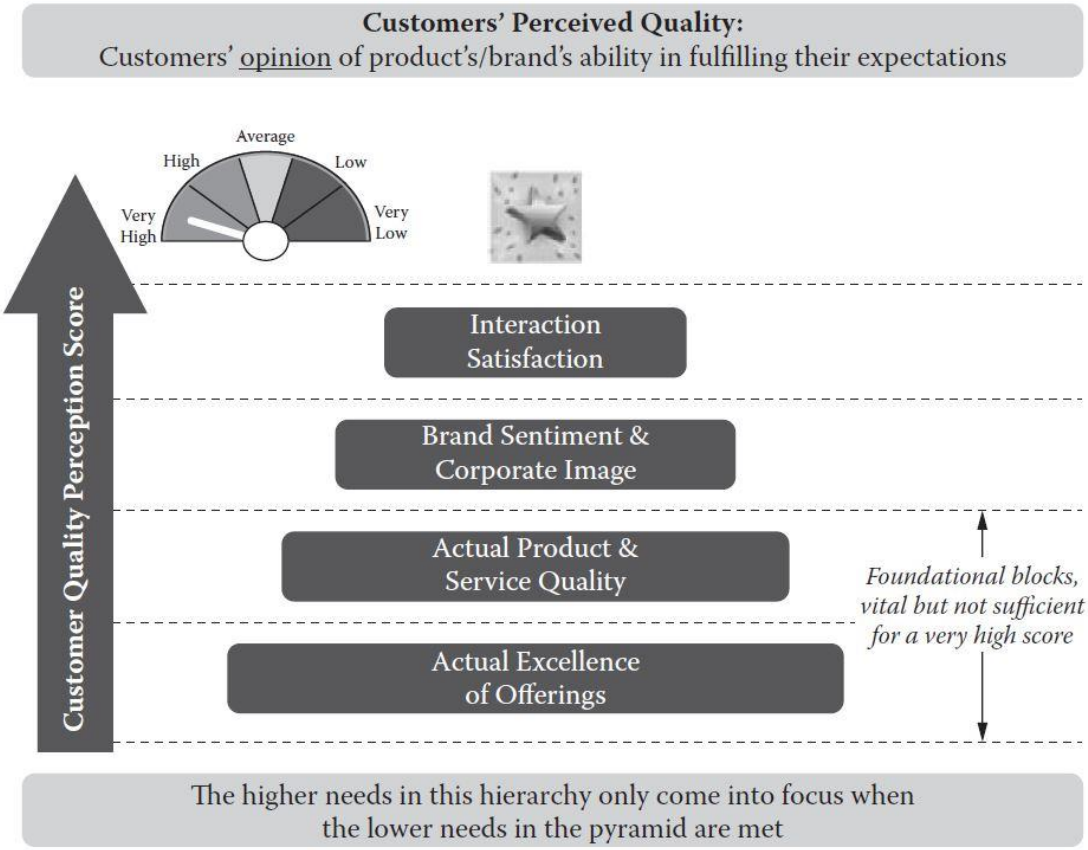


Figure 3.1

Needs hierarchy: from actual quality to perceived quality (Kureemun & Fantina, 2011).

It is easy to see in Figure 3.1, how the foundational blocks (or layers) are fundamental to overcome the buyer's inertia. Of course, these first layers are not by themselves enough to obtain a "higher score perception" by the customers. At the first level, the *actual excellence of offerings* is the need to offer products and services that fulfil a need (Kureemun & Fantina, 2011). We can make an easy example with food: in the literature review section, it was stated that clients could also be differentiated according to their *needs*; people that want to satisfy their first, biological, need for food, can probably just chose a chain-type restaurant (like McDonalds) and be content without really expecting high quality standards or even caring.

Once the products and services fulfil this basic need, they must be of high quality. This is the second level: *actual product and service quality* (Kureemun & Fantina, 2011).

By following their statements and the former literature example, we can describe *gourmet restaurants* as “special places” where, apart from the basic need of food, customers expect and could get a higher quality perception.

The *brand sentiment and corporate image* is a key point layer: Although many people may be customers of British Petroleum (BP), the massive, catastrophic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 has the potential to drastically alter the perception customers have of the quality of BP’s products. Toyota, once widely perceived as producing high-quality cars, is suffering because of the recall of some of its models. Although many Toyota models are of a very high quality, customers will not necessarily differentiate between the recalled Lexus, Camry, and Prius, and the not-recalled Yaris, Avalon, and Highlander. They may perceive Toyota’s products to be of poor quality (Kureemun & Fantina, 2011). This a drastic example, but of course it is possible to transpose that on a restaurant “sphere”: there could be a restaurant that had to face some hygienic issues, and from that moment had suffered major customer loss. Examples can be a lot.

The top layer of the pyramid, *interaction satisfaction*, is the *nirvana* each business wants to reach. If customers are satisfied with all their interactions with the company, perception of quality will be high. This is a significant challenge. Companies need to pay more attention to the top two layers that incorporate the intangible elements of quality. These top strata only come into focus when the lower layers have delivered actual quality in every shipment going out the door. There is no one, unified manner in which the organisations are addressing the customers’ perception of quality.

The quality of the total customer experience is the total of what the pyramid depicts as a framework that is complete, coherent, and looks at the world from the client's perspective:

1. The layers form a continuum that buyers experience during their interactions with a supplier, and getting these interactions right is decisive on overall customer satisfaction, likelihood to repurchase, and likelihood to recommend.
2. Quality criteria go beyond the actual, tangible, and measurable aspects. The customers’ *perception* of their experience will always constitute the criteria that they use to judge the quality of the experience.
3. Quality metrics need to mirror the customers’ perception of how well each criterion was met, along with one or more metrics that show how the firm or the business lived up to more objective quality standards (Kureemun & Fantina, 2011).

Customer’s perception is related to customer’s satisfaction, which is defined by Dube et al. (1994) as “an indicator of whether customers will return to a restaurant”, or as “the leading criterion for

determining the quality actually delivered to customers through the product/service and by the accompanying servicing". Many scholars defined customer satisfaction, but the most accredited definition was given by Oliver (1980). According to the latter, customers are used to buying products or services with the influence of previous experiences, which creates expectations. Customers will then compare his or her expectations by comparing it to the outcome of their purchase; if the outcome compares expectations, and the customer accepts it, then there will be satisfaction; if the outcome does not compare and the customer cannot accept it, then satisfaction does not occur.

3.1.2 Service Quality Perception and Conceptual Model

When talking about service quality, Gronroos (2001) defines it as something the customers perceives and not what management or workers think. The perceived service quality is a subjective concept, and therefore perceptions will always be different from one customer to another for the same level of service quality.

Fitzsimmons et al. (1994) provided a Conceptual Model of Customers' Perception of Service Quality, which is at this moment adapted and reported.

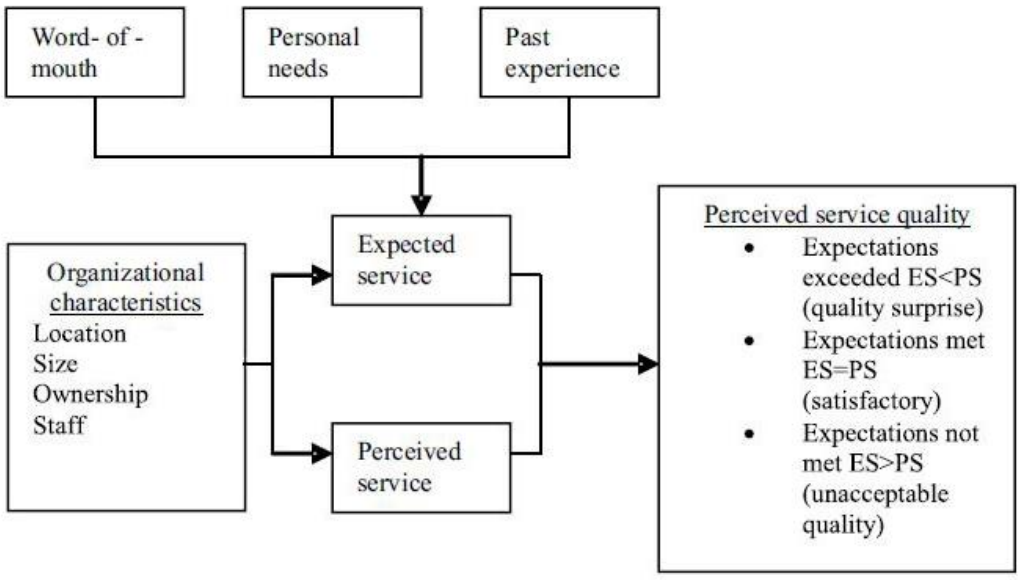


Fig. 3.2 Conceptual Model adapted from Fitzsimmons et al. (1994)

According to Gronroos (2001), the perceived quality depends on experienced service (ES) and perceived service (PS), as stated in Figure 3.2. Customers' perception of the service quality also depends on their past experiences and perception. This perception is influenced by attributes of the service delivery process (Bolton & Drew, 1991), and expectations are influenced by other spheres of personal needs, word-of-mouth and past experience (Parasuraman et al., 1995). The clients' perception is thus given as a result of an evaluation of the gap between expected service and perceived service (Gronroos, 2001; Parasuraman et al., 1995). Trivially, if the given gap widens, the perception of service quality decreases. Is it, therefore, important to identify what guests perceive as quality so to provide them service at the quality level desired by them.

Again, it is compelling to remember that service quality is not easy to evaluate because it is not a product to quantify, but a subjective evaluation that can differ from client to another. According to Gronroos (1984), service quality is evaluated when the user of service compare his perception with the actual experience.

3.3 The Expectation Value

For this paragraph, there will be a focus on the expectation value. Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman (2014) present the expectations as key points when talking about novelty and surprise. In their discussion, they firstly state that we tend to like food and drink more if they meet our expectations than if they do not (Peterson & Ross, 1972; Pinson, 1986). In fact, at the moment we eat and drink, our brains will make a prediction about the likely taste/flavour of that which we are about to ingest. Brains will also have made a judgment call about how much we are going to enjoy the experience (this is also known as hedonic expectancy; Cardello & Sawyer, 1992; Woods et al., 2011). Brunstrom & Wilkinson (2007) also underlined the importance of the appearance in setting up expectations regarding the satiating properties of food, which can influence a diner's subsequent feeling of satiety.

It is interesting to note how expectations can influence positively or negatively food and drinks evaluation, both immediately and in the long-term. Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman (2014) bring a meaningful example to explain this:

"When Heston Blumenthal and his colleagues served a savoury ice-cream that looked like sweet strawberry to unsuspecting diners in the setting of the laboratory, those who hadn't been forewarned that it might be salty rather than sweet liked the dish far less both at the time and when tested several weeks thereafter than those who had been told (by the name of the dish) to expect a savoury flavour.

In fact, simply giving the dish the name ‘Food 386’ helped to prepare diners for surprise, to expect the unexpected and so keep their mind open to new experiences. Just how many great-tasting dishes have been spoiled, one wonders, by the failure to get the name of the dish right”.

Nevertheless, although laboratory-based experiments about expectations would recommend “Do not surprise diners,” any self-respecting chef would not follow these suggestions. Otherwise, they would not be able to rank up the international San Pellegrino rankings. This is one of those cases where lab-proof experiments would result as inadequate for many Michelin-starred restaurants, where chefs excel in surprising clients, while clients are expecting to be surprised (Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014).

Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman (2014) finally add that “while surprise can undoubtedly be a delightful and exciting experience if the diner knows that they are safe in the hands of one of the growing number of culinary artists who have specifically designed the experience to be ‘just so’, it can be far less pleasant when dining at a friend’s house or if you find yourself taking part in a culinary experiment in the context of the research laboratory. Understanding the role of expectations in our dining experiences is, therefore, going to be crucial to approaching the perfect meal”. There is some evidence to suggest that the element of surprise can have an impact on customers’ perception and the overall experience. A good perception will make the client think whether the purchased goods (or services) are worth the money spent. Technically is called *value for money* and it is defined by the site InvestorWords so: “A buyer's perception of the goods or services that they receive. A consumer can attest to value for money when they feel that they have received an item that was worth the price that they paid for it. Several factors go into the consumers' decisions, including price, quality, and product or service suitability”.

3.4 The “everything else” factor

Food quality is the first thing we mostly care when we chose a restaurant. That might sound trivial, but it is usually ignored how much a great meal can be influenced not just by the freshness and seasonality of the ingredients, but also by the “everything else,” like tablecloths, the feel of the cutlery and the atmosphere (Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014). Every one of us likes to think that can we can taste the quality of the food; that means we believe we are not affected by other elements that aren’t strictly connected to our hunger.

This belief empirically appears to be an illusion: psychology research is in fact filled with studies regarding misperceptions that permeate our daily lives (Chabris and Simons, 2011; Kahneman, 2013). When scientists investigate what happens to people's ratings of food and drink when they get changed their plate colour, the ambient lighting, the music, etc., they find those ratings changed significantly. Note that when people are asked if the colour of the plate had any influence on their experience with the dish, they will say *"Of course not. Are you crazy?"* (Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014).

The authors (Spence & Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014) also don't forget to outline the role of the food itself, which is critical in its importance: having the freshest and most flavourful ingredients, the culinary skills to fuse and harmonize them with whatever else is going to be on the plate is yet the necessary precondition. However, if that wonderful food is going to be served on an aeroplane or in a shattered canteen, the taste will simply not be the same.
Still, many chefs, especially those of a more traditional persuasion, will tell that great food is nothing more than best ingredients mixed with skills. However, those same chefs will probably have their restaurants situated in a converted knitting museum while hiring a duty manager that will take care of the music selection (Chossat and Gergaud, 2003).

Others that we have spoken to start muttering something like "*You mean that you can serve dog food, and people will like it if you just play the right music*?". We honestly believe that that is unlikely to happen. What we are much more interested in is making sure that wonderful food is shown at its best (Chossat and Gergaud, 2003).

It is possible to get some practical examples of what may affect customers positively by reading one of the thousands of restaurant guides existing on the internet.

For example, Popick (2007) offered a list of ideas that the clients personally suggested and which should make an impact on the overall experience (and on the restaurant success, of course) not only in the restaurant sector but also in another type of business.

Some examples of the presented ideas are hereby listed: live music; wine tasting; food and wine pairings; meeting the chef; Get to know your regulars; Neighbourhood gatherings; Hosting a fundraiser; Making discounts for the next meal; examples may continue, but the ones cited above can give an idea of how broad and variegated can the "everything else" factor be.

3.4.1 Word of Mouth

Another factor that may reasonably be related to the people awareness towards the restaurant is the word of mouth aspect. Opportunities to reach new customers have been raising over and over in the last decade, especially through social media platforms, but a substantial difference has been studied, between the online communication word of mouth promotion and the offline one. Wyner (2014) cited in his article Ed Keller and Brand Fay (2012), authors of *The Face-to Face Book: Why Real Relationships Rule in a Digital Marketplace*, in which is shown how the majority of conversation (90%) happens offline, and only a minimum percentage (8%) of chatting takes place on social media. The data comes from large, representative, continuous tracking surveys that ask people to record their recent brand-related conversations (Wyner, 2014). Nevertheless, the author of the article also adds that the exact percentage may vary over time, but the consistent conclusion is that online is a small fraction of all brand conversations.
Plus, online mentions skew heavily toward media and entertainment, technology and automotive categories. Relatively fewer mentions online are for household products, beverages, food and dining, according to "On Brands and Word of Mouth," published in the Journal of Marketing Research in August 2013 (Wyner, 2014).

Word of mouth is also connected to the past experience of a customer. Zaltman (2003) states that not only our choices are affected by our memory, but also the latter is influenced by pre-existent experiences. For example, if we had a good experience in a certain restaurant in the past, it is likely that this will "suggest" us to replicate the good time we spent, even if that restaurant had some particular changes which sounded less appealing to us. And probably, we will suggest that experience to others.

3.4.2 Official recognition – *How can a professional guide be perceived?*

The concept of social recognition is quite general. In this research, the value of recognition is given to *La Locanda* by the *Danske Spiseguide*, which was inspired by the well-known guide Michelin. Indeed, it is stated on the *Danske Spiseguide* site that the criterion used for restaurants' evaluation is comparable to the ones employed by the Michelin Guide. Therefore, despite the poor existing literature regarding the Danish guide, it may be possible to compare to some extent the *Danske Spiseguide*'s awards to the Michelin's evaluation.

In the first place, it is to note that the first thing affected by these sorts of recognitions is the brand image associated with the restaurant. The simplest example of a brand image in restaurants could be found in McDonald's, which, regarding hospitality and quality perceived, are instantly and mentally associated with quick and cheap food. Haig (2004) claims that once a brand image has been created, it is extremely challenging to modify the consumer's perception of it again.

The website Tripsavvy ("What You Need to Know About Michelin Stars", 2017) describes the Michelin guide, which since 1900 anonymously reviews thousands of restaurant. The reviewers "concentrate on the quality, mastery of technique, personality and consistency of the food, in doing the reviews. They do not look at the interior decor, table setting, or service quality in awarding stars, though the guide shows forks and spoons which describe how fancy or casual a restaurant may be". Plus, the French guide does not consider consumer reviews to make evaluations.

The awarded stars are something restaurants long for, even because the majority of restaurants have none, and a single star is enough to highly enhance a restaurant's prestige. The brand image of a restaurant can, therefore, be influenced by the Michelin Start System or by similar professional rating organisations (like the *Danske Spiseguide*), creating in consumer's mind an image of quality, but with that quality being achieved at a price. Surlemont et al. (2005) claim that certain segments of the consumer can be affected by guide's recommendations beyond the bounds of affordability. However, there could also be other segments that would take advantage of the guide's recommendations. Porter (2004) in fact would argue that recognition would appeal those who wish to set themselves apart from the masses or are trying to create an impression for their purposes.

Furthermore, there is some evidence that consumers are moving away from solely respond to information provided from what is considered as a professional source, which would include the Michelin guide and, again, the *Danske Spiseguide*. Poiesz (2004) suggests by studying consumer's behaviour that the "modern" buyer will also rely on other sources, like the internet. Also, Bagozzi et al. (2002) find that consumers' choice is driven by different factors which are far away from the rating system; and indicate that consumers pay a considerable amount of attention to peer pressure and comments, and the Internet provides them with access to this type of response. Both Poiesz (2004) and Bagozzi et al. (2002) even consider somewhat offensive the formal approach displayed in reports such as the Michelin guide.

Also, Zaltman (2003) advocates that "the reliance upon peers can be a strong determinate for purchase. Thus, if consumers recommend restaurant brands in many cases this will produce a more positive effect upon others than the professional approach of recommendations provided by

Michelin". The Michelin brand is also affected by recent drops in guide sales in Europe, at least in this geographical area, and is seen as part of the reason for the guides expansion into the US and Asia. Bagozzi et al. (2002) also observe that while the standalone quality is measured, the Michelin organisation does not consider the quality perception and satisfaction that convince people to revisit the same restaurant. The authors state that, according to many academics, this area of consumers' behaviour equals the importance of quality of the offerings (Bagozzi et al., 2002).

Another flaw that may arise is the lack of structured measurement of quality adopted by Michelin. In fact, it is to consider that the judgment (and the possible consequential star rating) depends solely on the inspector's report (Surlemont & Johnson, 2005). This means that the chefs have no specific target to aim for, and they are just suggested to develop their own style and be patient, hoping to be noticed by the Michelin inspectors. Surlemont and Johnson (2005) also noticed in their research that some of the starred restaurants were not deserving their position, and this may negatively affect the perception of the quality and reliability of the system and the evaluation procedures. This also shows some difficulties for the Michelin guide to keep up to date the ratings for the same restaurants, being also widespread on a large geographic scale.

It may be demanding or pretentious to expect such indifference or nuisance towards the *Danske Spiseguide*, but it felt compelling for the researcher to consider future possibilities that may show up once the results of this research will be collected.

Chapter IV: Research Design

4.1 Introduction

The scope of the study is to explore the customers' perceptions towards Aalborg's Italian restaurant *La Locanda*, to analyse whether these clients are influenced in their choice by "*Den Danske Spiseguide*" for awarding *La Locanda* with the annual prize "*årets spot*" or not.
To do so, the perception models of Kureemun & Fantina (2011) and Fitzsimmons et al. (1994) have been presented in the theory chapter. It is important to underline, that while the first model proposed by Kureemun & Fantina (2011) was adopted integrally as a reference, the second model by Fitzsimmons et al. (1994) was only partially considered in the research questionnaires and the following analysis. The reason for that was the necessity to focus the attention on specific aspects of customers' experience and less on other features that would have touched in the first place the owner's personal choices (like the restaurant's location or size). Investigating the latter's perspective would have added another level of investigation to the research, which would not have been necessary to answer the problem questions. A further deepening of the dimensions of service quality presented in the Fitzsimmons et al. (1994) model, would have led the research towards other dimensions that have less to do with customers' perception and more to do with the restaurant's planning and internal organisation. The *årets spot* prize described in the second chapter is directly connected with the food quality (which is reviewed and judged by the *Danske Spiseguide*); therefore, the perceptions provided by customers were investigated accordingly. The following questions guided this research:

- What are the customers' perceptions towards the restaurant *La Locanda*?
- Is the restaurant's *årets spot* award influencing customers' choice?
- Do customers' perceptions results parallel the *årets spot* criterion?

The research questionnaires were given the approval by the restaurant's owner Carlo Liberati.

4.2 A Qualitative research

The qualitative research paradigm was adopted in this research. Creswell (2003) defines qualitative research as a way of exploring and understanding individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Patton (2002) describes qualitative research as something that emphasises words instead of figures in the data collection, and research findings are obtained through real-life settings where the studied phenomenon unfolds naturally. The qualitative research approach was thus adopted within this research, as the final scope was to generate an understanding of the customers of the independent restaurant "La Locanda" regarding their experience through self-administered questionnaires. According to Myers (2009), qualitative research is used to understand people and cultural context in which they live and work.

For every research paradigm, there are advantages and disadvantages, and quality research makes no exception. The strength of qualitative research, according to Merriam (2009), is that it can acknowledge complex situations and include paradoxes; on the other side, qualitative research can display a lack of accuracy in its data collection.

Different paradigms are existing within the qualitative research framework, and each paradigm represents researcher's scopes and expectations. Guba & Lincoln (1994) consider paradigms to be student's basic beliefs (also defined as thinking systems). Through this study, it is possible to note researcher's interpretative perception that knowledge and reality are built by social actions (or socially constructed), and there are multiple interpretations of events (Merriam, 2009). Guba & Lincoln (1994) also believe that knowledge can be obtained through the investigation process, especially with qualitative research methods, like observations.

4.3 Case study

The case study has been defined by Yin (1991) as an empirical inquiry that studies a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context. Also, according to Merriam (2009), case studies allow researchers to investigate complex social units consisting of multiple variables which can help to understand a phenomenon by describing and analysing a bound system. The bound system, in this case, is represented by the selected independent restaurant *La Locanda* located in Aalborg.

Finally, Merriam (2009), while defining case studies, points also out the ontological limitations of this method: the researcher relies its interpretive analysis on a limited number of population, thus resulting in a lack of "reliability, validity and generalizability" (Merriam, 2009).

4.4 Primary Data Collection - Questionnaires

The primary instruments used for data collection within the research were anonymous questionnaires. Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill (2009), while summarising questionnaire techniques, state that questionnaires work better with standardised questions a researcher can be confident will be interpreted the same way by all respondents. Questionnaires, therefore, tend to be used for descriptive or explanatory research. Descriptive research, such as that undertaken using attitude and opinion questionnaires and questionnaires of organisational practices, will enable to identify and describe the variability in different phenomena.

4.4.1 Types of Questionnaires – Delivery and collection

Saunders et al. (2009) describe several types of questionnaires: can be self-administered or interviewer-administered; self-administered questionnaires are usually completed by the respondents, while the interviewer-administered ones are recorded by the interviewer on the basis of each respondent's answers (Saunders et al., 2009).
In this case, self-administered questionnaires have been chosen. Such type of questionnaires can be administered electronically using the internet (internet-mediated questionnaires) or via the intranet (intranet-mediated questionnaires), can be posted to respondents who return them by post after completation (postal or mail questionnaires), or can be delivered by hand to each respondent and collected later.
The last method (delivery and collection questionnaires) has been adopted within the research to collect data.

The main reason behind the choice of delivered anonymous questionnaires relies on the fact that this was the only way the restaurant's owner, Carlo Liberati, agreed with the researcher to approach his customers and investigate their opinions. The restaurateur cared that the clients were not interrupted by researcher's investigation.

Still, by considering questionnaires, the researcher understood the possibility to reach more customers and require less time from each respondent (Saunders et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, the choice of delivery and collection questionnaires has also been influenced by several factors that are taken into consideration by Saunders et al. (2009).

The first factors are the "characteristics of the respondents from whom you wish to collect data (Saunders et al., 2009); the scope of the study is to gain knowledge about people's opinion and perception regarding *La Locanda*, thus the decision to personally deliver the questionnaires to the customers, which have a direct experience of the restaurant.

A second factor dealt with the importance of reaching a particular person as respondent; the "particular" person is represented, in this case, by the customers of the restaurant, and no other persons out of the restaurant context were considered as potential respondents.

The third factor underlines the "importance of those surveyed' answers not being contaminated or distorted" (Saunders et al., 2009); the "not contaminated" answer is an ambitious aim to be reached, since customers may share their opinion with other people around them. The advantage is that, according to Dillman (2007), "respondents to self-administered questionnaires are relatively unlikely to answer to please you or because they believe certain responses are more socially desirable."

Other factors that influenced in the questionnaire choice were connected to the type and the number of questions: the latter were strictly related to the restaurant and the *Danske spiseguide*, and questions were in total 15. Customers were also given the possibility to comment their experience openly.

The Questionnaire method particularly worked with question coding, allowing the researcher to easily aggregate responses into categories by also implementing Likert scale evaluation grids.

4.4.2 Rating questions - Likert Scale

Questions presented in the questionnaires are used to collect opinion data. Customers are given the possibility to rate multiple aspects of their experience at *La Locanda* by filling the provided Likert-style rating scale. The latter allows respondents to indicate how strongly she or he agrees or disagrees with a statement, usually on a four-, five-, six- or even seven-point rating scale (Saunders et al., 2009). Besides agreement, the Likert scale is used to measure satisfaction level or influence level.
By acknowledging Saunder's et al. (2009) definitions, it was decided to provide a five-point rating scale for each question that asked customers evaluation and opinion.

The reason for not choosing a higher rating scale was that "there is little point in collecting data for seven or nine response categories if these are subsequently combined in your analysis" (Saunders et al., 2009).
For some questions, like question number four (see paragraph 4.4.3), only three options were given to choose: the reason for that was to follow the existing literature review, in particular the three categories of restaurant customers described by Notaker (2009).

Likert Scale can measure different types of rating questions; in this case, *agreement* and *likelihood* rating questions were provided.
The Likert scale has been chosen by taking into account that:

• it would have measured what researcher was interested in;
• it would have been designed for a reasonably similar group of respondents (Saunders et al., 2009).

4.4.3 Structure of the Questionnaire

The whole questionnaire consists of 15 questions, and the last one gives people the possibility to openly express themselves regarding their experience through an open comment.
Conceptually, the questionnaire is divided into two dimensions (or parts): the first part focuses on customers' experience; clients are asked to evaluate several categories, as well as their overall experience.

Questions of the first dimension are listed below along with their description:

1) *Is this your first time at La Locanda?*
The first question is pretty general. The scope is to get a first glimpse of the number of customers that were already guests once, and possibly see if there is a link with the *årets spot*;

2) *If "No", do you approximately remember your first time?*
This question share its aim along with the first one; clients are given the possibility to choose between "2016" or "2017", so to eventually see whether they tried the restaurant un-prized or already rewarded; note that the restaurant won the *årets spot* prize the 31st of October 2016, but the idea of asking participants to recall the exact month sounded confusing.

3) *How did you know about La Locanda?*

The third question investigates the way people got to know the restaurants. Participants have three options: they could indicate whether they used as a source the internet, the friends' or family's' suggestions, or other forms of advertisement (like newspaper, magazines or guides). The question tests the theory regarding the actual impact of dining guides and contextualises it to Denmark.

4) *What are your general expectations when dining at La Locanda?*

Again, participants should indicate one of the three options, which are based on the people needs categorization presented by Notaker (2009): people that wanted to "just eat" would select the first choice; people that come to enjoy company with friends or families would choose the second option; finally, people that would look for a unique dining experience will choose the third option.

5) *How would you rate the service quality? This can be related to waiters, sommeliers, waiting times, design and exterior of the restaurant.*

The first Likert scale evaluation grid comes with an assessment of the service quality, which has been considered as one of the most important factors in a restaurant that influence customers' perception.

6) *How would you rate your food experience?*

Trivially, a high food evaluation score is one of the key-factors for a gourmet restaurant. The scope of this question is to test it.

7) *How would you rate the wine selection?*

Like the former question, this is to test another factor that sources (Goode, 2013; Notaker, 2009; Popick, 2007) refer to as another important part of the offerings.

8) *How would rate the wine taste?*

This question integrates the former one, and both are combined in the analysis section and labelled as "wine experience".

9) *How would you evaluate your overall experience?*

The question sums up what are the general feelings about the restaurant after the previous evaluations on the single categories.

Second dimension questions:

10) *Did you know or hear about the Danske Spiseguide before?*
The question calculates the number of participants that knew already the *Spiseguide* to test the current academic observations which put in doubt the value of official recognitions/certifications.

11) *Did you know La Locanda was awarded by the Danske Spiseguide with the årets spot prize?*
The direct correlation between the awareness of the *Danske Spiseguide* and the prize is not taken for granted, so this is question investigates the number of participants who knew about the prize without knowing the guide.

12) *If you did know, how was this influencing you in choosing the restaurant?*
The question explored the possibility that the *årets spot* had some influence on customer's choice. Participants are provided with the Likert scale to express whether they felt persuaded to choose *La Locanda*.

13) *Danske spiseguide awarded La Locanda for being creative with raw materials and bringing them to a "tasteful enjoyment". To what extent would you agree?*
Here, the level of agreement is tested so to answer the problem question. Again, the customers are provided with the Likert scale with which they could indicate whether the award paralleled they perceptions or not and eventually the extent of their agreement.

14) *Please select your age range.*
This investigates the average age of customers. Note that this question was only intended to get extra insights, and the results are not to be connected with the rest of the data. Tory (2012) reports that millennials, the group of people of 20-35-year-olds which represent roughly 22% of the American population, have a closer relationship to ethnic food and understand the importance of food quality compared to some other older people segments; plus, they tend to spend more money away from home for food. By citing Kelly Weikel, senior consumer manager for Technomic, for Millennials "Foodservice is just so ingrained in their lifestyle, they're relying on it; it's a part of their life" (Tory, 2012). This question will test whether a gourmet restaurant like *La Locanda* is also appealing to younger segments of customers.

15) *Is there anything you would like to comment regarding your experience at La Locanda?*
The last question is intended to give customers the possibility to freely express their opinions and gives the researcher extra values to be analysed and eventually linked to the other categories.

4.5 The Participants - Sampling

The only requirement to participate and contribute to the study by filling the questionnaires was to be a customer at *La Locanda*. Questionnaires were provided directly by the waiters, who had the permission of the restaurateur to ask clients whether they would be available to answer the questionnaires or not. In fact, the researcher was not allowed to approach customers and check their willingness to participate. Plus, according to one of the waiters who is also in charge of the client's management, the fact that the questionnaires were provided by highly qualified staff in a formal dress would have appeared more professional.

Questionnaires were to be proposed after people finished their meal, so to gather their opinion right after a direct experience.

In any case, there was no choice for the researcher if not to leave the questionnaires to the waiters and let them distribute the questionnaires. People contacted by the waiters were first asked if they were interested in participating, and only afterwards were given questionnaires.

According to Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2011), qualitative research usually works with smaller samples when compared to quantitative. In this case, purposive sampling has been considered within the restaurant's context. Bryman (2012) describes purposive sampling as it follows: "this type of sampling has essentially to do with the selection of units (which may be people, organisations, documents, departments, and so on) with direct reference to the research questions being asked."

Since the questionnaires contain a direct reference to the research questions, and by that respecting Bryman's (2012) official definition, purposive sampling has been implemented.

4.5.1 Distribution of the questionnaires

Customers were asked after they finished their meal if they wanted to be part of the researcher's project. Questionnaires were delivered to clients in different hours. Distribution took place during lunch or dinner time, between June and July 2017. To benefit heterogeneity, one questionnaire was distributed per table. The researcher was especially making sure that the experience customers were living were compatible with the questions they would have to answer once they accepted to participate in the research.

4.6 Secondary Data Collection – Observations

Observations were chosen as a secondary data gathering collection tool. Since the researcher was working at the restaurant during the year 2016/2017, it was easy to gain some insights and knowledge on how the restaurant worked.

Because of the professional bond between the researcher and the subject of his study, observations were used to get an extra impression from clients; for example, it was possible to notice whether the customers were feeling interested or bothered when asked to participate in the study. Thanks to observations, it was also possible to check if the answers provided were coherent with the participant's behaviour (e.g. the customer enjoyed the wine, but did the customer actually *ordered* wine?); by introducing observations, Bryman (2012) stated that sometimes reports or surveys could be perceived to be inaccurate, and observations constitute a possible solution in that it entails the direct observation of behaviour.

The type of observation established within the research is classified as a non-participant observation. Bryman (2012) defines it as it follows: "This is a term that is used to describe a situation in which the observer observes but does not participate in what is going on in the social setting. Structured observers are usually non-participants in that they are in the social setting being observed but rarely participate in what is happening".

4.7 Grounded Theory and coding

The grounded theory is used to analyse data. Before starting the analysis, existing literature about restaurants, customers' perceptions, expectations, as well as official guides' practices have been taken into account as a background to understand the discourse. The goal is to expand already existing theories with the findings obtained from the collected data (Jaccard and Jacoby, 2010).
The process of analysis started by gathering the total number of questionnaires to extract the results.

To collect, organise and in general manage data, an Excel spreadsheet was created. By proceeding with coding, the questionnaire has been conceptually divided into two dimensions: the first one is focused on the general experience of customers, with every question as a sub-category of that dimension. All the same answers were counted and grouped into the same category: for each category, it was added the number of people that selected the same answer, plus the number in percentage. The same process has been implemented in the second dimension. The latter focused on the *Danske Spiseguide* and other related questions. Again, each question of the second dimension was considered as a sub-category of the latter. Every category can potentially be linked to other categories as the questions are connected to each other by considering the main theme, which is *La Locanda*, the offerings it provides to customers, and the way the latter perceive those offerings. The process of connecting different categories, finding relationships between them and exploring the phenomenon taking place in order to get a deeper understanding of the subject is defined by Saunders et al. (2009) with the name of axial coding.

4.8 Ontology

Ontology is concerned with nature of reality. There are two aspects of ontology that can be discussed according to Saunders et al. (2009): objectivism and subjectivism. The first portrays "the position that social entities exist in reality external to social actors concerned with their existence". The second aspect is instead to claim that social phenomena are created from actions and perceptions of the social actors concerned with their existence.

Even though it is accepted that may exist multiple structures built on facts and laws which define reality, the emphasis in this study is on the single experiences that build that reality. In this way, reality depends on individuals, on their point of view and on the meanings they associate to phenomena.

Within the research, social constructivism is adopted as researcher's ontological position. According to Jaccard and Jacoby (2010), the human mind is to be considered as the element which defines the surrounding reality. People's mindset at a certain moment constructs and associates meanings to phenomena. Constructivism emphasises that particular understandings can vary across regions and time. Thus the researcher has to consider the context in which the investigation takes place, the elements that may affect people's mind (tangibles and intangibles) and people's needs. Being a restaurant, while the real elements can be somehow calculated or listed, the intangible features cannot be predicted, even because some of them may be created at the very moment in which the phenomenon takes place. The restaurant experience is discussed by taking in account people's mind-set at the moment they finished eating, and the starting point which can explain to some extent their perception is their expectation towards the restaurant.

4.9 Epistemology

Epistemology indicates the way how researchers understand the nature of knowledge-building, which influences the further decisions about the origin of what can be known and by whom (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Bryman (2012) adds that the epistemological position highlights the nature of acceptable knowledge and questions the procedures through which the social reality can be analysed.

The adopted paradigm is interpretivism. Mark Saunders et al. (2009) advocates that through interpretivism the researcher can understand differences between humans which act as social actors. This research is conducted by taking into account that the key factors existing in nature which make reality as we know it are not by themselves sufficient to provide an explanation of human actors' actions. The objective statement, which in this case can be represented by the *Danske Spiseguide* and its certification awarded to *La Locanda*, cannot by itself provide a generalisable proof of quality which equals every single customer's perception. The *Danske Spiseguide* and interpretivism are therefore linked by the necessity to distinguish what has been proven (like the award, which is fixed objectively) and what is perceived in social reality, where people influence the surrounding environment with their meanings.

Chapter V: Analysis

The following section provides the analysis of the self-administered questionnaires. As it was stated in the previous chapter, the questionnaire was conceptually split into two dimensions. In the first one, questions are aimed to explore the general customer experience (thus to answer the first research question). The second dimension focuses the attention on the *Danske Spiseguide* (from a client perspective), in order to find appropriate answers to the last research questions.

Percentages refer to the total amount of questionnaires (33). Otherwise, when specified, the researcher considered sub-groups of respondents and made analysis considering only the answers of these sub-groups to elaborate coherent observations for identical values that might appear with the same (numeric) significance, but can also have a different explanation.

N.B. The decimals numbers have not been inserted to improve readability, and numbers were rounded to match the whole number. Plus, in the Appendix Chapter, charts regarding evaluation-type questions have been inserted to facilitate comprehension.

5.1 The first dimension: customers' experience

The first research question is strictly connected to the first dimension, customers' experience:
What are the customers' perceptions towards the restaurant "La Locanda"?

To answer this question, it was useful to make comparisons between the questionnaires' results and the client's perception scale (Kureemun & Fantina, 2011) provided in Chapter 3 (see Figure 3.1). The following conceptual model retrieved from Fitzsimmons et al. (1994) (see Figure 3.2) is used to justify the choice of specific questions (e.g. "how did you know about *La Locanda*?").

The analysis follows the order of the questions in the questionnaire, step by step. However, an approach that considers each single question as a unique category which does not interfere with other ones would expose the analysis to some inconsistencies. For example, there should be a correlation (or, to some extent, a parallelism) between the "overall experience" evaluation question and all the previous evaluation inquiries related to the different aspects of the restaurant's service.
Therefore, the researcher chose, when needed, to link, comment or even mix some

questions'responses with other ones, so to facilitate a wider overview of customers' perception. Some of the commented results are deliberately redundant to benefit comprehension.

5.1.1 *First time experience*

In this first "introductive" question, almost 73% of the respondents stated that they were in the restaurant for the first time, while 27% have already been guests. By calculating the total number of completed questionnaires (again, 33) that means that nine people have already been customers. It is reasonable to think that regardless the prize, those nine people came back to *La Locanda* because they had a positive experience during their first time. This might be interpreted as an indication of a first positive feedback towards the restaurant.

5.1.2 *Memory of the first time*

The question is directly connected to the second one, which investigated how many of the "old" customers remembered whether they came at the restaurant during 2017 or 2016. In this case, the percentage of answers are related only to the number of those who answered "No" to the previous question. Of those nine people remembering their first time, the majority (77%) stated it occurred during 2016, and only a 22% recalled their first time during 2017. This question was to get an extra clue whether they experienced the restaurant before the *årets spot* prize or not.
Of all the people that already tried the restaurant, one-third (33%) indicated the *årets spot* to be influencing (four points on the Likert scale), almost half (44%) knew both the *Danske Spiseguide* and the related prize, but resulted in being indifferent towards the latter's influence (1 point on the Likert scale); finally, the minority (23%) were unaware of both *Danske Spiseguide* and restaurant's award.

5.1.3 *Awareness – How did you know about La Locanda?*

The third question investigated how people got to know *La Locanda.* Participants had three options: they could have indicated the internet as the main source, or word of mouth from family or friends, or finally other forms of advertisement (like TV, magazines and other).

Two-thirds of the respondents (66%) indicated that the restaurant had been suggested by family or friends, while one-third (33%) chose the internet as the main source and only one respondent chose "other forms of advertisement". The word of mouth value, described in Chapter 3 by Wyner (2014),

appears to have consistency also within this research, assuming that communication between family and friends about *La Locanda* occurred within an "offline" context.

5.1.4 *Expectations*

The fourth question on the questionnaire ("What are your general expectations when dining at La Locanda?") was designed by considering Notaker's (2009) classification of clients, based on their needs when choosing a restaurant. The majority of the respondents (60%) indicated to have chosen *La Locanda* by their willingness to enjoy a unique culinary experience (third option), while almost one-third (27%) indicated the second option ("I just enjoy being together with my partner/friends/family").
However, the calculation of the percentage in this question has been adjusted, since "unique experience" option was sometimes selected alongside with the other ones: two respondents indicated both the third and the second option; one respondent chose all the three options, and one chose both the first ("I just want to eat, as I don't have time to cook.") and the second one.

In total, four participants (12% of the total) marked more ovals than requested. These questionnaires represent the mixed answers. The researcher has decided to keep these as significant and added one extra line of coding so to specify the entity of these unexpected values for each option selected in the questionnaire.

The results in this question are significant for two reasons. The first reason is that, according to Notaker's (2009) classification of restaurants based on people's perception, *La Locanda* is perceived and expected to be a *gourmet* restaurant for the majority of the customers. Some of the latter decided to mark two or even three ovals, and in most of these multiple marked answers (75%), the third option was always considered as an "expectation factor".
The second reason which makes results significant is represented by the multiple marked answers, which shows how this very classification described by Notaker (2009) has its boundaries between one category and another blurred. Clients indicated that the expectation to taste a unique *cuisine* could also cohabit with the enjoyment to be with friend, relatives or partners. This can be particularly true in Scandinavia, where Notaker (2009) observed the importance and the possibility for people to spend more time together with the close ones during dinner time.

5.1.5 *Service quality perception*

In the fifth question, the five-point Likert scale rating model was used to gather perception concerning the service quality. More than three-quarters of the participants (76%) rated the service as "very satisfying" (highest number in the adopted Likert scale); less than a quarter of the contributors (21%) rated the service quality with a "four" in evaluation scale; the remaining 3% is represented by a single questionnaire in which the participant rated the service quality as "average".

If we consider the results above, there should be some evidence that the four *layers* (or *blocks*) presented by Kureemun & Fantina (2011) have been achieved for the majority of the participants (see Figure 3.1). The first foundational block represents the restaurant's effort into providing products that should satisfy clients' needs. The second block refers to the actual quality of that product, which should positively influence customers' perception.

According to Dittmer (2003), there is a tight connection between the quality of the food and the staff (waiters): the higher the food quality, the higher restaurant's staff is trained. In this case, it seems that the assumed correlation is demonstrated by a similar score of the two categories (service quality and food experience) within this study.
The brand sentiment, as it was specified, is a key point layer which has directly to do with clients' perception. The results obtained so far can reasonably justify a positive brand perception which influences not just the actual restaurant experience, but even everyday conversations (it was shown in paragraph 5.1.3 how the majority of people got to know *La Locanda* through suggestion).

What about the last upper *block*? The interaction satisfaction requirement, according to Kureemun & Fantina (2011), happens when customers are satisfied with all the interactions with the company or, in this case, business. Interactions may occur in several manners, but the authors underline that there is no unified manner in which organisations can address customers' perception of quality. Naturally, we could consider the extra elements, or as it was written, the "everything else" factor, which can be almost unlimited.

Some examples can be made by citing Popick (2007): wine pairing and meetings with the chef, for instance, both occur at *La Locanda* on a daily basis and can improve the overall experience. In fact, the researcher often noticed the owner, Carlo Liberati, walking through tables and serving clients himself. This used to happen both in busy days when customers were occupying the totality of the available tables, and during less busy days when the owner could spend some extra time with clients, giving some further information regarding served dishes, proposing plates not listed on the menù, or helping guests with wine pairing.

Surely, having the restaurant at its maximum capacity can cause some drawbacks: three questionnaires collected contained some critical feedbacks, which could be related to the particularly busy day at the restaurant.

The first comment stated:

”Lidt for meget salt, det tog lidt for lang tid at få serveret de 5 små retter. Ellers var alt godt”.

In this case, according to this client, it took too much time before being served, and there was a little too much salt. Otherwise, everything was good.

The waiting times at the restaurant can be a burden for clients, as Goode (2013) notices, and sometimes can be harder for the waiters to keep the same working-rhythm. The researcher had, while working at *La Locanda*, a consistent number of occasions in which could witness the amount of workload the waiters, and all the staff in general, had to bear. It is natural to think that sometimes the expected satisfaction level can suffer a brief decline. However, it is important to note how the negative comment regarding waiting times was alone among the rest.

The second comment which can also be related to the high number of people is the following: “Really good service. A bit too warm in the room”.

The room temperature inside the restaurant is usually cool or little warmer during the evenings. Eventually, windows, as well as the main door, could be opened to benefit ventilation. Although these precautions, it can be a challenge to maintain the temperature fresh when all the more than 50 seats are occupied, especially during summer season.

The third comment is more related to wine, but can also be indirectly linked to crowded situations:

“Please recommend wine for the main course. You have a great wine selection, but the selection is too huge. Else… nice people working here!!!”

The restaurant provides customers with qualified waiters that are also sommeliers (or waiters that are studying at the moment to become sommeliers). It may be that during crowded days waiters have to run more than usual from a table to another. During these situations, it may be possible that waiters do not ask whether clients want any wine-food pairing suggestions or not. Usually, clients ask directly for wine suggestion, but according to the comment, it may be probable that this time there was no direct request for assistance from this customer.

Otherwise it is to assume that the waiter serving this client refused to suggest any wine, but in that case, the tone and sentiment of the comment would have probably been different.
The wine category will be again discussed with more details in the paragraphs below.

5.1.6 *Food Experience*

Food experience has surely a key importance within the research. The rating in this value has a wide impact on the overall score, not just in the single category. In fact, the collected overall experience score (Question 9) is mainly influenced by some of the most important factors in customers' perception, like the product quality itself and the service quality (Zeithaml, 1985).
The overall score was predictably high, in accordance with the researcher's observations. The majority of the respondents (64%) rated the food with five points on the Likert scale and one-third (33%) rated with four points. Only one customer (3%) rated the food experience with three. Note that the "average" food experience was reported by the same client that was precedently cited for complaining about the perceived excessive amount of salt and waiting times, although stating that, besides the inconvenient, the overall experience was positive.

Food experience could have also been influenced by the commitment with which Carlo Liberati personally advised customers during their choices, listened to their comments, or even cheered with a glass of wine. "Meetings with chef" is also within the top-10 clients' request list published by Popick (2007), which may add a supporting clue to the discourse.

5.1.7 *Wine experience*

The wine theme has been discussed by Notaker (2009), Goode (2013) and Popick (2007). The first author listed described the importance of having a representative wine list, which makes a difference between a *gourmet* restaurant and a lower-class restaurant type. Goode (2013), when describing the importance of the wine, says "I'm happy to pay a decent mark-up where I feel the owner has taken some care in choosing decent wines that match her cooking." Nonetheless, wine tasting and wine/food pairings, which are suggested on the list Popick (2007) presented of the top-10 customers' requests, are both provided at *La Locanda* and are possibly enhancing the clients' fruition.

Results show no complaints regarding both wine tasting and selection possibilities (although one participant complained about the absence of wine/food pairings suggestion, see paragraph 5.1.5). Again, more than half participants (53%) indicated their appreciation with five points on the Likert

scale regarding the wine selection. Less than half (47%) rated "four" in the same question. One questionnaire was left blank.

A wider gap is shown in the results regarding wine's taste: for twenty respondents (66%) the wine taste was very satisfying, while eleven people (31%) indicated the wine taste with four points and for only one person (3%) the wine taste was average. It is interesting to note, that the latter who rated 3 points on the Likert scale for the wine taste, is the same person that, in the previous paragraph (see 5.1.5) was cited for writing "Please recommend wine for the main course." This case could suggest that a not-guided experience in wine selection can negatively affect the overall experience, which could be considered otherwise positive.

5.1.8 *Overall Experience*

The overall experience analysis is meant to provide a general understanding of customers' experience. Since the previous evaluations were mostly positive, it felt somehow predictable that the overall experience was going to be evaluated as high. Two-thirds of the respondents (67%) were "very satisfied" (5 points) with their experience at *La Locanda*; nine people (27%) rated their experience as "satisfying" (4 points), and only two (6%) indicated their experience as "average" (3 points).

Fifteen questionnaires (45%) out of 33 contained a comment. Out of these 15, positive feedback represents the majority of the total (80%); the remaining (20%) were categorised as mixed comments, in which customers both made appreciations and critical observations regarding their experience.

Positive feedbacks could give an idea of what was most appreciated.
First of all, there were four questionnaires in which the word "experience" was used to express their positive thoughts, and one of them was even signed, although questionnaires were meant to be anonymous. Here's the list of those comments (some of the reported comments are translated from Italian, and, when possible, Danish):

"Great experience! Looking forward to come here again";

"We really enjoyed the experience, grazie!";

"Very professional service (and yet personal and casual). Amazing food and wine experience";

"A nice experience";

"Fantastic experience. Value for money";

"We ate very well, as always Carlo is really very good and nice. It was a wonderful evening. Thank you so much!!!"

These comments (and the following ones) showed a high level of satisfaction. People were free to write or not a comment (the question title was "Is there anything you would like to comment regarding your experience at *La Locanda*?"), but nearly half of the participants wanted to underline their gratification openly. The experience value could be used to describe a general feeling ("a nice experience") or to narrow down a specific category particularly enjoyed ("Amazing food and wine experience"). In one of the above cases, it was also used to anticipate the willingness to come again ("Great experience! Looking forward to come here again"). In one of the comments was also added the "value for money" theme, which was defined by the InvestorWords finance website. The last comment was to express both gratitude for the evening (which can be connected to the experience dimension) and appreciation towards the restaurateur, Carlo Liberati. The "meeting with the chef" theme seems to suggest some evidence again in its impact towards clients' perceptions.

Also in other comments clients expressed their willingness to come back to *La Locanda*:

"Very pleasant service. I'll be back."

"There is Italian food, and then there is *La Locanda*! I would be proud to bring friends here…."

"Enjoyed, would come again. Will go for the tasting menu next time."

Notes go to the appreciation towards the service quality in the first comment.

The second comment, instead, marks a demarcation line between *La Locanda* and the other Italian restaurants, which can suggest an ulterior *uniqueness* feature to the perceived experience.

In fact, the comment belongs to the same participant who indicated in the fourth question his or her expectation to live a unique eating experience. Plus, in the second part of the comment, it seems that the participant would come again and bring other people with him, which suggests an inclination to suggestion. The "word of mouth" aspect is represented, and to some extent anticipated. The last comment not only shows participant's satisfaction but also anticipates his or her future choice.

"Everything was thumbs up!"

"Very good."

Finally, these last two comments were pretty straightforward, and in both of those questionnaires, the indicated rating in every section was of five points.

The mixed feedbacks (which contained both positive and negative observations), analysed in the previous sections (see 5.1.5), represent the 20% of the total comments.
According to Newell-Legner (2008), it takes 12 positive service incidents to make up for one negative incident. Although the ratio between the mixed and the positive feedbacks is of one every four, it is to note that comments were never totally negative.

Plus, even considering the most critical comment, the questionnaire in which it was contained registered a minimum rating of 3 points on the Likert scale, which can hardly be interpreted as bad, although it is insufficient to be considered as a higher rating.

If we had to use the Conceptual Model (see Fig. 3.2) from Fitzsimmons et al. (1994), we might assume that for at least 12 (36%) customers there was a quality surprise. In fact, they not only marked higher points on the Likert scale but ended the questionnaires with highly positive open comments, underlining different qualities of the restaurants (such as the service quality) and in some cases indicating that they will come back again.

5.2 The second dimension: *Den Danske Spiseguide*

The second dimension is linked with the last two problem questions:

• Is the restaurant's *årets spot* award influencing customers in choosing the restaurant?

• Do customers agree with the *årets spot* evaluation criterion?

5.2.1 *Awareness – The Danske Spiseguide and restaurant's prize*

The first question of the second dimension was to examine how many of the participants knew the *Danske Spiseguide*. Nine customers (27%) already heard about the Danish guide, while the remaining clients (72%, corresponding to 24 questionnaires) did not. The same percentage values and distribution apply to the following question ("Did you know *La Locanda* was awarded by the *Danske Spiseguide* with the *årets spot* prize?"), which explored the level of awareness circa the restaurant's prize.

Moreover, for the same percentages results collected in the first and second question, the analysis of both shows that some of the participants (9%) knew about the Danish guide but weren't aware of *La Locanda*'s prize, while on the other hand another group (9%) recalled the *årets spot* but did not know about the *Spiseguide*. This may be partially explained by citing the findings of Poiesz (2004) and Bagozzi et al. (2002), who found that consumers will rely mostly on other sources rather than professional guides before choosing a dining place. It might be safe to assume that in this case, those who had fluctuating knowledge regarding the prize or the guide, had their information provided randomly or just in an incomplete manner.

The two authors' results seem to find further confirmation when the award's influence level on customers is analysed.

5.2.2 *Award's Influence*

As it was stated above, the former researchers' findings circa customers behaviour can explain the low registered number of influenced clients.

Essentially, one person (3%) indicated to be "definitely influenced" by the fact that *La Locanda* was rewarded with the *årets spot*, five participants (15%) were "influenced", nine participants (27%) indicated to be "not influenced", and the majority of the respondents (55%) left the question unanswered as they had no knowledge of the *Danske Spiseguide* or the award.
It is to note, however, that the number of customers that answered to this influence-question is higher than the number of people who indicated to be unaware of the awarded prize (the question before). This might be due to some misunderstanding, or perhaps because customers deliberately decided to indicate the *possibility* to be or not influenced, regardless of their knowledge.

Bagozzi et al. (2002) claim that the clients have progressively started to disassociate themselves from official guidelines and to rely on other influencing factors. The actual findings confirm the latter trend: the majority (66%) indicated word of mouth as the main factor that made them choose the restaurant, and the second factor to be indicated was the internet. The official guidelines (which may include the *Spiseguide*) seem to have less appeal on people's criteria for selection. One reason may be connected to different customers' mind-reactions towards the perception of official recognition. Surlemont et al. and Porter (2004) bring two examples of different consumer segments: one first segment may perceive the Michelin's branding (or other professional *cuisine*-guides) as a synonym of high quality at a high price; a second segment may instead recognise in the guide an occasion to

distinguish itself from the masses. In the first case, clients are more likely to make a choice based on the affordability. The second segment would be more prone to dine at the suggested restaurant if the expectation to be unique or part of an exclusive experience is high enough to justify the choice. Moreover, as Zaltaman (2003) says, the degree of trust and confidence that consumers have in each other is, usually, stronger than the trust developed between a company or business organisation and the consumer.

The possibility that some of the above descripted dynamics can also occur at *La Locanda* is realistic. However, it is to acknowledge that while the former studies are based on perceptions and behaviours concerning the Michelin Guide, which is well known and studied in accordance with the reactions to it, the *Danske Spiseguide* has not the same level of awareness, and the results regarding the influence of the *årets spot* award can only apply those participants who knew the Danish guide.

5.2.3 *Award Criterion Agreement*

After observing how people get mostly influenced by the word of mouth factor instead of other more professional sources which can be found on the internet or through magazines, this paragraph is to acknowledge whether customers agree or not on the criterion the *Danske Spiseguide* has adopted to evaluate *La Locanda*.

Out of a total of 32 questions analysed (1 was left blank), the majority (68%) totally agreed with the criterion adopted by the *Danske Spiseguide*, so marked "5"; nine participants (28%) agreed and marked "4"; one participant (3%) moderately agreed by marking "3". The lowest value registered, 3 points, was given by the only client who had a worse experience compared to the other customers from the perspective of service quality, especially waiting times. These issues were presented in former paragraphs (see 5.1.5 and following).

The numbers above display an overall high level of agreement with the local Danish *Spiseguide*'s criterion. Although the majority of participants did not know about the organisation, the results may represent an answer to the criticism towards some aspects of the official valuation modality; for instance the inspector's report, which has been depicted as a flaw of the Michelin's (thus *La Locanda*'s) operating evaluation, appears to be valid in this case. Also, *La Locanda* was already a candidate for the *årets spot* award one year before winning, meaning that the *Spiseguide* had the possibility to evaluate the restaurant more than once. Compared to the Michelin organisation, the

Danish guide shows the advantage of covering a smaller geographic area of interest, and therefore to be more susceptible to surrounding "culinary" changes.

5.2.4 Age

As it was stated in the research design chapter (see page 33), clients were also asked at the end of the questionnaire to indicate their age range.

Results show that there is heterogeneity. To be precise, most of the respondents (8) were aged between 21 and 30 years old (24%). Customers in the other categories were almost equally distributed: 21% (7) were between 31 and 40; 21% (7) were between 41 and 50; 21% (7) were between 51 and 60; 6% (2) were between 61 and 70; 3% (1) was 71 or over; 3% (1) was under 21.
The report by Tory (2012), exposing the tendency of younger segments of customers to spend more money away from home than other segments do, seems to have relatively consistency also in this Danish context, although it is to consider that the low number of questionnaires do not allow a generalisation, even because the same reports underline that the same "Millennials" segment is one that mostly frequents fast-food restaurants.
Besides that, *La Locanda* seems to be appealing to a wide range of customers.

Chapter VI: Conclusions

6.1 Overview

The project has been focusing on the restaurant *La Locanda*, located in Aalborg. The dining place has been active for two years and a half, providing customers with high standards quality food so that the *Danske Spiseguide*, the Danish reference for restaurants and hotels, awarded the restaurant with one of the annual prizes, the *årets spot*.
Problem questions were to investigate customers' perceptions, to test the *årets spot* prize influence towards the clients and to understand whether the latter agreed with the criterion that was chosen to reward the restaurant.

This research may provide some insights about the restaurant sector in Denmark, in particular, the one connected with ethnic restaurants.

The method adopted for obtaining data was to provide potential respondents with printed questionnaires which were conceptually divided into two parts (or dimensions), with each part involving different aspects connected to the problem formulations.

The first part dealt with clients' experience, investigated whether it was or not their first time there (and possibly indicate when), and the way they got to know *La Locanda*. It also explored their expectations and tested their evaluation concerning multiple aspects of the restaurant. These aspects to rate were the service quality, the food experience, the wine experience (split into two separate questions, concerning selection and taste) and finally the overall experience.

The second part of the questionnaire focused on the *Danske Spiseguide*. Questions were to understand how many of the participants knew the Danish guide, to what extent were they influenced or not by the assigned prize, and how much did they agree with the criterion decided by the *Spiseguide*. The penultimate question was to get some extra insight on the average age of the customers, without it to be relevant for the research. Finally, participants were asked to comment anything regarding their experience at *La Locanda* freely.

The literature was to investigate the general dimension of the restaurant sector, the latter characteristics and difficulties. Several authors were cited to understand what is important to consider when running a restaurant. Elements that influence the customers' perceptions when experiencing an evening dining out were considered, such as the service quality, the distance between the tables, or the importance of a differentiated wine selection.

Afterwards, the *Danske Spiseguide* was described in its origins and aims, followed by several considerations on *La Locanda*, a dissertation on the meaning of dining out in Denmark, and a classification of restaurants based on clients' diversity of needs.

The theory part involved notions on quality and deepened in particular quality's perception by citing Kureemun and Fantina's (2011) works. This part's significance relies on the importance to understand that the actual level of quality served to clients is not by itself enough to make clients perceive it. Other factors (or *everything else*) influence the overall customers' sensitiveness, and many of those factors are not even tangible or calculable. The client's satisfaction also relies on client's expectation, which is an example of the intangible value that preventively imprints one's mind. The conceptual model taken from Fitzsimmons et al. (1994) was also to show some of the "intangible" elements that influence the expectation and which are deepened in the following paragraphs.
The last part of the theory is dedicated to several academics which criticised the Michelin guide evaluation system and discussed the way it may be perceived nowadays. This was to acknowledge the fact that professional guides and references may have some flaws within, and customers are increasingly relying on other sources to make their choices.

6.2 Findings

After weeks of data gathering (throughout questionnaires and observations), results show that the majority of the participants indicated a "total satisfaction" in each of the five sub-categories to be evaluated with the Likert scale in the first dimension (service quality, food experience, wine selection, wine taste, and overall experience). The average number of people that marked five points on the Likert scale was of 21, which represents an average of 64% of the total voters. According to this data, it should be possible to assert that the expectation to *enjoy a unique eating experience* at *La Locanda*, indicated in the fourth question by 60% of the contributors, has been satisfied for most of the clients. The expectation levels of the clients, as also shown on the Conceptual Model (see Figure 3.2) from Fitzsimmons et al. (1994) were similarly influenced by the word of mouth factor.

The latter, which was considered and tested, showed that the researches presented by Wyner (2014) regarding the offline and online brand-related communications have some consistency within the current study, as most of the participants (66%) got to know *La Locanda* through the suggestion of family members or friends. The internet was the second source which most influenced customers' choice.

Another implicit positive feedback comes from those participants who were already customers once, which represent almost one-third (27%) of the total. None of these clients resulted disappointed from their repeated experience, and their evaluations were all highly rated.

The *interaction satisfaction* presented on the needs hierarchy (see Figure 3.1) by Kureemun and Fantina (2011) represents the top-layer of the reachable satisfaction level a client can perceive. By adopting interpretation and analysing actual numbers, it was possible to sense that multiple customers have reached this level of satisfaction: feelings like happiness, the willingness of sharing the experience with others, or even gratefulness were visible through most (12) of the questionnaires' open comments.

Questionnaires that were empty of comments showed clients' high evaluation level for the restaurant by expressing it through the Likert scale. When five points were not indicated, four points were the second highest evaluation choice. In total, only two clients indicated a minimum score of three points, which still represents an average value and thus cannot be seen as a negative feedback. Only one comment explicitly showed some complaints, while also assuring that beside the inconvenient everything was fine.

The *årets spot* award given from the *Danske Spiseguide*, although being described as a high-value acknowledgement, was recognised only from the minority portion of participants.

Only one participant indicated to be "highly influenced" by marking 5 points on the scale, five customers were "influenced", nine indicated not to be influenced and the majority left the question blank.

The lack of influence and awareness confirms the several sources who have analysed the impact of the official recognition in the past decades (Bagozzi et al., 2002; Poiesz, 2004; Surlemont et al., 2005; Tripsavvy, 2017; Zaltman, 2003). There is a clear evidence of the results, in parallelism with Poiesz (2004) and Bagozzi et al. (2002), that consumers mostly relied on sources far away from official rating systems, like word of mouth suggestions or internet.

Finally, although the majority of participants ignored both the *Spiseguide* and the *årets spot* prize, the criterion reported by Bent Ole Christensen got the acceptance of most clients (68%), which "totally

agreed" with the given criterion. Nine customers (28%) "agreed", one person neither agreed nor disagreed and one questionnaire was left blank.

All in all, despite the fact that the evaluation criterion was largely accepted, the self-referential aspect associated with the professional dining guides and reviews like the *Danske Spiseguide* still exists. The *Danske Spiseguide*, in fact, is clearly described as an organisation inspired by the older Michelin guide, from which adopted its *modus operandi*; consequently, the two guides share, to some extent, the same weaknesses that were formerly presented, like the possibility to be perceived somewhat offensive due to the formal approach, or the fact that a single report can make a difference between a first, a second or a third place in a given rank. Plus, the two guides do not consider clients' rating scores, so to preserve their own evaluation procedures without external contaminations.

However, the main difference between the *Danske Spiseguide* and the French Michelin lies in the geographical area covered: Michelin guide has a wider impact thanks to the time its brand had for growing. Europe was the first interested area, then America, and Japan. The downside is that, although its effort to keep track of all the restaurants, there is still criticism on the reliability expressed by some academics. The Danish guide instead, considering its focus on a national scale, appears to be eased on its task to provide a consistent and most of all updated review of the surroundings dining places.

Nevertheless, by taking into account the entire data, there is one final consideration: despite the importance of the professional recognition, which is not to be diminished, the *årets spot* may have represented for *La Locanda* not only a certification of quality but also a *confirmation* of what has already been recommended by other clients. In fact, being word of mouth the main source of knowledge for the majority of the participants, customers had to try themselves what has been suggested by the people before them. Their high score evaluation towards the restaurant still represents the best reward the restaurant can get, as it does not represent just a fixed judgement, but in several cases (see comments) it embodies the willingness to enjoy the meal again, and thus to come back.

6.3 Limitations of the research

The word "satisfaction" can have many facets. The aim of the study was to provide a general understanding of the customers' experience at *La Locanda* with different parameters examined. However, the research does not consider different segmentations of consumers; levels of quality and satisfaction are in fact diverse for every group, and even the expectations are different depending on the required experience (Zaltman, 2003). The fact that the majority of the people long for a unique dining experience does not mean that the term *unique* is equal for every expectation; people in vacation might look at *La Locanda* differently compared to the expectations of a business man or a couple. A limitation is represented by the lack of this distinction.
Another noteworthy limitation is the fact that this research is not generalizable since the findings were obtained through a qualitative approach.

Plus the analysed questionnaires concern a limited time frame. A longitudinal study may have answered perceptions of customers on a longer period.

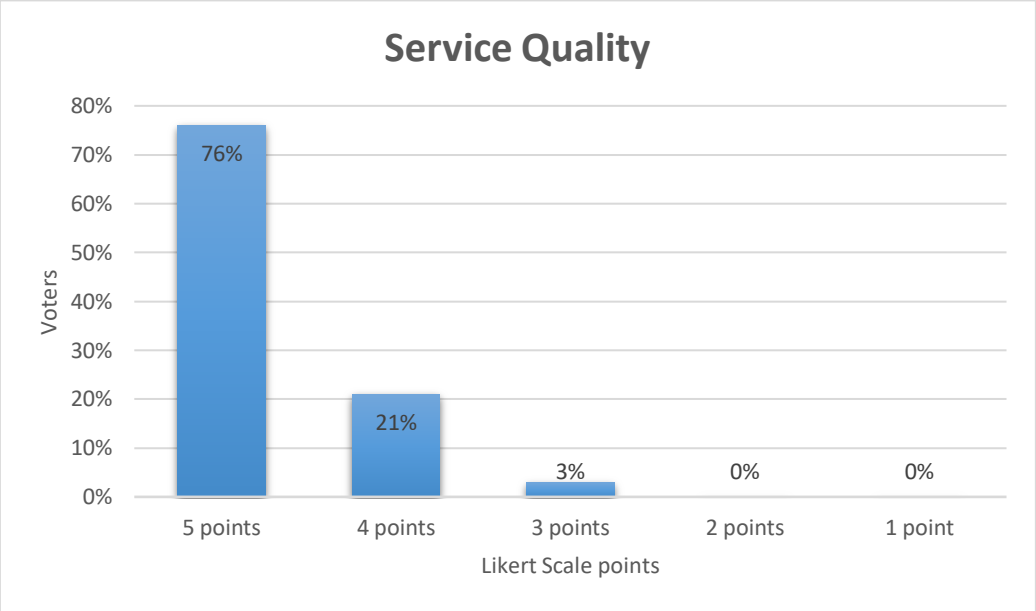
Moreover, the research does not consider the quality and satisfaction factors which convince people to come back to the restaurant. According to Bagozzi et al. (2002), this area of consumer behaviour may equal the importance of the quality of offerings.
Finally, the use of English language, which is not researcher's mother tongue, may have affected the readability of this paper.

6.4 Recommendations for future research

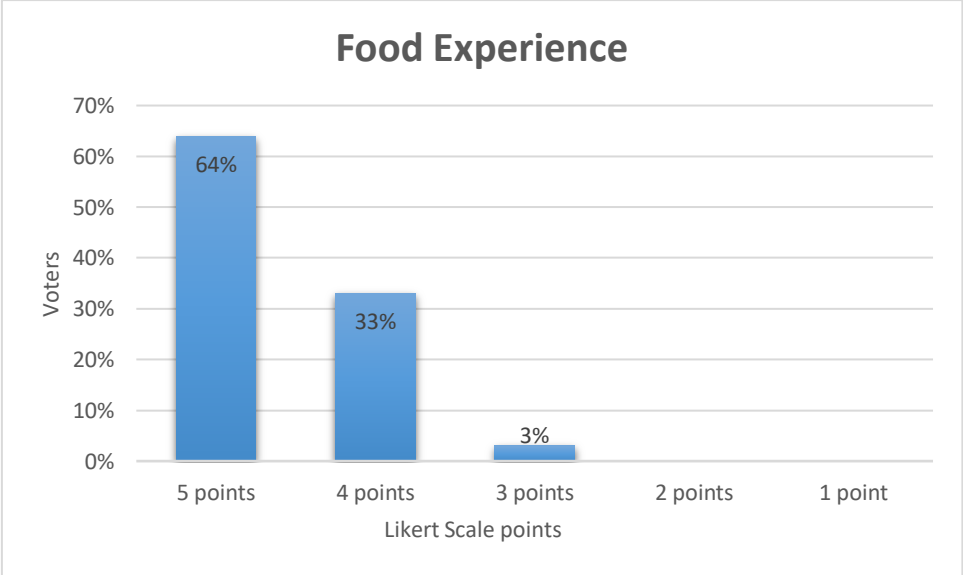
Examining a restaurant's progress or the *Danske Spiseguide* may require some time. Because of that, the future investigation would benefit from a longitudinal study, so that would be possible to observe changes that affect a restaurant over time. Also, future research could focus on other spheres that may influence clients to consider coming back to the same restaurants. Instead of presenting a fixed list of relevant influencing possibilities, a wider research can expand the knowledge by allowing clients to indicate themselves any element that would enhance consumer's experience with both the dining place and a hypothetic professional guide.
Plus, future research on *La Locanda* might consider other restaurant's dimensions, like the ones that concern the owner's point of view.

Appendix

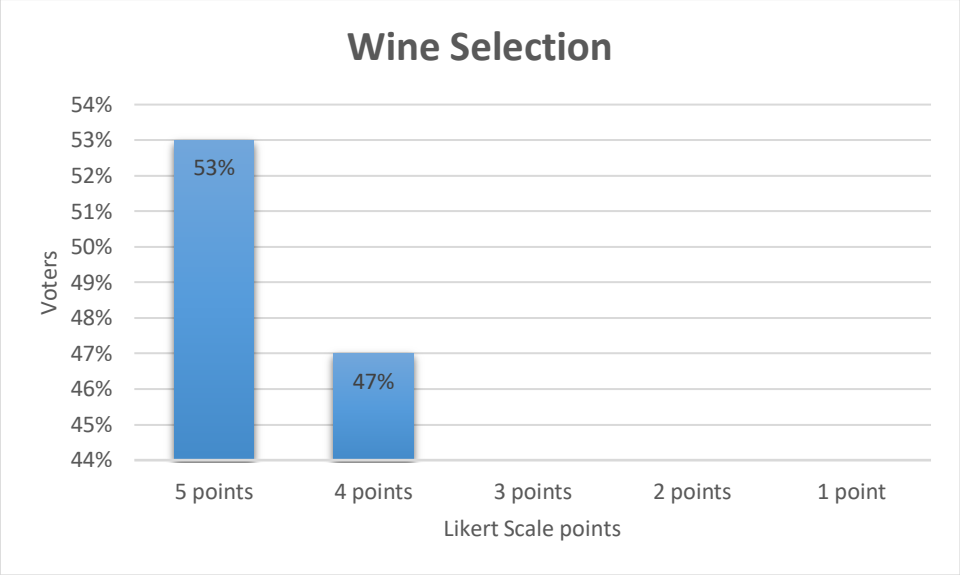
5.1.5 Service quality chart.



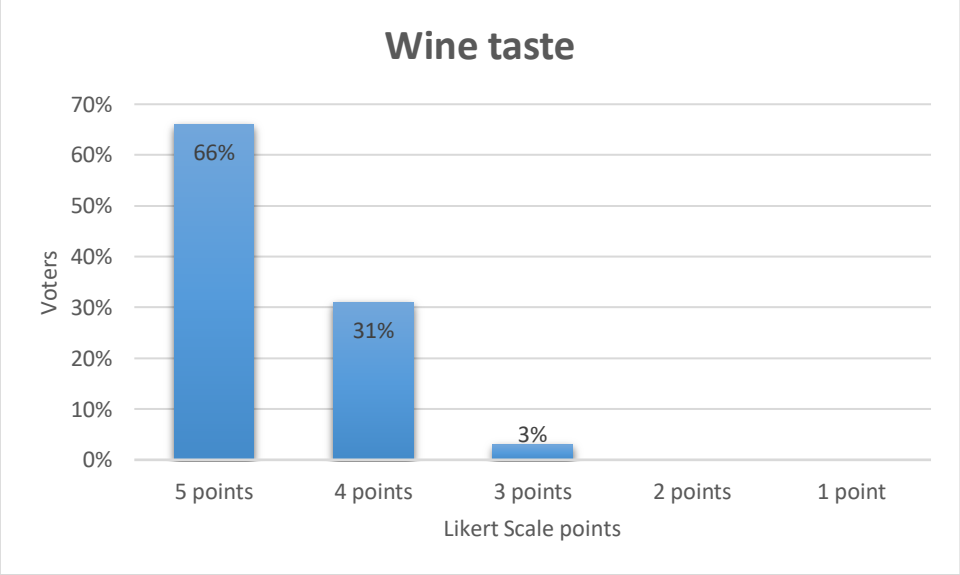
5.1.6 Food Experience chart.



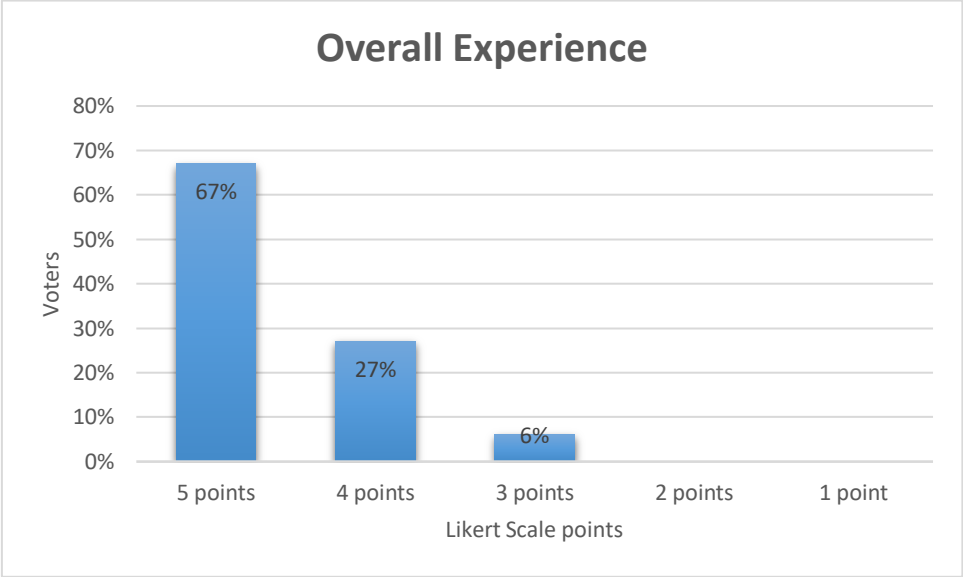
5.1.7 Wine selection chart.



5.1.7.1 Wine taste chart.



5.1.8 Overall Experience Chart.



5.2.2 *Årets spot* Influence chart.

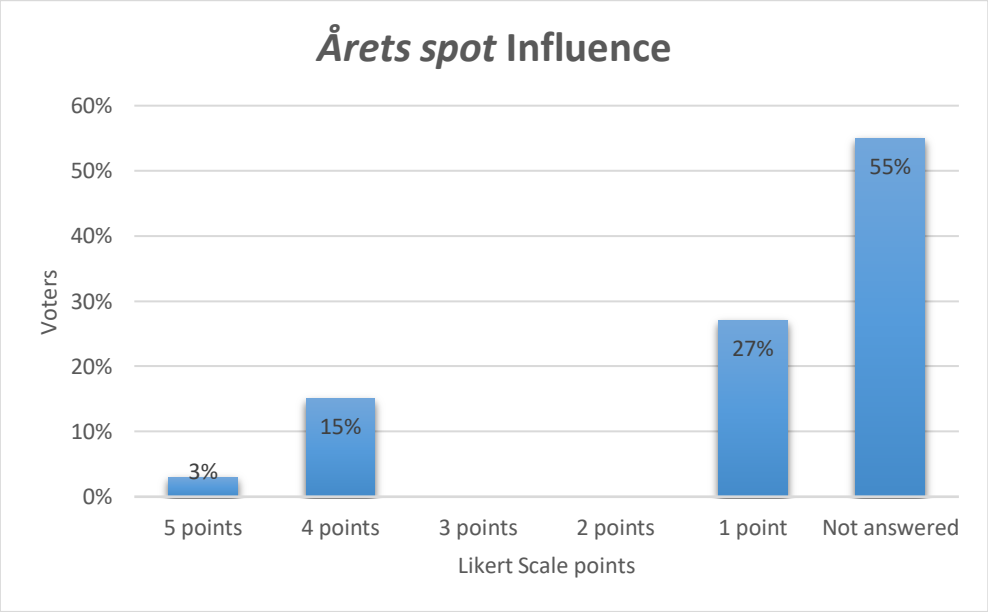
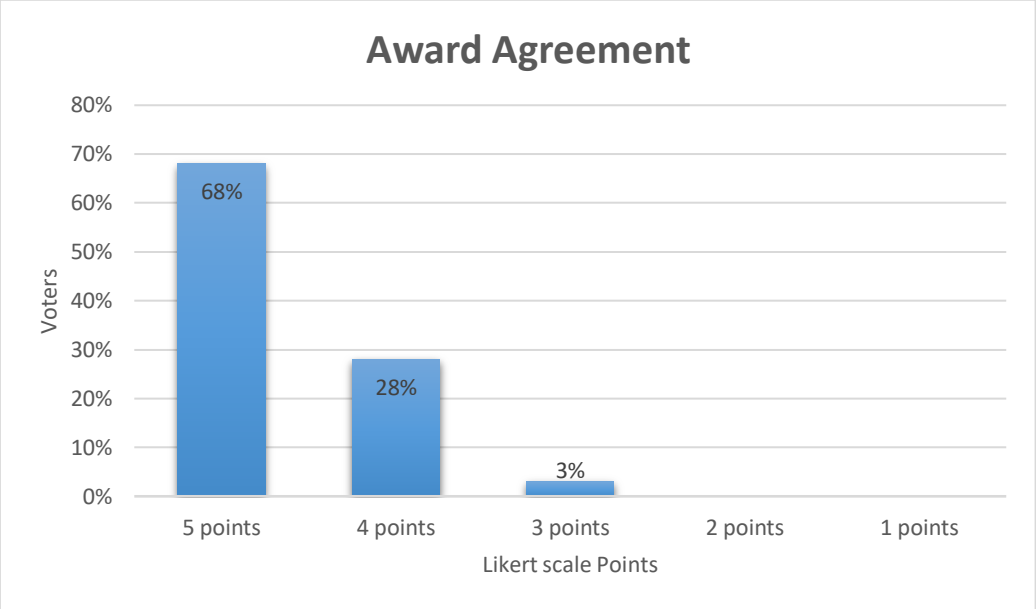


Chart 5.2.3 Award Criterion Agreement Chart.



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