

## Sensory Marketing and the Ecuadorian Cuisine

Viviane Carolina Paredes & Klaes Eringa

**ABSTRACT:** The last few years the Ecuadorian cuisine has become more known. One of the reasons is the diversity of the local ingredients, another the fusion of ancestral heritage with the creativity of a new generation of chefs. For this study four in-depth interviews were held with chefs of Ecuadorian haute cuisine restaurants, three in Ecuador and one in Spain. While the restaurants all value the Ecuadorian heritage, they each choose a slightly different angle for the leading concept of their restaurants, culture, history, nature, and in the case of the Spanish restaurant reviving memories and a sense of “home away from home”.

All four chefs present a remarkably strong narrative and they all consciously use sensory elements to support the harmony between this narrative and the dishes that they serve.

In the last decades, sensorial marketing or the use five senses to persuade customers to be more engaged with a product or service has gained importance in restaurants (Krishna 2011; Chen, Peng, and Hung 2015). This trend runs parallel with the growing interest in exotic cuisines. Latin-American has long been mainly represented by the Mexican kitchen (Long 2018, 319). Recent years have shown a rise in popularity of the Peruvian cuisine, leaving the other South American countries behind.

The purpose of this paper is to share understanding on how chefs in haute cuisine restaurants in Ecuador use a sensory strategy to influence guest experience. We first provide a short theoretical introduction of the main themes of the paper, followed by a section on the method that we used to collect and analyse the data. Then we present the four restaurants that are in our study, followed by the findings and analysis. A final paragraph presents the conclusions and implications.

### Sensory Marketing and Gastronomy

Sensory marketing is a relatively new field of study (Krishna 2011). Sensory marketing in gastronomy is even more novel, even when the sight and smell of food have always been such obvious indicators of its quality (Klosse 2019; Krishna and Schwarz 2014; Perullo and Montanari 2016; Shepherd 2012).

Krishna (2013, 5–6) defines sensory marketing as “marketing that engages the customers’ senses and affects their perception, judgement, and behavior.” One could say that this is exactly what chefs in restaurants aim to do, and

always have tried (Mulcahy 2019), seduce their guests. Numerous authors (Hetzel 2004; Deroy et al. 2014; Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman 2014; Michel, Velasco, and Spence 2015; Klosse 2019) mention the importance of the senses for a satisfactory gastronomic experience. Vision, hearing, smell, touch and taste all play their own role at different stages of a restaurant visit. Krishna and Schwarz (2014, 162) add an interesting element to this when they introduce “sensory illusions”. Ambient conditions, state of mind and company can influence guest perception. Spence (2018, xiii) sums it up in simple words when he writes, “The pleasures of the table reside in the mind, not in the mouth.”

### The Gastronomic Experience

A visit to an (haute cuisine) restaurant is an important experience for many people. Blichfeldt, Chor, and Ballegaard (2010) find romance and ‘spoiling oneself’ (48) and the interest in learning something new (51) among the main reasons for a visit. They coin the phrase “rich dining experience” (44), a nice double entendre. A gastronomic experience, of course, has a highly subjective side. Klosse (2019) who defines gastronomy as the science of flavour and tasting (33) argues that “Deliciousness relates to flavor and liking relates to tasting [...] Liking is a subjective personal judgement [...] Tasting capacity differs from person to person and there are many other influences. Tasting is learning. Some preferences are “acquired tastes” (34–35).

Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman (2014, 185) propose an inclusive multisensory integration of flavour, including olfactory, auditory and visual elements. They propose to use the term *gustation* for taste (187), in line with Hetzel (2004) who uses the term “gustatif” (69).

The restaurant experience, and even the gastronomic experience encompasses much more than the food. In his provocative style Spence states that “dining out isn’t really about fulfilling any kind of nutritional need” (200). So how do restaurants stage the experience? Spence (2017, 209) quotes Jeff Gordinier who wrote in 2012 that in his article “restaurants in the very top echelon these days—Noma in Copenhagen, Alinea in Chicago, Mugaritz and Arzak in Spain—sell cooking as a sort of abstract art or experimental storytelling”. In her account of how the once famous restaurant elBulli used discourse as driver of innovation, Opazo (2012, 88) offers a more comprehensive view of cuisine when she calls the gastronomic field “a collection of narratives”. And Perullo and Montanari (2016, 6) write that “a correct understanding of taste

requires a *qualitative* dimension that calls for a specific *narrative* of every single experience, each with its own situated story and structure.” Spence (2018b, xiii) sums it up in simple words when he writes, “The pleasures of the table reside in the mind, not in the mouth.”

#### A Holistic View of Haute Cuisine Restaurants

Hetzel (2004) is one of the early writers about sensorial marketing in gastronomy. In his holistic view of the Haute Cuisine offer system that creates the gastronomic experience he presents the following model (see figure 1):

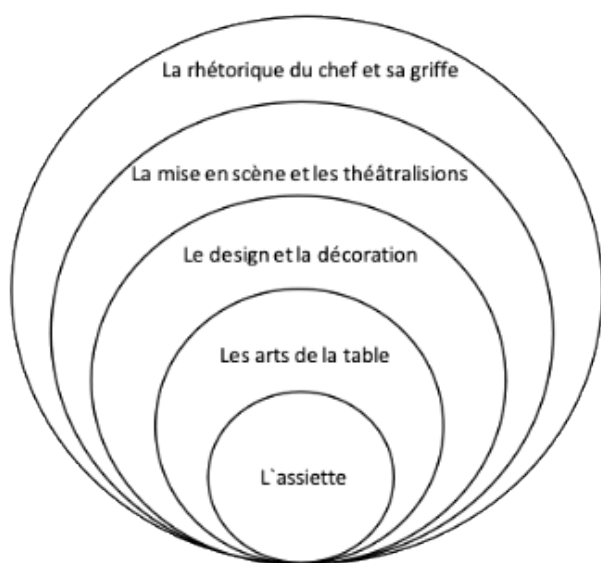


Figure 1. Hetzel's (2004, 75) holistic view of haute cuisine restaurants

Hetzel (2004, 75) explains that “it is clear that we have a real progression where we go from the plate, to the tableware, then to the design and layout of the place, then to its staging and, finally, to the devotion of the rhetoric of the leaders.”

The term *rhétorique du chef* in Hetzel's figure merits extra consideration. Hetzel (2004, 75) clarifies it as “their discourse about what they do.” Salvador Pérignon (2013, 21), referring to Hetzel, introduces the term “story” when she maintains that “the chef's rhetoric becomes an integral part of the taste experience” (30). It would thus be best to translate *rhétorique du chef* by *narrative of the chef*. Gomes Teixeira, de Azevedo Barbosa, and Gomes de Souza (2013) state that “this process of composition and sophistication of the offer seen holistically includes the participation of the chef, who with his rhetoric creates the central discourse of the offer proposed to the client” (340).

In his model Hetzel (2004, 75) offers an inside-out approach that rhymes the various stages or dimensions with the five senses: “the plate and the cuisine it contains refer mainly to taste and smell. Next, tableware, design and decoration make it possible to add the visible and the tactile. The staging, it will add the auditory. The chefs will do

everything to harmonize the different elements of sensory stimulation so as to create something ‘grand’ for the client.”

#### Ecuadorian Cuisine

In their study of Ecuadorian cuisine Carvache-Franco et al. (2020, 270) find that “Typical Ecuadorian cuisine is a multicultural mosaic, charged with intangible symbolic expressions, food diversity and inherited traditions.” The four different regions, high lands, coast, Amazon and Galapagos each have their unique local dishes, making use of local products (López and Florez 2018). The Ecuadorian cuisine is particularly rich in fruits and vegetables. The different races and cultures that make up the population of Ecuador - indigenous, mestizos and Afro-Americans - contribute with different cooking techniques and ingredients according to the zone where they are located to develop the Ecuadorian gastronomy we know nowadays (Walmsley 2018).

All these factors lead to the development that “Latin American gastronomy in general, and the Ecuadorian in particular, begins to be known internationally by different attributes, such as the quality of the raw material used, the ancestral gastronomic techniques, and the innovative character of its chefs” (López-Guzmán et al. 2019, 41). Recently, a generation of young chefs, together with the Ecuadorian Chefs Association, focused on the idea of making Ecuadorian cuisine known worldwide as a luxurious and gourmet food alternative and not only as a street food kiosk option. The book by Uddenberg et al. (2020) on SOMOS restaurant is a nice illustration of this development.

#### Method

We interviewed four Ecuadorian chefs of haute cuisine restaurants. The interviews were held in Spanish, the mother tongue of both the first author and the chefs. The interviews were held on-line, either via Skype or on MS-Teams. They lasted 45–60 minutes. Following the interviews, they were transcribed verbally in Spanish. For the analysis we used Hetzel's (2004) framework (see figure 1), with the addition of an extra dimension of Ecuadorian cuisine.

Hetzel sees a connection between the different dimensions and the five senses. Some senses play a more prominent role in various stages and accordingly in the dimensions that chefs regard when planning their gastronomic offer. We thus feel justified in presenting the five senses alongside Hetzel's original model.

One significant addition to the five of senses is that we include *mind* as an additional category. The inclusion of *mind* as a sixth sense has respectable origins. For example, Sharf (2018, 830), quoting the Mahāvādalla-sutta, writes that “the five faculties [...] have mind as their resort [...] mind is unique among the six faculties in having access to, and serving as foundation or “resort” for the other five”.

We present the following model as a framework for our analysis (see figure 2):

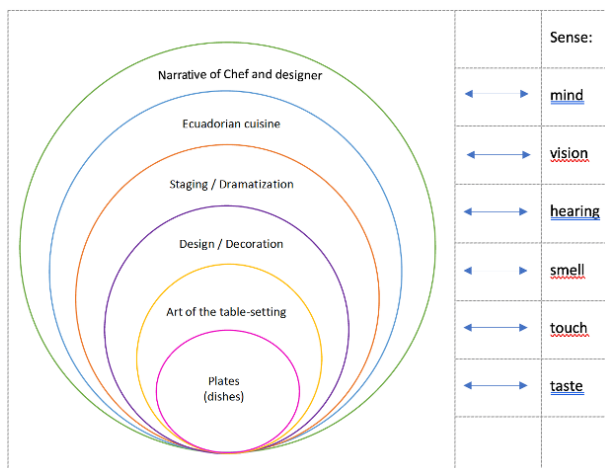


Figure 2. holistic view of Ecuadorian haute cuisine restaurants (based on Hetzel 2004, 75)

## Findings

We studied four restaurants. The first two are located in the centre of Quito, Ecuador, the third one is on the Ecuadorian coast and is included because the chef has a very articulate vision of the concept behind his company. The final restaurant is a Michelin-star restaurant located in Logroño, Spain, that serves a combination of Ecuadorian and Spanish dishes. It makes an interesting comparison between the type of narrative that this restaurant outside Ecuador uses and the narratives of the three other restaurants which are within the country. The chefs are all in their mid-thirties, and all have approximately 15 years of experience.

We then present the findings of the interviews, following the six dimensions in the concentric circles of the model. Here we shift perspective to the personal narratives of the chefs of the restaurants. Especially in haute cuisine restaurants, the chef is the heart of the business. For example, in Michelin-star restaurants, the stars follow the chefs: “When the chef leaves a restaurant, and works for another restaurant, it is no wonder if the restaurant receives immediately a star” (Gehrels, Kristanto, and Eringa 2006, 53). Hetzel (2004, 75) states that certain chefs have become real labels. Chef Rodrigo Pacheco of restaurant Boca Valdivia is a good example, with over 100,000 followers on Instagram.

## Interviews with Chefs and Further Analysis

### *Narrative of the Chef and Designer*

The chefs of the four restaurants all have a powerful narrative on the elements that make their restaurant Ecuadorian and how the senses play a role.

Juan Sebastián Pérez likens entering his restaurant to “a trip to a pampa table [a communal meal setting],<sup>1</sup> with the smell of firewood, the oven and you even have the kitchen in view where you already begin to connect [...] it was good because his 5 senses connected his mind to his emotions.”

Emilio Dalmau wishes for the guest “that you take away a concept and a memory of what Ecuador is [...] food from the coast, from the mountains, from the east and from Galapagos. So, I think we show the essence of Ecuador.”

Rodrigo Pacheco may be the most outspoken in his aim when he asserts that “it is our vision to connect people to nature in every possible aspect. In our case it is not a concept, it is a way of life. I am interested in highlighting the deep cultural aspect that Ecuador has through its long history of pre-Hispanic cultures that inspire us through their traditions. Culinary art is a means of education and culinary art has the obligation to educate the diner.”

Carolina Sánchez wishes “to evoke surprise and also that they remember dishes that they know from their childhood. We have our Ecuadorian clients who live in Spain and say: ‘I was transported to Ecuador.’”

The chefs all wish to do something more than serve delicious food. They wish to evoke a rich experience (cf Hetzel 2004; Blichfeldt, Chor, and Ballegaard 2010; Opazo 2012), create memories (Sutton 2010), use gastronomy as intangible cultural heritage (Gálvez et al. 2017; Salvador Pérignon 2013) to transform the guest. Emotions and the mind play an important role in that process. There is a close relation to what Perullo and Montanari (2016, 40) would call “naked pleasure ... an almost instantaneous perception.” It confirms the notion of a sixth sense as an additional faculty that is engaged in perception (Sharf 2018).

### *Ecuadorian cuisine*

The chefs also show their pride of the Ecuadorian cuisine. They all value the biodiversity of the country and the historical roots of the indigenous pre-Hispanic culture of Ecuador. Rodrigo Pacheco uses what he calls “ethnobotany”, and Juan Sebastián Pérez says that for him “gastronomy is the Ecuadorian culture. We are a country that stands out more for its cuisine than for its music, so it is our letter of introduction.”

Pérez praises the local ingredients. “Ecuadorian gastronomy is born from one of the most fertile soils in the world and is directly linked to our agriculture, livestock and fishing. So, we have an enormous privilege because of the quality of products that we can obtain from the soil.”

Emilio Dalmau finds his inspiration in the local markets. “As an Ecuadorian, now I go to the markets to see aromatic flowers, all the ancestral herbs that we have, fruits, that fascinates me[...] Ecuadorian gastronomy is totally our roots.”

What the chefs share is much in line with what research also shows, the multicultural aspect (Carvache-Franco et al. 2020), the use of local products (López and Florez 2018) and the inclusion of traditional elements (Gálvez et al. 2017; Carvache-Franco et al. 2020).

### *Staging or Dramatization*

In the staging of the experience the chefs use various sensory elements that help to create an ambiance that

**RESTAURANTE QUITU IDENTIDAD CULINARIA – Chef Juan Sebastián Pérez**

**Description:**

Quitú is a small restaurant located in a central area of Quito. Its main credo is to offer to its clients a gastronomic experience of a *pamba mesa* while using ecological products. The chef looks to highlight Ecuadorian history and culture, using haute cuisine techniques to prepare dishes that have a balance of flavours and a beautiful appearance. The menu changes constantly depending on the ingredients and the creativity of the chef.


**Dish gallery:**

Goat with mushroom duxelle



Quinoa with Amazon vanilla milk and guanabana chantilly



Figure 3: Restaurante Quitú Identidad Culinary.

**RESTAURANTE CASA GANGOTENA – Chef Emilio Dalmau****Casa Gangotena****Description:**

Restaurant Casa Gangotena is in a beautiful ancient but refurbished building, located in one of the most important squares in the old town of Quito, the San Francisco Square. The menu is designed around mestizo cuisine. Using combinations of flavours and textures in new and creative ways, they compose traditional Ecuadorian dishes with ingredients that are grown, harvested, farmed, and fished in various regions of Ecuador.

**Dish gallery:****Citrusy fish ceviche****Andean salad**

Figure 4: Restaurante Casa Gangotena.

**RESTAURANTE BOCAVALDIVIA – Chef Rodrigo Pacheco****BOCAVALDIVIA****Description:**

Bocavaldivia is a restaurant located on the coast of Ecuador. The main idea of Bocavaldivia is to use culinary art to educate their guests about the biodiversity in Ecuador and the contact with nature. The chef cultivates and fishes his own ingredients. By presenting the menu at the end of the meal he invites the guests to eat food they might never eat otherwise. This way he creates a sensorial experience that is not just gastronomic, but also cultural.

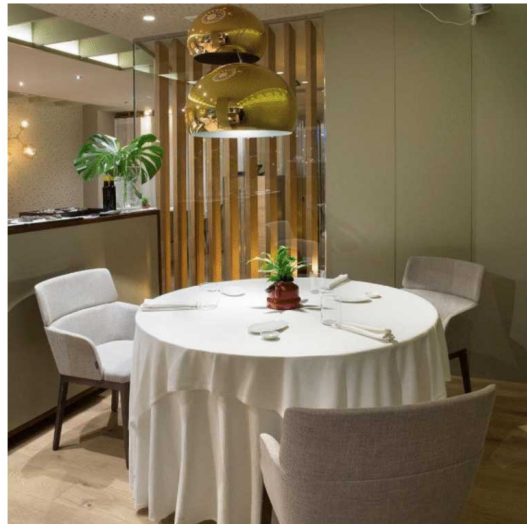
**Dish gallery:****Pumpkin crème brûlée****Mero fish with yellow cassava**

Figure 5: Restaurante Bocavaldivia.

**RESTAURANTE IKARO – Chef Carolina Sánchez**

**Description:**

Ikaro is a Michelin star restaurant, located in Logroño-Spain. In reflection of their backgrounds the chefs combine Ecuadorian and Spanish culture and ingredients to prepare dishes of avant-garde cooking. They cater to both Spanish guests and expats from Ecuador. They like to offer a mixture of something unknown to the guests and something they already know, in the hope to surprise them and provide the guests with an entire sensorial experience.


**Dish gallery:**

Calamari ravioli, crunchy rice and egg yolk gel



Nea piara'ka. (Ecuadorian Amazon fish soup with cassava bread)



Figure 6: Restaurante Ikaro.

reenforces their narrative. Restaurant *Quitu* has an open kitchen with a winged wood-burning oven. The guests receive sensory clues from the moment they enter the restaurant. Juan Sebastián Pérez makes the interesting observation that during a restaurant visit, “the senses begin to strengthen their sensitivity, your sense of smell, your hearing, your sight is already much more open.”

*Ikaro* has a kitchen that is not open, but it has a window, and the guest can see the entire kitchen from the dining room. In the restaurant music is very important. In Carolina Sánchez’ words: “this is what we also try to do through music, to create that good casual atmosphere but at the same time make you feel like it’s your home and that you’re relaxed.” She aims to involve all the guests’ senses so the guests will tell her “Oh! I was transported to Ecuador.”

Emilio Dalmau emphasizes the heritage element: “just by entering *Casa Gangotena* the guests know they are entering a monumental house that has been declared a heritage site.”

The employees perform an important role. Emilio Dalmau tells us “the servers know everything, so they are training every week, because they have tests and questions, so they know what each ingredient is that may be new or that they have not tried. The waiters have a story to tell you about each ingredient.”

Rodrigo Pacheco provides a menu after the meal and does not tell the guests what is on their plate. He explains that

it no longer gives people the freedom to say I want this and this, but people will say: Look, I came to Boca Valdivia, I ate oysters, I ate aloe vera, I ate 5 types of marine cactus, I ate sea urchins, I ate a green plantain tamale, I ate peanuts from the farm, I ate Chillangua, I ate fresh fish, yucca, shrimp, chives, achiote, neapía. In other words, it causes you a major surprise and you say Wow, this is a cultural experience, this is not a gastronomic experience. That is what we are looking for [...] It is very clear that we do not cook with fear, we do not put a product on the plate to make sure that you are going to like it, but rather we put what is available, what is fresh, so in that in that game there is a risk.

This touches on both the new experiences that many guests are looking for (Germann Molz 2007; Blichfeldt, Chor, and Ballegaard 2010; López-Guzmán et al., 2018) but also on more negative feelings that may range from concern (Kim, Eves, and Scarles 2009) and avoidance (Wolff and Larsen, 2019) to fear (Gyimóthy and Mykletun, 2009), reluctance (Pliner and Hobden, 1992; Cohen and Avieli, 2004) aversion (Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman, 2014) and even disgust (Lupton 1996).

#### *Design or Decoration*

The design and decoration of the four restaurants is very different. *Quitu* places the emphasis on identity. Pérez: “everything is organic, everything connects you with

nature, so that the flavours of the food, the smells, the sound of the environment and all your mind can focus on our diversity.”

Emilio Dalmau describes the decoration at *Casa Gangotena* as “quite elegant, quite sober. It is quite minimalist; we try to maintain the beauty of the mansion in which we work so that people admire that.

*Ikaro* also has a very sober decoration. As Carolina Sánchez explains: “we did not want it to attract attention. We use warm lighting to create a cosy atmosphere.”

Rodrigo Pacheco explains that *Bocavaldivia* is a restaurant without walls, under trees where you are “skin to skin with nature [...] at *Bocavaldivia* it is very important to use native elements and not fall into irrelevant design, but also that the part of the use of local materials and ancestral techniques is a complement so that the client can better understand the gastronomic proposal. Everything has to be in harmony, what goes on the plate, the dish as such and the environment must have a common thread to create a culinary experience.”

Blichfeldt, Chor, and Ballegaard (2010) report that “the more the senses are stimulated, the more entertaining the experience” (50). The most obvious sensory elements related to the design are vision and sound, but also smell influences both the perception and the memory of the gastronomic experience. Carolina Sánchez: “we want you to smell the food and the wine and that there is nothing else in the environment that obstructs this for you.”

#### *Art of the Table-Setting*

With the table-setting the chefs aim at supporting the Ecuadorian atmosphere. *Quitu* uses

clay dishes inspired by vessels and pre-Columbian shapes. *Casa Gangotena* works with local artisans and artists. *Bocavaldivia* uses pottery based on the Valdivia culture that gives its name to the restaurant. Rodrigo Pacheco explains that they “use elements of nature to serve food, that is, we create a new way of eating”.

Carolina Sánchez reports that they have brought crockery from Ecuador, commissioned craftsmen who work with stone. *Ikaro* also uses special cutlery that they try to change with each dish, “then that is also something that differs with the touch. Because you take different cutlery and they are striking cutlery too”. Intuitively, they act on the findings of Michel, Velasco, and Spence (2015) who report that “the weight and type of the cutlery exerted a significant impact on how artistically plated the main course was rated as being, how much the diners liked the food, and how much they would have been willing to pay for it” (1).

#### *Plates or Dishes*

All the chefs praise the diversity and quality of the local ingredients in Ecuador. Rodrigo Pacheco immediately aligns the dishes with his narrative: “Everything has to be in harmony, what goes on the plate. The dish as such and the environment must have a common thread to create a



culinary experience [...] We have to not only put ingredients on the plate but also put a story". Carolina Sánchez is a bit more critical of the Ecuadorian cuisine: "Really, in Ecuador, I think that is something that we lack a lot that our dishes are quite rustic".

The chefs invite the guests to use their hands. Carolina Sánchez explains that "especially in the appetizers at the beginning, we don't give them cutlery at all, we do want the fact that they also feel those textures in their hands". Juan Sebastián Pérez also encourages the guests, "first with the fingers and then with the sense of taste, which would be the one that closes the whole experience. So yes, all the senses are occupied". It is almost like moving the clock back four centuries (Spence and Piqueras-Fizman 2014).

### Conclusions and Implications

The chefs of the four restaurants all use a powerful narrative to stage the experiences in their restaurants. They all use the Ecuadorian heritage, with stories and images of indigenous culture such as pampa mesa and the elements of history and nature, but in their focus, they choose a slightly different angle. In a very broad sense one might say that the chef of *Quitú* focuses on culture; *Casa Gangotena* on history; *Boca Valdivia* on nature education; and *Ikaru* on re-creating memories and providing a home away from home. That said, all four chefs aim at evoking an image of Ecuador in the minds of their guests, and they all use sensory cues to achieve this.

The use of the narratives may be what it takes to give the Ecuadorian cuisine a more prominent position in gastronomic tourism. Narratives help to create expectations in the guests and to shape the experience, both during the meal and in the memories after the visit. Seeing the mind as a sixth sense can help the chefs and restaurants deploy their narratives even further and create a more global platform for the Ecuadorian cuisine.

### Notes

1. The Wikipedia article on pampa mesa states that "in indigenous communities of the Ecuadorian highlands, a pampa mesa or pamba mesa is a communal meal of food laid directly on a cloth spread on the ground. The meal is seen as an act of social solidarity; it also has mythological connotations." (Wikipedia Contributors 2020)

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