

# Haute cuisine three-star restaurants' representation on websites and dining guides: a lexicometric analysis

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to explore how haute cuisine excellence is and can be self-represented on the websites of three-star restaurants and juxtaposed onto the websites of external authoritative food guides.

**Design/methodology/approach** – In total, 26 French Michelin three-star restaurant websites and their reviews in the prominent Michelin and Gault and Millau dining guides were examined. This data was then processed using lexicometric software.

**Findings** – Five semantic universes emerged, showing that restaurants and dining guides do not emphasize the same elements of culinary excellence. While restaurant websites emphasize the charismatic leadership role of the chef through family history, professional recognition and vicarious learning, the two iconic guides are far from rating the criteria they claim to: For the Michelin Guide, criteria other than cuisine appear central. Conversely, Gault and Millau, far from its nouvelle cuisine principles advocating democratization at lower cost, insists on fine products.

**Practical implications** – It remains essential for restaurants to use a repertoire of cultural components and symbols, capitalize on the charismatic and architectural roles of their chef and showcase fine products that are representative of classical cuisine. Storytelling and dynamic narrative add-ons, regularly updated on large-audience social media, appear central to increasing restaurants' perceived value, communicating innovation and attesting to their singularity and uniqueness.

**Originality/value** – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first empirical study to overlap the lexical perspectives of three-star restaurants and iconic guides' websites.

**Keywords** Website, Michelin, Three-star restaurant, Gault and Millau, Elite chef, Legitimizing dining guides, Lexicometric analysis

**Paper type** Research paper



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## 1. Introduction

*Haute cuisine* is considered the pinnacle of professional cooking and dining (Balazs, 2001). Serving only 1% of all meals, fine dining restaurants constitute a small segment of the restaurant industry in France. Despite their small market share, *haute cuisine* plays a key role in trend setting, image building and establishing industry standards (Surlmont and Johnson, 2005). *Haute cuisine* is also a creative industry and a source of cultural values and commercial significance (Fileri and Mariani, 2021; Albors-Garrigos *et al.*, 2013). This is seen in the buzz around quality food and the hypermedia coverage of starred chefs, especially in countries where eating out is an important lifestyle element (Lane, 2013). *Haute cuisine* is culturally significant and considered a manifestation of national branding. It is a form of “gastronationalism” and identity expression via food and local culture (Bresciani, 2017; Petruzzelli and Savino, 2014).

Because of this intangibility, customers primarily rely on pre-consumption rating institutions such as dining guides (Surlmont and Johnson, 2005). These evaluators act as “soft” regulators and external observers (Koch *et al.*, 2018), awarding restaurants that meet their standards and deserve recognition by attributing symbolic and cultural capital to them (Bouty and Gomez, 2013; Stierand and Dörfler, 2016). These restaurants then become reference groups that are imitated in terms of their dominant codes and strategies (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Gómez *et al.*, 2021).

Firm’s innovation in creative industries, such as *haute couture* in fashion, relies heavily on individual artists and their know-how and creativity, reputation and leadership (Balazs, 2001; Svejenova *et al.*, 2010). If dining guides act “as arbiters of taste in the ‘fine-dining’ industry” (Lane, 2013, p. 343), chefs’ culinary excellence combining creativity, innovation and leadership, technical mastery and artistic expression is perceived as central for assessing the level/excellence of a restaurant (Byrkjeflot *et al.*, 2013; Svejenova *et al.*, 2010; Schwark *et al.*, 2020).

Legitimizing institutions, peers and customers constantly scrutinize the chefs of *haute cuisine* restaurants. Perceived as artists, they experiment with new food combinations and techniques to creatively develop their craft. Their innovations are based on aesthetics, symbolism, heritage, art or culture, which they interpret in their own culinary style (Bouty and Gomez, 2013; Louisgrand and Islam, 2021). *Haute cuisine* has become popular, especially through television cooking shows, and chefs today can in some cases be the entire focus of a customer audience at the expense of restaurants themselves (Lane, 2013; Cooper *et al.*, 2017). The media attention they receive is mainly focused on their distinctive identity and culinary style (Harrington *et al.*, 2013; Presenza *et al.*, 2017) and their ability to trigger emotions through their innovative talent (Svejenova *et al.*, 2010).

This phenomenon has to date not seen much academic attention in research (Lane, 2013). Studies focusing on *haute cuisine* have highlighted chefs’ culinary excellence regarding the commercial success and reputation of restaurants (Svejenova *et al.*, 2010). At the same time, even though restaurant websites have become fundamental for acquiring reservations, reputation, communication, interaction with customers and customer satisfaction (Lim, 2013), they have yet to gain the attention that might be expected (Daries *et al.*, 2018).

Only few studies have analyzed the discourse of legitimating guides describing award-winning restaurants. Award-winning restaurant websites, being the fundamental tools they are, have yet to be analyzed together with the dining guides that assess their excellence. This study aims to fill this gap, providing an analysis of empirical data and examining how *haute cuisine* excellence is self-represented on three-star restaurants’ websites (i.e. internally) and depicted on the websites of authoritative dining guides (i.e. externally).

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A lexicometric analysis of 26 French Michelin three-star restaurant websites and their reviews in the prominent Michelin and Gault and Millau dining guides was performed, revealing that restaurants and dining guides do not emphasize the same elements of culinary excellence. This study contributes to a better understanding of the multifaceted notion of culinary excellence. The self-representation concept emphasizes the image of an innovative chef who masters technique and artistic expression, as well as his/her professional family, entrepreneurial background and career that are rooted in a line of peers who have achieved professional recognition. Externally, the two iconic guides reveal contradictory elements, i.e. not the rating criteria they claim. Michelin emphasizes elements that go beyond the sole criterion of the cuisine they examine. Gault and Millau paradoxically insists on luxury products, far from their democratized lower cost concept principles of *nouvelle cuisine*.

## 2. Theoretical background

*Haute cuisine* studies have highlighted the role of chefs for the commercial success and positive reputation of restaurants (Byrkjeflot *et al.*, 2013; Svejenova *et al.*, 2010), mainly pointing at the leadership role of creative elite chefs (2.1) and the external signals of dining guides assessing their culinary excellence (2.2).

### 2.1 Leadership role of elite creative chefs

Elite chefs have to align their charismatic and architectural personal leadership roles to achieve their goals and reach the level of excellence expected by external observers (Kets de Vries, 2001; Balazs, 2002). The charismatic role of elite chefs is based on their predisposition, artistry, innovation and ability to empower and energize their subordinates. Their role as internal architects concerns the design, control and reward systems of their organization. Externally, they manage their environment and their stakeholder relations (Kets de Vries, 2001; Balazs, 2002). In their kitchens, elite chefs search, recombine and innovate, using unusual techniques and ingredients and, to enhance their image and reputation, set trends and stand out in the market. They also refine the aesthetics and design of their dishes to add symbolic value to their creations (Leschziner, 2010; Petruzzelli and Savino, 2014; Louisgrand and Islam, 2021). Braun and Ilh (2013) highlight how chefs perceive themselves as the main source and drivers of culinary innovations; they have their own perception of culinary improvement (Leschziner, 2010). As a result, they emphasize their unique culinary inclinations and vision through various mechanisms including centrality, consistency, distinction and valorization (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008).

For instance, the Elite Chef Alain Passard has made radical choices for his restaurant L'Arpège in Paris, sourcing selected vegetables from its three kitchen gardens and no longer using meat. To gain legitimacy and develop an inimitable competitive advantage, chefs build a strong self-image and a distinctive culinary identity, affirming *who they are* and *what they do*, through their culinary approaches and their signature dishes (Byrkjeflot *et al.*, 2013; Montargot, 2013).

The name of a great chef is both a mark of individuality and a sign of the overall quality of the restaurant (Stierand and Sandt, 2007). Indeed, elite chefs are influential leaders who develop their personal brand (Albors-Garrigos *et al.*, 2013). They use digital communication technologies such as social media to increase their visibility and customer engagement (Mariani *et al.*, 2019). When it comes to social media content analysis, Mariani and Baggio (2021) argue for new research, methods and techniques at the intersection of hospitality and tourism management, as well as data science. A review of the literature on artificial intelligence (AI) at the intersection of marketing, consumer research and psychology shows

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the potential of a data-driven approach. The introduction of AI not only increases the quality of analysis but also refines the prediction of consumer behavior (Mariani *et al.*, 2021).

Through their charismatic and architectural leadership roles, elite chefs internally and externally offer an empowering, attractive and creative vision of the future, impacting their teams and followers and motivating them to change (Balazs, 2002). Their influence opens up new business opportunities outside their restaurants, such as becoming prominent representatives of French culture and excellence, consultants in the food industry or for restaurants abroad, television show hosts or book authors (Svejenova *et al.*, 2010; Petruzzelli and Savino, 2014; Clarke *et al.*, 2016).

Chefs play the main role in terms of strategy and control of the creative culinary process (Koch *et al.*, 2018). They also transmit and integrate their visions of excellence into the culture and functioning of their organization. To do this, they rely on competent and highly complementary individuals on their staff and create a sense of community and excitement (Balazs, 2001, 2002).

Vicarious learning and mentoring are essential for developing innovations. First, chefs observe role models such as parents and mentors. Second, they analyze the positive and negative effects of their behavior. Third, they focus on the key elements of success to experiment, innovate and improve their performance (Abecassis-Moedas *et al.*, 2016).

Chefs also adopt master–apprentice relationships to develop an inimitable competitive advantage. Here, they increase the level of tacit knowledge of their highly hierarchical teams, composed of skilled individuals assembled inside of a complementary constellation (Balazs, 2001, 2002; Stierand and Dörfler, 2016). Chefs also impose strong pressure on their teams, as well as customs, rituals and almost military practices (Bourdain, 2000; Vinh Hoa and May, 2021). They impose strict rules on their kitchen brigades to control quality, maintain high performance standards and foster innovation (Bouty and Gomez, 2013; Albors-Garrigos *et al.*, 2013; Cooper *et al.*, 2017).

Elite chefs are artists who can be architects of a collective movement (Svejenova *et al.*, 2010; Petruzzelli and Savino, 2014). Indeed, a common culinary identity is part of a social construct that generates rules regulation, dissemination, adoption and legitimacy. For instance, *nouvelle cuisine* principles have challenged the classical culinary school (Rao *et al.*, 2003). In the same vein, New Spanish Cuisine proposes an avant-garde molecular gastronomy, challenging centuries of French hegemony (Lane, 2013; Albors-Garrigos *et al.*, 2013). The current reality is that legitimacy is more likely to be achieved when members clearly define their collective identity story and clarify their guiding purpose and core practices (Wry *et al.*, 2011). More recently, the manifesto of the New Nordic Cuisine from Denmark has been inspired by the use of natural and native ingredients (Petruzzelli and Savino, 2014). The support granted by the culinary profession, political institutions, legitimating scientists, media and interpreting audiences were key success factors in its dissemination (Byrkjeflot *et al.*, 2013).

Awards are synonymous with consecration for elite chefs. They represent a powerful signal of culinary achievement, prestige and fame (Aubke, 2014). To earn the highest awards, chefs have to align their charismatic and architectural roles to improve the upstream sophistication and originality of their meals served in a unique physical environment by highly qualified staff (Barrère *et al.*, 2014). Dining guides' recognition leads to career development for chefs (Surlémond and Johnson, 2005) and also achieves positive business outcomes (often for the restaurant as well) via stronger media coverage and increased sales, sometimes by up to 30% (Bouty and Gomez, 2013). The study by Johnson *et al.* (2005) shows that managerial skills such as the ability to handle the right human resources and finances are of the utmost importance for economic success.

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When a three-star restaurant is demoted to two stars, the impact is economically negative for the restaurant and can be psychologically detrimental to the chef. One example of this was the 2003 suicide of the 52-year-old Bernard Loiseau, a *nouvelle cuisine* Pioneer in the 1970s. Stripped of his third star by Michelin and dropped from 19 to 17 points by Gault and Millau, his downgrade was received as brutal, unfair and humiliating. Under these conditions, some three-star chefs such as Joël Robuchon in 1996, Alain Senderens in 2005, Antoine Westermann in 2006, or more recently, Sébastien Bras in 2017 or Marc Veyrat in 2019 returned their hard-won awards, questioning the hegemony of the elitist gastronomy model (Barrère *et al.*, 2014).

Making choices about food and restaurants is a complicated process involving a number of influences and personal circumstances. The decision process differs according to the type of customers and information they receive about a restaurant. The more frequently they dine out, the more important it is for them to obtain information about value for their money (Gregory and Kim, 2004). And the older they are, the more likely customers will be to consult dining guides (Harrington *et al.*, 2013).

A high price is a typical indicator of quality in fine restaurants, influencing their perceived value (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2006). Consumers also make their decisions based on subjective characteristics such as their search for the right dining experience, social connection or even hedonism (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Ryu *et al.*, 2012). Manniche and Larsen (2013) suggest developing narrative complements to value creation in restaurants, while Yang *et al.* (2017) highlight the influence of online review formats using both text and images: with texts, review length and readability affect their usefulness, while images (physical environment, food and drink) are positively related to enjoyment. Their study shows that the most important factors influencing usefulness and enjoyment are the length of the review and the images of food and drink. According to Mossberg and Eide (2017), delivering an outstanding experience can, for example, be strengthened by storytelling based on common fundamental dramaturgy elements. Narration is also pertinent in creating context and making sense of the consumer's experience (Harrington *et al.*, 2013).

Food quality, service and atmosphere are additional dimensions for assessing the overall quality of any restaurant (Chen *et al.*, 2017; Ryu *et al.*, 2012). In fast food, for instance, the cleanliness, speed and ease of understanding the offer are more likely to determine consumer satisfaction (Mathe-Soulek *et al.*, 2015). Andersson and Mossberg (2004) pointed out that customers' decisions vary depending on the time of day. Social and intellectual needs tend to correlate to the dinner time of day, whereas physiological needs synchronize more closely with lunchtime.

## 2.2 Legitimizing dining guides as external signals to assess culinary excellence

Consumers need and demand signals they can trust during their decision-making process (Surlumont and Johnson, 2005; Harrington *et al.*, 2013; Filieri and Mariani, 2021). Dubar (2003) emphasized the important role of institutional legitimation in the construction of individual and organizational identities. An opposition between two groups characterizes them: those who deserve recognition and awards and those who do not. In this respect, dining guides constitute an external indicator, assessing and legitimating culinary excellence.

Guide ratings are authoritative among chefs. They influence consumers by reducing uncertainty and contributing to the prestige of gastronomy and *haute cuisine* (Stierand and Sandt, 2007; Aubke, 2014). Guides operate according to three main principles: selection (or relegation), comparison and ranking. Among the dining guides, the iconic red *Michelin*

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*Guide* and the yellow Gault and Millau restaurant guide are two of the most famous and influential institutions that exercise “gatekeeper” functions (Johnson *et al.*, 2005; Stierand and Dörfler, 2016). They constitute a well-respected source of information for gourmets (Harrington *et al.*, 2013), influence their emotions and increase their competence (Mossberg, 2008; Mossberg and Eide, 2017).

First published in 1900 by the French Michelin tire company, the annual guides were given away free of charge to truckers and sales representatives until 1920. As time passed, the guide began rewarding restaurants on a one- to three-star scale. This attribution was based on five (somewhat controversial) criteria that were supposed to assess the excellence of cuisine (ingredient quality, mastery of flavoring and cooking, culinary personality of the chef, value for money and consistency between visits) without taking into account other elements such as the restaurant’s decoration, ambience or service (Vinh Hoa and May, 2021). One Michelin star signifies quality cuisine that is worth stopping for; two stars signal excellent cuisine worth going out of your way for; while three stars stand for exceptional cuisine that is worth a special trip.

The *Michelin Guide* now covers 28 countries, rating over 40,000 establishments on three continents. In doing this, Michelin has contributed to the hegemony of French *haute cuisine* standards around the world (Johnson *et al.*, 2005; Lane, 2013). More recently, less formal settings or even street food have been rewarded, generating controversy as a result (Vinh Hoa and May, 2021). *Haute cuisine* has clearly evolved over the past few decades and can be expected to change further in the coming years due to several factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic (Schwark *et al.*, 2020). As a matter of fact, gastronomy pluralism and multiculturalism appear to be on the rise, offering different restaurant forms and prices, with more relaxed and less conservative dining, a far cry from the elitist hegemony historically found among some restaurants (Lane, 2013; Barrère *et al.*, 2014).

The *Michelin Guide* website had more than 25 million visits in 2018, and an agreement was announced at the end of 2019 between Michelin and Tripadvisor to share their data and allow online users to book a table directly after reading a review. The website now employs a hundred anonymous, highly trained reviewers/restaurant testers (Bouty and Gomez, 2013). Far from being transparent, the *Michelin Guide* continues to maintain a certain opacity about its evaluation procedures, the number of its inspectors and what leads to good or bad ratings. In France in 2016, the *Michelin Guide* presented more than 4,340 restaurants and awarded three stars to 26 restaurants, two stars to 82 restaurants and one star to 492 restaurants.

In response to the conservative *Michelin Guide* which valued quality and tradition, the two French Restaurant Critics Henri Gault and Christian Millau initiated the *nouvelle cuisine* movement with a strong emphasis on innovation. Presenting in the 1970s a simple salad of green beans and tomatoes, they questioned Michelin’s gastronomic and political authority (Rao *et al.*, 2003; Bouty and Gomez, 2013). Gault and Millau accused Michelin of focusing too narrowly on wealth, the dishes of a particular location or the cleanliness of restaurants, initiating a counter-movement to the Michelin star system and provoking substantial resistance from which a rivalry emerged (Byrkjeflot *et al.*, 2013). According to them, culinary excellence was not linked to the wealthy appearance of a restaurant or its dishes, but instead to its taste, aesthetics and chefs’ innovation (Lane, 2013; Louisgrand and Islam, 2021). This innovation (Presenza *et al.*, 2017) is an important entrepreneurial feature for financial performance throughout the hospitality industry (Kallmuenzer, 2018). Interestingly, the literature on entrepreneurship and innovation in hospitality additionally mirrors this competition between Michelin’s focus on tradition and Gault and Millau’s focus on innovation (Presenza *et al.*, 2019).

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Gault and Millau rates restaurants with the assistance of 20 to 25 freelance reviewers [1]. These ratings vary on a 1- to 20-point scale. It hardly ever awards a score of 20, arguing that perfection is beyond the limits of normal human beings. As the Gault and Millau guide indicates, while French traditional cuisine inherited from the 19th century featured heavy, rich sauces in well-to-do and bourgeois restaurants, their focus was instead on innovativeness, product and flavor. They transformed the collective identity of chefs, codifying their *nouvelle cuisine* principles into commandments that include truth, lightness, simplicity, imagination and aesthetics (Rao *et al.*, 2003).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research design

A qualitative approach that systematically analyzed and interpreted primary data was chosen to provide a wide margin of exploration and allow new discoveries (Eisenhardt, 1989). All 26 French three-star Michelin restaurants rated in 2016 were selected (Table 1). France is the primary model of elite gastronomy and a *haute cuisine* benchmark (Barrère *et al.*, 2014). The corpus (set of textual data) was threefold, composed of each restaurant's website and their related reviews [for textual and statistical analysis techniques for data from websites and (online) reviews see, e.g. Mariani *et al.* (2018), Mariani (2020), Mariani and Matarazzo (2020) and Mariani and Baggio (2021)] on the two iconic Michelin and Gault and Millau dining guide websites (Johnson *et al.*, 2005; Aubke, 2014). Non-text content such as photos was not applied in this study.

#### 3.2 Data processing and analysis

Mariani *et al.* (2019) and Mariani and Baggio (2021) find that the research methods and techniques used in hospitality and tourism management are rather limited. The corpus of the study was therefore subjected to lexicometric analysis, using a software not widely used in the literature, ALCESTE 2018. This software uses a combination of textual and statistical analysis. Using an inductive recursive approach, ALCESTE enabled the identification of co-occurrences or word associations in a sentence. Its lexical analysis based on similarity, specificity and co-occurrence analyses consists of studying the statistical associations of lemmas (or root words), favoring a maieutic of meaning (Santiago Defosse *et al.*, 2015). Developed by Reinert (1993), this software was chosen because of its high processing capacity and suitability for processing representations; it was a good fit for this exploratory approach. Compared to a textual content analysis, the quality and reliability of its results, presented in a detailed report, and the objectivity of its purely algorithmic method allowed the identification of semantic universes (or classes) without any preconceived ideas (Illia *et al.*, 2014). The analysis also provided various statistical operations edited in a detailed report, such as hierarchical top-down classification, class profile, repeated segments, presence/absence of reduced forms, classification tree, lists of representative words and text segments per class tested by chi-square and a factorial correspondence analysis (Montargot and Ben Lahouel, 2018).

Using ALCESTE required prior coding of the corpus to indicate which variables to identify: restaurant brand, chef's name, year of obtaining Michelin's three stars and category of website (Michelin, Gault and Millau or the restaurant itself). Five stages followed:

- (1) text segmentation and word coding, with the corpus segmented into elementary context units (ECUs);
- (2) lemmatization: the words were reduced to their radicals;
- (3) definition of a contingency table of "analyzable" reduced forms and ECUs;

**Table 1.**  
List of the 26 three-star French Michelin chefs

Three stars since	Chef's name	Restaurant name	Location	Department
1965	Bocuse Paul	L' Auberge du Pont de Collonges*	Collonges-au-Mont-d'Or	69 Rhône
1967	Haeberlin Paul and Marc	L' Auberge de l'III*	Illhaeuvern	68 Haut-Rhin
1968	Troisgrs Jean and Pierre	Maison Troisgrs*	Roanne	42 Loire
1977	Guérard Michel	Les Prés d'Eugénie*	Eugénie-les-Bains	40 Landes
1981	Blanc Georges	Georges Blanc*	Vonnas	01 Ain
1986	Pacaud Bernard	L' Ambroisie	Paris 4e	75 Paris
1990	Ducasse Alain	Le Louis XV* - Alain Ducasse	Monite-Carlo	Monaco
1993	Gagnaire Pierre	Pierre Gagnaire*	Paris 8e	75 Paris
1996	Passard Alain	L' Arpège*	Paris 7e	75 Paris
1999	Bras Michel et Sébastien	Le Suquet	Lagutole	12 Aveyron
2002	Savoy Guy	Guy Savoy*	Paris 17e	75 Paris
2005	Marcon Régis	Régis et Jacques Marcon*	Saint-Bonnet-le-Froid	43 Haute-Loire
2007	Rohat Christophe and Barbot Pascal	Astrance*	Paris 16e	75 Paris
2007	Anton Frédéric	Le Pré Catelan*	Paris 16e	75 Paris
2007	Pic Anne-Sophie	Maison Pic*	Valence	26 Drôme
2008	Passédat Gerald	Le Petit Nice	Marseille	13 Bouches-du-Rhône
2009	Fréchon Eric	Epicure au Bristol	Paris 8e	75 Paris
2010	Goujon Gilles	Auberge du Vieux Puits*	Fontjoncouse	11 Aude
2010	Pras Eric	Lameloise	Chagny	71 Saône-et-Loire
2012	Renaut Emmanuel	Flocons de Sel*	Megeve	74 Haute-Savoie
2013	Donckele Arnaud	La Vague d'Or*	Saint-Tropez	83 Var
2014	Lallement Arnaud	L' Assiette Champenoise*	Tinqueux	51 Marne
2015	Alléno Yannick	Ledoyen*	Paris 8e	75 Paris
2015	Meilleur René and Maxime	La Boutte	Saint-Martin-de-Belleville	73 Savoie
2016	Le Squer Christian	Le Cinq*	Paris	75 Paris
		Four Seasons		
		George V		
2016	Ducasse Alain	Alain Ducasse*	Paris 8e	75 Paris
		Plaza Athénée		

**Note:** \*These restaurants also received the highest distinction in the Gault and Millau guide (five *toques*)



- (4) top-down hierarchical classification analysis performed to obtain stable classes and their significant words (tested by chi-square); and
- (5) class description to aid interpretation (Mazzonetto and Fiates, 2014).

The text analysis was conducted entirely in French, followed by all results being translated into English with the help of a professional native English speaker/editor.

## 4. Results

The findings were based on a statistical analysis of the corpus (3.1), with five lexical universes interpreted (3.2).

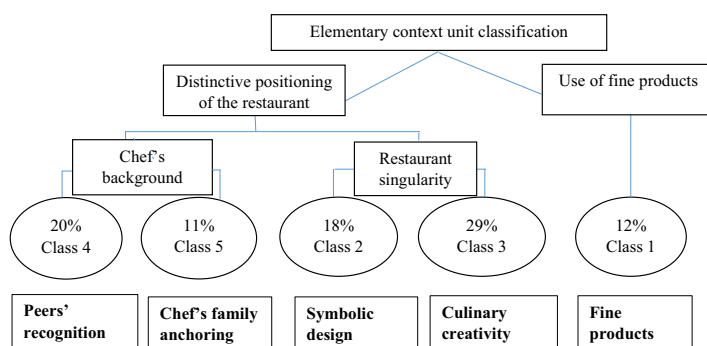
### 4.1 Statistical analysis of the corpus

ALCESTE 2018 segmented the corpus, broke it down and ranked it via a hierarchical descending classification method. The distinct classes covered 84.32% of the corpus, showing a robust representativeness. The classification tree partitioned the corpus into five lexical classes and allowed distribution visualization, as presented in Figure 1. We named and interpreted each class by studying their most representative forms. Here, we noticed that ECUs were not evenly distributed. The partition revealed a first branch composed of Class 1, only related to the use of fine products, including 12% of the ECUs. The partition also showed another branch linked to the distinctive positioning of the restaurant, which was subdivided into two grouping Classes 2 (18%) and 3 (29%) that referred to the restaurant singularity and Classes 4 (20%) and 5 (11%) that related to the chef's background.

### 4.2 Presentation and interpretation of lexical universes

Five classes represent distinctive discursive postures. The results are presented using the main branches appearing in the classification tree: "Use of fine products" for Class 1, "Restaurant singularity elements" for Classes 2 and 3 and "Chef's background" for Classes 4 and 5. Table 2 summarizes the characteristic words, the representative text segments and the interpretation attributed to each class.

4.2.1 *Use of fine products.* This class contained 12% of the classified ECUs and was surprisingly representative of the Gault and Millau websites. They relate to fine luxury products such as caviar, truffles or *foie gras*, which are representative of classical cuisine. Chefs such as Eric Prat, Michel Guérard, Alain Passard or Gérard Passédat are found within this class.



**Figure 1.** Distribution of the corpus into five classes with significant terms (Khi2)

Class and % of ECUs*	Most frequent words	Significant text segment for illustration	Interpretation of the class
1 12%	Sauce 45 Caviar 42 Truffle 38 Foie 34 Gras 34 Dessert 32 Lobster 30 Cream 27	Elementary unit of context n° 413 - Khi2 = 75 – Chef Pras <i>(Langoustines), hot (and) (cold) (juice) of (green) (apple), (light) cream with (mustard) fallot (and) (caviar) of aquitaine with (thin) snails from (burgundy) (pie), (fresh) seasonal (herbs) (and) (vegetables), sparkling garlic</i>	<i>Fine products</i> Representative class of both Gault and Millau and restaurant websites. This class relates to fine luxury products corresponding to the norms of classical cuisine
2 18%	Place 39 Elegant 27 Shrine 23 Location 23 Decoration 22 Table 22 Terrace 22 View 20	Elementary unit of context n° 341 Khi2 = 57 – Chef Frechon <i>Since its metamorphosis, the (famous) (table) of the (Bristol) continues to (offer) (moments) of (exceptionalism). In what used to be the (dining room) of the (restaurant), (facing) the (garden) of the (private) hotel, one discovers a (room) of (brilliant) (classicism), (signed) Pierre Yves Rochon</i>	<i>Symbolic design</i> Representative class of Michelin Guide website. This class relates to the hedonic fine dining atmosphere that awakens the senses and reveals the singularity of the restaurant
3 29%	Cuisine 21 Innovation 20 Simplicity 19 Nature 19 Tribute 18 Sublime 18 Creativity 17 Story 17	Elementary unit of context n° 169 - Khi2 = 27 – Chef Bras <i>Focused on (essentials), his (cooking (is) (not) (demonstrative)) but encompasses (all) the (senses). I enjoy working with low (value) (added) (simple)(products)</i>	<i>Culinary creativity</i> Representative class of Michelin Guide. It relates to the characteristics of the cuisine, such as innovation, and sublimation of simple products that evoke nature and tell a story
4 20%	Star 91 Award 76 Third 61 Guide 50 Achievement 50 Craftsmen 50 Best 47 France 47	Elementary unit of context n° 545 – Khi2 = 119 – Chef Goujon <i>(In) 1997, (he) (obtained) his first (Michelin) (star). (In) 2001, a second (star) (came) (glittering) in the (sky) of (Fontjoncouse). (Authentic), (generous), (instinctive) and (creative) (he) was at (times) a (young) (apprentice), has (l) appetite (d) ogre (to get) three (Michelin) (stars)</i>	<i>Peers' recognition</i> Representative class of both the Michelin Guide and the restaurants' websites. It concerns the chefs and their career achievement, through the third star awarded and the prestigious title of one of the "Best Craftsmen in France"
5 11%	Hostel 149 Hotel 145 Father 109 Daughter 98 Continuation 95 School 65 Son 63 Spouse 63	Elementary unit of context n° 626 – Khi2 = 49 – Chef Haerberlin <i>(This) is how he (met) (his) future (wife), (Danielle), the (daughter) of (Paul). In 1992, he (created) the (hotel) des (berges) in the park of the (Ill) (hostel) and added (five) stars to the sky of (Illhaeusern)</i>	<i>Chef's family anchoring</i> Representative class of restaurant websites. This class relates to the strength of the family bonds that allowed the initial restaurant to develop over time and assert a distinctive food expression identity

**Table 2.**

Results of the

lexicometric analysis

**Note:** \*% of ECUs: extracted fragments, representative of the class

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4.2.2 *Restaurant singularity elements.* A branch of the classification tree presents Classes 2 and 3. It uncovers tangible and intangible components of restaurants such as their symbolic design and the chef's creativity. Both classes are representative of the *Michelin Guide* discourse. The second class contains 18% of the classified ECUs related to the attractiveness of the restaurant and its symbolic interior design, as indicated in Table 2. Chefs such as Eric Fréchon, Guy Savoy, Bernard Pacaud or Régis Marcon are representative of Class 2.

The third class contains 29% of the classified ECUs related to culinary creativity, innovation and their link to simplicity and sublimation of products or *terroir*, as indicated in Table 2. Chefs such as Michel and Sébastien Bras, Yannick Alléno, Jean and Pierre Troisgros or Paul Bocuse are representative of this class.

4.2.3 *Chefs' backgrounds.* The other branch of the classification tree examines Classes 4 and 5. It uncovers the chefs' backgrounds, such as the importance of their peers' recognition and family anchoring in their charismatic leadership role.

The fourth class contains 20% of the classified ECUs related to peer recognition. It refers to the third star awarded, mentioning the unique and prestigious French competition among professionals that grant the title of "Best French Craftsmen." This class is both representative of the restaurant websites and the *Michelin Guide*, as indicated in Table 2. Chefs such as Gilles Goujon, Yannick Alléno, Arnaud Lallement and Alain Passard are representative of this class.

The fifth class contains 11% of the classified ECUs related to the chef's family anchoring and professional ancestry. It refers to culinary and bloodline affiliation between father and son/daughter to ensure the continuity, development and fame of the family business. This class is linked to the restaurant websites. Chefs such as Paul and Marc Haerberlin, Arnaud Lallement or the brothers Jean and Pierre Troisgros are representative of this class.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

### 5.1 Conclusions

This study investigated how *haute cuisine* excellence was self-represented on the websites of three-star restaurants and externally depicted on the websites of authoritative dining guides. The overall findings show that culinary excellence is not internally addressed in the same way on restaurant websites as it is externally addressed on two iconic dining guide websites.

5.1.1 *Fine products as basis of haute cuisine.* Fine products are the first important element that emerged from the corpus analysis. As architectural leaders, chefs determine and select these from their best suppliers. The elitism of these products is foundational for what is offered in *haute cuisine* restaurants. The literature shows that one way to engage consumers is by combining food and storytelling to help create an attractive dining experience (Mossberg, 2008).

Legitimizing guides driven by a French elitist hegemony (Lane, 2013; Barrère *et al.*, 2014) influence consumers (Aubke, 2014). As described above, the counter-movement of *nouvelle cuisine* democratized and authorized simpler, healthier food based on innovativeness and tasty everyday products. This evolution expanded the range of products for chefs. However, the results indicate that it is still essential for restaurants to communicate and emphasize fine products, confirming the fact that the axis of product presentation chosen by the restaurants still corresponds to the norms of classical cuisine such as those determined by Michelin. Luxury products, representative of the elitist and exclusive classical cuisine criticized by Gault and Millau (Lane, 2013; Barrère *et al.*, 2014), are paradoxically and surprisingly anchored in the Gault and Millau website, a far cry from their core notion of simple and relaxed cuisine promoted by their *nouvelle cuisine* movement.

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5.1.2 *Importance of symbolic values in haute cuisine restaurants.* Symbolic values involve the charismatic and architectural leadership roles of the chefs. They are also related to tangible and intangible elements of the restaurant regarding design and creativity. In this regard, AI could provide them with a new source of inspiration (Fileri and Mariani, 2021; Mariani *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, the use of AI to pair ingredients according to their aromatic compounds is another possibility for creative new combinations.

The results showed that restaurant websites insist on the strength of family ties to build a story, emphasizing the centrality of family bonds and professional ancestry through their vicarious learning (Johnson *et al.*, 2005; Abecassis-Moedas *et al.*, 2016). The chefs' personal and career pathways also bestow symbolic values, which are used to strengthen the restaurant's image (Byrkjeflot *et al.*, 2013). The results furthermore confirmed that references to previous workplaces are common in gastronomy (Wry, 2011; Aubke, 2014).

According to Dubar (2003), the role of legitimating institutions is to build individual and organizational identities. As architectural leaders, chefs typically scrutinize their environment and especially what their peers are doing (Leschziner, 2010), inducing a form of replication of the same dominant codes known as *isomorphism* (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Gómez *et al.*, 2021). Chefs' identity formation builds upon a set of social and cultural reference points, allowing them to establish a dual balance between personal intrinsic and external social motivations (Dubar, 2003). It contributes to the alignment of their charismatic and architectural leadership roles (Balazs, 2002). Among elite chefs, the importance of being part of a professional ancestry attests to their belonging to their "clan" and reinforces their charismatic leadership role (Bourdain, 2000). Their search for recognition and quest for institutional legitimacy are fully part of their identity construction process and occur through the practices of identity regulation (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008). The results show that both the websites of the restaurants and the *Michelin Guide* specifically emphasize elements of professional recognition, especially when chefs have won the title of one of the "Best French Craftsmen" (Montargot, 2013).

Social niches emerge in the field of gastronomy, bringing together interdependent actors. These niches regroup the closed circle of *haute cuisine*–legitimated restaurants, with their interactions presenting individual and collective interests: chefs want to display their drive for excellence that is linked to their identity construction, balancing between strictly complying with the cuisine state of the art while simultaneously making their own creative mark (Braun and Ilh, 2013; Montargot, 2013). They also reflect their artistic positioning on social media by presenting a modern and personal vision of culinary excellence (Clarke *et al.*, 2016; Stierand and Dörfler, 2016).

Literature indicates that customers seek hedonistic experiences (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Our results show that atmosphere is an important element for assessing overall restaurant quality (Chen *et al.*, 2017; Ryu *et al.*, 2012). The lexicometric analysis revealed the use of a repertoire of cultural components and symbols; it appears that Michelin's discourse is particularly characteristic of these elements. For Michelin, the design of the restaurant and the chef's culinary creativity (in the artistic sense of the word) are central. This discussion generates managerial recommendations as a result.

According to Mossberg and Eide (2017), storytelling based on dramaturgy is a convincing way to attract customers and add value to their dining experience. Manniche and Larsen (2013) also suggest developing narrative add-ons to value creation in restaurants. A discourse based on the creation of a unique and innovative fine dining atmosphere may achieve a singularity for the restaurant (Ryu *et al.*, 2012), providing the desired signal to gourmets during their decision-making process (Surlmont and Johnson, 2005; Harrington *et al.*, 2013; Daries *et al.*, 2018).

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### 5.2 Theoretical implications

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first empirical study to overlap lexical perspectives of three-star restaurants' self-perceptions and iconic guides' website representations. Its theoretical implications find that the representation of culinary excellence is multiform and depends on which actor depicts it. Internally, the findings show that excellence is reflected in the chef's personal, family and entrepreneurial background, being part of a line of peers already awarded by the profession (Wry, 2011; Montargot, 2013; Aubke, 2014). These findings add to literature that finds culinary excellence to be based on the image of an innovative chef who masters technique, artistic expression and the ability to select the most exclusive products/services while surrounded by the most competent staff (Byrkjeflot *et al.*, 2013; Svejenova *et al.*, 2010; Schwark *et al.*, 2020), aligning their charismatic and architectural leadership roles (Kets de Vries, 2001; Balazs, 2002).

Externally, we contribute to the literature by showing contradictions between what the guides say about the criteria attesting to a restaurant's level of excellence and their website content. Indeed, the evaluation criteria of the *Michelin Guide* on their website, which claim to be based solely on cuisine, depict a culinary excellence that is also largely based on elements external to the cuisine itself, i.e. atmosphere, décor and service. Culinary excellence as depicted by the Gault and Millau website guide also shows a contradiction. While the principles of the *nouvelle cuisine* movement do not rely on the opulence of a restaurant or the dishes it offers (Lane, 2013; Louisgrand and Islam, 2021), their website does in fact insist on the presence of fine products.

### 5.3 Practical implications

The findings of this study can help improve the restaurant discourse in terms of their culinary excellence. It is surprising that restaurant websites do not emphasize the different moments of dining and atmosphere. Since consumption depends on the time of day or season, texts referring to the restaurant's atmosphere may (or may not) reflect these variations, enhancing (or decreasing) their array of possibilities. In the same vein, social and intellectual elements correlating to dining and its different modes of consumption should be narrated (Andersson and Mossberg, 2004). This will be especially relevant in the post-COVID-19 period, where private dining and take-away gourmet meals have gained and continue to grow in importance (Schwark *et al.*, 2020; Vinh Hoa and May, 2021).

Second, the websites of starred restaurants may insist on both utilitarian and hedonic benefits a customer expects when online (Lim, 2013). They might pay particular attention to the length of their websites' texts and the food and beverage images they show, i.e. the most important factors for achieving utility and enjoyment goals (Yang *et al.*, 2017). Websites might also be able to improve consumer satisfaction by providing the latest information (Daries *et al.*, 2018). They could be coupled with other social media with a large audience, along with an attractive and regularly updated information flow (Mariani *et al.*, 2019); these different communication channels could capitalize on the charismatic role of leaders who represent excellence, set trends and facilitate acceptance of change. Schwark *et al.* (2020); for instance, note that in the post-COVID-19 period, traditional foods could be supplemented with insect or plant proteins and sophisticated combinations of nonalcoholic foods. These are trends that need to be supported by consumer education, as well as textual and visual promotion. In this respect, leaders could use their influence and sign partnerships and consultancy contracts related to their personal branding to change the image of these products (Svejenova *et al.*, 2010; Petruzzelli and Savino, 2014).

Third, the dynamic use of news, narratives and storytelling on restaurant websites appears pertinent for creating context and making sense of the consumer's experience

(Harrington *et al.*, 2013) to foster online interaction, as well as increase the number of restaurant visits and reservations (Daries *et al.*, 2018).

#### 5.4 Limitations and future research

The use of the ALCESTE 2018 software was limited to the lexical data processing collected over one year. Nonverbal content and longitudinal differences were not analyzed. In terms of methodology, it would be interesting to use another software to analyze website photos and videos, as well chefs' personal social networks, which might show a different vision of their culinary excellence (Clarke *et al.*, 2016; Stierand and Dörfler, 2016). It would also be interesting to continue this study by interviewing starred chefs and dining guide representatives about their visions of culinary excellence and leadership, their evolution and the way they internally and externally communicate these issues.

The application of other methodologies, such as the automated sentiment analysis in a big data approach, could also be chosen for its high capacity to detect positive and negative textual opinions. It would examine the semantic relationships and meaning of the different sources of information that have an impact on reputation, image, leadership and performance (Alaei *et al.*, 2019). In the same vein, a big data analysis method based on social media, including photo and video sharing (Flickr, Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube), immediate microblogging services (Twitter) and community discussions and media sharing (Facebook) could help lead to the analysis and prediction of consumer behavior (Miah *et al.*, 2017; Mariani *et al.*, 2021).

We also have to consider that high-quality restaurants have become key economic assets in many countries and "pull" tourism factors (Daries *et al.*, 2018). Cultural values, food experiences and perceived experience matter in terms of online evaluation (Mariani and Predvoditeleva, 2019; Filieri and Mariani, 2021). Comparing the online presence of three-star restaurants with other countries also famous for their cuisine, such as Italy or Spain, would be a valuable addition to our work. Similarly, a big data approach would allow an examination of the cultural dimensions affecting the content and helpfulness of online reviews (Filieri and Mariani, 2021).

New avenues of research could also consider other regions with different forms of gastronomy, such as Asia, America or Australia (Lane, 2013; Vinh Hoa and May, 2021), especially in light of how the former hegemonic position of France is now being challenged by globalization and internationalization processes (Svejenova *et al.*, 2010). Further studies of dining reviews could also be expanded to include other legitimating guides and even customers' online reviews (Filieri and Mariani, 2021). Even though Michelin and Gault and Millau remain authoritative, it would be interesting to expand the analysis of reviews to these new sources of legitimation.

Finally, the findings of the study in the context of *haute cuisine* could be transferred to other industries where vicarious learning, mentoring and leadership roles are central to the process of achieving excellence.

#### Note

1. [www.lenouveleconomiste.fr/dossier-art-de-vivre/les-guides-gastronomiques-14991/](http://www.lenouveleconomiste.fr/dossier-art-de-vivre/les-guides-gastronomiques-14991/)

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