LUMEN ET VIRTUS
ISSN: 2177-2789

THE ROLE OF FOOD CRITICISM IN CONSUMER CHOICE: CONTRIBUTIONS AND INFLUENCES

https://doi.org/10.56238/levv15n43-049

Submitted on: 13/11/2024 **Publication date:** 13/12/2024

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ABSTRACT

Food criticism, traditionally carried out by experts in the field, has been transformed with the advent of digital platforms, allowing ordinary consumers to share their experiences and influence purchasing decisions. This study aims to analyze how gastronomic criticism, both professional and consumer, influences food choices and what are the main contributions of this practice to the gastronomy sector. The methodology adopted involves a literature review and analysis of review content on platforms such as TripAdvisor, Google Reviews, and social networks, in addition to considering different types of reviews, such as those from influencers and food bloggers. The results point out that online reviews play a significant role in consumers' decision-making, with lay opinions gaining more and more relevance, although they have limitations compared to specialized reviews. The study also highlights the growing influence of digital influencers, who, while helping with the visibility of establishments, often compromise the fairness of reviews. It is concluded that, although the modern consumer has become more protagonist in the dissemination and use of gastronomic criticism, the lack of a critical approach to the available information can lead to automated and impulsive choices. Therefore, it is essential that the consumer develops a more conscious and responsible reading of criticism for a more balanced use of this instrument.

Keywords: Gastronomic Criticism. Digital Influence. Consumers. Online Reviews.

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INTRODUCTION

Food criticism is a fundamental process in the food sector, acting as an evaluation instrument that goes beyond the simple judgment of dishes. It involves the careful analysis of elements such as flavor, presentation, service, environment and cost-benefit, offering consumers a guide that helps them choose restaurants and other gastronomic services. Historically, food criticism emerged as an exclusive medium, conveyed by experts in newspapers and magazines, but with the advent of the internet and social networks, it has become more accessible, democratizing gastronomic evaluation and expanding its impact.

The relevance of the topic transcends the sphere of consumers. For establishments, food criticism is an opportunity for prominence and promotion, while it can act as an instrument of continuous improvement. For critics, it is a practice that requires responsibility, technical knowledge and cultural sensitivity, considering that reviews directly influence consumer behavior and the reputation of restaurants.

This article was prepared as a literature review, based on the analysis of academic literature, journalistic articles and data from digital platforms for gastronomic evaluation. The selection criteria included studies published between 2000 and 2024, in reliable sources and that addressed the influence of gastronomic criticism from different perspectives: consumer, market, and cultural production.

The purpose of this article is to analyze how food criticism influences consumer choices, exploring its main contributions. The discussion will be based on aspects such as the construction of expectations, the education of the palate and the impact on the gastronomic market, highlighting influences, perspectives and opportunities presented by the contemporary scenario.

THE EVOLUTION OF GASTRONOMIC CRITICISM: FROM EMERGENCE TO PRACTICES

It is observed, throughout history, that gastronomy criticism emerged and developed based, above all, on social practices and with a strong connection with the cultures and arts of countries, emerging or not. Food criticism emerged as a practice associated with culture and the appreciation of the culinary arts, playing an essential role in the appreciation and preservation of gastronomic traditions. According to De Certeau, Giard and Mayol (2008), the first records of food appreciation date back to historical texts that sought to capture food practices as cultural expressions. In the twentieth century, food criticism gained prominence in newspaper columns, such as those of Craig Claiborne in *The New York Times*, which

professionalized the activity by introducing more systematic criteria for the evaluation of restaurants (Giard; Mayol, 2008).

Over time, specialized publications, such as the renowned Michelin Guide, consolidated food criticism as a field of authority, creating patterns that directly influenced consumer behavior and the dynamics of the food market. As Montanari (2008) explains, gastronomy is both a science and an art, requiring from critics not only technical knowledge, but also cultural sensitivity.

In the traditional model, reviews were produced by experts and published in newspapers, magazines and specialized guides. Notable examples include the Michelin Guide and Gault & Millau, which set a standard for gastronomic evaluation, using star or dot scales to indicate culinary excellence. These formats, according to Symons (2001), reflect not only the quality of the restaurants, but also the symbolic relationship between food, status and power. On the other hand, the digital format has revolutionized food criticism by democratizing access to information. Specialized blogs and social networks such as Instagram and TikTok have become popular platforms, while sites such as TripAdvisor and Yelp have allowed everyday consumers to contribute reviews. As Parker (2019) points out, digital criticism has amplified the voice of the consumer, creating a global network of opinions about restaurants and food services.

The internet has profoundly transformed food criticism, reducing the distance between consumers and experts. The traditional model, which relied on a few authoritative voices, has been replaced by a multiplicity of opinions, often conflicting. This change brought advantages, such as greater diversity of perspectives, but also challenges, such as the problem of fake reviews and the overvaluation of passing trends.

For Le Couteur (2020), food criticism in the digital age is marked by a tension between the authority of specialized critics and the authenticity perceived in consumer opinions. In addition, the impact of social networks has been significant in building the image of restaurants, requiring chefs and owners to adapt their communication strategies to meet the expectations of an increasingly informed and connected public.

TYPES OF INFLUENCE OF FOOD CRITICISM ON THE CONSUMER

Food criticism exerts a wide range of influences on consumer behavior, ranging from the formation of expectations to the construction of a more sophisticated gastronomic repertoire. The provision of detailed information and technical evaluations allows criticism to guide choices and promotes reflection on quality, service and innovation in the food market. As Finkelstein (1989) and Johnston and Baumann (2015) point out, modern gastronomy is

increasingly mediated by critical narratives that dialogue with contemporary demands for authentic and memorable experiences.

In this context, food criticism is not limited to the role of evaluator of dishes and services. It also educates consumers, broadens cultural understanding of gastronomy, and directly influences consumption decisions. The following are the main types of influence that criticism exerts on the consumer.

INFLUENCE ON THE PERCEPTION OF QUALITY

Food criticism plays a significant role in shaping consumers' perception of quality. By analyzing aspects such as flavor, texture, freshness of ingredients, preparation techniques and presentation of dishes, critics establish standards that directly influence the public's choices. For Trubek (2000), the perception of quality in gastronomy is constructed not only by sensory characteristics, but also by the narrative associated with the dishes, such as the origin of the ingredients, the reputation of the chef and the concept of the restaurant.

This type of influence is particularly relevant in an increasingly competitive market, where the appreciation of the gastronomic experience goes beyond the simple act of consuming. Well-founded criticisms can highlight differentials that consumers would not always identify on their own, such as the use of seasonal ingredients, creativity in menu composition, or harmonization between dishes and drinks (Trubek, 2000). According to Reichl (2005), a good review not only describes the food, but also gives the consumer tools to recognize culinary excellence.

In addition, the perception of quality is intrinsically linked to the consumer's trust in the critic. Some digital platforms, such as Yelp and TripAdvisor, have democratized access to food reviews, but they have also brought credibility-related challenges. While professional reviews are based on technical criteria and anonymous visits, reviews from ordinary users don't always follow the same standards, which can lead to distorted perceptions of quality. As Finkelstein (1989) argues, formal criticism is essential to differentiate passing trends from lasting contributions to gastronomy.

Something that also needs to be observed in this process is the impact of negative reviews. While they may initially drive away consumers, constructive criticism offers restaurants the opportunity to improve their service and regain public trust (Reichl, 2005). On the other hand, exaggeratedly harsh or unjustified criticism can unfairly damage an establishment's reputation.

According to Parker (2019), the recognition of quality promoted by food criticism also benefits the market as a whole, stimulating innovation and the search for excellence. That

is, restaurants that receive positive reviews are often driven to maintain high standards, while others are encouraged to improve in order to stand out in a competitive landscape. Thus, food criticism not only shapes consumers' perception of quality but also acts as a catalyst for evolution in the industry.

CONSTRUCTION OF EXPECTATIONS

Before they even visit a restaurant, customers are influenced by detailed descriptions, scores, and analytics that shape their perceptions and generate specific expectations about the services, ambiance, and quality of the dishes. As Finkelstein (1989) argues, food criticism not only describes the experience, but creates an anticipatory narrative that directly influences the way the consumer experiences the moment.

The construction of expectations can occur both positively and negatively. Rave reviews, which highlight attributes such as innovative dishes, exceptional service, and pleasant atmosphere, tend to attract customers and create a desire for remarkable experiences. Negative reviews, on the other hand, can discourage visits and have a significant impact on a restaurant's reputation. However, even unfavorable reviews can be useful to consumers, helping them to avoid experiences below expectations and, at the same time, serving as feedback for establishments to improve their services (Reichl, 2005).

One of the main factors that contribute to the construction of expectations is the narrative created by the food critic. According to Trubek (2000), the way the experience is described, with emphasis on visual, sensorial and cultural elements, directly influences the consumer's previous vision. For example, phrases like "melt-in-your-mouth dishes" or "an explosion of authentic flavors" generate an emotional anticipation that prepares the consumer to experience something special.

Additionally, the narrative may also include references to the restaurant's cultural and historical context, such as the chef's history or the use of regional ingredients. Johnston and Baumann (2015) highlight that modern critical discourse often seeks to align itself with trends of authenticity and sustainability, which strengthens the expectations of consumers who value these aspects.

With the growth of digital review platforms such as TripAdvisor, Google Reviews, and social media, building expectations has become even more dynamic. While professional reviews are widely respected for their technical analysis, user reviews provide a more comprehensive and democratic perspective (Brandão. 2020). However, information overload can lead to a phenomenon known as "inflated expectations," where overwhelmingly positive reviews create an unrealistic expectation that the restaurant may

not meet. As Finkelstein (1989) points out, the relationship between expectation and actual experience is delicate, and small discrepancies can influence consumer satisfaction.

The way expectations are built has a direct impact on the customer's final satisfaction. When dining experiences meet or exceed expectations, consumers tend to associate greater value with the service or product. On the other hand, expectations that are too high can lead to disappointment, even if the quality is objective. Reichl (2005) argues that critics have a responsibility to balance their evaluations, avoiding exaggerations that may compromise the consumer experience.

GASTRONOMIC EDUCATION

According to Symons (2003), gastronomic education aims to promote the development of a more refined palate and expanding knowledge about food cultures, culinary techniques and gastronomic concepts. In addition to guiding individual choices, criticism has a pedagogical effect, allowing consumers to better understand what they are consuming and enjoy the gastronomic experience in a more conscious and informed way.

Barbieri (2010) states that the detailed description of dishes, ingredients, methods of preparation and the history behind recipes made by food critics help to educate the public, especially in relation to the appreciation of sustainable practices and the preservation of culinary traditions. As Symons (2003) points out, gastronomic criticism not only evaluates, but also acts as a cultural mediator, bringing consumers closer to previously unknown practices and concepts.

A clear example of this influence is the popularization of concepts such as *terroir*, which refers to the relationship between geography and the characteristics of food and beverages. By highlighting the importance of local and seasonal ingredients, critics teach consumers the value of authenticity in gastronomy, encouraging choices that are more aligned with sustainability and the appreciation of regional culture (Pollan, 2006).

Food critics also play an important role in introducing consumers to different culinary cultures. Through analyses that address the history, symbology and rituals associated with typical dishes, they help to expand the cultural repertoire of the public. For Haden (2018), food criticism works as a bridge between cultures, promoting tolerance and understanding through food.

For example, the complexity of cuisines such as Japanese, which values simplicity and purity of flavors, or Mexican, with its richness of spices and ancestral techniques, critics help consumers realize that gastronomy is a direct reflection of the traditions and identity of a people (Haden, 2018). For the author, this mixture of cultures and arts in gastronomy

makes it possible to create new experiences, especially to promote new dishes. In addition to promoting cultural knowledge, food criticism contributes to the development of a more refined palate. Detailed descriptions of flavors, textures, and combinations of ingredients arouse the consumer's curiosity, encouraging them to try new foods and get out of their comfort zone. As Barbieri (2010) points out, criticism is an essential tool to educate the palate, allowing the consumer to go beyond immediate satisfaction and learn to value nuances and complexities.

Through its educational work, food criticism influences more conscious and informed choices and introduces concepts such as organic food, ethical production practices, and functional gastronomy, critics encourage the public to adopt healthier and more sustainable eating habits. In this sense, Lang and Heasman (2004) highlight that gastronomic criticism can be an agent of transformation, promoting a more balanced and responsible diet.

Lang and Heasman (2004) observe that food criticism also has the potential to educate beyond immediate experiences, that is, it can inspire consumers to seek more information, participate in cooking courses or even try to prepare dishes at home, in order to foster this curiosity, criticism does not enrich the individual repertoire and contributes to the appreciation of gastronomy as an artistic and cultural expression.

GASTRONOMIC CRITICISM AND THE MARKET: CONTRIBUTIONS AND INFLUENCES

The relationship between gastronomy and the global market has intensified exponentially in recent decades. The gastronomic sector, once restricted to cultural or geographical niches, has become a significant pillar of the global economy, moving billions of dollars annually. This phenomenon is intrinsically linked to the evolution of gastronomic criticism, which today exerts a direct influence on consumer behavior and the way establishments are perceived.

According to Bourdieu (2010), gastronomy transcends the food field, and is also a space of social and cultural distinction. In this context, gastronomic criticism emerges as a mediator between market players, guiding consumer demands and encouraging restaurants to position themselves as relevant brands. This interaction has intensified with the growth of global tourism and the digitization of reviews, enabling consumers to share experiences and rate services in real time (Flores, 2018).

Tourism is one of the sectors that most influences and is influenced by gastronomic criticism. Tourist destinations often use their gastronomy as an element of cultural promotion, creating unique experiences that attract visitors. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2019), 88% of tourists consider the culinary experience an essential

factor in their trips. In this scenario, positive reviews can boost the fame of a restaurant or region, while negative reviews can discourage visits.

In Brazil, the relationship between gastronomy and tourism has gained ground, with states such as Minas Gerais and Bahia promoting their culinary traditions in events of international projection (Machado, 2020). For establishments, this represents not only an opportunity for growth, but also an additional push for quality and consistency, often evaluated by renowned critics and digital platforms.

The appreciation of new talents and establishments also surrounds the practice of gastronomic criticism. Unknown restaurants and chefs can gain prominence after a positive evaluation in established guides such as the Michelin Guide or in specialized publications. According to Goldstein (2017), the visibility generated by a good review has the power to transform a chef's trajectory, consolidating him as a reference in the market. In Brazil, chefs such as Alex Atala and Helena Rizzo are examples of professionals whose visibility has been amplified by international reviews and awards. This appreciation also encourages the training of new professionals and investment in infrastructure, raising the quality standards of the sector (Silva, 2021).

Ferreira (2019) also points out that gastronomic criticism also encourages innovation and continuous improvement in the services offered. The quest to surprise consumers and meet the quality standards set by critics leads to the creation of new dishes, the application of modern techniques, and greater care in the selection of ingredients. As Flores (2018) observes, criticism acts as a feedback mechanism, guiding establishments on points to be improved and encouraging constant development. This dynamic also contributes to the diversification of the gastronomic offer, providing richer experiences to consumers.

Goldstein (2017) argues about the role of food reviews in promoting sustainable and ethical practices, noting that restaurants adopting sustainability measures, such as the use of local and organic ingredients, tend to receive more favorable reviews, creating a positive ripple effect in the market. This trend reflects a more conscious consumer aligned with environmental values.

According to Prado and Lima (2022), food criticism can act as a catalyst for change, encouraging establishments to adopt sustainable practices and value the local production chain". This approach also strengthens the cultural identity of regions, while contributing to environmental and social preservation.

THE CONSUMER IN THE DIGITAL AGE: PROTAGONISM OR PASSIVITY?

With the popularization of the internet and digital platforms, the role of the consumer in the gastronomic universe has undergone profound transformations. Previously passive, consumers now occupy a more active position, sharing their experiences through reviews and comments on platforms such as TripAdvisor and Google Reviews (Santos, 2022). This practice democratized food criticism, allowing anyone to contribute to the formation of the reputation of establishments, even without formal expertise in the area. However, this change raises a debate: is today's consumer truly a protagonist or does he still maintain a passive behavior in the face of external influences?

Santos (2022) argues that platforms such as TripAdvisor and Google Reviews, considered today as major references in the sector, have transformed the way consumers choose restaurants. These tools offer an average of the reviews and also provide detailed descriptions of real experiences, photos, and practical information that directly influences the purchase decision. Studies show that 88% of consumers trust both online reviews and personal recommendations (Brandão, 2020).

However, there are challenges associated with this evaluation model. Manipulated comments, known as *fake reviews*, can damage the credibility of platforms. Research carried out by Silva and Almeida (2021) points out that 32% of Brazilian consumers have already felt deceived by incorrect information in online reviews. Thus, although the platforms expand access to food criticism, their reliability is still an issue to be improved.

Digital influencers and *food bloggers* have gained prominence as opinion leaders in the gastronomic scene. By combining attractive images and detailed descriptions, they often turn establishments into true tourist destinations. According to Ferreira (2019), influencers are able to reach specific audiences, creating a close relationship that traditional critics often do not reach.

However, the lack of regulation and ethics in content production is a critical point. Some influencers are criticized for promoting restaurants in exchange for benefits, without transparency with their followers (Santos, 2022). This behavior compromises the impartiality of recommendations and reinforces the need for clear criteria to distinguish genuine content from advertising.

According to Brandão (2020), professional criticism is based on technical criteria, such as the quality of the ingredients, preparation, presentation, and coherence of the menu. On the other hand, lay opinions often reflect individual experiences, such as service or environment, without necessarily addressing technical aspects of gastronomy. As

observed by Oliveira and Menezes (2020), both have their value: while professional criticism raises the standard of the sector, lay opinion connects emotionally to the public.

However, the coexistence of these perspectives can generate conflicts. A restaurant highly rated by critics can be misunderstood by lay consumers who do not have the same gastronomic reference. Thus, the convergence between these two forms of criticism is still a challenge to be explored. The consumer of the digital age, although they have the tools to play a leading role, often remains passive in accepting information without questioning its veracity or context. Brandão (2020) argues that the ease of access to evaluations can lead to automatic choices, based on trends or majority opinions.

Furthermore, engaged consumers have the ability to shape gastronomic narratives by sharing authentic experiences and demanding transparency from influencers and establishments (Santos, 2022). From this, a hybrid consumer emerges: passive in some situations, but potentially protagonist when they use digital tools critically and consciously.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Food criticism has been consolidated as an essential tool for evaluation and recommendation within the food sector, playing essential roles for both consumers and gastronomic establishments. Throughout this article, it was possible to observe that the contributions of the critics go beyond simply evaluating the taste of a dish, covering aspects such as the environment, the service and the cost-benefit ratio. For consumers, criticism works as a guide, offering important insights into what to expect from a restaurant or a new dish, while for establishments, it represents a form of visibility, recognition, or even an opportunity for improvement.

In addition, digital platforms and the rise of gastronomic influencers have considerably expanded the reach and democratization of criticism, allowing any individual, with or without training in the area, to share their opinion and influence consumption decisions. However, the coexistence between professional and lay critics, often distant in criteria and depth, generates tension about how reviews should be interpreted and used by consumers.

The future of food criticism is closely linked to the evolution of digital platforms and the growing role that social media plays in building a restaurant's reputation. Accessibility to information has allowed consumers to become protagonists in the dissemination of their opinions, which has contributed to the creation of a culture of constant and collaborative evaluation. However, issues such as the authenticity of reviews and the growing pressure

on critics and influencers to maintain an ethical relationship with the establishments they review also arise.

In any case, the trend is for food criticism to become even more interactive, with the active participation of consumers in the construction of experience narratives, through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Google Reviews, and others. However, this evolution also requires greater awareness of the impacts that criticism can have, not only on business, but on the collective experience of consumption and the very process of forming taste and cultural identity.

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