


GOOD AMBIENCE 'MAKES FOOD TASTE BETTER'

Little details of the dining experience

Customer satisfaction with F&B sector reached all-time high this year, with 70.3 points scored

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SINGAPORE – At first glance, The Library, with its neat rows of books perched on bookshelves, resembles a bookstore. But as soon as one offers a password — which changes weekly — to the “book-keeper”, a secret door among the bookshelves is unlocked and one is invited into a dimly-lit bar. The novelty of the experience was one reason Ms Kristi Kee returned to the bar at Keong Saik Road. “It is like underground societies,” said the regional manager. “And the people (the service staff) are fantastic as well.”

Customer satisfaction with the food-and-beverage (F&B) sector climbed to an all-time high this year, according to the latest Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore results for the third quarter. The F&B sector scored 70.3 points in the survey, an increase from the 67.7 points recorded last year. The survey was conducted by the Singapore Management University’s (SMU) Institute of Service Excellence (ISES).



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 CHEF DE CUISINE
 OF NOSE-TO-TAIL
 RESTAURANT WOLF



The Library (top) and WOLF restaurant. PHOTOS: KEONG SAIK SNACKS, THE PRIVE GROUP

The quality of food had the “largest and most significant” impact on customer satisfaction. ISES Academic Director and SMU Assistant Professor of Marketing (Practice) Marcus Lee noted that it is “intuitively obvious” for F&B establishments to focus on improving food quality.

“However, the savvy restaurateur also appreciates that customers do not consume their food in a vacuum and that the dining experience plays a significant role in the overall satisfaction of customers,” he said.

Indeed, as the Republic’s dining scene evolves, consumers are increasingly spoilt for choice, with restaurateurs upping the game and introducing more types of cuisine and dining concepts. Said Ms Alysia Chan, Chef de Cuisine of nose-to-tail restaurant WOLF: “Everything is of equal importance. If one single aspect of that lets the customer down, then the whole thing is ruined, from the very start to the very end — the wine, the service,

the reservation, the food, the atmosphere, the music.”

While 686 restaurants opened here last year, 537 shuttered as well, reported the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority. Restaurants accounted for 36.4 per cent, or 2,426, of the 6,668 F&B establishments here as of last year, according to the Singapore Department of Statistics.

The competitive dining scene has seen new entrants work hard to make a mark, and several diners TODAY spoke to noted the little details that left lasting impressions. For SMU student Eugene Lim, 23, the quality of food came first but ambience could not be ignored. “Sometimes ... you’re going to stay a little bit longer to chit-chat with your friends, so the ambience comes into play,” he said.

Civil servant Soh Teck Hwee, 34, recalls the interiors at Oso Ristorante in Bukit Pasoh, which set the tone for the evening. “The restaurant has warm lighting, with thick upholstery

*** CSISG 2013 Q3:
 HOW CUSTOMERS
 RATED RESTAURANT
 TOUCHPOINTS**

Restaurants touchpoints	Rating (1-10)
Quality of food	7.6
Staff responsiveness	7.4
Ease of reservation	7.4
Time taken to receive food	7.3
Time taken to receive menu	7.5
Order process	7.4
Bill timeliness and accuracy	7.9
Waiting to be seated	7.2
Cleanliness	7.7

SOURCE: ISES

framing the dark wooden windows (which are) set against a backdrop of white walls,” he said. “It’s pretty elegant, yet warm, with waiters with a personal touch.”

Another diner, business executive Cheng Chek Lim, 30, praised the setting at Cocotte in Little India.

“It helps to create conversation and also sets up the mood,” he said. “With its quirky layout, one would expect some unusual dishes from its menu.”

Mr Cheng added that when he is with friends, the ambience should be “cosy and conducive for gatherings and chats”. “A less-than-comfortable ambience would not be perceived as worth the value,” he said.

National University of Singapore (NUS) undergraduate Lee Pei Zi, 22, said a nice ambience “makes the food taste better”. “The table arrangements and lighting are determinants to a good ambience. The table should be arranged spaciouly with sufficient distance away from other tables so diners can enjoy food with some privacy,” she said.

Nonetheless, the diners were unanimous that quality of food is paramount, as borne out by the survey findings. “Ultimately, what is important is what you’re going to eat,” said 48-year-old financial consultant Amy Lo.

Agreeing, lawyer Charles Phua, 44, said: “Sometimes, when the service quality is (lacking) but the food is good, you don’t mind.”

Housewife Brenda Kow, 38, felt that “proactive, good service” is above having a great concept or ambience. “If the concept is great, but the service is not paying attention, half the time you would be trying to get hold of them (the service staff),” she said.

Other factors cited include the restaurant’s accessibility and value for money. NUS graduate Navene Elangovan, 23, said she is willing to pay a premium if the restaurant can guarantee that the dining experience, including food and service, is worthwhile.

“If I am paying (the) service charge, I expect whatever I paid to be justified,” she said.

This report is a collaborative project between TODAY and the Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore.