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Dissertation Memo: Coding Restaurant Reviews

The Exquisite and the Elevated

**Data:** I coded 315 restaurant reviews for restaurants in New York and San Francisco that have earned a Michelin star or a Michelin recommendation in 2015. I coded the reviews for the restaurants published by both Michelin and Zagat. I also have data for an addition 155 restaurants, but these are restaurants that do not have Michelin reviews because they are only Zagat recommended. I’ve coded these restaurants, but do not include this data here to maintain consistency across sources. Most of the Michelin reviews are about 2 paragraphs in length, while the Zagat reviews are 2 sentences in length. When classifying restaurants according to ethnicity, I use the label provided by Michelin, even when there is tension with Zagat, for the purposes of this analysis just to maintain consistency. The differences in classification may be the topic of another paper later. I provide examples of each kind of restaurant review for the restaurant Comal in Berkeley here:

Michelin: The word is out—Comal is excellent and everybody knows it! Jam-packed since day one, the hot spot on this (Berkeley) block serves delicious Mexican dishes in an industrial space fitted with soaring ceilings. Within this lofty lair, the dress is casual and the staff gracious. The regional food (mostly small plates) is elevated by seasonal Californian ingredients and is great to share. The menu may change frequently, but flavors are consistently spectacular in fresh, tangy, and zesty halibut ceviche; tender corn tortillas filled with wood-grilled rock cod, spicy pickled cabbage, and avocado aïoli; or rich duck enchiladas smothered with delicious *mole coloradito*. Every item is made from scratch—from the griddled tortillas to the wonderful *mole s*and salsas.

Zagat: There’s “great energy” in the air at this “bustling” Mexican in Berkeley’s Arts District, where chef Matt Gandin presents an “upscale”, Oaxacan-focused menu that’s “tasty” and “not formulaic”; those who find the decibels too “loud” in the industrial-chic interior retreat to the “nice patio”, complete with its own bar and fire pit.

When coding, I only noted language that pertained to the general ambiance of the restaurant or the cuisine. If a word was used to describe the décor, the service, or the location, I did not factor this language into the classification of restaurants in my coding scheme because I am interested in questions about the food and the restaurant in a general sense, not service or décor. While I do not denote which language comes from which source (Zagat or Michelin) here, I have collected this data and will examine if there are significant differences across evaluative bodies. At first glance, I do not see much difference between Michelin and Zagat, although Zagat refers to pricing/cost much more often than Michelin does.

**Codes:** I classified restaurants as “elevated ethnic,” “exquisite ethnic,” “ethnic,” “elevated non-ethnic,” “exquisite non-ethnic,” and “non-ethnic.” These categories are mutually exclusive, so a restaurant cannot be both “elevated ethnic” and “exquisite ethnic” in my coding scheme. A restaurant is “ethnic” if the primary cuisine/ethnic label provided by Michelin is not European, generic, or American. The non-ethnic categories include Italian, BBQ, American, Spanish, European, Spanish, Contemporary, Pizza, Seafood, French, Californian, Gastropub, Eastern European, Steakhouse, and International. The most puzzling category included in this list is the “Contemporary” category, which is also the most common label applied to 2 and 3-star restaurants by the Michelin guide. I have no idea what this means. The ethnic categories included in this analysis are Ethiopian, Turkish, Japanese, Lebanese, Asian, Indian, Mexican, Chinese, Thai, Moroccan, Greek, Caribbean, Vietnamese, Peruvian, Portuguese, and the ever-confusing (and dirty word in the restaurant industry) Fusion.

I classified a restaurant as “elevated ethnic” if the language of the review included language suggesting that the cuisine at an ethnic restaurant is elevated compared to either expectations of the cuisine or the general restaurant pool. The language for the elevated ethnic category is usually linked to class, including words like “haute,” “elevated,” “luxurious,” “high quality,” “upscale,” “sophisticated,” and “refined.” For example, Casa Enrique, a New York Mexican restaurant, is described as offering, “a haute take on Mexican.” Kin Khao, a one-starred Thai restaurant in San Francisco, serves cuisine that is “elevated by sustainable ingredients.”

The exquisite ethnic category applies to restaurants that serve non-European, non-American food and are described as exceptional or exquisite compared to either general expectations of the cuisine or other restaurants in the ethnic category. These reviews feature words like, “exquisite,” “exceptional,” “remarkable,” “standout,” and “memorable.” Here, the food or restaurant is distinctive not because of some classed experience but because of the skill, artistry, or ingredients used to produce the food. For example, Umi NOM, an Asian restaurant in New York, is described as “well above takeout.” Masa, a three-starred Japanese restaurant in New York, serves “the continent’s best sushi.” Zabb Elee, a New York Thai restaurant, is “one of the city’s most complex Thai restaurants.”

Restaurants that fall in the “ethnic” category are those ethnic restaurants that do not fall into either of these categories. The language used to describe them is pretty generic, such as “delicious,” “solid cooking,” “excellent,” or “flavorful.” These restaurants often, although not always, are also described as inexpensive or, at least, “moderately priced.” To fall into the exquisite or elevated categories, most restaurants must have earned at least one star from Michelin, and a few non-starred standouts are included, as well.

The line between elevation and exquisiteness for non-ethnic restaurants was a bit blurrier than for ethnic restaurants. While elevation for ethnic restaurants is largely focused on classed language suggesting a particular framework of cultural capital and exquisiteness is focused on the preparation and presentation of superior cuisine compared to expectations and other restaurants in the same category, exquisite and elevated non-ethnic restaurants are usually those restaurants with at least one star from Michelin. I used the same linguistic markers of elevation and exquisiteness for the non-ethnic category as I used for the ethnic categories, and I picked the category that the restaurant fell into based on the code that the majority of the language in the review matched best. The general non-ethnic code was used for those restaurants that were not reviewed using language of elevation or exquisiteness, and like the general ethnic category, often feature descriptions of affordable prices.

**Descriptive Statistics:**

**Categories by City**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Ethnic** | **Elevated Ethnic** | **Exquisite Ethnic** | **Non-ethnic** | **Elevated Non-Ethnic** | **Exquisite Non-Ethnic** | **Total** |
| **New York** | 37 (18.4%) | 18 (9.0%) | 29 (14.4%) | 56 (28.0%) | 30 (14.9%) | 31 (15.4%) | 201 |
| **San Francisco** | 20 (16.9%) | 11 (9.3%) | 6 (5.1%) | 35 (29.6%) | 22 (18.6%) | 24 (20.3%) | 118 |
| **Total** | 57 (17.9%) | 29 (9.0%) | 35 (11.0%) | 91 (28.5%) | 52 (16.3%) | 55 (17.2%) | 319 |

\*Percentages in parentheses reflect percentage of total N for that city

**Ethnic Classification of Restaurants by Ethnic Code**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **NY** | **SF** | **Total** |
| **Middle Eastern** | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| **Korean** | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| **Japanese** | 5 | 4 | 9 |
| **Greek** | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| **Chinese** | 9 | 5 | 14 |
| **Deli-Jewish** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Mexican** | 6 | 1 | 7 |
| **Malaysian** | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| **Laotian** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Turkish** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Fusion** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Asian** | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| **International** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Latin American** | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| **Vietnamese** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Southern** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Thai** | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| **Mediterranean** | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| **Indian** | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| **Peruvian** | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| **Portuguese** | 0 | 1 | 1 |

**Ethnic Classification of Restaurants by Elevated Ethnic Code**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **NY** | **SF** | **Total** |
| **Ethiopian** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Turkish** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Japanese** | 5 | 3 | 8 |
| **Southern** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Lebanese** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Asian** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Mediterranean** | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| **Indian** | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| **Mexican** | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| **Chinese** | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| **Moroccan** | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| **Thai** | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| **Sri Lankan** | 0 | 1 | 1 |

**Ethnic Classification of Restaurants by Exquisite Ethnic Code**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **NY** | **SF** | **Total** |
| **Korean** | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| **Chinese** | 6 | 1 | 7 |
| **Malaysian** | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| **Senegalese** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Southern** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Thai** | 4 | 0 | 4 |
| **Greek** | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| **Mexican** | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| **Caribbean** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Mediterranean** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Asian** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Japanese** | 8 | 3 | 11 |

**Ethnic Classification of Restaurants by Non-Ethnic Code**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **NY** | **SF** | **Total** |
| **Italian** | 23 | 7 | 30 |
| **BBQ** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **American** | 17 | 5 | 22 |
| **Spanish** | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| **European** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Contemporary** | 8 | 2 | 10 |
| **Pizza** | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| **Seafood** | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| **French** | 1 | 7 | 8 |
| **Californian** | 0 | 6 | 6 |
| **Gastropub** | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| **Eastern European** | 0 | 1 | 1 |

**Ethnic Classification of Restaurants by Elevated Non-Ethnic Code**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **NY** | **SF** | **Total** |
| **Contemporary** | 14 | 13 | 27 |
| **French** | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| **Italian** | 3 | 5 | 8 |
| **Scandinavian** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Seafood** | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| **Gastropub** | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| **Spanish** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Austrian** | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| **American** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Fusion** | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| **Californian** | 0 | 1 | 1 |

**Ethnic Classification of Restaurants by Exquisite Non-Ethnic Code**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **NY** | **SF** | **Total** |
| **American** | 5 | 1 | 6 |
| **Seafood** | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| **Contemporary** | 9 | 8 | 17 |
| **Pizza** | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| **Italian** | 6 | 5 | 11 |
| **Deli** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Spanish** | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| **Steakhouse** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Gastropub** | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| **Californian** | 0 | 8 | 8 |
| **International** | 0 | 1 | 1 |

**Common Language In Reviews**

Elevated: Upscale, High prices, elegant, sophisticated, refined, haute, luxury, classy/swanky, elevated, posh, quality, chic

Exquisite: complex, delicate, exquisite, exceptional

**Other words of interest**: lush, luscious, simple, rustic, hearty, decadent, fresh, creative, art, exotic, adventurous, “temple/Zen”

**Language Usage By Category for Common/Theoretically Interesting Words**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Word | Elevated Ethnic | Exquisite Ethnic | Ethnic | Elevated Non-Ethnic | Exquisite Non-Ethnic | Non-Ethnic | Total |
| Upscale | 13 | 1 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 1 | 22 |
| Authentic | 6 | 9 | 15 | 0 | 1 | 8 | 39 |
| High Prices | 10 | 8 | 5 | 32 | 28 | 10 | 93 |
| Affordable Prices | 7 | 13 | 27 | 3 | 5 | 30 | 85 |
| Elegant | 6 | 7 | 0 | 25 | 8 | 2 | 48 |
| Sophisticated | 6 | 1 | 0 | 12 | 6 | 2 | 27 |
| Complex | 5 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 16 |
| Refined | 5 | 1 | 0 | 11 | 2 | 0 | 19 |
| Delicate | 7 | 3 | 4 | 8 | 5 | 4 | 31 |
| Fresh | 5 | 11 | 9 | 7 | 5 | 14 | 51 |
| Luxury | 3 | 1 | 0 | 14 | 4 | 0 | 22 |
| Haute | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 6 |
| “Temple” | 4 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 9 |
| Creative | 4 | 4 | 4 | 6 | 6 | 9 | 33 |
| Art | 3 | 1 | 0 | 8 | 10 | 1 | 23 |
| Exquisite | 3 | 7 | 0 | 5 | 6 | 0 | 21 |
| Exotic | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Adventure | 0 | 3 | 5 | 0 | 8 | 0 | 16 |
| Classy/Swanky | 7 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 13 |