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Performance paper

Sommelier craft

Aesthetic judgements in the performance of decanting

ABSTRACT

This performance study focuses on sommeliers, delving into what constitutes their work and the process of achieving this title. Sommeliers are wine specialists tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that beverages are served properly in combination with food. Similar to other craft persons, the sommelier's craft is connected to their knowledge of the products, primarily wine and other beverages, and the products' relation to different foods. The art of tasting is an acquired knowledge, an embodied craft, a central professional competence to determine the quality of beverages. Other elements of sommelier knowledge are communication with guests, a social craft, and how to move in relation to the room, a spatial craft, both of which are based on the influence of different contexts. This study highlights the complexity of aesthetic judgements that sommeliers make through their embodied, social and spatial craft practices while decanting wine and serving it to a guest. It uses a video-reflexive ethnography to emphasise the aesthetics of the sommelier craft. The decanting is carried out in line with the guidelines of the International Sommelier Association. Simultaneously, some judgements in the performance must be articulated verbally to emphasise the complexity of the different crafts in relation to the importance of understanding the complexity in adopting the service to the situation. Social, embodied and spatial craft practices, in relation to the sommelier, show how aesthetic judgements are developed into a willingness to understand people and satisfy guests. This is achieved by 'cognitive planning', which entails working diligently and preparing to enhance the efficiency of the craft, and by 'situational adjustments' that occur in real time to improve and optimise the guest's experience.

Keywords:

Culinary Arts and Meal Science, Restaurant, Sommellerie, Beverage, Dining Room, Practices.

INTRODUCTION

Restaurant work in today's restaurant dining rooms covers different positions with complex and multifaceted work areas, including different craft skills such as cocktail bartender (Ocejo, 2012), artisan barista (Lee & Ruck, 2022), waiter (Wilson, 2019) and sommelier (Scander et al., 2019).

The sommelier profession

Sommelier, sommelière and sommellerie are words that can be both difficult to pronounce and spell. The latter refers to the profession and the former pertains to the performer, male and female respectively. That is, a sommelier and a sommelière perform sommellerie. Accordingly, the definition of the profession is unclear (Scander, 2019), and the present paper does not intend to claim any authority to define it.

Nonetheless, sommelier is a widely used term to refer to a wine specialist, wine waiter or wine steward (Robinson, 2006), whose job is to help with food and wine matching and ensure that wines are served correctly. Most of the sommeliers' focus is on tracking customer preference when recommending wines as well as finding wine that provides value for money for the restaurant, monitoring beverage inventory and possessing an understanding of winery reputation and beverages in general (Muñoz et al., 2018).

In the last two decades, Swedish Sommellerie has thrived, and multiple sommelier training programmes have been established in the private sector, trade organisations and in higher education, producing more than 100 sommeliers every year. As wine continues to increase in popularity and guests become more knowledgeable, the sommelier plays an even more important role. It is also important to emphasise the professional importance of scientific results showing the impact of the sommelier, both in restaurant profit and customer satisfaction (Ben Dewald, 2008; Manske & Cordua, 2005; Scander, 2020). Furthermore, professional sommeliers have been shown to play a significant role in influencing the dining experience in restaurants (Muñoz et al., 2018), particularly from the beverage perspective, and providing tasteful combinations with food in fine dining restaurants. The professional sommelier has for a long time served as a cultural intermediary (see Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Smith Maguire, 2010) at restaurants, providing guests ideal pairings using their cultural knowledge in performing food and beverage combination practices. Therefore, it is interesting to add the sommeliers' work on the debate on performing taste. Sommeliers do not only serve 'good' food to the guests but also combine it with the 'right' beverage, which is one of their main tasks (Ben Dewald, 2008; Manske & Cordua, 2005). This notion is central to the discussion of how sommeliers perform on their stage, and within gastronomy, it is something that sommeliers seem to practice on a daily basis.

The performing sommelier

Sommeliers are wine specialists tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that beverages are served properly in combination with food. Similar to other craft persons, the sommelier's craft is connected to their knowledge of the products, primarily wine and other beverages, the products' relation to different foods and dishes, and how these can be combined. The art of tasting is an acquired knowledge, an embodied craft, a central professional competence to determine the quality of beverages, storage potential and optimal temperature and how beverages should be combined with food (Scander & Jakobsson, 2022; Scander et al., 2020). Other elements of sommelier knowledge are communication with guests, a social craft, and how to move in relation to the room, a spatial craft, both of which are based on the influence of different contexts.

Sommeliers seem to develop a competitive advantage in what we call the social craft, in that they become unafraid of failure when acting on the restaurant floor. This is where the understanding of good taste relates to meaning. By internalising the cultural capital (understanding what is considered 'right') and then adapting it individually to dining guests, one could say that one has learned to master sommellerie. This practice is called the social craft, as it is something sommeliers perform and create based on the conditions and means needed to satisfy guests (Scander, 2020). Hence, mixing knowledge and the ability to plan one's work as a competence in sommelier performance gives meaning by developing the ability to interact confidently with guests. The practice of sommellerie as, for example,

a performance of the art of food and beverage pairing applied to guests, is based on the ability to socialise with guests and understand their individual preferences. This skill seems to be founded on perceiving social conventions as good taste or good behaviour, which can be understood in the light of Bourdieu's (1979/1984) sociological framework, where one always strives to better position oneself in relation to others in the same field. For the sommelier, this emphasises the importance of how to interact with others—both guests and colleagues.

Social craft can also be understood as internalised competence coexisting with habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). We can understand habitus as an embodied capital, deeply stored dispositions that individuals carry from their social origin and can change during life. However, these changes take time. Habitus acts as an internal taste compass and can be a valuable asset in social life. It is likened to an opportunity-generating 'practical mind'. In relation to the social craft, the efficiency in the performance is also linked to the embodied practice (Scander & Jakobsson, 2022). We can understand the embodied craft from an internal material ability, such as when tasting wine. When tasting wine, the shape and size of the glass are important for how the wine's aroma enters the nose and how the wine interacts with the mouth. Through the tasting, we then make several judgements of the taste and how flavors can be appreciated, combined or developed. This embodied craft is acquired through long-term practical engagement and experience of wine and food (Scander et al., 2020). Moreover, spatial craft is not only linked to the materiality of the room and the placement of different utensils in relation to each other, but also to how you put them down yourself. For example, it is how you pick up glasses, place them on a tray and then set them down in front of the guests on a table. Based on Bourdieu's (1979,1984) theory of practice, our actions occur based on the distinctive choices we make. These choices are actions and are characterised by doing 'right' based on one's habitus and the field in which one performs. Therefore, an aesthetic performance is characterised by the fact that it is an aesthetically 'correct' value, which also occupies a dominant place. In relation to the sommelier, an aesthetic performance is characterised by a smooth movement pattern, a pleasant tone and politeness, all with the goal of delivering excellent service.

Aim

This performance highlights the complexity of aesthetic judgements that sommeliers make through their embodied, social and spatial craft practices while decanting wine and serving it to a guest. The intention is to emphasise the decanting process and the different judgements performed in relation to the craft to deepen the knowledge of sommelier practices.

Performance

The study uses a video-reflexive ethnography (Ajjawi et al., 2020), where I study myself and my sommelier craft. Through video recordings of myself and my craft performance, I capture my actions and statements in relation to the practices (Reckwitz, 2002). This method enables me to highlight the aesthetics of sommelier craft, partly capturing both the articulated and inarticulate. Field notes are also taken before and after for the recorded material (Olive, 2019). Content analysis of the material is conducted in line with Graneheim and Lundman (2004), using a hybrid inductive-deductive approach as outlined by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). In this approach, the content is identified from the video recordings and extracted as meaning-carrying units based on the embodied, social and spatial crafts.

The decanting is carried out in line with the guidelines of the International Sommelier Association, which is standard for many sommelier training programmes and assessment criteria for sommelier competitions. Simultaneously, some judgements in the performance must be articulated verbally to emphasise the complexity of the different crafts in relation to the importance of understanding the complexity in adopting service to the situation.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

During the analysis, two preliminary categories for understanding the aesthetic judgement of the sommelier craft emerged: *cognitive planning* and *situational adjustments*. Cognitive planning entail working diligently and preparing to enhance the efficiency of the craft. It seems to allow more time for socialising with the guest, which is also important to increase the understanding of the guest. Meanwhile, situational adjustments occur in real time to improve and optimise the guest's experience. This includes, for example, observing the low temperature of a specific wine and then replacing it with a *cognitively planned* decanter, one that allows the wine to breathe more and rise in temperature more quickly. Hereby, I also point out the significance of the social, embodied and spatial crafts in relation to the sommelier and how these abilities together develop the willingness to understand people, learn how to handle social interactions and satisfy the guest, as organised by common understandings, rules and teleoaffective structures (Schatzki, 1996). As both mental and embodied abilities are developed and routinised (Reckwitz, 2002), the outcome appears to be the self-confidence to interact with others, and this is what we argue to be the social craft, which should be understood as a professional performance developed within the field of sommellerie.

By presenting decanting as a craft, the intention is to showcase the complex work of the sommelier and how aesthetic judgements are formed, both articulately and inarticulately. Since this is an underdeveloped research area, we look forward with pleasure to continuing this journey to highlight the sommelier as a professional category with unique knowledge and aesthetic judgements (Herdenstam, 2023). At the same time, we hope that this performance can not only inspire others to adopt more aesthetic perspectives on the sommelier craft, but above all, inspire more people to continue their journey towards or within the sommelier profession.

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To all sommeliers.

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