

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Exploring tourists' experience at private social dining: Dimensionality and satisfaction

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## Abstract

Private social dining is a new form of service emerging in culinary tourism. Although its popularity has been increasing worldwide, studies on private social dining, especially its influence on tourism, are limited. The present work aims to explore tourists' experiences using private social dining as a context by constructing the dimensions for tourist experience. A qualitative research method is utilized to analyze reviews from top service providers in three popular destinations. Results confirm seven dimensions of the three types of experience existing in tourists' private social dining experiences, which affect tourist satisfaction. These results lay the foundation for future studies.

## KEYWORDS

culinary tourism, dimensionality, private social dining, satisfaction

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In this era of experiential economy, tourists' travel needs go beyond traditional sightseeing, scenery appreciation, and shopping. An increasing number of tourists are immersing in the multidimensional culture of a destination to acquire special experiences during their trips. Food has been listed among the important ways to experience a specific culture of a destination in the contemporary context (Getz, Robinson, Andersson, & Vujcic, 2014; Laing & Frost, 2013). Different from other types of travel activities, dining at travel is compared with an artform that pleases all of the human senses (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). Thus, dining at travel is regularly considered an activity that offers tourists sensory pleasure, which fulfills the experiential function of travel (Hjalager & Richards, 2002). Given the importance of dining experience to the overall satisfaction of travel, this area has received an extensive attention from scholars (Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2010; Ellis, Park, Kim, & Yeoman, 2018).

Private social dining is emergent in the contemporary sharing economy, together with the growing popularity of Airbnb and Uber. It is regarded as an innovative form of gastronomic services. Different from other types of dining, private social dining is a casual service that

offers homemade food products to satisfy diners. Private social dining is similar to Airbnb and Uber in terms of their operational mode. Uber hosts offer a spare seat to a guest and obtain additional income by providing such services, whereas private social dining hosts share what they cook with guests and receive additional money accordingly. Private social dining also creates a win-win situation, given that it allows hosts to demonstrate their cooking skills and meet interesting people without leaving the comfort of their kitchen (Clear & Larrieu, 2015). Guests can also obtain an exclusive opportunity to try an authentic homemade meal at hosts' homes (Clear & Larrieu, 2015). Thus, a growing number of tourists have incorporated private social dining into their travel itinerary.

Tourists' dining experience was introduced by Long (1998) as a niche research field in tourism. Gradually, different studies have been conducted to enrich this area, from the basic profiles of tourists who seek an authentic dining experience at a destination (Okumus, Okumus, & McKercher, 2007) and the relationship testing between dining experience and the destination image (Ko, Kang, Kang, & Lee, 2018) to the evaluation of marketing strategies deployed by destinations to promote a particular dining experience

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(Horng, Liu, Chou, & Tsai, 2012; Lin, Pearson, & Cai, 2011) and the assessment of the brand value of food destinations (Tsai & Wang, 2017). These studies have contributed to the academia and practitioners' understanding of tourists' dining experience and helped in guiding the development of dining services offered at destinations. However, in comparison with other research areas of tourism, previous studies of tourists' dining experience remain scarce in the current literature (Ko et al., 2018). Thus, studies targeting tourists' dining experience in the context of experiential economy are even rarer. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, only one study investigated the reasons why tourists prefer private social dining, wherein a generic primary motivation of achievement was identified to be the key factor (Ketter, 2019). However, tourists' actual dining experience at private social dining was not examined in that study.

In view of the scarcity of previous works in this area, the present work aims to understand private social dining experience with a qualitative approach. Specifically, the research objective is to explore and construct the main dimensions comprising consumers' experience gained in the context of private social dining as a new form of sharing economy. The successful identification of experiential dimensions for this type of culinary tourism activity is the basis for conducting further studies in this area. Thus, this study can extend the academia's understanding toward the development of culinary tourism and lay the foundation for future studies pertaining to this research area. Moreover, this study can help private social dining to achieve improved satisfaction. This study can elaborate on the development of the expanding culinary tourism. The next section follows a rigorous scientific design in providing a review of the literature on tourists' dining experience and discussing the use of user-generated content in tourism to set the foundation for this study. After the introduction of the methodology, the findings of this study are presented. This study concludes with a discussion on theoretical and managerial implications, as well as the limitations and suggestions for future research.

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 | Tourists' dining experience

Although dining experience is an important part of a trip, it has not elicited extensive attention from the tourism industry and the academia (Cohen & Avieli, 2004). The lack of research on dining experience is closely related with people's bias toward dining, which is normally regarded as a basic consumption to meet tourists' daily necessities during their travel (Mak, Lumbers, Eves, & Chang, 2012). However, given the emergence of studies on food tourism in recent years, this conventional bias has been gradually changed, and dining experience is recognized as a major part of travel consumption and a key source of tourist attractions for various destinations (Mak, Lumbers, & Eves, 2012). According to Mak et al. (2012), tourists' expenditure on dining can occupy up to one-third of their total travel spending. Thus, tourists' dining experience is drastically becoming a topic of interest in tourism research (Andersson & Mossberg, 2017; Mak et al., 2012). This increased importance can also be witnessed in the

publications of special issues in major tourism journals regarding multiple facets of food tourism (Ellis et al., 2018).

Tourists' interest in dining experience during their travel considerably varies. Some tourists are keen on dining experiences that may function as the major motivation or even the sole motivation for them to visit a specific destination (Tikkanen, 2007). Tourists labeled as a "foodie" is one example of this category. They visit a destination with a strong passion to search for an authentic or special dining experience, decisively affecting their image on a destination (Laing & Frost, 2013). By contrast, others may simply consider dining a physiological need to support their needs during their travel, wherein they are not committed to the food they eat (Ketter, 2019). For such tourists, dining is only located at the first level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. However, for most tourists, the situation lies in between these two extremes, wherein dining experience is perceived as an important way to experience a destination's colorful culture (Bjork & Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2016). Thus, dining experience is confirmed as an indispensable element composing tourists' overall touristic experience and merits the attention of the academia from tourism. Bjork and Kauppinen-Raisanen (2019) posited that even a destination foodscape exists among current food tourists.

Dining experience has its own characteristics, including being personal and contextual. With regard to being personal, dining experience is associated with a diner's assessment of the experience (Sfandla & Bjork, 2013). For example, some may seek for sensational experience, whereas others may prefer an emotional one (Caru & Cova, 2008). Some only intend to experience ordinary but authentic local food, whereas others are trying something unique or extraordinary (Wooliscroft & Ganglmair-Wooliscroft, 2009). For some, the experience may be new, whereas for others, the same experience may have already become a routine (Kauppinen-Raisanen, Gummerus, & Lehtola, 2013). Therefore, dining experience by nature is quite subjective. With regard to being contextual, dining experience can arise in multiple venues, given that food can be offered in a wide array of places (Lanier & Hampton, 2009). Food can be served from normal restaurants to supermarkets, food courts, and farmers' markets. Different experiences may be stimulated under these diversified dining contexts. In sum, whenever a consumer attempts a dining experience, this experience is bound to be influenced by personal and contextual elements. For research about the examination of tourists' dining experience, both elements should be incorporated into the design of the research accordingly.

This section indicates that with the growing prominence of food tourism, dining experience has been and should be highlighted to improve brand and market a destination. Most studies have investigated dining experience during trips. However, the major dimensions of dining experience in sharing economy, which are part of the basic work in promoting dining experience in this new form of economy, have been scarcely researched. Generally, sharing economy has greatly changed customers' way to make travel decision making, which merits substantial academic concern in scrutinizing different travel activities developed under this economic context. This phenomenon further confirms the importance and necessity to conduct the current study to bridge this research gap.

## 2.2 | Use of eWOM in tourism

In this era of Web 2.0, customers use the Internet to acquire intended information on products and services and share what they have perceived after experiencing the related products and services (Chan & Guillet, 2011). The shared information or the user-generated content online, namely, electronic word of mouth (eWOM), is easier and more cost-efficient than the conventional WOM, given that it can reach more people in a relatively shorter period through various electronic media (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Among these media, online customer reviews are considered a powerful information source in customers' decision-making processes, because they are believed to be reliable and trustworthy without considerable bias (Filiari & McLeay, 2014). Likewise, eWOM has increasingly attracted attention because of another reason. Research (Park & Gretzel, 2007; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009) indicates that online reviews are mainly used by younger customers, but more recent studies are emerging to support that they can be used by people of all ages (Li, Ye, & Law, 2013; Liu & Park, 2015; Pantelidis, 2010). Thus, eWOM tends to affect a huge portion of the potential market.

eWOM has elicited considerable emphases among tourism researchers. Generally, positive eWOM is verified to help create a positive image or increase the awareness of the destination or the service provider in tourism among potential customers who are unfamiliar with the product or the service they offer (Lai, 2020). Specifically, eWOM has been used to examine various issues in tourism. For example, service quality can be scrutinized by examining the complaints and negative reviews written by previous customers, and it can be improved by proposing proper measures (Ye, Law, Gu, & Chen, 2011). For destination image research, eWOM is considered a supplement to the previous use of human subjects for data collection (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2015). Mobility pattern identification can also be conducted by using eWOM. When customers provide eWOM, their digital footprints will be recorded in the respective platform and become a data source of this type of research. For instance, geo-tagged photos in eWOM are used to identify tourists' movement at a destination, which can help in ushering the flow of tourists (Su, Wan, Hu, & Cai, 2016). The final important use of eWOM is to gauge customers' experience and behavior. eWOM is even considered a near-perfect source for scholars to conduct research (Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007).

Regarding the use of eWOM in dining experience, studies have mainly investigated the effect of eWOM on the dining industry. Kim, Li, and Brymer (2016) tested the relationship between eWOM and the financial performance of restaurants. Studies have confirmed that contents (eWOM) from generators with different personalities have varied influences, such as professionalism (Zhang, Ye, Law, & Li, 2010), credibility (Salehi-Esfahani, Ravichandran, Israeli, & Bolden, 2016), and affinity and age (Gkoumas, 2019), on readers who intend to consume a particular type of food. Tiago, Amaral, and Tiago (2015) verified that food quality is a crucial factor that influences customers' perception, wherein the dimension of food is more than satisfying customers' tastes alone through the analysis of eWOM left by food

tourists. In addition, food and wine have been demonstrated to be an essential part of destination identity and should be seriously considered in destination marketing (Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2016). Most recently, eWOM is utilized to help construct the dimension of food experience for customers with food allergies (Wen et al., 2020). In view of the reason why this group of tourists tends to leave WOM online, Khuong and Nga (2018) confirmed that food quality, price, and culture are three dominant factors.

As an important source of tourism research data, eWOM has been utilized in different ways among various tourism studies, including studies to construct tourists' dining experience in specific contexts. However, no prior studies have attempted to investigate this particular experience in the context of sharing economy from the analysis of eWOM. Therefore, this study endeavors to utilize the confirmed proper source, that is, eWOM, to examine tourists' dining experience during private social dining. In this manner, this study not only can extend the application range of eWOM but also contribute to the mitigation of the identified research gap.

## 3 | METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was selected due to the exploratory nature of this study, and the inductive thematic analysis approach was deemed appropriate. According to Schreier (2012), this approach is data or text driven, with the aim to identify hidden patterns. In the analytical stage, researchers search for differences and similarities within the examined data, which are subsequently depicted in themes on varying levels of abstraction. Thus, a study can realize theoretical understanding from data. In other words, researchers can transfer concrete textual information to an abstract and general concept or knowledge. The evident advantage of this method is its flexibility in research design and general accessibility to educated general public (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, thematic analysis has been a frequently utilized method in tourism studies for decades (Medhekar, Wong, & Hall, 2020; Youssef, Leicht, & Marongiu, 2019). The present work aims to discover new theoretical perceptions toward tourists' dining experience in a particular context. Specifically, the online reviews left by tourists were extracted and analyzed to obtain in-depth information on tourists' dining experience under the context of private social dining, which was prepared for subsequent thematic abstraction. In comparison with questionnaires, customer reviews have distinctive advantages, given that reviews are eWOM that can offer additional information to help understand the meaning of customers' perception toward issues and phenomena (Eves & Dervisi, 2005). In this case, customers can freely express their perceptions on their dining experience at hosts' homes without the constraints that questionnaires usually set.

All the reviews were extracted from a sharing economy-oriented platform, EatWith. This platform was established in 2012, with the aim to create a communal dining experience in which authentic social connections can be built among diners or between diners and chefs. Economic benefits can also be generated simultaneously for culinary

entrepreneurs. EatWith has many similarities with Airbnb and implements many concepts of Airbnb in the culinary industry. On the basis of the official website's statement in December 2019, EatWith has offered dining services in more than 130 countries with 20,000 hosts and 150,000 tourists and residents (EatWith, 2019). According to an interview with the CEO of EatWith, the platform's original target market and main customers are tourists who are seeking for shared dining experiences; however, gradually, residents have also become EatWith customers because they intend to experience something different from a normal dining setting, interact with people throughout the world, or simply follow a famous chef (Price, 2016). Thus, most of the reviews were assumed to be left by tourists and used as appropriate data to examine tourists' dining experience under the context of private social dining.

In this study, reviews about the most popular private social dining experience in three global metropolitan cities, namely, New York, London, and Paris, are used. The reason for selecting these reviews as the research sample is threefold. First, on the basis of the search results in the examined platform, the three cities are top-ranked in terms of the number of hosts and customers in private social dining. Therefore, reviews from these cities can be sufficiently representative and true to the research context. Second, the reviews are from the most popular ones in these respective cities, indicating their high visibility among customers. Thus, they are likely to influence potential tourists who are planning to avail private social dining services in these cities. Third, the type of dining they offer and the number of guests they can entertain at one time is also diversified, indicating that they can cater to a wide range of tourists' needs. Thus, the reviews from these experiences can further reflect tourists' perceptions and evaluations of private social dining. Finally, a total of 954 reviews, from the appearance of the first eWOM in the platform to December 2019, were collected, wherein the total number of words was 29 506. Table 1 shows the detailed information on the extracted reviews.

On the basis of the recommendation about the procedure in conducting rigorous thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the analysis in this study was performed in the following six steps. First, all data were read thoroughly to familiarize the researchers with the data. Second, the initial codes were generated for the data; these codes included "delicious food," "beautiful ambience," and "destination knowledge." Third, meaning extraction was performed to group the codes in themes. For instance, "delicious food," "crafted food," and "committed preparation of raw material" were all grouped as one theme in the study. Each identified theme was then reviewed to guarantee the suitability of the themes. For these steps, two researchers initially coded and themed independently and then compared what

they obtained. If any difference was identified in the end, another researcher was asked to participate in the discussion to make the final decision. After the completion of theme identification, the fifth step was to define each theme, which laid the foundation for the sixth step, that is, themes that have been found to address the research question were reported. In the subsequent findings, the definition of the theme and the typical original eWOM from tourists were reported. Different from big data coding that emphasizes the evident pattern existing in a dataset, human coding and theming can generate a more comprehensive result in which some minor themes can also be identified.

## 4 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After the thematic analysis, the major findings of the study are presented in this section. Initially, the major dimensions and their subcategories are presented and discussed, followed by the summary of the findings.

### 4.1 | Sensory experience

#### 4.1.1 | Tasting heartfelt food

As the core product of any culinary format, food should be the crucial reason to attract tourists to participate in private social dining (Madaleno, Eusebio, & Varum, 2017). Only when the taste of delicious food is realized can the other dimensions of private social dining work properly. Food quality is frequently mentioned by tourists, as presented as follows.

Ai has a really quirky warehouse apartment in Brooklyn, my dining companions were from all over the world and the conversation flowed, as did the wine... But the star of the show was definitely the food, each course better than the one before, our host was an incredibly accomplished chef, it was a highlight of my two-week stay.

In terms of the difference between the food offered in private social dining and other formats of restaurants, the key point is that tourists can directly witness how devoted the chef is in making the food from the selection of the ingredient, which starts from the cooking process to the presentation of the food and the pairing with wine. Diners also directly express what they perceive in terms of this difference.

**TABLE 1** Information on the data source

Name of the host	City	Number of guests	Type of cuisine	Number of reviews
Gabriel Waterhouse	London, UK	1–22	British	271
Jean-Yves	Paris, France	2–12	French	306
Ai	New York, USA	8–10	Fusion	377

You can tell how much care she takes in preparing each dish and she sources many of her ingredients from her own rooftop garden!

Jean-Yves would present each dish with a short explanation of the preparation and the rationale for the choice of its placement in the meal. This personalized presentation from the chef is way more than you would ever get in a typical dining experience, even in a 5-star restaurant. Each course had such a distinct personality.

The food was creative, presented beautifully, and tasty.

The wine pairing was superb and the whole evening was fun yet relaxed.

Reviews about heartfelt food are the most dominant in terms of the number. In addition to the words depicting the food (e.g., great, delicious, and wonderful), customers have used some highly positive adjectives to describe the food quality, such as creative, phenomenal, and exceptional, to indicate the perfection of the heartfelt food offered in private social dining.

The ingredients were carefully selected and of a high quality and each dish was beautifully presented. Everything tasted phenomenal. Chef and his team were very welcoming and they managed to create a comfortable and relaxed environment that perfectly complemented the dishes that were served.

I cannot fault the Waterhouse Project. The Gabriel passion for food is superseded only by the exceptional taste of what he creates!

Therefore, it can be assumed that tasting heartfelt food refers to tourists' perception of the exceptional food quality generated by different efforts the host has used to demonstrate the commitment.

#### 4.1.2 | Experiencing authenticity

According to MacCannell (1973), tourists are not only anxious to try something new at travel but are also motivated to experience residents' real life in a destination. In other words, tourists have a desire to experience the authenticity of a destination. The idea of authenticity is found to be particularly pertinent to some types of tourism, including cultural and heritage tourism (Wang, Huang, & Kim, 2015). Thus, as a special form of cultural tourism, food tourism should be developed to offer authentic experiences to tourists. Authenticity is also what a destination constantly aims to create for tourists; however, truly building such an authentic experience for tourists is difficult due to the arrival of mass tourism and the limited capability in various destinations (Figini & Vici, 2012). Through private social dining, the way for tourists to seek authenticity has been enriched. In this specific context, experiencing authenticity indicates that tourists not only can taste authentic food but also visit

nontourist areas and meet the local residents of a destination instead of falling into those tourist-only areas. The following are comments from tourists:

What a wonderful diner with charming Jean-Yves in this very authentic area of Paris.

We met some great locals and enjoyed the whole experience.

Excellent dinner with a great host and great guests. Perfect way to get immersed in Paris and experience the magic that this city and its people have to offer.

This dinner experience was worth every minute of the hours we spent at Jean-Yves' home enjoying this five-course meal paired with delicious wines and fabulous conversation. It was a perfect experience to escape the tourist trap one can be subject to in a city with so much to see and do.

The importance of sensory experience on behavior has been confirmed in previous studies (Chen & Lin, 2018). Evidence also further supports that the sensory experience reflected in eWOM is a good signal to arouse positive rating behaviors (Chung, Ryu, Green, & Kang, 2015). In the research context, the host of private social dining has realized the role sensory experience can play in satisfying potential tourists. Therefore, the host or the business owner has endeavored in two aspects to enhance tourists' sensory experience, including tasting the heartfelt food and experiencing authenticity. Food stimulates customers' sense of taste and smell, but goes far beyond that. Customers can sense the commitment a host has put into to create a food crate. Although experiencing authenticity involves two senses, it incorporates more senses, including the sense of sight, touch, and sound.

## 4.2 | Emotional experience

### 4.2.1 | Social interactions

Taking a kind of social interaction is verified to be growingly prevalent in some forms of tourism (Brent, Glen, & Betty, 2010), and it also exists in private social dining. Eating in a homelike atmosphere enables tourists to socialize either with other diners or with the chef easily. If a wonderful social interaction is experienced, then tourists may quickly become friends, and some even regard their newly met dining partners as old friends because of the pleasant communication during eating. Hence, tourists highly enjoy social interactions, as they commented as follows.

By the end of the meal, it felt as if we had known each other for years and leaving hastily after such an evening of fullness was difficult.

The evening went by too fast, but we have plenty of pictures and a new friend in Paris, Jean-Yves. Thanks

for a wonderful evening and we'll see you the next time we pass through Paris!

An important reason for tourists to enjoy social interactions in private social dining is that the interaction under this context even exceeds the age limit and makes some shy people or people with less social experience feel free to communicate. However, such a situation cannot be easily realized in a regular package tour, when certain customers are apt to form small groups during an interaction whereas most still regard one another as strangers (Jin, Lin, & Hung, 2014). Therefore, being immersed in private social dining can stimulate tourists.

What I enjoyed the most, though, was meeting all the different people—older, younger, all really interesting and great to talk to. I had thought it would be awkward—not at all. This was our first experience but we will definitely return.

I am not someone who particularly enjoys talking with a big group of strangers when I eat but I didn't feel any pressure to do so. We wound up chatting throughout the night with another couple and had a very pleasant, casual evening.

For solo-traveling tourists, social interaction at dining time is even identified as a major attraction for them to attend private social dining. This group of tourists may prefer to travel alone without partners from a familiar context, but they occasionally need to relieve their loneliness during travel and make them have a sense of being (Bianchi, 2016; Seow & Brown, 2018). At this time, private social dining performs such a function to provide solo tourists a chance to reconnect with the society.

This was my first time in Paris and first time traveling solo. I was starting to feel a little lonely and isolated, but being in someone's home enjoying a home cooked meal (and a delicious one at that) with other travelers made me feel connected again.

Moreover, the overall setting of private social dining, such as table seating, facilitates the progress of social interactions and a harmonious atmosphere among tourists. It indicates whatever the hosts create for their customers and whether the concerned customers can sense it and give positive comments accordingly.

Communal table seating meant we were sat next to strangers but that was a bonus as we had a bunch of friendly and interesting table mates to banter with.

In sum, the experience of social interaction in this specific context is created and facilitated by the host, which enables customers to be involved in conversations and make friends in the process.

## 4.2.2 | Value for money

Generally, customers consider a good value for money when they perceive the product or service they receive matches or even exceeds the money they pay (McKevitt, 2015). Value for money is also a decisive factor when customers are making dining choices (Oh, 2000; Soriano, 2002). For tourists in private social dining, value for money is what they constantly mention, given that the food quality is markedly high, but the price is relatively low and reasonable. Some tourists even comment that the chefs can charge more money for the food they have created. Another important feature for this dimension is that tourists prefer to use Michelin stars as the benchmark to evaluate the value. Thus, if the food quality can meet a Michelin level at a low price, then tourists will naturally perceive value for money for the service they receive. In the context of private social dining, value for money refers to customers' perception of what they consume is higher than the expected level with reasonable payments. Following are three typical comments from the examined data.

This was such a great experience. The food was top notch and so affordable considering the skill involved. The final plates are a work of art, the Galvin brothers obviously taught you well. Honestly, I think you could charge double but I know this is the beginning of your project.

Five Michelin star-quality courses for under £40 a head... fantastic quality and phenomenal value for money in a private dining environment.

Social interaction and value for money in this study are classified into tourists' emotional experience stimulated after they choose the food service because emotional experience goes beyond the sensory level and involves more thinking from tourists. Hence, the successful witness of this experience in tourists' eWOM is a good indication of the competitive advantage established by the host of private social dining because emotional experience or the resultant emotional attachment is regarded as a momentum to help a company stand out in a fierce market competition (Manyiwa, Priporas, & Wang, 2018). This type of emotion also lays the foundation to the perception of spiritual experience.

## 4.3 | Spiritual experience

### 4.3.1 | Novelty seeking

Dining out has become a normal practice for modern people due to multiple reasons, resulting in the culinary industry to have a large market potential worldwide (Ottenbacher & Harrington, 2007). Most of the time, people would choose restaurants based on factors, such as location, food offered, and service level; thus, certain types of restaurant may become customers' favorite selection (Jang, Kim, & Bonn, 2011; Rahman, 2012). However, people will not forget to try

something new, given the curious nature of human beings, especially for tourists. Thus, novelty seeking is confirmed as a vital pull factor to engage tourists to experience a unique culture, including food culture (Ji, Wong, Eves, & Scarles, 2016). The appearance of private social dining can meet such customers' needs to seek novel dining experiences, as shown by the following comments.

Fantastic event! Ai was a fabulous host and prepared in tantalizing array of courses. I would recommend this event to anyone looking for a break from the normal restaurant scene.

If you love adventure in the great wide somewhere or just LOVE hanging out with locals or LOVE meeting new people, this experience is for YOU!

This meal was amazing and we all had such a great time. Great conversation all around. The food was so special and such a different experience from what you would normally have in an upscale restaurant (it definitely exceeded my expectations).

WONDERFUL! We were four friends meeting up in Paris after some time apart and this was the highlight of our weekend! Chef Jean was welcoming and a wonderful guide on this gastronomic adventure. WE loved the food, which challenged our palates and left us only in amazement of his creations, but we also appreciated chef's guidance and explanations.

Novelty seeking in private social dining can be realized in three forms, including seeking for novel food, novel atmosphere, and most importantly, novel experience gained from the interaction with the chef and other customers. Seeking novelty in food experience has been identified as one of the four dimensions that affect tourists' satisfaction toward a destination (Renko, Pestek, & Cinjarevic, 2014). Previous research has confirmed the importance of unique food and distinctive atmosphere provided by restaurants for food tourists' novelty seeking (Wang, Asif, & Samia, 2018). However, for private social dining, novel experience is mainly composed of people, wherein conversation is apparent. Such experiences are what make private social dining different from other dining experiences, as shown as follows.

Top to bottom incredible. The food was Michelin star quality, and the people, conversation and ambiance were so much more enjoyable and welcoming than anything you could find in a restaurant.

#### 4.3.2 | Acquiring knowledge

Knowledge seeking has long been associated with tourists' experience, especially in cultural tourism (Alvarez & Korzay, 2011). As a special form of culture tourism, private social dining also plays such a role. In this context, acquiring knowledge is not only mainly concerned about the acquisition of knowledge related to food but is also

extended to learn from other tourists' experience. With regard to customers' comment "Tasting heartfelt food," tourists can witness every detail of the entire food-making process, including the selection of ingredients, the cooking, the presentation, and the food and wine pairing. Thus, the experience also becomes a golden opportunity for tourists to learn about cooking. The hosts also introduce knowledge on dining etiquette and the creation of different flavors. Thus, the food event is sometimes laden with a heavy educational component, and some tourists even describe the experience as attending a culinary workshop. Educational function is reviewed by tourists as follows.

Jean-Yves was outstanding not only with the flavor and presentation of food but his passion to educate his guests about what they were eating, how to eat it and why certain flavors work!

I am thrilled with Ai's miso making workshop. I always wondered exactly how miso paste is made, the ingredients, and the fermentation time needed to make miso paste. Now I know. Ai was working so hard to prepare everything for her students. She was extremely easy to communicate with, provided aprons for those of us who forgot theirs, and showed us the necessary technique to make tasty miso paste.

To enhance the experiential component, a host may devise various activities for tourists to attend and acquire culinary knowledge during this process consequently. For example, one of the examined chefs invited diners to identify different flavors of the food, and tourists finally left the following comment:

We were taken on a unique culinary journey that kept us on our toes as we were challenged to identify Asian incorporated with traditional French influences. We learned a lot, had some good wine, great conversation, and an unforgettable experience.

After such a wonderful experience, tourists may even wish to practice duplicating the food they have tasted. Consequently, the final learning outcome is achieved. One tourist mentioned that he may even spend quite a long time to cook the learned dishes in the review.

I will spend eternity trying to duplicate it.

In addition to knowledge learning on food, culture, and the destination, tourists learn to share not only their food but also their life experiences, making dining meaningful for most tourists. Such situation is in accordance with the ideology of EatWith in the concept of sharing economy. This sharing experience can be witnessed in the following review:

The meal prepared by Jean-Yves was quite an experience. All the unique flavors and surprises with every

course, was not only an educational experience, but provided guests the opportunity to “share” the experience together. This experience is what we felt EatWith events would provide and it delivered! We not only had a wonderful meal, but met new friends and enjoyed several hours of good conversations!

### 4.3.3 | Esthetic appreciation

The host of private social dining creates multidimensional experience, wherein esthetics is among one of these dimensions. Aesthetic appreciation is verified to be a superior and vital dimension of experience at travel (Tieskens, Van Zanten, Schulp, & Verburg, 2018; Yu & Xu, 2016). Tourists in private social dining can appreciate the esthetics in multiple facets, including crafted food, beautifully designed tableware, and artistic presentation. One customer even considers the presentation of food as reading a poem, in which great aesthetic value can be witnessed. Moreover, the aesthetic setting of the host's home can stimulate tourists' artistic imagination. The great appreciation of this experience is shown in the following reviews:

While Jean-Yves was hard at work, we would steal glances towards his artistic endeavors in the presentation of each dish, capturing pictures when possible and, of course, a video of the lobster flambé.

Overall, this experience brought me to a little artisan store on a quiet street somewhere in a Japanese neighborhood.

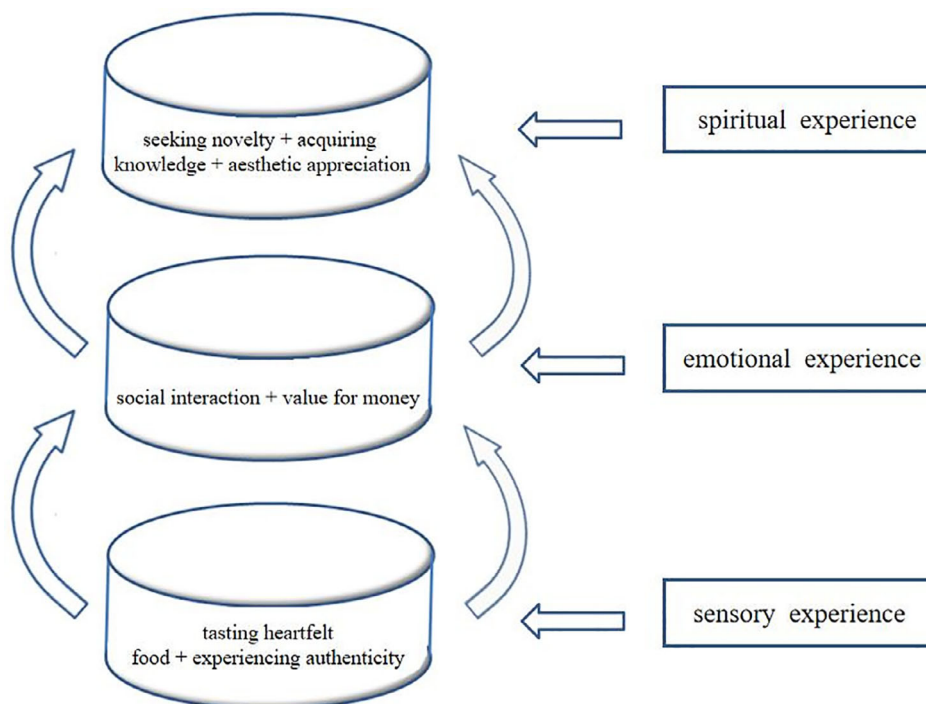
In a word, a tourist uses another three identities to mark the aesthetic value of a chef.

Jean-Yves is one part chef, one part artist, one part architect, and one part magician.

Spiritual experience is involved with three facets, namely, novelty seeking, acquiring knowledge, and aesthetic appreciation. All three facets are situated at the highest layer of tourists' experience because travel means sightseeing or relaxation for many tourists as well as travel service providers who seldom take this group of experience seriously (Park, Seo, & Kandampully, 2016). Nevertheless, a call to upgrade tourists' experience to a spiritual level is frequently mentioned in different studies (Curtin & Brown, 2019; Zhang, Lee, & Xiong, 2019). Thus, the emergence of private social dining caters to this demand from the perspective of food tourism, which elucidates the academia and the practitioner on how food can be crafted to elevate the service level in tourism and while creating satisfaction.

### 4.4 | Summary of the finding and discussion

In summary, seven dimensions are finally identified, and all of them go beyond simple food tasting to satisfy tourists' basic need for food. The seven dimensions can be further grouped into three types of experience, namely, sensory, emotional, and spiritual experiences (Figure 1). Each dimension actually can partially be realized in ordinary travel or certain type of food tours. However, what the host in private social dining creates has its special features, which also become the highlight of this newly emerged form of tours. Moreover, a hierarchy exists in the three experiences. Such hierarchy starts from the sensory experience to the emotional experience and ends with the spiritual experience. Although this hierarchy does not exist strictly, simulating the next level of experience is easy as long as tourists can gain an in-



**FIGURE 1** Dimensions of tourists' private social dining experience [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



depth engagement with the previous level of experience on the basis of the examined data. This phenomenon can lay the foundation in helping practitioners design and offer their service in this area to cater to customers with different preferences and improve their overall service level.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

This study has confirmed seven dimensions involved in three experiences existing in tourists' participation in private social dining by analyzing eWOM. A hierarchical relationship exists among the three experiences. Sensory experience is a step further from the common dining experience by adding the flavor of heartfelt food and authenticity. After perceiving a sensory experience, a satisfactory condition tends to be elicited, which is reflected in the emotional experience. Tourists demonstrate certain positive responses in the context of dining, including conducting social interaction and perceiving the value for money of their purchase. In the end, the highest level of experience can be observed. Tourists regard private social dining not only as a novelty-seeking behavior but also as a chance to acquire new knowledge. Aesthetic appreciation has been added to the experience to further enhance tourists' satisfaction. Thus, the simple touristic dining experience is laden with sufficient content and has been highlighted in this new dining context.

This study is among the early ones to explore tourists' experience in a new form of dining context, namely, private social dining. Evidently different from previous dining contexts, private social dining has become a market niche to satisfy tourists at travel. Initially, the findings of this study facilitate a solid understanding of how tourists experience private social dining. The dimensions identified in this study can become the theoretical foundation for future studies to explore private social dining (e.g., the design of questionnaires and the establishment of conceptual frameworks). Thus, this study enhances the current literature in food tourism by framing the experience dimensionality and satisfaction into three types of experience. This approach is also useful for the exploration of the psychological activities of tourists participating in private social dining. On this basis, the current study contributes to the literature by elaborating and exploring the construct of tourists' experience at private social dining, which is also an enrichment of Bjork and Kauppinen-Raisanen's (2019) destination foodscape by incorporating private social dining into food tourism experience. In comparison with the previous literature that utilized surveys or interviews, the findings from this study can represent viewpoints from a wider population, which overcome the associated bias with the convenience sampling method (Roberts, Stewart, & Airolidi, 2016). Private social dining is a form of sharing economy. Thus, this study deepens the academia's understanding about how food tourism can develop in the new economic era. This study also calls for further academic attention to emphasize the importance of this dining service, given that it can play such a crucial role in promoting destinations.

With regard to managerial implications, operators of private social dining should emphasize the importance of the seven dimensions to

improve the satisfaction of potential tourists. Simply offering some food is far from being sufficient for the sustenance of private social dining, as confirmed in this study. Hence, operators may not achieve great performance in all dimensions due to some constraints, such as the composition of all guests; however, they should attempt to improve their efforts to provide what tourists expect to achieve after attending the service. Furthermore, operators should advance tourists' experience to a level as high as possible. In this context, spiritual experience can maximally stimulate tourists' positive evaluation and the subsequent eWOM. In this manner, not only their businesses can be sustained but a decent destination image can also be established. Private social dining may also achieve a good position in a destination's marketing and branding campaign. In addition, dining experience offered by different hosts is related with the current image building of the destination where private social dining exists, and an increasing number of tourists have shown their interest to attend such a food experience when traveling. Thus, government agencies or destination marketing organizations should steer the development of such business, given that private social dining offers is beyond simple dining experience. Only through the joint effort from the industry and the related agencies can private social dining sector provide improved services to cater to potential tourists and promote the growth of tourism at a destination.

Some drawbacks inevitably exist in this current study. First, as a qualitative exploratory study in the early stage, the number of data collected is limited. When more eWOM appears, new dimensions might emerge as well. Thus, this limitation calls for future research. Second, eWOM is a prevalent data source of qualitative tourism studies, but it still has some limitations and may have certain biases. If eWOM can be combined together with interview data, a more objective result can be achieved. Finally, this study has selected three popular culinary destinations to retrieve the data, but the type of dining is limited. Thus, future studies need to incorporate more food culture to offer a panoramic view of this new dining context.

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