

**The role of guides in artistic industries: the special case of the “star system”
in the haute-cuisine sector**

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Abstract

This paper analyses the role of the Michelin “star system” in the haute-cuisine industry. The research, derived from 20 exploratory interviews of chefs belonging to the “star system” in France, Switzerland and the UK shows that such guides play a strategic role of a “signalling device” in the industry. It analyses how the system copes with two, apparently, antagonist demands from customers: providing reliable advice about choice of restaurant while concurrently preserving the “magic of discovery” and creativity every haute-cuisine restaurant should provide. Field research and analysis demonstrate the pressure to minimize type II errors, of selecting restaurants that do not merit inclusion. This behaviour explains the stability, reliability and consistency of the system. The paper also explores how secrecy contributes to preserve chefs’ creativity for the benefits of customers’ satisfaction.

Introduction

Haute-cuisine is the high-end of the restaurant industry. If, from a quantitative standpoint it represents a marginal segment of the industry with less than 0.5 % in volume from a qualitative aspect it plays a key role. Indeed as haute-couture operates in the fashion industry, haute-cuisine plays a key role in trend setting, image building and in setting quality standards for the industry as a whole. It operates as a kind of lighthouse in the industry. Such importance raises the question of how this peculiar segment emerges from the whole restaurant industry, what drives the formation of this exclusive upper class. In particular if we consider that (a) restaurants are experience goods (Muller, 1999) and (b) haute-cuisine probably is an “artistic” industry where creativity hence some sort of subjectivity plays a role, addressing such questions is not trivial. In other words, the restaurant industry is driven by two key characteristics. As a typical experience good, it needs signalling devices that consumers may trust in their decision making process. In particular, in the haute-cuisine sector, where the cost of a bad experience can be deterrent, a trust-worthy and reliable signal seems essential. Haute-cuisine is also special to the extent that consumers expect from it some sort of “magic of discovery”. In other words, haute-cuisine cooking is considered as an act of art where creativity and perfection are the driving forces.

In Europe, the Michelin Guide, which has recently been relabelled as the “Red Guide”, seems to play a key role that context. A highly respected institution in the haute cuisine community, this guide is widely accepted as “the” reference for gourmets of French cuisine in Europe and its influence on restaurant choice is unquestionable. As a consequence, the “star system”, a key element of the Red Guide rating system, potentially signals the institution as being part of the haute-cuisine sector. It has also a major impact on restaurants’ turnover and profitability.

Despite the importance that the Red Guide exerts on that segment on the restaurant business in Europe, very little academic research has been conducted to understand the mechanisms by which, what may be termed the “Michelin star system”, operates in the market. There has been some research on the role that guides may exert on restaurant choices from the supply side (Cotter and Snyder, 1998)

and on the role, character and culture concerning chefs (Fine, 1996, Balasz, 2001, 2002, Ruhlman, 2001, Cameron et al, 1999) but to the best of our knowledge, this is the first research study that attempts to investigate how the mechanism of the Michelin star system may influence demand and supply of haute cuisine restaurants. In particular, no research has addressed so far, how guides may contribute to build a trustworthy signalling choice, while preserving creativity for artistic goods.

Central to the key features of this system is the “mystique” culture and clandestine nature of Michelin which is an essential element of the Red Guide itself that contributes to preserve creativity in the segment. The policy of the Guide is to categorically refuse to create and diffuse guidelines about the criteria that are necessary to advance in the Michelin star system. An aspect of this is that Michelin inspectors who test and rate the restaurants do so anonymously and visits are unannounced, so that Chefs simply don’t know when they are serving the inspectors.

The Red Guide has also been criticized for its conservative attitude with respect of including and promoting new chefs or new types of cuisine. It is our contention that these policies contribute to make the guide reliable as a source of information (signalling role), a central focus of the whole Michelin system that appears to have exerted a major impact on the haute-cuisine industry.

This paper reports on an exploratory research project that attempts to understand the mechanisms of the system. In particular, it addresses the questions of:

- how trust is built into the system in an experience goods industry;
- how secrecy operates in an “art” industry where creativity needs to be preserved and encouraged;
- the consequences of the system rationale on the haute-cuisine industry.

Research methodology background

This research is part of a substantial research project developed by the Ecole d'hôtelière de Lausanne, the Haute Ecole de Commerce from the University of Lausanne (both from Switzerland) and the Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Troyes (France). We identified all the restaurants in France, Belgium, United Kingdom and Switzerland that had at least two Michelin stars over the last 10 years. The choice of these countries was driven by two considerations. Firstly there was a criterion of tradition: France and Belgium are more reputed as countries of tradition for "haute-cuisine", while the UK and Switzerland have only recently entered the club of countries for gourmets (the first Red Guide for Switzerland was published as recently as 1993). The second criterion was of size: France and the UK have a population of a similar size as have Belgium and Switzerland. We then analysed the stability of the database over time to evaluate the number of restaurants that gained or lost stars over the period. A subpopulation was then selected, which included the 2 star restaurants that gained their stars over the last 10 years and the 3 star restaurants that gained at least 1 star over the same period (as at the end of 2002). The purpose of the selection was to identify the establishments that may be seen to be the most successful in the star system in that period. The intention was to understand the dynamics of the system by focusing on the elite that climbed to the top of the ladder over the last ten years.

We decided that the most appropriate methodology would be to seek qualitative data using semi-structured interviews via an interview guide and a questionnaire (Glaser and Strauss, 1999). The questionnaire addressed issues such as the structure of the surveyed restaurants (size, number of employees, types of activities, geographic location), the restaurant's historical background as well as a profile of the chefs (experience, education, personality, date of commencement of operation), management and internal organization of the business (financial management, human resources) and more importantly the relationships, perceptions and influences that the Red guide may have on the fine dining sector (drive, pressure, motivation, choice of strategies). We also conducted telephone interviews with the Red Guide Editor, Mr Derek Brown.

Walsh (1993) has provided a comprehensive review of the benefits of qualitative research, especially in creating new knowledge and the evaluation of issues through "rich thick description". Kwortnik

(2003) further expands the use of qualitative analysis and its role in generating a deeper understanding of complex issues. Simple narrative analysis (Stern, Thompson, and Arnould, 1998) was also utilized for the purpose of contextualizing the connections between categories and themes so as to contribute to a more holistic understanding of the Michelin-ranked chefs.

Out of the 36 restaurants in our sub-population, we interviewed 20 chefs in Switzerland, the United Kingdom and France, which is more than 50 % of the population. The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and were undertaken between February and May 2003.

The Red Guide Star System, a signalling device in haute-cuisine

Created in 1900, the Red Guide was initially designed by the Michelin tyre company to help motorists by giving various technical advice. Originally, the guide included information as diverse as locations of garages for car repairs and the list of doctors operating in most cities of France (Karpik, 2000). A little later on (by 1908), the guide had developed into a handbook for tourists with information about areas and places that were worth a visit or a trip. It was in 1933, that the so called, “Michelin” evolved towards its present function as a guide for hotels and restaurants. From a national presence, the guide expanded internationally, and by 2002, 1.2 million copies were sold in 10 countries. The French guide has over 1500 pages and selects almost 10,000 restaurants, (which is only about 10% of the total number of restaurants in that country). Over time, the guide has built up a solid reputation due in large part to the guide’s grading system remaining virtually the same since 1933 thereby facilitating comparison between restaurants. The Michelin star system allocates one star to the restaurants that are “une bonne table dans sa catégorie”, (provides a good meal in its sector) two stars for those that “mérite le detour” (worth a detour) and 3 stars for the elite group that are “vaut le voyage” (worth making a specific journey). Only 5% belong to the star system and by 2002 there were only 44 restaurants world wide that merited 3 stars. Every year the release of the Red Guide is largely covered in the international, national and regional media. This naturally places the “nominees” under the news spotlights and gives them valuable public exposure. It has been demonstrated that moving up the Michelin star system has a major impact on restaurant’s performance (for example in terms of pricing policy) and in the occupancy load of restaurants (Snyder and Cotter 1998, Cotter and Snyder, 1998).

Due to the undisputed reputation of the Red Guide in the industry, any award of a star is viewed as duly-deserved recognition of achievement and excellence. This is the reason why so many chefs are driven by the desire for a future inclusion and promotion in the Michelin system in their quest for continuous improvement and quality delivery. The interviews revealed how important a promotion in the system can be for the motivation of the rest of the establishment, especially the kitchen brigade. Beside these individual impacts, our research suggests that the mechanism of the star system has some other fundamental impacts on the haute-cuisine industry as a whole.

A restaurant is a typical example of an experience good (Muller, 1999) which is a product or service that one may only assess during or after the experience. The key problems for assessment relate to information asymmetry taking place in some experience goods markets between the customer and the seller. Since quality can only be assessed during or after the food and beverage has been “experienced”, one of the crucial problems is to signal the quality of such products to potential customers (Akerlof 1970, Mishra et al 1998). In an attempt to deal with this, restaurants may consider using several techniques to reduce information asymmetry (Shapiro and Varian, 1999) such as:

- a) using tangible information including pricing or location to signal quality (e.g., “chic” or designer restaurants);
- b) launching promotions to induce first trials and then afterwards relying on word-of-mouth promotions (for example flyers which offer a free aperitif or wine);
- c) proposing a free trial to potential customers (in particular for take-away food);

There are evident limitations to these techniques for restaurants: excessive pricing may in fact deter customers (Snyder and Cotter 1988-1); promotion may be counterproductive to image building; word-of-mouth takes time; free trial is not always possible, and in addition, some restaurants face another informational problem: to signal their location when they are far away from crowded areas. Building reputation (for example Gordon Ramsey in the UK) has been identified as a way to overcome and to solve the problem of experience goods (Shapiro and Varian, 1999). In that respect, it is largely

accepted that guides play an important role in solving information asymmetries by helping restaurants establish their reputation. Their supposedly neutral judgment should help the potential customers in their choice of place to eat outside home; as one of the famous chefs reasoned: *“if the guide did not exist, we would have to invent it”*. To play such a role, guides must comply with two major requirements. In the haute-cuisine sector, customers expect: (1) reliable and trustworthy advice and (2) out-of-the-ordinary creativity that we have named a kind of “magic of discovery”.

How guides build trust

The role of a guide is to reduce information asymmetries, to regulate restaurants and, potentially, to set benchmarks within the industry. During our interviews it was clearly mentioned that guides may build or destroy reputations very quickly. The tragic event of Bernard Loiseau, the great 3 star chef who committed suicide in 2003 soon after his restaurant was downgraded in a competing guide (the “Gault-Millau”) was also under pressure from the fear that his restaurant may lose one of his stars is just another illustration of the guides impact on the industry.

Having said that, the questions become: How may a guide build a reputation that is credible enough to be trusted? What are the key conditions to establish and retain that reputation? Within the past few years there has been a dramatic resurgence of interest among social scientists in exploring the role of trust and the mechanisms of trust building (Coleman 1990, Fukuyama 1995, Kramer and Tyler 1996, Mayer et al 1995, McAllister 1995, Putnam 1993, Mistzal 1996, Seligman 1997, Sitkin and Roth 1993, Kramer 1999). This burst of scholarly activity has been paralleled by equally earnest efforts to apply emerging trust theory to a variety of situations (Brown 1994, Carnevale 1995, Show 1997, Whitney 1994, Zand 1997). More recently, for instance, an impressive body of research has investigated the key role trust is playing in the e-commerce environment (Cheung and Lee 2001, Corbitt et al 2003, Corritore et al 2003, Papadopoulou et al 2001, Ribbink et al 2004, Povlan 2001, Rutter 2001). Despite such proliferation, no research has investigated how guides build trust as a third party to provide reliable information in experience good industries.

Although there is no consensus as to a definition of trust, the literature shows a broad agreement that there are two distinct dimensions of trust: benevolence and credibility (Ganesan 1994, Doney and Cannon 1997).

While the academic literature has predominantly focused on benevolence, it would appear that guides and the “star system” belong to category-based trust (Kramer 1999, Orbell et al 1994) with credibility mechanisms. Indeed, credibility-based trust expects that the other party can perform the job effectively and reliably and will fulfil implicit and explicit requirements. It is usually impersonal and built on reputation (Ba and Pavlou 2002). In that respect, guides operate as a third party that diffuses trust-relevant information (Burt and Knez 1995)

In the restaurant business the Red Guide is widely accepted as “the” reference by gastronomes and chefs for categorization. Criteria promoted by the guide play an important role in the way the whole segment of haute-cuisine restaurants operate. From the point of view of the guide, the key driver of criteria setting may be summed up in one word: reliability. Indeed, for purchasers of the guide, the primary objective is to get advice that will match expectations. The critical element is that the information must be consistent. If the guide mentions a three star restaurant that is “worth the trip”, then the restaurant must absolutely be of the standard specified and the meal experience be completely enjoyable in every facet for every customer at every occasion. Building reputation serves as a means to reduce uncertainty and generates a feeling of trust (Einwiller and Will, 2001).

As may be anticipated, however, there is a price to pay to build in establishing a reputation of trustworthy advice that also consequently contributes to building up restaurants’ reputations. Our research shows that the drive for building reliability from the point of view of guides’ managers is to minimize type II errors. That is, to make sure that that no restaurant is selected or promoted without the required standard of merit. This requirement has major consequences on the way the guide operates and the resultant functioning on the haute-cuisine industry.

Inertia of the system

Minimizing type II error induces a great deal of stability, if not inertia, in the Michelin system and in the industry. The Michelin Star System is indeed exceptionally stable. Previous research shows that 82% of the rated restaurants were already in the system 10 years before (Snyder and Cotter 1998). These figures were 55% and 33% for, respectively, the 15 and 20 year periods. Our research confirms these observations. It shows that among the 30 existing 3 stars restaurants from our population in 2002, 46.7 % have kept their stars over the last 10 years, while only 6.7% went from scratch to 3 stars and 10% from 1 to 3 stars during the same period. These data are not fundamentally different for the 2 stars restaurants since 40% out of the 110 restaurants that had 2 stars in 2002 have not changed category over the last 10 years. Also, our data show that among all the 42 restaurants that achieved 3 stars status at least once over the last 10 years, only 7.1% have disappeared, 2.4% have lost 2 stars and 19% have lost one star. In other words, stars are hard to get but tend to be retained over the long term. These observations could be explained by the necessity of minimizing type II errors. The Red Guide insists a great deal on consistency. When it recommends a restaurant because it has been satisfied or impressed by the quality, it must ensure that, when the customer uses the guide to choose that same restaurant that he/she experiences a similar quality of experience. The importance of this consistency factor is reinforced by the fact that customers do not necessarily use the guide from the current year. In fact, many customers refer to information that could date from between two to five years. This observation is totally consistent with past research that has noted that trust is easier to destroy than to create (Barber 1983, Janoff-Bulman 1992, Meyerson et al 1996). To explain the fragility of trust, Slovic (1993) argues that there are a variety of cognitive factors that contribute to asymmetries in the trust building versus trust-destroying process. Trust-destroying events carry more weight in judgment than trust-building events of comparable magnitude.

Our interviews demonstrate that chefs are well aware of the consistency requirement and the crucial aspect of service delivery quality. This necessity is enforced in many ways by the Red Guide. As mentioned previously visits are unannounced and anonymous. Secondly, before a restaurant is promoted in the system, several inspectors will have visited over a certain period before making the decision, to ensure that consistency is there over time and that an inspector is not biased. Thirdly, the

guide tends to wait a while before promoting a restaurant. In other words, the observation period may be lengthy to ensure that consistency is there and that the restaurant will not disappear in the short term. This was confirmed by our investigations. The only chefs that opened a new restaurant and got one, two or three stars within the next year had all, without exception, previously operated another Michelin star restaurant.. An important consequence of this situation appeared clearly from the interviews. Since chefs understood the importance of consistency, they all strongly insisted on the importance of continuous improvement, striving for perfection and building customer satisfaction. In fact rigour and consistency was cited as the key reason for the success of the restaurant by the chefs. There was an expectation that this professional and technical rigour would someday be rewarded by Michelin recognition. It was clear from the interviews that Michelin's preoccupation with consistency induces a drive of quality improvement that could, in turn, benefit the whole industry.

The reliability induced by the Michelin concern of avoiding type II errors is reinforced by the chefs themselves. It has been demonstrated that gaining a star correlates with an increase in the sales turnover of restaurants (Cotter and Snyder, 1998). In many cases such promotions induce significant changes in the operation of the restaurant (promotion, hiring of new employees and price increase). Once a chef gets promoted in the guide, the restaurant becomes more famous, attracts new customers which then drives the chefs for further continuous improvement. In other words, the reaction of the chefs tends to reinforce the judgment of the guide to promote him. The guide never promotes a chef for what may be achieved but for only what has been proven to be achieved. Therefore, once promoted, they are very likely to reinforce Michelin judgment, hence the stability of the whole star system.

Another interesting aspect that was uncovered during our research was evidence that the "Star system" could be a real trap for chefs. In one instance a chef explained that when he received his second Michelin star, his clientele began to change and became more demanding. To sustain the level of quality expectation that such a restaurant should deliver, it was necessary to price significantly higher than the average restaurants in his region. This pricing policy naturally led to a reputation for being an expensive restaurant that is only frequented by local customers on exceptional occasions. In order to

fill capacity, it was essential to have the Michelin stars to attract businessmen and tourists coming from outside the region who used the guide to choose high quality restaurants. The pressure is, therefore, very strong to maintain existing quality and the guide's approbation. This pressure is increased by the fact that had the chef been required to change his policy by downgrading his service and quality to reduce the price, he would lose on two counts. Firstly, due to disappearing from the guide, businessmen and tourists would no longer be potential customers. Secondly, since he has built up the reputation of an expensive restaurant in the region, it will be very hard and costly to inform and convince local customers that the policy has changed and try to attract them and not to be perceived as a loser. Again this fear is consistent with research on reputation destroying (Slovic 1993). Slovic (1993) found that negative events had more impact on trust judgements than positive events. He noted further that asymmetries between trust and distrust may be reinforced by the fact that source of bad news tend to be perceived as more credible than source of good news.

Other research confirms the dramatic impact of downgrading on restaurant profitability (Snyder and Cotter, 1998). To some extent, one could argue that the fact that the guide is slow to promote a restaurant and requires consistency is in favour of chefs themselves. Indeed, since promotion could be a trap for the ones that are not adequately prepared to tolerate the consequences and the pressures it implies, the time it takes before being promoted could be perceived as a way to verify that chefs could sustain the pressure.

Maximisation of the type I error

Minimizing type II, almost automatically, maximizes type I error, i.e. not to select or promote a restaurant that deserves it. The purpose of a guide is to minimize the risk of disappointing customers; the policy, therefore, is skewed to high selectivity and strict criteria for promotion, even at the expense of not selecting a restaurant that may deserve to be selected. Guides may be blamed for having recommended a restaurant that happens to be a bad experience for the customer and consequently destroy their reputation. On the other hand not including a good candidate that may deserve a promotion is of lesser importance and could even, possibly, reinforce the elitism of the whole star

system. Customer feedback is an important element of the system. The Guide receives 45,000 letters annually from customers (not including the large and increasing number of e-mails) that give feedback and opinions about guest experiences. This information is obviously strategic to “fine tune” their selection over time and possibly to “catch up the fishes that have escaped the fishing net”. It should be stressed that the vast majority of this feedback is positive. The fact that there will be greater penalty in selecting a “bad restaurant” (type II error) than by not selecting a good one (type I error) makes the Red Guide very risk averse and, somewhat conservative. This risk aversion of the Guide has been cited several times in the past including quite strong criticism in the eighties in the slowness in reaction to the emergence of the so called, “nouvelle cuisine”. That inertia, coupled with what some observers considered as too many “forgotten” restaurants, opened the door for competition, with for example the “Gault et Millau Guide” entering the arena in 1976, promoting restaurants that Michelin tended to disregard and also introducing a new classification of a criteria to distinguish the traditional (black toques) from the “nouvelle cuisine” (red toques).

Preserving creativity and the “magic of discovery”

Building reliability and the reputation of a reliable third party also requires some type of objectivity through relying on well defined criteria. Information providers may be supported by the use of a widely accepted and transparent set of rules (Kramer 1999, March and Olsen, 1989).

Einwiller et al (2000) for instance are showing how factual signals (i.e. certificates and trust marks) can convey trust in e-commerce. Certification systems (e.g. ISO) rely on third parties to validate reliability and reputation in many industries and service business. Most of these systems rely on a well defined, transparent set of rules and clear specification documents.

In principle, a guide should use objective criteria to remain credible and retain its reputation of a self-standing reference. In particular, it should not be influenced by chefs, outside critiques or any kind of financial pressures. This factor has evident implications on the Red Guide policy. It explains the absence of publicity in the guide. The managers of the guide also refuse to react to any kind of

polemic and criticism or to justify their selection in newspapers or magazine. In addition all food and beverage consumed by inspectors during their visitors is fully paid for by the company.

This observation leads to the interesting issue, in the case of Haute-cuisine, of the criteria that are used to select restaurants. In many industries of experience goods, referees or independent guides tend to publish clear and well defined criteria, of an almost “technical” nature as may be found in the manufacturing sector. Indeed the use of clear and published criteria helps to establish the reputation of a guide that is “objective” in its evaluation. In the case of restaurant business in general and the Michelin policy in particular, the issue of criteria used is much less straightforward. If technical criteria are published then a framework has been defined and a benchmark or a standard created that chefs must comply with if they wish to be promoted. This philosophy may be useful for objectivity but might well be damaging for creativity. Indeed, we could argue that cooking is an art form and the more it is codified the more it might be seen to stifle and prevent creativity and discovery.

A customer that makes a specific journey to visit a restaurant wishes a special experience and to make a kind of “discovery”. For instance, a visitor to chefs like Marc Veyrat (France) or Adria Ferran (Spain) expects to be impressed and even enchanted by innovative and high quality cooking. The very concept of pre-determined criteria that chefs should comply with if they wish to be promoted is an anathema and if there is anything that should be avoided at all costs, it is standardized cooking. As a consequence there seems to be a dilemma between the two contrasting requirements of customer satisfaction (building consistent quality and reliability with objective and transparent criteria and ensuring creativity).

It became apparent from our interviews that the existence of such clearly defined criteria would literally induce, as one chef remarked, the “*MacDonaldization of haute-cuisine restaurants*”., through a very standardized cooking and style. Our research underlines the importance of the non-disclosure policy in the guide’s strategy. If Michelin were to publish their criteria, there would be at risk of destroying their market because standardized restaurants are the opposite of what most gastronomes would expect from a guide. By not disclosing any criteria they induce the chefs to focus on their

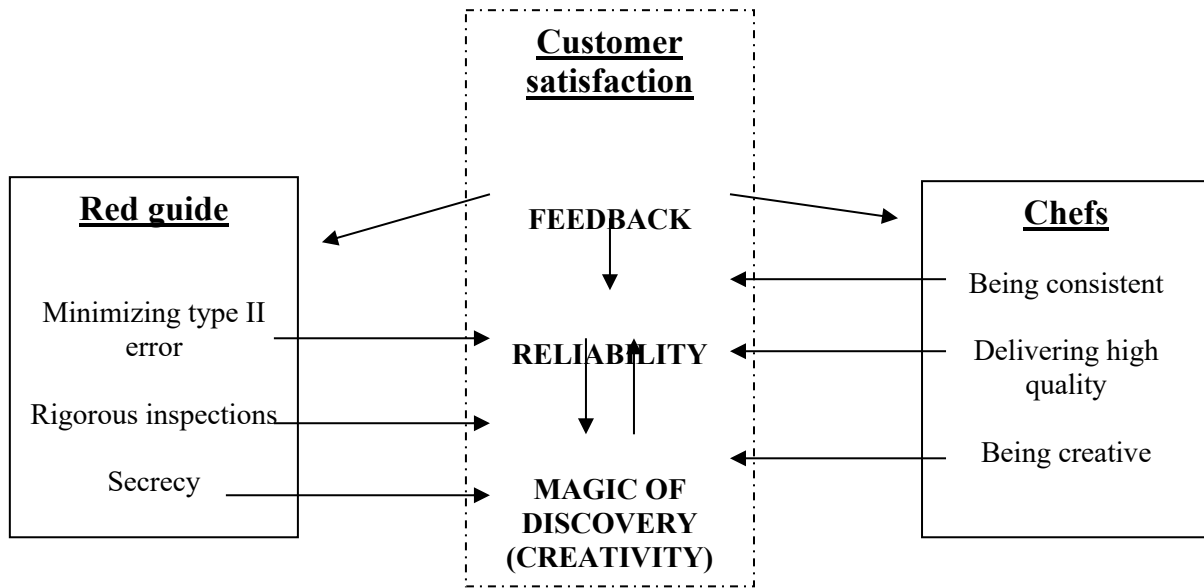
creativity and their core business, not looking towards how an outside referee may judge their work. A chef mentioned in the interview: *“it is not at all clear how the Guide judges our production. The best way not to get a star is to be puzzled everyday by the obsession of getting one. Chefs should only focus on their kitchen and their customers”*. We also realized that if criteria were clearly defined, it would be much more difficult for the guide not to promote a restaurant that satisfies the criteria, hence losing the “magic” of a promotion in the system. By way of advice to aspiring chefs, Michelin simply advise that they should study the competition in the respective categories.

Conclusions

Our observations stressed the difficulty faced by guides like Michelin in retaining their credibility. Indeed, to build up a consistent reputation of objectivity requires some sort of criteria but at the same time the guide may die if these criteria become too “objective”. In addition, the somewhat fuzzy nature of the unpublished criteria and the fact that some candidates considered worthy are not promoted in the system could reinforce the risk of standards appearing arbitrary and vague in terms of evaluation purposes. To cope with this dilemma and keep the credibility as a guide, a must for Michelin is not to disappoint their customers, which again stresses the strategic importance of minimizing type II errors. Fortunately, the impressive feedback Michelin receives from their customers, providing comments, critiques or congratulations on selections helps a great deal in the fine tuning of those mysterious criteria to ultimately satisfy customer satisfaction. The non-disclosure policy has another consequence on chefs’ behaviours that has been revealed in our field research. Most chefs we interviewed did not really understand why some of their colleagues were not promoted in the system. As a consequence, most of them declared that chefs should not “aim” for a Michelin star, since it was not at all clear how to get them. This perception of chefs is obviously reinforced by the conservative attitudes of the guide with respect to new promotions.

Figure 1 summarizes how the Red Guide “star system” operates in the haute-cuisine sector.

Figure 1: “The star system”



In the haute cuisine business, customer satisfaction is at the centre of a system that promotes reliability while protecting the “magic” of discovery. To keep the magic, the guide must not set clear-cut criteria for promotion into the system. To be reliable, the guide must avoid, at all costs, the selection of a restaurant that should not have been selected (type II error). To avoid such error, the guide must ensure that the chef is consistent in the quality and service that is delivered to customers, so that the loop is complete when customers experience a restaurant that has met the guide recommendation, hence confirms the reliability of the system

This system has not only important side effects but also key implications for the different actors. The first and probably most important consequence of the system is the drive to minimize type II error. This induces inertia and type I errors. Michelin cannot afford to promote a chef too rapidly into the system, to be influenced by outside pressure (except, perhaps if there are many consistent recommendations from the guides’ readers) or to move too fast in trendy concepts (i.e. the emergence of “nouvelle cuisine”). From Michelin’s perspective, inertia implies that it is likely to make a lot of type I errors, hence closing the doors to chefs that would deserve a promotion and, consequently, opening the doors to some competing guides that might be quicker to promote good restaurants, more likely to surf on new trends and willing to take more type II risks. Inertia has also some potential positive effects on the chefs, to the extent that it might be a “necessary evil” for the profession. That the guide is slow to promote a chef, has a side effect that a promoted chef is more likely to be able to cope with the pressure that the star system may induce and that he could stand what is sometimes perceived as a trap or as a kind of silver “hamster wheel”. The secrecy policy also forces chefs to focus on what they should do, to cook creatively and ensure consistency.

From the point of view of the customers as a whole, it becomes clear from our interviews that inertia did in fact work in favour of the industry. As the Red Guide is genuinely respected by the chefs, it may be seen to be operating as a kind of “lighthouse” for the industry. The resultant standards may be seen to be at the highest levels of the industry. The notion of consistency and perfectionism is clearly diffused in the culture of all the chefs we interviewed. As a consequence, the star system is largely driven by customer satisfaction. If the chefs did not know exactly how the guide makes its selection,

they were all clear about the importance placed upon supreme levels of consistency in all aspects of the operation, which was achieved through extraordinary hard work, long hours and an almost fanatical attention to detail and customer satisfaction.

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Note that the male term has been used throughout as all chefs in the sample were male.

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