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The Private Dining Restaurant: The Ideal Restaurant of the Future due to Covid-19?

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Abstract

This paper presents a model of a dislocated restaurant created based on dislocated hotels in Italy. This paper aims to provide an innovative solution for new initiatives in the food and beverage industry experiencing great losses due to the Covid 19 epidemic. The study uses an existing hotel model and adopts it in restaurants, and it uses analyses and synthesis for developing and defining new concepts. The private dining restaurant model represents a hybrid modification between dislocated hotels and classic à la carte restaurants and is more customized to the new normal. Depending on space constraints, a private dining restaurant can be built as a brand new restaurant or use the many empty spaces in the centre of many cities for this purpose, thus encouraging urban regeneration. Although, given its characteristics, this restaurant model is easier to apply from the beginning as such (as dislocated) rather than applying to existing buildings.

Keywords: Covid 19; restaurant; privacy; social distancing; dislocated restaurant; innovation in tourism

JEL classification: L1, M16, Z3

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Introduction

Changes in food and drink are global, constant, and dynamic, and in the first place, it is worth mentioning those affecting food itself. Some key trends are related to the increase in healthier foods, resulting in restaurants introducing healthier meals to their menus and new ingredients.

The focus on innovation in the restaurant industry was often on the restaurant concept itself - creative menus, big names, and eye-pleasing design. With the advent of the pandemic that paralyzed most of the world today, restaurants had to reinvent themselves to survive - and the emphasis on restaurant innovation was logically placed on distribution to minimize social contact. Worldwide there is a significant boom in delivery companies, such as Wolt, Glovo, Pauza, etc.

Instead of focusing on distribution, this paper aims to model the restaurant as a facility, answering the research question – how should the future restaurant look to be adjusted to the new COVID-19 reality? Based on the same starting point, minimized social contact, the paper proposes a restaurant model adapted to business in the pandemic era based on the principles of dislocated hotels, a concept invented by prof. D'Allara to help revive the Friuli Venezia Giulia region after the 1976 earthquake. These are separate dining rooms, which will be presented in more detail below.

The paper consists of five chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion. The theoretical overview presents dislocated hotels: the story behind their invention, the key requirements, and the current state of diffusion of this type of accommodation. The next chapter, within the theoretical review, deals with restaurant trends in general and in the context of Covid19 impacts. The concept of the dislocated restaurant is elaborated in the third chapter, followed by the discussion and concluding remarks.

Theoretical review

Widespread hotels (albergo diffuso)

There are three models of horizontal accommodation: accommodation networks and integrated and widespread hotels (Slivar et al., 2016). Connecting more owners in private accommodation networks (with joint marketing functions) is not a new collaboration model; however, the *albergo diffuso* (dislocated hotel or widespread hotel) concept goes further than that as it standardises the level of services offered and brands to the public as a whole. The integrated hotel is not a more basic or centralised model, as its name might suggest; namely, the key difference between it and the widespread hotel is that the latter is based inside an inhabited area, where commercial properties are mixed with local housing. Both models offer common facilities, whereas those in the case of a widespread hotel are within walking distance. The focus of this theoretical review will be on dislocated hotels; although those are the most elaborated accommodation type, the literature consists of only a few papers, as the literature is scarce.

The invention of the concept of dislocated hotels is attributed to prof. D'Allara derives from the efforts to regenerate the earthquake-affected villages in Friuli Venezia Giulia, Italy. The evolution of the first accommodation networks in Italy (from a product conception towards a market orientation) resulted in the first proto initiatives of widespread hotels in the 90s of last century, which offered the comforts of a home combined with hotel services (Slivar, 2014). The first widespread hotel was Bosa (Sardegna) later on, in 1996, named "Corte Fiorita," and its main characteristics were used as basic requirements for the legal framework of this new model of hotels,

adopted for the first time in Sardegna in 1998. This document states, besides being based in smaller inhabited historic villages, other important determinants of widespread hotels include the vicinity of facilities (at approx.. 300m) and common amenities (restaurant, reception, cleaning, maintenance, etc.) run by unified management.

A widespread hotel may be owned by a single owner, the municipality, or an association or cooperative. Regarding the relationship between management and ownership, in Italy, 51% of widespread hotels have a single management (no matter the number of owners involved); in 25% of cases, ownership and management overlap, and 3% more cases, more owners also represent the management. Allotment contracts, management agreements, or simply renting might be stipulated in case more owners allow single management, while cooperatives are multi-stakeholder and more long-term oriented solutions (Slivar, 2014).

The widespread hotel triggers the development of villages: it revives them and generates networks and distribution chains, thus slowing down the migration to urban areas (D'Allara, 2011).

According to the research of Slivar, Kontošić, and Dolenc, in 2018, there were 76 registered dispersive accommodations, including accommodation networks and horizontal hotels (integrated and widespread hotels) mainly based in Italy. Among those, a similar facility is based in London, while a few integrated hotels are based in Croatia (where these properties were legally recognised in 2014.). The low number of this sustainable hospitality model worldwide might be due to the lack of a strong international brand (Slivar et al., 2018).

Trends in the restaurant industry

Like hotels, restaurants can be independent or part of a restaurant chain. In the context of restaurant franchise business, especially fast food ones (e.g., McDonald's, Fried Chicken, Hardees) are becoming increasingly popular. It is challenging to transfer the franchise concept to other countries and cultures successfully.

In the case of restaurants within tourist facilities, it is possible to distinguish between *à la carte* and boarding house restaurants. Restaurants can be divided into (Walker 2011):

- full-service restaurants - where a minimum of 12 courses are cooked to order
- fast food restaurants
- fine dining - refined restaurants
- ethnic - bring the cuisine of a particular region or state
- thematic - the guiding idea is a concept (e.g., past tenses)
- celebrity - restaurants (partially) owned by a celebrity who occasionally appears in these restaurants, etc.

Trends indicate a growing interest in fine dining restaurants, healthy eating, ethnic restaurants, restaurants with indigenous offerings, local products, and fish restaurants in coastal destinations (Slivar et al., 2016), while peer-to-peer experiences are also on the rise (Samardžić, 2021), etc. Sustainability and its aspects as fresh/organic/local, social entrepreneurship, smaller portions, new tastes, vegetarian menus, probiotics, and non-gluten food are among the key trends worldwide (Slivar et al., 2016).

An exploratory study (Ivkov et al., 2016) conducted before Covid19 interviewed restaurant managers who classified the importance of innovating aspects of restaurants and found the most important aspect was:

- 1) food and drinks (size of portions, new ingredients, no allergens, organic food)
- 2) human resources
- 3) design and atmosphere (interior, exterior, colors, music...)

- 4) technology (e.g., POS, online reservations, mobile apps, social media)
- 5) corporate social responsibility (waste management, ecological awareness...).

It is not a surprise that most of the innovations in this industry are regarding the core product itself and the service (whereas being helpful, kind, and serving with a smile is a standard). The atmosphere is also quite important and has to be tailored to changing trends as it affects the dining experience. Technology is a must in running most businesses and is being used more in improving the operative process of restaurant staff. Although there are some remarkably creative uses of technology for entertaining purposes, such as augmented reality in the projections on the plate at *Le Petit chef* restaurant in France. Within technology, a special place belongs to customer reviews as they affect today's connected customers' perceptions and buying behaviour (Dedić, 2017). In the Covid era, a seemingly easy adoption was the introduction of QR codes for menus. CSR helps restaurants diminish food waste, use energy more rationally and become an example of sustainability (Golja, 2021).

Based on the surveyed managers, the author came to nine dominant trends in the hospitality industry over the next ten years, and they were divided into the following categories (Ivkov et al., 2016):

- customized service (experience-based values)
- focus on local food and wine
- the importance of social networks in communication
- a healthier menu
- technology
- fast food
- menu for children and families
- employee education and waste management.

The pandemic threat has been widely neglected in many pre-Covid types of research regarding the travel industry. Covid19 has shaped the restaurant industry heavily. Customer behaviour has changed drastically. For instance, many respondents to the survey of the National Restaurant Association in the USA reported they did not eat out as much as usual, which is even more emphasized by the baby boomer generation (Restaurant.org, 24 Jan 2022). The most researched topics related to the pandemic in tourism were: (1) psychological effects and behaviour; (2) responses, strategies, and resilience; (3) sustainable futures; (4) impact monitoring, valuation, and forecasting; and (5) technology adoption (Yang et al., 2021).

The advent of the pandemic brought to light many innovations aimed at providing resilience. It is worth mentioning one example of best practice adaptation of the tourism industry to Covid-19, which is relevant to this paper. According to Forbes (2020), the Swedish hotel Stadshotellet (meaning city hotel) in Lidköping, unable to book its rooms for overnight stays, started to use them as separate dining rooms for its restaurant clients, adhering thus to the pop-up restaurant trend.

The private dining restaurant model

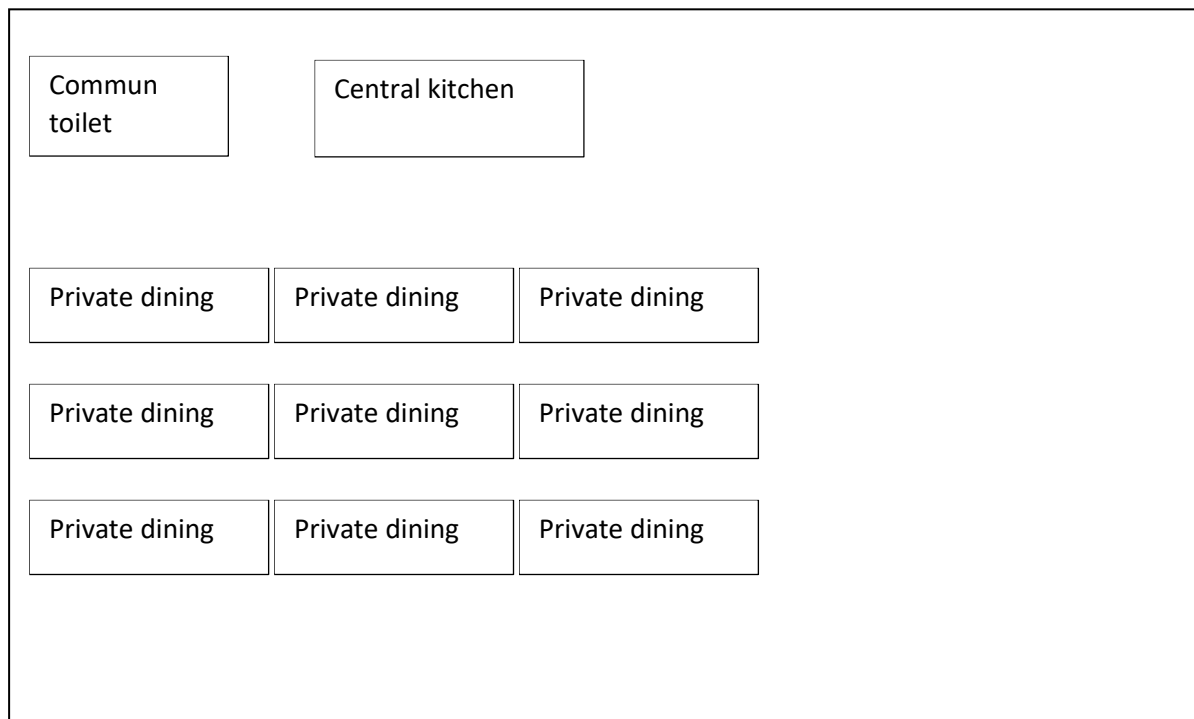
The need to distance oneself and mix less with others was a reason to consider alternatives to the current restaurant concept. Considering the impossibility of wearing masks due to the consumption of food and drinks, the idea of greater spatial dispersion and construction separation was inevitably imposed. At the same time, a review of the available literature, especially of widespread hotels and the example of the organizational innovation of the Stadshotellet in Sweden, directed the creation of the model of the future restaurant.

The concept of the dislocated restaurant has a central kitchen and bathroom, both within walking distance of separate independent rooms with dining rooms that are ideally accessed from the outside. Booking a table means a lot more because customers get a separate room for lunch and socializing. Such rooms are the basic unit of dislocated restaurants and are called private dining. It is suggested during the decoration that guests can independently choose several types of curtains, depending on whether they want to be away from indiscreet views or enjoy being seen.

As far as serving is concerned, to keep contact to a minimum, it is possible to avoid serving and delivering food on restaurant carts at the doorstep. This implies greater engagement of guests, but at the same time, security is guaranteed for all involved. Of course, various contactless ordering and payment options are welcome.

The model is shown graphically in Figure 1.

Figure 1
The basic model of a private dining restaurant



Source: Author's illustration

As presented in Figure 1, the basic model of a dislocated restaurant comprises a central kitchen, a common toilet, various private dining rooms, and passages among them. The only upgrade of the model represented in Figure 1 refers to the in-dining private toilets (marked in italics). In the case of private toilets intended for just one private dining room, the legal framework should allow it to be a unisex toilet. Many other upgrades are possible and welcome to distinguish better private dining from other ones, such as in the concept of the best table in the restaurant.

Conclusion

This paper presents a theoretical model proposed as a reaction to the global pandemic. The timing for its introduction is very actual as it tacks the important issues of safety, health, and privacy. The concept itself could help future restaurants to provide safe dining experiences with practically no need to intervene in the legal framework and tourism policy modifications regarding the introduction of its basic model.

The originality derives from the proposed concept of a different restaurant, which is based on the architectural innovation of the restaurant space and modifies minimally certain service elements. The added value of the work relates to the relatively easy applicability of the model in practice (representing its practical implication). If the restaurant operates in existing buildings, it is coherent with the sustainability agenda of tourist destinations. Another contribution of the paper stems from the fact that literature on the topic of dislocated hospitality models in tourism is scarce; thus, the paper enhances a pioneer study area in tourism.

Although even a newly built private dining restaurant can be a green initiative, the model's sustainability is accentuated in cases where the private dining restaurant uses vacant spaces not to consume scarce resources, i.e., land. It could act as an urban regeneration agent, considering the many SMEs that have stopped operating in various town centres. Many vacant business spaces can be easily converted to private dining rooms of a future private dining restaurant.

The limitations of this study derive from its conceptual nature, whereas the model has not been tested in practice. Therefore, future research should investigate the opinions of potential customers and practitioners regarding the introduction of this model: its advantages, disadvantages, and challenges of its implementation and tackle possible new directions of development.

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