

## Women dining alone in restaurant rooms

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### Abstract

The purpose of this project was to discuss women's single dining by investigating the reception of a woman arriving alone in the evening and ordering a dinner including glasses of wine in upper class restaurants. Methods used: Visits to ten different restaurants in a large city in Sweden. Field observations were done and interviews, i.e. colloquies, were held with both women and men who had experience of single dining in restaurants. The results show, that there is neither any hindrance for a woman to enter an upper class restaurant and dine alone; nor were there any special treatments offered. The colloquies were interesting, women talked with fear of single dining in restaurants, they talked about being exposed and placed in public view as a body of womankind. She and her sisters may need some other kind of concept to feel relaxed when visiting restaurants. What can be done to offer comfort? How can she become a satisfied customer? A new group of customers, women in urban society, needs a new consumer policy, which makes them feel comfortable when dining in modern restaurants.

### Introduction

Sweden is said to be an equal society, not only concerning gender but also concerning ethnicity, age, sexual disposition, etcetera, where all people should have the same rights, the same opportunities, but also the same obligations (Regeringen, 2002/2003). In Sweden, as well as in other parts of western society, modern urban women have need of solo dining in restaurants. She is maybe a business woman with a travelling occupation or an educator, giving lectures in conferences or in university context. She needs admission to public dining at lunchtime as well as in evenings. These women have their own money, and often a rather good economy and want to enjoy a comfortable urban life. Both in US and UK there is a wide interest in solo-dining. Internationally there is an ongoing discussion on a website called SoloDining.com™ ([www.solodining.com](http://www.solodining.com), 2007).

*SoloDining.com serves up 'solo dining savvy' for you – whether you despise or delight in a solitary meal in a restaurant or at home; whether you're fond of fast food or fine dining (or something in between!) and whether you're married or divorced, single or solo, bachelor or*

*bachelorette, widow or widower; business/pleasure traveller or stay-at-home-lover. So pull up a chair and join in. The company's fine. Sooner or later; everyone faces the challenge of eating alone.*

From SoloDining you can link up to a blog *Diners' Journal* of thoughts on, and explorations of dining in New York and elsewhere, from the dining staff of the Times. Here you can read that Solo diners are popping up more frequently than you might think and that the increase is noticeable but not enormous.

If you want to study social differences in consumption of food you could study meals in restaurant as well as the choice of restaurant (Warde & Tomlinson, 1995). Restaurants can be defined as places of emotions and as instrument for the experience of the emotions (Finkelstein, 1989; Lashley, Morrisson, & Randall, 2004). The purpose of our study is to investigate the reception of a woman arriving alone in the evening, ordering a dinner including glasses of wine in an upper class restaurant. The purpose is also to study how a solo dining woman reflects on her situation when dining alone. And the over all purpose of this project is to reflect on women's right and possibilities to get access to male coded areas, in this case the restaurant area. Modern women are not always pleased with the narrow choice of a meal experience offered by pizzerias and fast food restaurants like McDonalds. Eating in fast food restaurants causes no problem neither for men, nor for women or families (Ritzer, 1996). So, therefore first class restaurants are chosen for the research purpose.

As we, the authors of this article are both objects and subjects in the study – as will be shown later in the article - we want to give a short presentation of ourselves. Our research area is social and cultural sciences with a focus on food. In our private life we have left behind the everyday responsibility for preparing meals. We both have grown up children but do not any longer live in a family. We have a professional interest in the broad spectra of performances of food and meals as social and cultural expressions. We both are working as teachers and researchers in department of culinary arts and meal sciences. At Örebro University and at Göteborg University there are educational programmes for restaurant managers, chefs, and sommeliers but also doctoral programmes and research done concerning this areas, in which we are involved. Therefore we follow with interest descriptions in newspapers of trendy restaurants. The whole concept of “eating out” (see Warde & Martens, 2000) is of interest.

Our imaginations about visiting “first class restaurants” can be described as a longing for a specific place where you can have excellent food and wines in a comfortable and pleasant situation. In the book *Eating Out, social differentiation, consumption and pleasure*, (Warde & Martens, 2000) eating out is expressed as “people's attitudes towards, and expectations of, eating out as a form of entertainment and an expression of taste and status” (ibid, i).

In the 1960's a book titled “The Meal Experience” was published (Campbell-Smith, 1967). The concept the Meal Experience has had an importance for the commercial understanding of customer's satisfaction of eating out. Internationally sociologists and researchers in hospitality management have shown interest in the field (Finkelstein, 1989, 2004). (Lashley, Morrisson, & Randall, 2004; Warde & Martens, 2000). Within the research area of Culinary Arts and Meal Science a model with five aspects of the meal experience is often used; the aspects are the Room, the Meeting and the Product as well as the Atmosphere/Ambiance, and at last the Management Control System. This is called the Five Aspect Meal Model (FAMM) with an aim to point out that meals consist of much more than just food (I-B. Gustafsson, 2003; I-B Gustafsson, Öström, Johansson, & Mossberg, 2006). In our research we want to widen the

perspective by including women's access to different places and rooms as well as to explore the subjective experience and its constituents in a solo dining context.

We will take a closer look at gender aspects on the restaurant room. This room has so far, within the Swedish area of Culinary Arts and Meal Science, mostly been studied from an architectonic point of view: light, colours and table arrangements (Watz, 2004) floors, walls, and roofs (Silfverhielm, 2004) or the restaurant interior connected to the behaviour of customers and staff (I-B Gustafsson, Öström, Johansson, & Mossberg, 2006). But it is said that there is a genderization of the city, which means that streets and public areas have a distinct gender coding, either female or male (Forsberg, 2003, 2005) Human beings relate their identity to places and places develop their identity (Forsberg, 2003).

Gendering the room is a two-way process; Coding of rooms can be interpreted in gender aspects; it also becomes a coding of the man/woman in the room, where he or she is. There is sometimes a "regenderisation" of public rooms, where a typical area, during daytime coded as female, during nights transforms into a male room (Forsberg, 2005). In rooms where the public life takes place it is important not to be in a wrong place in a wrong time. It is important in an urban society to have safety, especially during evenings and nights. According to Domosh and Seager in their book *Putting Women in Place* (Domosh & Seager, 2001) it is not only a risk to be in the wrong place, this attitude can also be used as a tool to keep women in place.

*Women's perceptions of risk from crime in the city, and the gendered association of the city as male, are mutually reinforcing. There are real risks to women who venture into the wrong street at a wrong time, but our culture also tends to exaggerate those risks, thereby keeping women in their "place" (at home) (Domosh & Seager, 2001)p.100).*

Thereby this kind of coding becomes a part of the gendered control system. Train compartments as well as restaurants are closed rooms, a sphere, which in Friberg's (Friberg, 2005) discussion is not available in the same conditions for women and men. She asks if it is of any importance to "have a female body and not a male when you travel by train" (Friberg, 2005). In Friberg's article she asks: "Can you sit calm and cosy? Can you feel safe a late evening? Are the toilets in good condition? Are there alternative exits if you feel threatened? Do you have to go through an unpleasant tunnel? Do you dare to take the elevator? Is there anybody to ask for help?" Some of these questions, we think, can be of interest to use as instruments when analysing the importance of being a female guest when visiting a restaurant.

Already in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the sociologist Simmel reflected about the restaurant as a place where new ways of thinking, new feelings and codes to behave were created. The reason he said was that people sat in public places and enjoyed to be in the middle of a vivid public life, were they were looked upon as well as they were looking at others. But at the same time a blasé attitude of a passive voyeur was practiced. A way of acting as a part of urban life (Simmel, 1950,1993).

### **Purpose and methods**

As described, the purpose of our study was to investigate the reception of a woman arriving alone in the evening, ordering a dinner including glasses of wine in an upper class restaurant. The purpose was also to study how a female solo diner reflects on her situation when being in

a first class restaurant. The restaurants were chosen in one of the biggest cities in Sweden. Modern women in the urban society have interest in dining out in restaurants. As said before, they are not always pleased with the narrow choice of a meal experience offered by pizzerias and fast food restaurants like McDonalds. Eating in fast food restaurants causes no problem neither for men, nor for women or families (Ritzer, 1996). But, as we see it, and as we have been told from other women, it is not easy for a single woman to enter an upper class restaurant. Why is it so?

Methods used in the project were visits with field observations in restaurants; the method can be describes as active participating observations, and additional reflective data were: repeated discussions between the two researchers during the field study, and repeated colloquies wherever and whenever we, the researchers, met people (during seminars, meetings, parties, among friends, when travelling etc.). Also discussions were carried out with students from hospitality education in universities. This method was inspired by Thomsson, who describes how she actively searches for places where she met her target groups. We used this method with a purpose to let reflections “come falling like a rain”, as Thomsson (Thomsson, 2002) describes it.

The field observations consisted of “eating out” at twelve different restaurants in a large city January - July 2007. We visited in total six different restaurants alone in evenings (Table 1; visits no. 2, 4, 9, 10). Together we also visited four different restaurants in lunchtime the same days as the evening visits, in order to discuss how to observe and what to observe and also to discuss experiences and findings during the data collection (Table 1; visits no. 1, 3, 5, 8). As comparison we also made two visits together with other persons, men and women. Visit no 6: here we were accompanied by a man. Visit no. 7, in a group of totally ten women (see Table 1).

Table 1. Visited high class restaurants from January to July 2007

Visit Jan- July	Number of persons	Type of meal	Number of restaurants
1	2	Lunch	1
2	1+1	Dinner	2
3	2	Lunch	1
4	1+1	Dinner	2
5	2	Lunch	1
6	2+1 (a man)	Dinner	1
7	1+9 (women)	Dinner	1
8	2	Lunch	1
9	1	Dinner	1
10	1	Dinner	1

We made up an observation schedule, based on experiences from an earlier pilot study in restaurant environment (Jonsson, Nygren, & Pipping Ekström, 2006). This earlier study was focussed on gender aspects among restaurant staffs only. This time everything was related to the single woman as a guest. The different observation themes were about

- a) The single guest's emotions, sense experiences and feelings; i.e. the researcher observing herself
- b) Service, treatment when arriving, when ordering and during the meal, and when finishing the visit in the restaurant, i.e. observing the interaction with the staff
- c) Behaviour, comments etc. from other guests
- d) The restaurant room including furnishing, lighting, equipment, colours and table arrangement

This means that we, as the researchers, are at the same time both objects as well as subjects in the study.

There were no notes made during the visits. We, the research team, made the observations in different restaurants, twelve restaurants in all. In restaurant business it is common to scrutinise the quality of restaurants by doing hidden visits as it is done in for example Guide Michelin (Guide Michelin, 2007) and therefore our visits were done in the same manners.

Each evening two different restaurants in the same district were chosen. It was decided beforehand that a dinner could include at a maximum a drink, or a glass of champagne, a main course and a dessert or a starter and a main course. Wine during the meal, and coffee afterwards. The different dishes and beverages on the menu were not the objects for this study. We decided to be in contact with each other via mobile phone but only silently, by short messages<sup>1</sup>. After each visit notes were written and the experiences were discussed together by the research team. All the time during the research period we reflected on the findings and experiences from the visits. This was done in the light of the colloquies we had with other persons on the topic "women dining alone in restaurant rooms".

The colloquies were taken spontaneously. To be short: wherever we, the research team, met women (our target group), we discussed the project idea, and whenever we two met, we discussed our findings. This is what we call the "additional reflexive data".

## **Results and discussion**

The restaurant room is a closed area, where you enter a scene and become a part of a performance (Goffman, 1959/2004). The interior of the restaurant rooms varies due to time and fashion. Now in the beginning of the 21th century one of the trends is the "Feng shui"-style, simplicity, steel and wood. Very few details, no decoration. Air and space. As a single guest you can feel that the restaurant is a bit deserted, of course depending on where you have been seated.

### *A lady eating by herself*

A typical visit could be described as follows. A table for one person at 8.30 pm., a Friday afternoon was ordered by telephone beforehand. The restaurant staff said "No problem. You are welcome". One of us, here called the lady, arrived in time and was met by one of the staff

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<sup>1</sup> We had decided to go home together after the visit and to immediately afterwards discuss our experiences. Mobiles are seen everywhere although in a Swedish book on etiquette it is said that in the most famous restaurants a guest could be asked to leave her mobile in the wardrobe (Ribbing., 2005).

who escorted her to a table chosen for her. “Do you like a table where you can look at the other guests or do you like to sit a bit aside instead?”, a female waiter asked. She was dressed in black trousers and an apron that touched her shoes. The lady ordered a glass of wine, and got the menu and some bread and butter as an extra starter. She ordered and then she sat there looking around slowly nibbling at her bread and sipping the wine, in order to fill up the time, when waiting for the main course.

Citation from the notes, written after the visit:

*When the “fish arrives” I have almost finished my glass of wine, and I ask the waitress for another glass. “May I recommend a red wine”, said the waitress, “it is red wine in the sauce”. “Yes, please”, I answer. The fish tastes good; I eat and look at the other guests in the restaurant. Discreetly I send a short message to my colleague, who is in a restaurant in the neighbourhood, telling her that I have nearly finished my main course. I try to look as if I am having a pleasant time all by myself. Not quite nice or easy! When I ordered the main course, I thought about having a dessert as well, and now I ask for the menu once again. I decide to take an Espresso with a small glass of cognac and some small pieces of chocolate. That is very good! And well enough. Then there is nothing more to do and I ask for the bill. After a short time I leave the restaurant.*

The service was good, but the staff acted a little bit reserved, silently and hesitantly, as if they wondered, why the woman dined alone. Nothing was wrong, but nothing was on the other hand done to give pleasure and pleasure for this special guest. We, the researchers, afterwards checked the restaurant with a help of a list from “The art of making people feel welcome”, a guideline for people in hospitality industry (Gunnarsson & Blohm, 2003).

When I walk into a restaurant, there are several things that make me feel welcome:

- ✓ Information – There should be a menu outside the door
- ✓ Design – That someone cares
- ✓ Cleanliness – Everything from the hostess’s blouse to crumbs swept off the floor
- ✓ Safety – If it’s below ground, I want to see an emergency exit
- ✓ Greeting – someone should notice I am there
- ✓ Attention – I don’t want to sit and wait forever
- ✓ Friendliness – It doesn’t hurt to smile
- ✓ Listen – I want to be heard
- ✓ Speed – Service, service, service
- ✓ Price – I don’t want to be overcharged.

Figure 2. Checking list (Gunnarsson & Blohm, 2003).

It was possible to tick all the different listed steps according to this handbook, everything was OK and in order, but despite all this, the lady did not feel comfortable. From a newspaper interview with a Swedish actress we cut a colourful description of this situation:

*She very much likes eating out. Then it sometimes happens that the head waiter asks:*

*“One person, are you alone?”*

*“No I am by my self”, she usually answers.*

*...”I love to be served a good dinner with a fine glass of wine and perhaps have a book or just sit and think” she continues. (Carina Lidbom /Lisbeth Tell, DN Gratulerar/Family,*

20070208.p. 26<sup>2</sup> ).

The other guests in the restaurant did not notice the lonely lady. They were all busy experiencing their meals together with their companions. During all the visits in the evenings we observed only one single person dining, a man. But he seemed to be a regular customer, as he behaved as if he was at home, relaxed and talking to everybody.

*Keeping women in place*

A Thursday evening in February 2007 we, the researchers, visited two different high class restaurants situated rather nearby in the centre of the city. Each of us had a five course dinner including wines of high quality. The experiences were the same as described in the first example above. Good and polite service. But although the lady (A) tried to discuss the wines and asked questions about the food, the staff showed no special interest. No extra comment, no discussions. Politeness and distance may be the words to describe the situation.

Lady (B) in the other restaurant rather quickly finished her meal. Her five courses were served in a row one after another without any pauses or conversation to help her to stretch out the time. She therefore - as agreement – sent a short message to the other lady (A). “I have finished my meal. Have you?” Lady (A) answered “My God, just started my main course! Come, take a glass of wine with me”. She also asked the waiter if it was OK if a friend could come for a glass of wine. “Yes of course”, the waiter said. A few minutes later lady (B) arrived and was cordially met in the door and escorted to the table. She immediately got a glass of wine on the house and an extra plate to share the cheese; she also was offered a dessert and coffee. Suddenly there was a remarkable change in the atmosphere in the restaurant room as if everyone felt relieved. - The lady (A) was no longer alone! She did not have to sit alone any more. She had got a companion. The atmosphere suddenly became more comfortable. This showed us the big difference between sitting alone in a restaurant room or being together with someone – our own experience as well as the staffs’. We also felt that the other guests in the restaurant smiled with a sigh of relief. In a way one can say that there was “order in the court”.

How can this be understood? We realise that we, in one way or another, have transgressed the rules for what women are supposed to do. There is a tacit and implicit meaning that a woman's place is at home. Goffman, in his book *Behaviour in Public Places*, says that “rules of conduct in streets, parks, restaurants, theatres, shops, dance floors, meeting halls, and other gathering places of any community tell us a great deal about its diffuse forms of social organization” (Goffman, 1966)(p.3-4). He also suggests that in many situations certain categories of persons may not be authorized to be present, and that should they be present, this in it self will constitute an improper act. Etiquette manuals could be a guide to the manners expected, Goffman says. When we looked in the well known Swedish Etiquette guide (Ribbing, 2005) we found a chapter on eating out<sup>3</sup>. There was nothing written about single persons eating in restaurant. Only about how to behave in company! Is it so that we, the two researchers, have not understood or place and position in society? But as modern women, we want to take part of the public rooms of the city, like restaurant rooms etc, both as private persons but even more as professionals (being teachers and researchers in the area of food science). Or is it so, that we as single persons have transgressed the rules already by spending

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<sup>2</sup> Our translation.

<sup>3</sup> ”Restauranghyfs”/Decent behaviour in restaurant (p. 276-285)

an indecent sum of money on eating and drinking by ourselves? An article in Dagens Nyheter<sup>4</sup> writes about a change in the urban club culture towards VIP cards and guestlists: "...some persons are more welcome than others. The nightlife in the city [Stockholm] consists not only of rich gentlemen and beautiful girls. Even young and handsome boys and women with cool titles and money are favourites" (Björklund, 2007; Sandström, 2007).

#### *Colloquies*

All people that we discussed our research with were immediately interested and wanted to share their own experiences on the matter with us. Everyone had something to say. They commented the project in either positive or negative ways. Here are some of the comments:

"Oh, what a wonderful idea! Please tell me more about it."

"What an interesting project! Why haven't we thought about this before?"

"Who wants to go alone to a restaurant?"

"Eating out is the same as community".

"My God, how do you dare to....?"

"How dull, sitting there alone! I never go out eating alone, at least not in the evenings".

We were also told about women's strategies to avoid eating out in an evening when travelling alone. Instead they either ordered something to the room or brought some bread and cheese or a pizza slice. There was even one woman who told about her car, extra equipped with a fridge box, where she could keep the evening meal, thereby avoiding eating out. All this was eating only for hunger, not for pleasure. Maybe these women better knew the rules and the proper things to do; better than we, in our research project, where we try to take place and get access to a male coded area? Is it so, that not only women, but even single men not have the right to sit alone, dining in an evening? One of the men we discussed this with said: "I do not feel well when I have to dine alone. I often spend too much money on the wine because I pity myself for being alone". Other men confirmed his saying.

All this comments made us reflect on what the project really was about. Our starting points were to get access to the restaurant room in the urban society as well as our professional interest in the subject. When mapping the field we found how researchers in their gender studies try to explain the problem for women to take place in society especially in urban rooms (Domosh & Seager, 2001; Forsberg, 2003, 2005). That led to a deeper reflection on our roles and positions in society, as women, as researchers, middle class and middle aged. Is our demand on getting access really reasonable?

There were also questions about the economic side of eating out. Some women said that they rather would spend the same amount of money on a visit to a SPA or buy a new dress or go to the hairdresser. This made us think about the abundance of eating. "For a single woman to have a 3 – 5 courses dinner including wine is on the border of indecent wastefulness! Vulgar? Most unsuitable!", we asked each other. Not even the books on etiquette tell us how to behave as single persons visiting a restaurant (Ribbing, 2005).

#### *Towards a new consumer and a new consumer policy*

In our colloquies we met comments as "How dare you...? I should never..." But many of

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<sup>4</sup> Dagens Nyheter the biggest daily newspaper in Sweden.

them at the same time told us that they really wanted to be part of the comfortable milieu in a high class restaurant with a glass of wine and a well tasted dinner. Some of them also wanted to enjoy service and attention. From the Diners' journal a quotation:

*All the time people are dining at bars but...a solo diner is more likely to arouse curiosity or even pity, more likely to feel conspicuous. It's usually a businessman travelling or someone from the restaurant business who's herein New York to check out some restaurants. It's almost always men. Men will have dinner alone before women will.*

When finding these American comments we, as female single diners, realise why it has been so demanding to take the steps and enter a restaurant and dine alone also in Sweden.

In Sweden there are more than 2 million peoples aged 55+ (out of 9 million) with the view of living an active life during their future 20-25 years. They have a rather good economy and many also save money for "good life experiences". Amelia Adamo, head editor of the magazine "M" recently asked on a seminar for the Swedish fashion industry: "Why don't you invest (go in for) grown up women with their wallets full of money - and nothing...to buy?" (www.levom.nu, 2007a, 2007b). In the same manner, we would like to put the same questions to the restaurant industry. It's time for new consumers and a new consumer policy.

Some efforts are done to make the visits more comfortable. In UK and US (<http://www.solodining.com>, 2006) there are something called *communal tables*. There you do not take reservations and leave the way open for as many customers as can be catered to. It means that the single diner doesn't have to eat alone. They say that it's a democratic approach "We're popular because we don't discriminate. We don't take reservations". What more can be done? A restaurant manager tells that when a solo diner wants a private table she wants to give that person a really good table. She almost feels sorry because they are alone and want to make their experience better. Because they don't have somebody to have a conversation with, you want them to see some action. She also keeps some magazines and newspapers on hand.

Finally we would like to argue for the importance of continued research on this area, both on opinions from male and female solo diners, but also on opinions on the matter from restaurant owners' and staffs' points of view on the phenomenon. All this for the benefit for customers, restaurants, staffs and not least for the educational programmes at universities and vocational training schools.

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