



By: **Emre Alkin**

Gastronomics Has a Strong Sense of Justice



In the past, presentation and taste were seen as two distinct notions. Today, people who offer good taste garnished with appealing presentation are the ones who have created a brand for themselves.

However, when presentation turns into some sort of show and leads to lack of taste, the results tend to be unsatisfactory.

The word "show" usually has a negative connotation in almost every language and probably any context. But sometimes, activities that require mastery and that have quite appealing nature can unintentionally turn into a show.

As you may know, culinary economy is one of the topics I have been writing about for quite a while, mainly due to the fact that consumer spending in restaurants and cafés has risen very rapidly after the pandemic.

As high inflation is crushing consumers, making it impossible to buy a car or a house, there is nothing strange about people eating out to lift their morale in challenging times. However, the fact that restaurants and cafés are full and buzzing does not indicate that things are going well, economy wise.

For example, according to a survey conducted in the United States last year, tens of thousands U.S. citizens responded, "I will not eat out for lunch and dinner" to the question "How will you protect yourself against inflation?"

But the actual figures do not match the intention. U.S. consumer spending on eating out has increased to \$100 billion today, which had totalled \$60 billion a month before the pandemic.

The situation is more or less the same in other countries. The cost of eating out is increasing, along with food prices. Yes, the official inflation rate is decreasing, mathematically, but the cost of living is becoming stickier.

Speaking of eating out, let's explore this sudden interest in gastronomy?

People go to restaurants and cafés to socialize

As I have stated in my previous articles, 25% of 40-year-old Americans had never been married, according to statistics. Most of them are living alone. In Türkiye, home to over 85 million people and where the traditional nuclear family is quite common, 17 million people live alone.

Apparently, no one wants to get married anymore, not just young people. Not many divorcees consider remarriage. Therefore, millions and millions people go to restaurants and cafés to socialize. There are plenty of food establishments and options for every budget. Each and every one of them contribute to a growing economy. So how to survive in culinary industry?

Running a food business requires a lot of work, effort and dedication, as well as good business acumen

Obviously, running a food business requires a lot of work, effort and dedication, as well as good business acumen, such as efficient use of capital, smart borrowing, effective management of operations, with an emphasis on supply, storage, and finance, investing in human resources and digital technology, choosing the right advertising method and the right pricing strategy, and most importantly, not compromising quality.

However, the most important thing here should not be making a fortune out of food. We have seen many businesses collapse because they thought of food merely as a means to make money.

Tell people a story worth sharing

Today, the culinary industry is taken to a whole new level thanks to fine dining

restaurants that appeal to customers' five senses. Actually, whether I dine at a luxury restaurant or eat from street food vendors, I enjoy them both equally.

For me, there is no difference between eating at a Michelin-starred restaurant and eating at a regular restaurant that has been around for multiple generations because it has been delivering the same quality service and food for years.

A good restaurant should be able to convince people to choose outside the box, help them break out of clichés

Arzak in San Sebastian and Smelt & Co. in Balat provide me with the same eating pleasure, so do Lara Balık in Antalya, Maiami in Thessaloniki and Tim Raue in Berlin.

The important thing is to have something to say, tell people a story worth sharing, remembering or rooting for. A good restaurant should be able to convince people to choose outside the box, help them break out of clichés.

For example, inspiring a customer who started their meal with a seafood appetizer to try something different as main course, instead of fish.

Remember, people come to fine dining restaurants not only for food but also to explore and experience. And exploration is a matter of courage and mindset, encouraging us to push our boundaries.

A chef's goal

Bilbao, Guggenheim, San Sebastian, Biarritz. These cities show us what art, gastronomy and economy can do when they unite.

Before the pandemic, I had decided to sell my old car and buy a new one. However, when it came time to sell it, they quoted a price lower

than what I expected.

So I decided not to sell it and use the money for a visit to the Basque Country with my children, thinking that I could always buy a car but I may not get a second chance to travel there in the future.

I should tell you that I am so glad now that I had made that decision. We experienced an amazing journey, starting in Guggenheim in Bilbao and ending in the 3-Michelin-star San Sebastian restaurant Arzak.

A chef's goal should not be to please themselves, but to make the guests happy

It is not surprising that this part of Europe, which was associated with terrorism in the 1970s, now stands 35% above the EU average of GDP per capita. This is a living proof that art and food can bring more added value than most other industries, as long as we don't go through life wearing blinders.

People go there to forget their troubles for a few hours while discovering culinary marvels. It's not just food they serve there. It's also happiness, love, experience, music, ambience, and ultimately satisfaction.

In life, we learn from what we have experienced, rather than what we have planned. If you have lost your ability to go beyond what was planned, you cannot create economic value.

You don't need to compromise your values or principles, but obstinate devotion won't get you very far in your job. A chef's goal should not be to please themselves, but to make the guests happy.

Never think of food business as a money printer

Let me tell you about an experience I had a few years ago. My wife and I went to a

restaurant located in one of the most beautiful spots in Istanbul. I had booked a table for us a month ago.

When we arrived, the food service attendant showed us a table placed in a dark corner of the restaurant where employees were issuing cash receipts, which should not be in such a restaurant.

So I called for the restaurant manager and then asked him: "Do people sitting at these tables pay the same price for food here?" Naturally, he answered "yes". I replied: "So if every customer pays the same price for food, what is the reason for punishing some customers by placing them at a table in the corner?"

Having listened to my criticism, he immediately removed the tables and chairs that were placed in remote corners of the restaurant. This was a polite reaction to a comment that he did not expect to hear.



Never think of your food business as a money printer, but as an institution that produces added value for customers and naturally for the economy as a whole - Emre Alkin

As for restaurant owners, let me ask you this: Would you prefer type of people who ask for privileged treatment or those who want equal treatment as customers?

Or people who have a lot of money or those who choose your restaurant to spend their money in? Your choice will determine your quality, and your quality will determine the lifespan of your business.

An anecdote from Picasso's life illustrates this

quite nicely: One day, a retired teacher asked Picasso to sell him his most beautiful painting. He said he would give him all of his savings. So Picasso sold the teacher one of his most beautiful works. A friend of the painter whom he told about this transaction said, "Are you crazy? That painting would be worth 100 times more!". Picasso's answer was: "But no one has ever offered me all of their money for one painting."

Never think of your food business as a money printer, but as an institution that produces added value for customers and naturally for the economy as a whole. Doing your job the best you can and not compromising quality is the way to ensure the growth of your business.