A Study of Some of the Factors Determining the Choice of International Restaurants by Bangkokians

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Abstract

This research aims to explore some of the demographic and social characteristics that influence Bangkokians' choice of international restaurants and to assess the level of importance of these factors. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed in seven restaurants in Bangkok, each representing a particular kind of cuisine. The research was conducted between August and November, 2010. The results reveal that reputation, location and parking facilities, cuisine, and SERQUAL are important to those patronizing these restaurants. Among these four factors, SERQUAL or service quality turns out to be the most important one. Moreover, people with different demographic and social characteristics perceived these factors differently.

Key words: *Demographic and social characteristics, Reputation, Location and parking facilities, Cuisine, SERQUAL, International restaurants.*

Introduction

Thailand, often depicted as "The Land of Smile," has also become a melting pot. Bangkok in particular is home to numerous cultures, a fact reflected by the high number of international restaurants in the capital. Indeed, cuisines from around the world can be found in many restaurants and hotels around the city and foreign delicacies, once a rarity, are now ubiquitous. How do Bangkokians choose among this vast array of international restaurants? What factors do they consider when making a choice? Conversely, what should international restaurant owners or operators in Bangkok do to attract more customers, whether Thai Nationals, foreign residents or tourists? This research attempts to address these issues.

Restaurants provide a mix of products and services, which represent both tangible and intangible values. Customers' expectations must be carefully considered. In an ever more intensely competitive gastronomic environment, knowing the main factors that influence people's choices in terms of international restaurants is critical for restaurant owners and operators to provide better products and marketing policies, be able to allocate resources wisely, and focus on the most influential aspects of their customer approach.

Bangkokians in this study include native Thai, foreigners, and tourists who have been staying in Bangkok for at least one year. And international restaurants refer to ethnic restaurants and do not include restaurants that may have some – but not exclusively - international dishes on their menus.

Theoretical Perspective and Review of Literature

Nationality and Consumer Behavior

Nationality refers to citizenship; it indicates that an individual belongs to a community of "nationals"; it carries weight in marketing and consumer behavior as it reflects and influences culture. Levy and Grewal (2007) broadly defined

culture as the shared meanings, morals, beliefs, customs, and values of a group of people. Culture affects what, why, how, where, and when people buy. People's nationalities determine their country cultures, which engenders visible nuances such as artifacts, behavior, dress, symbols, physical settings, ceremonies, language differences, colors and tastes, and food preferences (*Ibid*). Numerous studies have examined the effects culture has on the consumption process. For example, Munson (1984) found that individuals' behaviors result from their values and attitudes. Shimp and Sharma (1987) concluded that the ethnocentrism of consumers mold their perceptions on the comparison of the domestic products and the foreign ones, and their attitudinal and behavioral aspects as well.

Gender and Consumer Behavior

It is not until the early 1990s that the relationship between gender and consumer behavior, hitherto overlooked, received attention (Costa, 1994). Males and females are differentiated by both biological differences and gender identity differences. Some personality specialties combined with masculinity and femininity account for the diversification among male and female's consumer behaviors. Hence, as some marketing scholars emphasized, the importance of gender differences in consumer behavior and marketing (Blackwell et al., 2001; Kotler and Keller, 2006).

Alan et al. (2002) explored the relationships between gender and a wide range of food products and relevant issues in Leicestershire. They used the list of Family Health Services Register as a base and used computer software to produce a random list of 2,000 names and addresses representing their sample. With the response rate of approximately 35%, 471 individuals agreed to participate, and among whom 421 respondents were actually interviewed. The findings indicated that, by and large, both men and women thought people's health depends on some factors that are controllable. But women appeared to be more concerned about regulating food ingestion as they always thought about health issues. As to the moral aspects of choosing food, women were always more sensitive on the ethical issues when comparing with men. When they make a choice of food, women would keep in mind the animal welfare or ecological issues. The results also revealed that men feel more comfortable with traditional cuisine when referring to health issues. On the contrary, women were more reflective about and healthy eating and food choice, and shown more willingness when they were to have some new kinds of food items. The research brought forward some other findings relating to issues such as nutritional choices, nutritional attitudes, nutritional practices, and changes in eating patterns, decision making and food work, knowledge about food and healthy eating, food intake restriction and body image, and health and lifestyle. The results ascertained the gender-based differences between men and women when considering food and eating issues.

Age and Consumer Behavior

Such generation labels as baby boomers, X generations and Y generations from American sources (Meredith et al., 2002a) are generally associated with marketing opportunities, consumer behavior and segmentation (Schewe and Noble, 2000; Noble and Schewe, 2003) in that consumer behaviors vary among people with different age. Young generations tend to have extensive interests, especially in new and innovative things, and care more about hedonic benefits. On the contrary, the older generations

feel more comfortable with traditions and are more likely to focus on utilitarian benefits. It is proved that people are impressed by momentous events such as wars, political turbulence, and economic crises, especially those occur during the late adolescence and early adulthood (Rogler, 2002). These events and the relevant experiences are referred to as defining moments, which shape people's needs and desires, favor and preferences, and attitudes. Consequently, those who experience similar momentous events share values together and those values are not to be changed throughout their lives because of the rootedness in their memories. And these people form a group called a cohort (Meredith and Schewe, 1994). Age can tell which kind of cohort a consumer may be classified in. Together with common life events experienced, individual frame of mind and aims in life, consumers with different age may have different intention and behavior according to their desires, favors, and influencing factors.

William and Darin (2009) examine the relationship between service performance and justice perception, and the moderating impacts of family life cycle (FLC) position and culture on these perceptions, using data from 717 respondents from Central and Eastern Europe. The results confirm and support the general assumption of the FLC model which is that consumers at different stages of age normally will not have the same consumption patterns or attitudes in the process of service consumption. And in turn, it influences consumers' expectations of being treated fairly during the process of service in a very significant way. In addition, the study reveals that the cultural factors also have effects on expectations for both fairness and performance in service process. Other than the correlation between customers' perceptions of justice and service product quality,

the authors pointed out that the importance of culture as well as family life cycle on the impact of perceived procedural justice on perceived service performance. As a matter of fact, both of them play important roles and act as moderators.

Education Level and Consumer Behavior

Education level influences the ideology, the social status, the surrounding people, and self-cultivation of that person, which, to some extent, determine the job, income, and social class. Moreover, education has an important effect on people's consumption skills and especially plays an indispensable role in their service consumption skills, consumer rights protection skills and special consumption skills. Hence, education plays a role in helping improve consumers' consumption quality, meet their consumption needs, ameliorate residents' living standards and promote their all-round development (Xuemin and Xining, 2006).

Income and Consumer Behavior

Among the four aspects of socio-economic, personality, attitude and communication variables, the socio-economic factors had the greatest effects on consumer innovativeness (Medina and Michaels, 1991). In developing countries, the social class's distribution is usually described as a triangular shape (Raju, 1995). So does Thailand. The lower class constitutes a large proportion of population, the middle class is somehow a smaller group, and on the top of the pyramid is the very small upper class. In Thailand, the majority of upper class is populated with Thai-Chinese or Chinese-Thai, and some other countries' foreigners as well. Their values, preferences and partialities may influence the marketing approach of international restaurants in Thailand.

Kuo and Fred (2009) researched the changes

in food demand in China and the relationship among food demand on different food categories, food quality, income level, and nutrient effects. They used the Chinese food consumption and expenditure surveys for urban households to get the data. What they found was that income, quality, and nutrient elasticities are important indicators for consumers' food choices; the quantity of food consumed by Chinese households is highly responsive to income growth at low-income levels, while high-income households have very inelastic demand and appear to have reached a saturation point in food consumed.

SERQUAL (Service Quality)

Brysland and Curry (2001) concluded that "from the perspectives of different authors that it is about providing something intangible in a way that pleases the consumer and that preferably gives some value to that consumer".

Service quality is important to all kinds of businesses as it is "regarded as a driver of corporate marketing and financial performance" (Buttle, 1996). It has also been put forward as a critical determinant of competitiveness (Lewis, 1989), and a source of lasting competitive advantage through service differentiation (Moore, 1987). With the development of society and improvement of standard of living, people's perspective of consumption has gradually changed. They are no longer satisfied with the physical products as such. Instead, in the process of consumption, consumers would like to ameliorate their living environment, improve the taste of life, fulfill interests, and obtain spiritual enjoyment. As a result, services are extraordinarily important no matter what products are being sold. More particularly, service quality affects the re-purchase intentions of customers (Ghobadian et al., 1994).

Many service quality models have been proposed (e.g., Moore, 1987; Heywood-Farmer, 1988; Beddowes et al., 1988; Nash, 1988; Philip and Hazlett, 1997; Robledo, 2001). Among all the models, the most enduringly popular, widely cited and best researched method is SERVQUAL (Asubonteng et al., 1996; Robinson, 1999; Waugh, 2002) developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985, 1988). Thus many scholars and researchers use SERVQUAL because "it is a tried and tested instrument which can be used comparatively for benchmarking purposes" (Brysland and Curry, 2001).
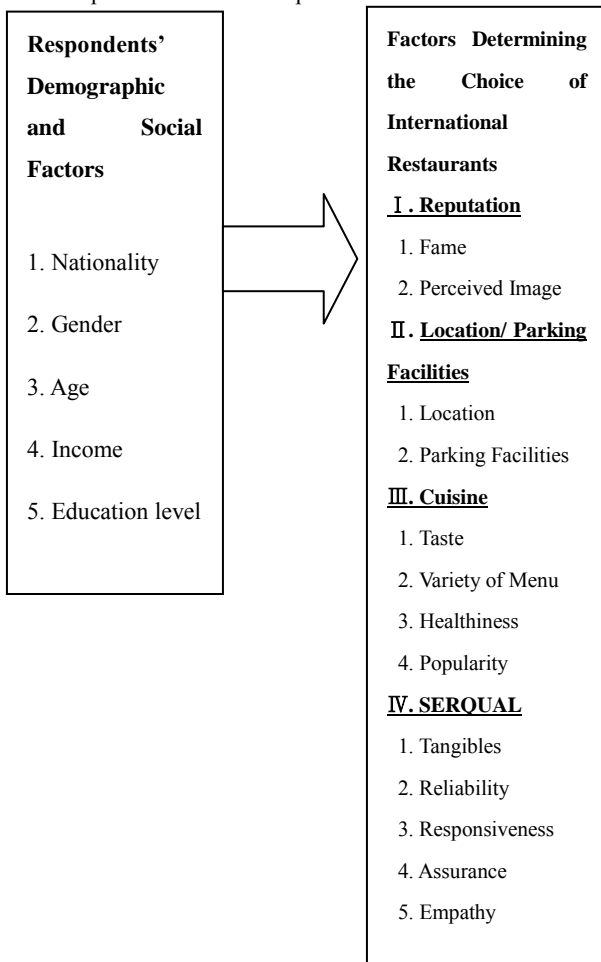
Parasuraman et al. (1985) identified the ten determinants of service quality as: accessibility, reliability, responsiveness, competence, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding the customer, and tangibles. When Parasuraman et al. (1988) developed the SERVQUAL model to measure customer perceptions of service, these ten determinants were condensed into five dimensions which are: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Tangibles refer to the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials and reliability, to the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. While responsiveness is defined as the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service, assurance means the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence. As to empathy, it is used in reference to caring, individualized attention the organization provides to its customers.

Hong Qin and Victor (2009) examine the relationship among service quality, food quality, perceived value, customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions in fast-food restaurants (FFRs). Together with a pre-test of 30 sets of questionnaires, a total of 282 usable responses

were collected through an online media from college students. The findings showed that two factors: food quality and service quality play a critical role in generating customer satisfaction. More particularly, the important dimensions of service quality are tangibles, reliability/responsiveness, recovery, assurance, and empathy. Compared to these two factors, the perceived value is of less significance. Hong Qin and Victor explained that it is because the survey was concentrated on only the fast food restaurants and therefore restrictive compared to restaurants in general.

Conceptual Framework

Independent Variables Dependent Variables

Respondents' Demographic and Social Factors	Factors Determining the Choice of International Restaurants
1. Nationality 2. Gender 3. Age 4. Income 5. Education level	Ⅰ. **Reputation** 1. Fame 2. Perceived Image Ⅱ. **Location/ Parking Facilities** 1. Location 2. Parking Facilities Ⅲ. **Cuisine** 1. Taste 2. Variety of Menu 3. Healthiness 4. Popularity Ⅳ. **SERQUAL** 1. Tangibles 2. Reliability 3. Responsiveness 4. Assurance 5. Empathy

Source: created by the author for this study

The conceptual framework of this research is modified and concluded based on four models: David and Susan's (2001), Zafar, Ahmed, Imad, Zbib, Arif, and Karlat's(2010), Clare and Peter's (2005), and Hong and Victor's (2009) models.

The independent variables are nationality, gender, age, income, and education level. The dependent variables are reputation, location and parking facilities, cuisine, and service quality, with some subentries under each variable. Under each dependent variable, there are some sub-variables. Reputation is composed of fame and perceived image. Location and parking facilities are measured separately. Cuisine is considered in terms of taste, variety of menus, healthiness, and popularity. SERQUAL is measured by its five dimensions which are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

In this research, the researcher tried to find out the differences among people with different demographic and social characteristics while considering the factors influencing the choice among international restaurants in Bangkok. Accordingly, the researcher selected five relevant aspects to be the independent variables.

Reputations of the cuisines in general and restaurants in particular may influence Bangkokians' choice regardless of previous experiences with the restaurant. Therefore, it is listed in the conceptual framework as the first dependent variable.

Location and parking facilities is the second dependent variable here for the reason that the car possession rate in Bangkok is quite high as it stands at 69% as of 2004. Moreover, the heavy traffic and sometimes lack of parking lots or spaces has become a considerable problem.

Restaurants provide a mix of product and service. For that reason, both cuisine itself and the service quality are the third and fourth

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dependent variables.

Research Question and Objectives

The main research question of this study is whether there are differences among diners in choosing international restaurants with regard to reputation, location and parking facilities, cuisine, SERQUAL (service quality), when related to various demographic and social characteristics (nationality, gender, age, income and education level).

The objective of this research is (i) to test whether different demographic and social characteristics influence Bangkokians' choice of international restaurants and (ii) measure the level of importance of these factors with regards to their choices.

There are limitations to this research. First, only five main demographic and social characteristics were under consideration. Secondly, the researcher collected data at only seven restaurants in Bangkok, involving only seven different kinds of cuisines. Thirdly, the results could be only applied to the restaurant industry in Bangkok. And the research was done in 2010 and therefore reflected only the present status of consumers' preferences. Thus, as time passes, the results may become unreliable due to the change of people's preferences or consuming habits.

Research Methodology

This research used descriptive research, the goal of which being to determine the answers to who, what, when, where and how questions (Zikmund, 2003). The targeted population in this research was people 15 years or over, both males and females, who had been residing in Bangkok, Thailand for at least one year, and had dining experiences in international restaurants. In this research, a non-probability sampling method was used, which required some judgments from the researcher in the process of choosing samples. The techniques of non-probability sampling applied were quota sampling and convenience sampling. The researcher selected one Bangkok-based representative restaurant of each of the seven famous cuisines considered: French, Italian, Chinese, Thai, Indian, Japanese and Korean. Each restaurant was allocated with 57 sets of the questionnaire except the Korean one which was assigned 58 sets.

The questionnaire, based on the conceptual framework, consisted of four parts, totaling 49 questions. It was also translated into Thai so as to make it more convenient and easily understood for some respondents.

- Part I includes three screening questions designed to make sure that the respondents qualified, i.e., had dined at international restaurants, had been residing in Bangkok for at least one year and were 15 years old or over.

- Part II deals with the independent variables and focused on five attributes relevant to the topic. For the purpose of categorization, participants were asked to put themselves into groups or properly indicate which group or category they belong to (Cooper and Schindler, 2006). The category scale included (i) Nationality (five choices based on the region); (ii) Gender; (iii) Age (four age groups to choose from); (iv) Income Level (five levels); (v) Education level (three levels).

- Part III considers the dependent variables: Reputation focuses on fame and perceived image; Location and parking facilities consist of the two crucial factors, location and parking facilities. Cuisine refers to taste, variety of menu, healthiness, and popularity. SERQUAL is measured by tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Likert summated rating scales consist of statements that

express either a favorable or an unfavorable attitude toward the object of interest (Cooper and Schindler, 2006). A five point Likert Scale was used to measure all these items (1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly agree).

- Part IV focuses on the respondents' descriptive data: their preferences in terms of cuisines, restaurant characteristics, and dining pattern.

50 questionnaires were distributed at the Japanese restaurant to test the reliability of the questionnaire, which is considered reliable if the alpha value is not less than 0.6. Since this was the case in this study, the questionnaire was deemed to be reliable.

Results and Analysis

As Table 1 shows (see Appendix A), the majority of the respondents in this study are Thai nationals (60.8%) and the number of female respondents slightly higher than males (52.3%.). The highest numbers of respondents are between 26 and 35 years old; get paid between 10,000 to 25,000 Baht per month and have a Bachelor's Degree. Moreover, 32.8% of the respondents like Thai cuisine the most; 35.8% of them eat out once a week; 63.8% of them have dine out and 59.5% of them consider the taste of the food as the most important characteristic of an international restaurant.

The four dependent variables are all important to Bangkokians when they are choosing among international restaurants. Moreover, the results show the level of importance of the sub-variables as follows: "Reliability" and "empathy" are very important factors. "Fame", "perceived image", "parking facilities", "taste", "variety of menu", "healthiness", "popularity", "tangibles", "responsiveness", and "assurance" are factors considered as important. There's only one neutral factor which is "location". And there are no factors that are considered as unimportant or very unimportant.

The results of hypotheses testing indicate that there are differences among respondents in their choice of international restaurants regarding reputation when classified by nationality, age, and income. Then, it shows also that there are differences among respondents in their choice of international restaurants regarding location and parking facilities when classified by nationality and income. We will notice as well that there are differences among respondents in their choice of international restaurants regarding cuisine and SERQUAL when classified by nationality, gender, age, and income. On the other hand, there is no difference among respondents in their choice of international restaurants regarding reputation when classified by gender and education. There is no difference among respondents in their choice of international restaurants regarding location and parking facilities when classified by gender, age, and education. There is no difference among respondents in their choice of international restaurants regarding cuisine and SERQUAL when classified by education.

Conclusion and Recommendations

After analyzing the findings of this study, the researcher wishes to make the following recommendations:

The first factor of choice is "reputation." Customers consider reputation one of the most important characteristics of an international restaurant. And as part of the reputation factor, perceived image is more important than fame. This indicates that reputation as a whole is quite critical. Between the two sub-entries of reputation, namely fame and perceived image, the later one has a greater impact. The researcher

suggests that international restaurant owners and operators should especially pay attention to building, keeping, and improving their reputation. In the case of new owners or operators, whose restaurants might not be famous right from the beginning, it is critical to build a positive perceived image. This can be done by attractive interior design, well-trained waiters and waitresses, word of mouth, or advertisement if the budget allows. Owners and operators have to beware of all the possible shortcomings and overcome them as well as strengthen the good points to induce people to try the new restaurants. Once a good reputation is set deep in people's mind, previous and loyal customers will keep patronizing these restaurants. And through word of mouth, new customers will come even though they have had no previous experience with these restaurants.

The restaurant industry is no more in a seller's market, supposing this has ever been the case. This is a buyer's market. Consumers are the ones who make their choices among all the restaurants. A restaurant can rely on its competitive advantages, derived from its resources, to create new products, build the brand, and gain customers. Reputation is one of the important intangible assets or resources of restaurants and a significant contributor to success. In order to widen their networks and reach a wider audience, restaurants should make use of effective promotional means, including social networking and blogging (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) which involve their employees. Moreover, always being sincere and friendly to customers and prospective customers is obviously very important as part of the process of generating a positive perceived image.

The second factor of choice is "location and parking facilities". In terms of location and parking facilities, location is a neutral factor while parking facilities is an important factor. Of course, it is a substantial advantage if restaurants are located in commercial centers or flourishing areas as the amount of pedestrian and traffic flow brings more potential customers and more awareness of the restaurants.

However, as the research indicates, Bangkokians do not think highly of location. It may be because of the relatively wide coverage of public transportation in Bangkok. On the other hand, the high possession rate of private cars makes Bangkokians value the parking facilities and regard it as an important factor for choosing among international restaurants. Therefore, the researcher recommends that an international restaurant should have a parking lot with enough parking spaces, whose number should be based on the size of the restaurant. Otherwise, it's better to locate the restaurant near the available parking lot of some shopping malls, residential district, hotels, etc. And it is important to let people know where they can park their cars if choose to eat in that particular restaurant.

The third factor is "cuisine". Cuisine has been characterized by taste, variety of menu, healthiness, and popularity. Among these four components, taste is the most important one, with healthiness the second most important one and variety of menu and popularity as number three and number four, respectively. The main product of international restaurants is food. It is therefore no surprise that cuisine is regarded as the most important item under this factor.

First, the researcher advises that restaurants to hire a chef who can cook the ethnic food well and consistently as the quality of food typically represents a restaurant the most. People come to restaurants to consume food and get their culinary needs satisfied. Good tasting food will go a long way in establishing loyalty among

customers and keeping attracting new ones. Second, restaurants should make sure that the food is clean and healthy. Diet food is an especially important issue for some young female customers. Keeping in mind that food taste and healthiness is a pre-requisite to compete with others will ensure success. Third, the variety of the menu cannot be ignored either as an attractive element.

Without losing track of the fact that the target is a niche market, international restaurants should provide as many items on their menus as possible in order to attract more customers. This assumes, however, that these menus match the specific culture of the restaurants and can be cooked with the same level of quality. Last but not least, Bangkokians tend to choose some popular cuisines or menus and are always interested in trying something new. Accordingly, international restaurants should provide some popular menus no matter what kind of cuisine they offer. And in case the cuisine is not currently the most popular, the owners or operators of such restaurants must find ways to raise the level of awareness among people and encourage them to try their cuisine as the first try may turn out to seduce the newcomers' palates.

Nowadays, few restaurants are using pricing strategies as people's incomes have increased. Besides, there are many more restaurants on the market, therefore a price war would not help and in fact may harm the profitability of restaurants. Instead of adopting a pricing strategy, owners or operators of international restaurants should consider marketing strategies based on differentiation. These differentiated marketing strategies could include bringing variety to the food, ensuring the quality of the service, refining the environment, and possibly improving human resource management.

The fourth factor in this study is SERQUAL or service quality. Tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy are the five dimensions of SERQUAL. As the results show, all the dimensions are important to Bangkokians with reliability and empathy standing out as the most important ones when compared to the other three. The researcher suggests that the waiters or waitresses of international restaurants should provide service dependably, that is, make the customers think they can trust them and rely on their services. Meanwhile, the quality and the taste of a dish should be consistent. Moreover, a good international restaurant should understand what its customers really desire, need, and want. Each customer should be treated as a unique and important one and their feelings should be paid attention-to as well.

As people with different demographic and social characteristics (nationality, gender, age, income, and education) have different traits, they need services which are also different so as to address those specificities. This requires the offer of personalized services which include both standardized and customized services. Basically, international restaurants should provide services that cover customers' prevalent requests. Furthermore, providing additional services such as delivery, reservation, and online ordering services could prove to give these restaurants a differentiating edge. By offering a greater number of quality services, restaurants will enhance their chance to attract a wider scope of customers.

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Appendix A
Table 1 - Highest percentage of demographic and social characteristics, preferences, and general consumption patterns of respondents

Item	Highest Percentage (%)	Respondents
Nationality: Thai	60.8%	243
Gender: Female	52.3%	209
Age: 26 – 35 years old	44.0%	176
Income: 10,000 – 25,000 Baht/month	29.0%	116
Education: Bachelor's Degree	61.5%	246
Favorite Cuisine: Thai cuisine	32.8%	131
Frequency of eating out: Once a week	35.8%	143
Timing of eating out: Dinner time	63.8%	255
Most important characteristic of an international restaurant: Taste of cuisine	59.5%	238