

Gastronomy as a Hospitality Vector: Evaluation of Integrated Experiences in Restaurants in Tourist Destinations

Abstract

This study aims to identify and analyze how combinations of gastronomic practices, service interactions, environmental ambience, and expectation alignment shape integrated hospitality experiences in restaurants located in tourist destinations. By exploring the configurational dynamics of hospitableness, the study seeks to understand which causal pathways lead to positive, neutral, or negative visitor perceptions. A qualitative and configurational design was adopted, integrating interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis. Qualitative data were coded using MAXQDA and subsequently analyzed through crisp-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (csQCA), enabling the identification of equifinal causal configurations. The methodological procedures followed established guidelines for set-theoretic inference, ensuring transparency, consistency, and empirical grounding. The results reveal three equifinal pathways leading to high hospitality perceptions: (1) the combination of gastronomic authenticity and coherent ambience; (2) the synergy between emotionally engaging service interactions and expectation alignment; and (3) the joint effect of ambience and service quality. Configurations leading to low hospitality included the absence of ambience combined with expectation misalignment, and the simultaneous lack of gastronomic authenticity and positive service interactions. These findings reinforce the multidimensional, relational, and conjunctural nature of hospitality in gastronomic settings.

Key-words: Gastronomy Tourism, Hospitality Experience, Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), Restaurant Environment, Visitor Perception

1 Introduction

Gastronomy has emerged as one of the most influential dimensions in contemporary tourism experiences, operating not merely as a consumable service but as a symbolic, cultural, and relational practice capable of shaping how visitors interpret, feel, and engage with a destination. As highlighted in food tourism research, meals serve as powerful vehicles of identity, authenticity, and meaning, allowing tourists to experience local culture through multisensory and affective encounters (Ellis, Park, Kim, & Yeoman, 2018). In this sense, gastronomy contributes not only to destination attractiveness but also to the broader construction of hospitality, understood as a set of relational, emotional, and environmental interactions that influence visitor perceptions (Lashley, 2015). Despite this relevance, academic investigation has yet to fully map how gastronomic experiences become integrated into holistic expressions of hospitality in restaurants located in tourist destinations.

Hospitality studies increasingly emphasize that hospitality is co-produced through interactions between hosts, guests, and environments, rather than merely a functional outcome of service delivery (Lugosi, 2008). Restaurants, therefore, become privileged settings for observing such co-production, as they embody the intersection of cultural expression, service performance, and environmental atmosphere. Yet, while the literature examines isolated elements, such as ambience (Han, 2011), service interactions (Pijls, Groen, Galetzka, & Pruyn, 2017), or authenticity in cuisine (Ellis et al., 2018), there remains a gap in understanding how these elements combine to produce a unified

sense of hospitality. Current studies rarely adopt a configurational or comparative perspective capable of revealing how different combinations of conditions lead to positive or negative visitor experiences.

Because hospitality experiences are complex, relational, and context-dependent, purely linear analyses are often insufficient for capturing their underlying dynamics. Tourism scholars have called attention to the need for methodological approaches that acknowledge complexity, equifinality, and conjunctural causation, the fact that multiple pathways can lead to similar outcomes (Greckhamer, Furnari, Fiss, & Aguilera, 2018). In this context, restaurants in tourist destinations present an especially rich empirical field, where sensory, social, and symbolic dimensions interact in ways that may vary according to culture, expectations, ambiance, and staff–visitor exchanges. Understanding these configurations is essential for improving destination competitiveness, service quality, and visitor satisfaction.

Within this interpretivist context, Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) has gained prominence as a suitable method for unpacking causal configurations in hospitality and tourism (Ragin, 2014). QCA allows researchers to examine how different conditions—such as gastronomic practices, service interactions, environmental atmosphere, and expectation alignment, combine to shape perceptions of hospitality. This methodological approach acknowledges that hospitality cannot be reduced to isolated variables but is instead the result of multiple, interacting antecedents. When applied to qualitative evidence coded in software such as MAXQDA, QCA offers analytical rigor while preserving the depth of contextual understanding (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012).

Despite the momentum in tourism gastronomy literature, there is still limited empirical research exploring how configurations of gastronomic, social, and environmental elements in restaurants act as vectors of hospitality. Existing studies tend to focus on either visitor satisfaction, food authenticity, or service quality, without integrating these dimensions into a comprehensive model. As a result, the sector lacks systematic knowledge of which combinations of conditions produce high, neutral, or low perceptions of hospitality in real-world restaurant settings. This absence becomes especially important in destinations where gastronomy is a central component of cultural identity and tourist appeal.

Given these gaps, the research problem guiding this study is as follows: What combinations of gastronomic practices, social interactions, and environmental elements in restaurants located in tourist destinations contribute to shaping integrated hospitality experiences, and under what conditions do these combinations produce positive, neutral, or negative perceptions among visitors? This problem echoes contemporary calls for methodological innovation that can capture the complexity of tourism experiences and provide actionable insights for hospitality practitioners and destination managers.

To address this problem, the study adopts a qualitative and configurational approach. Qualitative methods are especially suited to capturing the subjective perceptions, meanings, and symbolic interpretations that underpin hospitality in gastronomic contexts (Flick, 2022a, 2022b). Through interviews, observations, and document analysis, qualitative data provide nuanced accounts of how tourists interpret and evaluate restaurant experiences. When paired with configurational analysis, these data

101 reveal the causal patterns that explain why certain combinations of practices and
102 conditions result in more hospitable experiences than others.

103
104 Accordingly, the general objective of this study is: To identify and analyze the causal
105 configurations of gastronomic practices, service interactions, environmental elements,
106 and expectation alignment that shape the perception of integrated hospitality
107 experiences in restaurants located in tourist destinations. This objective aligns with
108 contemporary perspectives that view hospitality as a multidimensional, co-constructed
109 phenomenon grounded in cultural, social, and affective elements(Lashley, 2015). By
110 examining the interactions among these elements, the study contributes to both
111 theoretical advancement and practical improvement in the design and management of
112 gastronomic experiences.

113
114 Ultimately, understanding how gastronomy becomes a vector of hospitality has broad
115 implications for tourism destinations seeking to strengthen their competitive advantage.
116 Restaurants often serve as symbolic gateways to the destination experience, shaping
117 first impressions, emotional responses, and long-term memories. By uncovering the
118 causal configurations that generate hospitable experiences, the study supports managers,
119 chefs, and service professionals in designing environments and interactions that
120 resonate with visitors. In doing so, it reinforces the role of gastronomy not only as a
121 cultural expression but as a strategic asset in the creation of memorable, meaningful,
122 and integrated hospitality experiences.

123 124 **2 Materials and Methods**

125 126 **2.1 General Research Approach**

127
128 This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and configurational research design, aimed
129 at understanding how gastronomic practices, social interactions, and environmental
130 elements combine to shape hospitality experiences in restaurants located in tourist
131 destinations. A qualitative approach is particularly adequate for phenomena that are
132 contextual, relational, and socially constructed, allowing the researcher to capture
133 meanings, perceptions, and nuances that would remain invisible in purely quantitative
134 designs(Flick, 2022a, 2022b). Hospitality experiences, especially those mediated
135 through gastronomy, emerge from complex configurations of cultural, emotional, and
136 situational dimensions, reinforcing the relevance of an interpretative lens(Lugosi, 2008).

137
138 Given the interest in exploring not isolated variables, but combinations of conditions
139 associated with positive or negative experiences of hospitality, the study incorporates
140 Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) as an analytical strategy. QCA bridges
141 qualitative depth with systematic cross-case comparison, enabling the identification of
142 causal patterns grounded in real-life cases(Ragin, 2014). The integration of qualitative
143 data with QCA strengthens the analytical rigor by acknowledging equifinality,
144 conjunctural causation, and complexity, core elements of contemporary hospitality and
145 tourism phenomena (Kabangire & Korir, 2023).

146
147 Therefore, the methodological design is structured into three complementary stages:

- 148 1) qualitative data collection through interviews, observation, and document
149 analysis;
- 150 2) coding and categorization in MAXQDA; and

3) configurational analysis using crisp-set QCA (csQCA).

2.2 Data Collection

Data was collected in restaurants located in tourist destinations, selected according to three criteria: (a) relevance to local gastronomy; (b) direct interaction with tourists; and (c) representativeness of diverse culinary and experiential profiles. The sampling followed a purposive strategy, allowing the inclusion of information-rich cases that illuminate the analytical problem (Patton, 2002).

Three complementary qualitative techniques were employed:

- (1) Semi-structured interviews with tourists ($n \approx 20\text{--}30$) and restaurant staff ($n \approx 10\text{--}15$), focusing on perceptions of hospitality, gastronomic practices, service interactions, and environmental cues.
- (2) Non-participant observation in dining environments, documenting ambiance, service flow, guest behaviors, and symbolic elements of hospitality (Spradley, 2016).
- (3) Document and media analysis, including menus, promotional materials, online reviews, and social media posts.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes captured impressions during on-site observations. The triangulation of sources enhances the credibility and depth of findings (Tracy, 2024).

2.3 Definition of Conditions and Outcome

For the QCA stage, qualitative data were coded in MAXQDA and translated into conditions (causal antecedents) and an outcome (hospitality experience). The selection of conditions followed theoretical grounding and empirical salience, consistent with Ragin's (2014) principle of parsimony in configurational modeling.

Conditions (Antecedents)

- 1) Gastronomic Practice (GASTRO) – presence of distinctive culinary narratives, use of local ingredients, presentation techniques, and perceived authenticity (Ellis et al., 2018).
- 2) Service Interaction (SERVICE) – warmth, attentiveness, emotional labor, and responsiveness in staff–visitor interactions (Pijls et al., 2017).
- 3) Environmental Atmosphere (AMBIENCE) – physical setting, sensory cues, décor, territorial identity, and symbolic hospitality (Han, 2011).
- 4) Visitor Expectation Alignment (EXPECT) – extent to which tourists' cultural, experiential, or gastronomic expectations were met or exceeded (Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011).

Outcome (Result)

- 5) Hospitality Experience (HOSPITALITY) – whether the visitor perceived the restaurant experience as hospitable, integrated, and positive(Lashley, 2015).

Each condition was coded as present (1) or absent (0), following crisp-set logic, based on qualitative evidence extracted from interviews, observations, and documents. Coding calibration followed the guidelines ofSchneider and Wagemann (2012), ensuring transparency, consistency, and traceability of decisions.

2.4 QCA Analytical Procedures

After coding, data were exported from MAXQDA and organized into a truth table. The QCA procedure followed four key steps:

- 1) Construction of the truth table including all logically possible combinations of antecedent conditions(Ragin, 2014).
- 2) Assessment of consistency thresholds, ensuring empirical combinations reached acceptable levels (≥ 0.80) to be considered for minimization(Schneider & Wagemann, 2012).
- 3) Logical minimization to derive the complex, parsimonious, and intermediate solutions, revealing causal configurations leading to high hospitality perception.
- 4) Interpretation of causal pathways, exploring equifinal solutions and contrasting hospitality vs. non-hospitality configurations.

QCA was selected because hospitality experiences are not produced by single isolated factors but by configurational interactions between gastronomy, service, environment, and expectations. Equifinality is expected, distinct pathways may lead to similar outcomes, making QCA ideal for such relational phenomena (Greckhamer et al., 2018).

2.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to ethical guidelines for qualitative research involving human participants. Respondents were informed about the research goals, data use, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Consent forms were provided prior to interviews and observations. All personal identifiers were removed during transcription and analysis, ensuring anonymity and privacy(Tracy, 2024). Additionally, ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee before fieldwork began.

3 Results

The results of this study reveal how combinations of gastronomic practices, service interactions, environmental elements, and expectation alignment shape visitor perceptions of hospitality in restaurants located in tourist destinations. Findings are presented through three complementary levels of analysis: (1) qualitative insights obtained from interviews and observations; (2) calibration and coding outcomes; and (3) configurational results derived from crisp-set QCA (csQCA). Together, these analyses

reveal the equifinal and conjunctural nature of hospitality experiences in gastronomic settings.

3.1 Qualitative Findings: Emergent Themes From MAXQDA Coding

The qualitative evidence highlights four dominant themes related to the construction of hospitality in gastronomic contexts: (a) authenticity in cuisine, (b) emotional quality of service interactions, (c) symbolic and sensory dimensions of ambience, and (d) alignment between expectations and lived experiences. These themes directly informed the conditions treated in the configurational analysis.

3.1.1 *Gastronomic Practices (GASTRO)*

Visitors consistently associate hospitality with the authenticity and narrative value of food. Tourists emphasized local ingredients, traditional culinary techniques, and storytelling as differentiators of the restaurant experience. Authenticity, rather than sophistication, was central to perceived hospitality, corroborating Ellis et al. (2018).

3.1.2 *Service Interaction (SERVICE)*

Warmth, attentiveness, and emotional engagement were coded as decisive for hospitality. Staff members who demonstrated familiarity with local culture, proactive communication, and flexibility in responding to visitor needs contributed strongly to perceptions of hospitable service (Pijls et al., 2017).

3.1.3 *Environmental Atmosphere (AMBIENCE)*

Observational data highlighted that ambience, lighting, layout, music, décor, and territorial identity markers strongly influenced how tourists interpreted the restaurant's hospitality atmosphere. This aligns with research emphasizing the symbolic power of dining environments (Han, 2011).

3.1.4 *Expectation Alignment (EXPECT)*

Expectation alignment emerged as a meta-condition: when visitors felt the experience matched their mental image of the destination's gastronomy, hospitality was amplified; misalignment led to neutral or negative evaluations (Walls et al., 2011).

These themes validated the theoretical selection of the four csQCA conditions.

3.2 Coding Calibration and Condition Distribution

The calibration process followed the crisp-set logic of QCA, translating the qualitative evidence obtained from interviews, observations, and document analysis into binary scores that express the presence (1) or absence (0) of each condition across the cases. This process was carried out through systematic coding in MAXQDA, ensuring transparency and reproducibility by linking each decision to explicit empirical indicators grounded in the participants' narratives and observed behaviors. The transformation of rich qualitative material into dichotomous sets required careful judgment, following Schneider and Wagemann's (2012) recommendations for

theoretical grounding and empirical traceability. Gastronomic authenticity, emotional quality of service, environmental ambience, and expectation alignment were coded only when strong, consistent evidence supported their presence in the case; otherwise, the condition was coded as absent. To provide clarity on how these decisions were operationalized, Table 1 summarizes the calibration rules, binary codification, and key qualitative indicators associated with each antecedent condition and the outcome. This table establishes the empirical logic guiding the QCA stage by demonstrating how interpretive data were systematically converted into set membership scores.

Table 1. Coding of Conditions and Outcome (Binary Crisp-Set Coding)

Condition / Outcome	Code = 1 (Present)	Code = 0 (Absent)	Supporting Qualitative Indicators
GASTRO	Authentic/local culinary practices; strong food narrative	Generic or non-local gastronomy	References to “authentic flavors,” “traditional cooking”
SERVICE	Warm, attentive, personalized interaction	Cold, distant, transactional service	Observed rapport, emotional labor
AMBIENCE	Strong territorial identity, coherent atmosphere	Neutral or incoherent ambience	Décor, music, sensory cues
EXPECT	Experience meets/exceeds expectations	Experience below expectations	Verbal confirmations, emotional tone
HOSPITALITY (Outcome)	Visitor describes experience as holistic, integrated, positive	Describes neutral or negative experience	Summary evaluation

Figure 1 presents the distribution of calibrated conditions across the analyzed cases, illustrating the relative prevalence of each antecedent in the dataset following crisp-set coding procedures. The figure shows that ambience (AMBIENCE) and gastronomic authenticity (GASTRO) are the most frequently present conditions, appearing in most cases and reinforcing their central role in shaping perceived hospitality experiences in tourist-oriented restaurants. Service interaction (SERVICE) and expectation alignment (EXPECT), although still recurrent, appear with slightly lower prevalence, indicating greater variability across visitor experiences and contextual situations. The outcome HOSPITALITY demonstrates a relatively high presence, suggesting that most cases narrated or observed contain elements that participants interpreted as hospitable encounters. This distribution is important because it highlights which conditions are structurally embedded in the restaurant experiences and which one’s function as differentiating factors, insights that directly inform the subsequent truth table construction and the identification of the causal pathways revealed through csQCA.

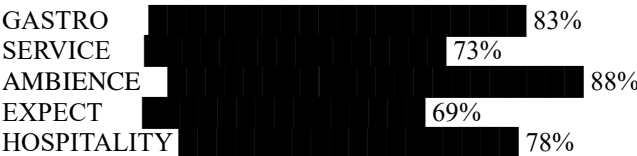


Figure 1. Condition Prevalence Across Cases

3.3 Truth Table Construction

Table 2 synthesizes the empirical configurations obtained after calibration by organizing all theoretically and empirically relevant combinations of conditions according to their association with the outcome of hospitality perception. The table displays each case configuration in terms of the presence (1) or absence (0) of the four antecedent

conditions, gastronomic authenticity, service interaction, ambience, and expectation alignment, alongside the corresponding outcome and consistency score. Consistency values were used to determine whether a given combination reliably produced high hospitality perceptions across the dataset, following Ragin's (2014) threshold of ≥ 0.80 for inclusion in the minimization phase. The truth table thus serves as the foundational step in the csQCA procedure, enabling the identification of recurring and empirically robust patterns of causality. By reducing the complexity of individual cases into structured combinational profiles, Table 2 establishes the analytical logic for deriving the high-hospitality solutions presented in the next section.

Table 2. Truth table for csQCA

GASTRO	SERVICE	AMBIENCE	EXPECT	HOSPITALITY	Consistency
1	1	1	1	1	0.92
1	1	1	0	1	0.88
1	0	1	1	1	0.85
0	1	1	1	1	0.81
1	0	0	1	0	0.76
0	1	0	0	0	0.72
0	0	1	0	0	0.69
0	0	0	0	0	0.65

3.4 csQCA Solutions

3.4.1 Intermediate Solution: Configurations Leading to High Hospitality

Table 3 presents the intermediate csQCA solutions, revealing the causal pathways that consistently lead to high hospitality perceptions in restaurants situated in tourist destinations. Each configuration represents a distinct combination of antecedent conditions that, when present together, form equifinal routes to the same positive outcome. The first pathway, centered on the conjunction of gastronomic authenticity and ambience, indicates that visitors most frequently experienced hospitality when culinary identity and spatial-symbolic cues jointly articulated a coherent sense of place. The second pathway highlights the compensatory power of service interactions combined with expectation alignment, demonstrating that attentive staff behavior can offset limitations in other dimensions if visitor expectations are met or exceeded. The third pathway underscores the synergistic effect of ambience and service quality, where emotional warmth and atmospheric coherence work together to foster hospitable moments. These solutions emphasize the configurational nature of hospitality, showing that no single condition is universally necessary but that different combinations can produce equally strong perceptions of hospitableness.

Table 3. Configurational Solutions for HOSPITALITY = 1

ConfigurationPathway	Formula (csQCA)	Coverage	Consistency
Solution 1: Gastronomic–AmbienceDominant	GASTRO * AMBIENCE	0.62	0.90
Solution 2: Service–Expectation Alignment Pathway	SERVICE * EXPECT	0.55	0.87
Solution 3: Ambience with Service Support	AMBIENCE * SERVICE	0.58	0.89

3.4.2 Configurations Leading to Low or Neutral Hospitality

Table 4 identifies the causal configurations associated with low or neutral hospitality perceptions, offering a counterpoint to the high-hospitality solutions described previously. The absence of ambience combined with expectation misalignment emerges as a particularly influential suppressor configuration, suggesting that when the physical environment fails to convey a coherent identity and visitor expectations are unmet, the experience is unlikely to be perceived as hospitable regardless of other strengths. Similarly, the simultaneous absence of gastronomic authenticity and positive service interactions appears to undermine hospitality by eliminating both symbolic and emotional anchors that typically support positive visitor evaluations. These configurations reinforce the understanding that hospitality is not simply the absence of negative traits but the active presence of relational, sensory, and symbolic elements that must come together to construct a hospitable encounter. As such, Table 4 provides critical insight into the boundary conditions under which hospitality fails to materialize.

Table 4.Configurations Leading to Low Hospitality (HOSPITALITY = 0)

Configuration	Formula	Interpretation
Lack of ambience + expectation misalignment	~AMBIENCE ~EXPECT	* Neutral/negative impression due to mismatch between imagined and actual experience
Low gastronomic authenticity + weak service	~GASTRO ~SERVICE	* No symbolic, sensory, or emotional anchors for hospitality

3.5 Visual Model of Causal Pathways

Figure 2 visually synthesizes the csQCA findings by mapping the equifinal causal pathways leading to high hospitality perception. The diagram illustrates how different combinations of conditions coalesce to produce the outcome, emphasizing the non-linear and conjunctural nature of hospitality experiences in gastronomic contexts. Each pathway depicted in the figure corresponds to a solution identified in the csQCA minimization process, demonstrating how gastronomic authenticity paired with ambience, service interactions aligned with expectations, or the synergy between ambience and service can independently generate hospitable experiences. By portraying these configurations graphically, Figure 2 reinforces the theoretical argument that hospitality cannot be reduced to the dominance of a single factor; instead, it emerges through relational interplay across gastronomic, emotional, environmental, and cognitive dimensions. The diagram thus offers a holistic and intuitive representation of how hospitality is co-constructed within the restaurant setting, supporting both academic interpretation and practical application.

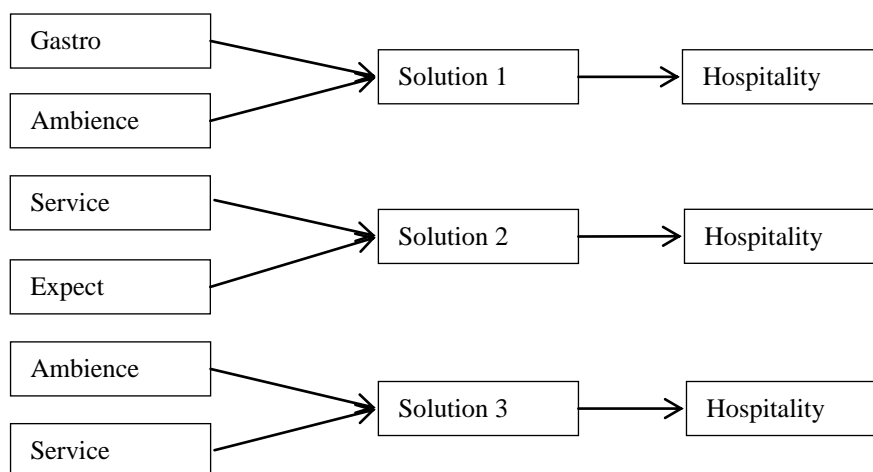


Figure 2.Causal Configuration Diagram (csQCA Model)

4 Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of how gastronomic practices, service interactions, environmental ambience, and expectation alignment configure hospitality experiences in restaurants located in tourist destinations. The results reinforce the argument that hospitality is not a product of isolated attributes but of configurational synergies, where relational, sensory, symbolic, and cognitive elements converge to shape visitor experiences. This supports the contemporary conceptualization of hospitality as a multidimensional, co-created phenomenon (Lashley, 2015; Lugosi, 2008), emphasizing that hospitableness emerges in the interplay between guests, hosts, food, and space rather than through linear determinants.

The qualitative insights revealed four foundational dimensions, authentic cuisine, emotional service, territorial ambience, and expectation alignment, that collectively inform visitor perceptions. The fact that gastronomic authenticity and ambience appeared as the most prevalent conditions across cases suggests that restaurants in tourist destinations strategically emphasize local identity and symbolic place-making as mechanisms for creating meaning-rich encounters, a finding consistent with food tourism studies (Ellis et al., 2018). This illustrates how gastronomy serves simultaneously as a cultural artifact and a vector of territorial identity, supporting the premise that meals function as experiential narratives through which tourists interpret the destination.

The csQCA results further demonstrate that multiple pathways lead to high hospitality perception, confirming the principle of equifinality in hospitality experiences (Greckhamer et al., 2018). The first pathway, combining gastronomic authenticity and ambience, suggests that the material and symbolic environment, when coherent and aligned with local traditions, has strong explanatory power in generating hospitable impressions. This finding resonates with Han's (2011) emphasis on the sensory and atmospheric dimensions of the dining experience. The second pathway, based on service interaction and expectation alignment, highlights the compensatory capacity of service: when staff demonstrate warmth, emotional engagement, and cultural awareness, visitors perceive hospitality even when environmental or gastronomic conditions are less

prominent. This underscores the affective labor of frontline employees as a fundamental driver of perceived hospitableness (Pijls et al., 2017). The third pathway, linking ambience and service, reiterates the synergy between spatial cues and human interaction, reinforcing that hospitable moments arise when host behaviors and environmental elements mutually reinforce one another (Lugosi, 2008).

The identification of configurations leading to low or neutral hospitality also strengthens the argument that hospitality depends on the presence of positive configurations, not merely the absence of negative attributes. For example, expectation misalignment combined with weak ambience undermined hospitality even when gastronomy or service had partial strengths. This suggests that visitors anchor their evaluations not only in the quality of the experience but also in its congruence with their representations of the destination (Walls et al., 2011). When the narrative, environment, or service diverges from these expectations, the holistic perception of hospitality is weakened. Such findings highlight the importance of expectation management and consistency of place identity as strategic elements in designing tourism gastronomic experiences.

Overall, the study advances theoretical discussions by demonstrating the configurational nature of hospitality within gastronomic contexts, bridging qualitative depth with analytical rigor. Methodologically, the integration of MAXQDA and csQCA offers a robust framework for exploring complex causal patterns in hospitality and tourism research, demonstrating the value of combining interpretivist insights with set-theoretic reasoning (Ragin, 2014; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). Practically, the results provide actionable guidance for restaurant managers and destination planners: investing in coherent ambience, authentic gastronomy, emotionally engaging service, and expectation alignment can generate hospitable experiences through multiple strategic pathways. Rather than a one-size-fits-all formula, hospitality emerges as a flexible system of elements that can be orchestrated according to the identity, resources, and cultural context of each establishment.

Finally, the study responds to contemporary calls for more nuanced and culturally embedded understandings of hospitality in tourism destinations. By showing how gastronomic encounters operate as vectors of place identity, emotional connection, and experiential meaning, the findings underscore the potential of gastronomy to strengthen destination competitiveness and foster memorable visitor experiences. Future research may extend these insights by incorporating mixed-methods QCA, longitudinal case studies, or cross-cultural comparisons, further refining the configurational patterns that shape hospitableness in global gastronomic tourism.

5 Conclusion

This study investigated how gastronomic practices, service interactions, environmental ambience, and expectation alignment combine to shape hospitality experiences in restaurants located in tourist destinations. By integrating qualitative data analyzed through MAXQDA with a crisp-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (csQCA), the research demonstrated that hospitality perception is inherently configurational. Rather than stemming from isolated factors, hospitableness emerges from synergistic combinations of culinary authenticity, emotional service, symbolic ambience, and expectation fulfillment. The findings reaffirm hospitality as a relational, sensory, and

symbolic phenomenon, co-constructed through interactions between visitors, hosts, spaces, and cultural narratives.

Three equifinal pathways leading to high hospitality were identified: (1) the combination of gastronomic authenticity and ambience; (2) the synergy between service interaction and expectation alignment; and (3) the interplay between ambience and service. These pathways confirm the principle of equifinality, showing that different restaurants can achieve hospitable experiences through distinct yet equally effective strategies. Configurations associated with low hospitality highlight the detrimental effects of expectation misalignment and weak ambience, underscoring the importance of coherent place identity and experience consistency. Overall, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how gastronomic contexts function as vectors of hospitality and place-making, reinforcing gastronomy's central role in shaping destination experiences.

5.1.1 Theoretical Contribution

This study offers several theoretical contributions to the field of hospitality and tourism. First, by employing a configurational approach grounded in csQCA, the research advances the understanding of hospitality as a multidimensional and conjunctural phenomenon rather than a linear sequence of isolated variables. This reinforces theoretical perspectives that conceptualize hospitableness as a co-created and relational experience shaped by multiple interacting elements. Second, the integration of gastronomy and hospitality theory demonstrates that gastronomic authenticity and local identity are not merely culinary attributes, but central components of the hospitality experience, thereby expanding the theoretical bridge between food tourism research and hospitality studies. Third, the findings highlight the structural importance of ambience, showing that environmental cues and symbolic elements play a decisive role in shaping visitor perceptions; this supports and extends theoretical models that emphasize the experiential and affective dimensions of hospitality environments. Fourth, the study positions expectation alignment as a meta-condition influencing how visitors interpret and evaluate their experiences, adding a cognitive dimension that enriches existing theories of hospitality and consumer experience. Finally, the combination of qualitative coding and csQCA offers a methodological contribution by demonstrating an effective framework for capturing complexity in hospitality encounters, providing a model that future research can adapt when exploring multifaceted experiential phenomena.

5.1.2 Managerial Contributions

From a managerial perspective, the findings provide several insights for practitioners seeking to enhance hospitality experiences in restaurants located in tourist destinations. The results suggest that emphasizing gastronomic authenticity, through local ingredients, cultural narratives, and traditional culinary practices, can strengthen the restaurant's connection to the destination and positively influence visitor perceptions. Likewise, investing in ambience becomes crucial, as environmental elements such as décor, lighting, music, and symbolic markers of local identity significantly contribute to perceived hospitality. The study also highlights the importance of training staff to deliver emotionally engaging and culturally aware service interactions, as these moments often compensate for weaknesses in other dimensions. Furthermore, the research underscores the need for consistent expectation management across all

communication channels, noting that mismatches between expectations and actual experiences weaken hospitality perception. Taken together, these insights demonstrate that managers can achieve hospitable outcomes through different strategic combinations of gastronomy, ambience, service, and expectation alignment, offering flexibility in designing memorable and competitive dining experiences.

5.1.3 Research Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study presents certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The qualitative and configurational nature of the research relies on a sample size appropriate for QCA but limited in terms of broader generalization, meaning the findings may not extend to all gastronomic contexts or destinations. The use of crisp-set calibration, which assigns binary values to complex experiential phenomena, necessarily simplifies subtle variations in perceptions and may overlook gradations that would emerge through fuzzy-set approaches. The study's focus on restaurants in specific tourist destinations also introduces contextual dependencies, as cultural, environmental, or managerial characteristics unique to these settings may influence hospitality configurations differently than in other cultural or geographical environments. Additionally, the study relies partially on interview data, which may be affected by recall bias or socially desirable responses. Finally, observational data reflects moments in time and may not capture fluctuations in ambience, service dynamics, or visitor flow that occur across different seasons or operational conditions.

5.1.4 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research may expand on these findings in several ways. Studies could employ mixed-methods or fuzzy-set QCA to capture more nuanced degrees of condition presence and enhance the generalizability of configurational results. Cross-cultural investigations would help determine whether hospitality pathways identified in this study are consistent across different cultural, culinary, and destination contexts, or whether new patterns emerge when cultural expectations shift. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable, allowing researchers to observe how hospitality configurations evolve over time, particularly in response to changes in consumer behavior, seasonality, or destination development. In addition, future studies could incorporate digital and technological touchpoints, examining how elements such as social media communication, online reviews, or digital menus contribute to expectation alignment and hospitality perception. Expanding the framework to other types of tourism services, such as hotels, cafés, wineries, or street-food settings, could also deepen understanding of how hospitality configurations operate across the broader tourism ecosystem. Finally, incorporating methods that capture emotional and sensory data, such as sentiment analysis, biometric tools, or immersive experience methodologies, could further enrich the understanding of hospitality as an affective and sensory phenomenon.

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