

FOOD AND BEVERAGE

Experiential mindset has paved way for fine dining as luxury

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LVMH-owned Krug Champagne often hosts themed pop-up eateries

By JEN KING

LISBON, Portugal Consumer behavior shifts toward experience rather than material goods have positioned gastronomy as the new must-have luxury, says the executive chef of London's Chiltern Firehouse restaurant.

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In the past, fine dining was an ostentatious, ornate and stuffy experience that attracted ill informed diners who cared little about sustainability, ingredients and culinary innovation. But, dining trends have evolved from this "sad state of reality" to be experience-based where informed diners, armed with Instagram, are increasingly appreciative of culinary trends, exotic ingredients and talents in the kitchen.

"Over the last couple of decades the term of luxury has changed dramatically in many different areas of the market," said Nuno Mendes, executive chef of **Chiltern Firehouse**, a 5-star restaurant in London housed in a former fire department house.

"You can see it in the fashion, lifestyle, design and several other mediums," he said. "Luxury has also changed and evolved in the terms of restaurants and foods."

From the kitchen

During the "How Food Became the New Luxury" session at FT's 2017 Business of Luxury Summit on May 15, Mr. Mendes said that prior to the rise in experiential luxury, stiff white linens, ornate cutlery and ingredients such as caviar, truffles and gold leaf defined fine dining.

Also, fine dining often attracted uninformed diners with little interest in behind-the-scenes gastronomy. In many ways, dining was seen as a closed off refuge from the ways modern society was changing, being less about story and all about status.

These "temples of the past" have changed dramatically now that luxury is experience driven. Looking to the culinary world clearly shows how consumers now yearn for experiences rather than status symbol material goods.

Today, diners seek a true connection to the artisan behind the meal and ingredients. Diners look for meals and products with stories to champion and discuss after it is enjoyed with friends at home.



Nuno Mendes speaking during FT's Business of Luxury Summit May 15

The highest expression of luxury is also access. A hard-to-get reservation at a restaurant is now an expression of luxury, possibly more so than a handbag.

Modern luxury dining reflects the desire of more than just a good meal, and restaurants have had to adapt to offer experience. The more exclusive and limited to a few, the better, especially for discerning diners.

This interest has led to chef collaborations and culinary pop-ups becoming the hottest event on a city's social calendar.

For example, Champagne house Krug whisked up a tasting experience using eggs as the primary ingredient in 2015.

Krug has developed a number of pop-up eateries and chef's dinners that pair a particular ingredient, such as potatoes or crab, with its Champagnes. For the Krug x Roma experience, consumers visiting Rome had the opportunity to attend a series of tasting events held at a collection of the Italian capital's best dining institutions ([see story](#)).

Similarly, guests of Rosewood Hotel Group's London property this January had the chance to snack on bite-sized works of contemporary art during an afternoon tea service.

Rosewood London unveiled a month-long Art Afternoon Tea menu, which drew inspiration from five internationally revered artists. The hospitality industry often turns to dining experiences as a way to dispense culture in an interactive, enjoyable way ([see story](#)).



Rosewood London's Art Afternoon Tea cakes

Limited bookings and themes that will not be replicated secure a dining experience as a unique moment in time obtainable only by the privileged, so much so that real estate developers have begun looking to well-known chefs and restaurateurs to anchor building projects.

In the past, status brands would be a ground floor focus of a building, but now food operators set the bar and have been shown to improve real estate profitability.

While physical retail's days are numbered, consumers still need to eat, which has driven food as an experiential

platform, Mr. Mendes explained.

Dining for the likes

The culinary landscape now has a stronger emphasis on the personal experience created during a meal.

Consumers' desire to share and retell of the experience with social circles has also resulted in gastronomy as a true luxury.

Going forward, culinary offerings will become more bespoke and experiential with chef or artisan relationship to the consumer being at the forefront. Food will become more personal, intimate and visible in its new business model.

Serving food to diners creates a storytelling platform that has been enhanced by digital and social media. Instagram, and consumers' habit of sharing must-have meals and culinary experiences with their community, has transformed the kitchen.

While some chefs may plate with foodie snaps on Instagram in mind, the sharing of artfully plated dishes, and ingredients or products of interest, gives access.

Mr. Mendes explained that the visibility offered by social media has opened up fine dining to an audience beyond cooking and travel publications.

Also, digital and social media have provided insight into global food ideas and trends, and importantly, inform and educate diners through engagement with favorite chefs and restaurants.

LVMH, for example, recently launched Clos19, an online platform offering spirits- and dining-focused experiences.

Launched April 26 in the United Kingdom, Clos19 will soon grow into Germany in the coming months. Additional markets are expected in the future.

Wines and spirits such as Mot & Chandon and Hennessy will be sold through Clos19. In certain regions, consumers will be able to order Mot Hennessy spirits with 24-hour delivery service.

The experiential aspect of LVMH's dealings with Clos19 will include editorial content, organized pairings and branded events ([see story](#)).

"[LVMH] is trying to connect, and trying to make a connection [with consumers]," Chiltern Firehouse's Mr. Mendes said. "[Clos19] shows that the experience is how we capture the audience, so by creating these out-of-this-world experiences, it is achieved."