Eating alone, or commensality redefined? Solo dining and the aestheticization of eating (out)

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Abstract
Consumers’ increasing fascination with recreational eating out has contributed to numerous transformations in the upmarket restaurant practice. This paper explores such changes in regard to the “social” aspects of eating out, focusing particularly on the “cultural phenomenon” and practice of eating publicly alone (solo dining). Specifically, the paper extends previous portrayals of solo dining as a bundle of aloneness and togetherness by exploring such interplay in the context of the aestheticization of eating and/or the aesthetic food(ie) movement. Based on the interviews of Finnish food/restaurant enthusiasts and exponents of solo dining, the paper firstly depicts solo dining as a practice in which eating publicly alone is celebrated for the sake of enhanced aesthetic immersion. Secondly, the paper argues that solo dining can indeed be interpreted as a form of eating together and depicts the myriad ways, both concrete and “anonymous”, through which solo restaurant meals are shared between like-minded enthusiasts. Thus, the aesthetically oriented slice of solo dining becomes not understood as a complete departure from the ideal of shared public meals but as an alternative manifestation of commensality within an enthusiasm-based consumer group characteristic of late modern consumer culture.
Introduction

The increasing interest in recreational eating out in many Western societies (Warde, 2016) has contributed to multiple types of transformations within the now diverse field of upmarket restaurants (DeSoucey and Demetry, 2016; Lane, 2014; Pearlman, 2013). This paper explores such changes in regard to the “social” aspects of restaurant consumption. More specifically, we grasp the practice of solo dining that seems to have recently turned into some sort of a “cultural phenomenon” (Lahad and May, 2017). A substantial amount of media texts, websites, and solo-friendly restaurants have celebrated the delights of entering restaurants alone, perhaps in the spirit of the wider solo consumption “trend” (Bianchi, 2016). The increasing appreciation of solo dining is intriguing since the practice appears to challenge the robustly rooted ideal of eating together at the same table (i.e. commensality literally understood, see Fischler, 2011) that has dominated especially in the public contexts of eating (Pliner and Bell, 2009).

This study, however, departs from the view of solo dining as a pure form of eating alone as well as from the literal definition of commensality. Instead, we build on recent notions about the blurring boundaries between eating alone and eating together, as well as on the related call for better identifying novel manifestations of commensality (Mäkelä, 2009). Correspondingly, we draw on the limited but burgeoning literature on solo dining that has provided some evidence for viewing the practice as a bundle of aloneness and togetherness (e.g. Goode, 2018; Lahad and May, 2017). Despite the valuable perspectives offered by these studies, however, there seems to be much room for further viewpoints in terms of age, social class, gender, restaurant types, consumer groups etc. (see Goode, 2018), both in regard to solo dining as such and the narrower theme of alone-together interplay. For the purposes of our article, relevant is that solo dining (as a hybrid of aloneness and togetherness) has not been sufficiently discussed in relation to enthusiasm-based consumer groups characteristic of consumer culture, such as the foodie movement (see Warde, 2015).

Therefore, we suggest that the viewpoint of the aestheticization of eating (Warde, 2016) and/or the aesthetic food-ie movement contributes valuably to the discussion on solo dining as a nexus of aloneness and togetherness. Regarding the ambiguous nature of “aestheticization” (Reckwitz, 2017) we draw on a specific understanding of it as circulating in social scientific studies touching upon the consumption scholarship (Charters, 2006; Reckwitz, 2017; Rössel et al., 2018; Szmigin, 2006). This leads to an understanding of aestheticization of eating as an increasing appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of the objects and services
of food and drink. This sort of understanding contains clear references to the consumption of art, and it has been recently accentuated for instance in the literature concerning dining out (e.g. Raviv, 2017; Warde et al., 2020) or the consumption of wine and other beverages (Charters and Pettigrew, 2005; Rössel et al., 2018; Thurnell-Read, 2018), in the emerging field of food philosophy (Furrow, 2016; Kuehn, 2005), as well as in studies on the aesthetic/artful food(ie) movement (Furrow, 2016; Johnston and Baumann, 2015). As for the latter, crucial here is that foodie-ism allegedly celebrates meaningful (aesthetic) relationships between people and objects of food and drink while supporting peer connectedness (e.g. De Solier, 2013).

Hence, the purpose of this paper is to utilize the cultural trend and practice of solo dining to study the relationship between the aestheticization of eating (out), the emerging desire for dining publicly alone, and the diversifying forms of (public) commensality. The empirical materials of the study consist primarily of the interviews of Finnish consumers who are not only restaurant enthusiasts but also exponents of solo dining. Interestingly, Finland is part of the allegedly “hyper-individualistic” Nordic consumer culture filled with culture-historical idealizations of individuality, which Ulver (2019) interweaves with the remarkable recent rise of the foodie culture in Sweden. Perhaps the ideal of individuality and laid-back attitude towards doing things and consuming alone also partly relates to the fact of Nordic people moving out of their parents’ house soon after reaching adulthood (Klinenberg, 2012). As for Finnish food and restaurant culture, worth mentioning is that relatively speaking, eating out alone is not highly unusual in Finland (see Lund et al., 2017).

The paper proceeds as follows. After introducing the traditional and more contemporary interpretations of “commensality”, we explore the current literature at the intersection of solo dining, eating out, and the foodie movement. The subsequent section provides details on data and methods, including an explication of the practice theoretical underpinnings of the study. The sections on results are divided in two, and they aim at demonstrating how the desire for dining publicly alone intertwines with the emerging forms of togetherness, both concrete and anonymous, among the like-minded restaurant enthusiasts. Hence, we argue that solo dining must not be understood as a complete departure from the ideal of shared public meals, but as part of the diversification of commensal eating patterns under the aestheticization of eating (out) and casualization of upmarket dining. Lastly, we discuss the results not only in relation to previous understandings on solo dining and commensality but also in regard to foodie sociability and Reckwitz’s (2017) “object and atmosphere-centred sociality”.

**Commensality**

The most classic and literal definition understands commensality as the practice of sharing food, or eating together, with people sitting at the same table (Fischler, 2011). In this meaning, the concept has occupied a central role in the European...
meal studies over the last 50 years or so. The profound importance of commensality relates to views about social interaction as a vital part of a “proper” meal (Sobal, 2000; see also Bugge and Almås, 2006), as well as to the potentially positive consequences that eating together may have for humans, relating for instance to health and to the family cohesion (see e.g. Marshall and Anderson, 2002). In a more abstract sense, eating together has been understood to express the core of human sociality. That is, sharing food may be seen as one of the main avenues through which humans rise above their biological needs and differentiate themselves from animals (see Fischler, 2011).

However, recent studies on contemporary eating patterns suggest a broader perspective. Namely, it has been argued that the boundaries between eating together and eating alone are becoming increasingly blurred (Mäkelä, 2009). In late modern society, “eating together” does not entail the act of sharing (the same) food with people sitting at the same table (Holm et al. 2016); instead, people may eat together and express commensality in various ways (Grignon, 2001; Mäkelä, 2009; Sobal and Nelson, 2003). For instance, the potentially growing number of “family dinners” eaten at the sofa while watching TV does not necessarily indicate a reduction in commensal eating patterns (Holm et al., 2016), and Sobal and Nelson (2003) note that sharing a beer between neighbours over a fence, for instance, may count as a commensal act. Furthermore, and importantly, Masson and her colleagues (2018) have suggested that digital food sharing may be understood as another form of commensality. Indeed, food has a major role in contemporary online communities (Zukin et al., 2017), which allow passionate food consumers to “create meaning, understanding and identity through discussing their experiences” (Watson et al., 2008).

Eating together certain types of food in certain ways defines a group (see Grignon, 2001). Usefully for our purposes, Grignon (2001) brings out the inter-connection between the diversity of social groups and diversity of commensality types in contemporary society. One could thus think that novel manifestations and understandings of commensality more easily appear, e.g., in a society with numerous enthusiasm-based, loosely structured (or “superficial and occasional” in Grignon’s words) social groups, such as the “lifestyle movement” of foodies (Watts, 2016).

Recently, the question of how to understand commensality has also been connected to the issues of sustainability. Rather intriguingly, British philosopher Julian Baggini (2014) suggested in a public talk, that in order to reach a truly sustainable food culture, an even broader perspective to commensality should be adopted. That is, Baggini advocates the idea that when eating a good meal, the diner should feel commensal connectedness not only to the persons s/he is concretely dining with, but also to the (potentially exploited) workers in the food system and even to animals used in the production of the meal. In any case, Baggini’s account as well the ones presented above demonstrate that the practice of commensality remains open for fresh interpretations.
Solo dining, eating out, and foodies

The ideal of commensality is particularly embedded in the public performances of eating (Pliner and Bell, 2009), illustrating more generally the difficulty of public and hedonic solo consumption (Ratner and Hamilton, 2015). Correspondingly, although the anxieties around eating out alone have clearly diminished in many countries and, e.g., the proportion of last meals out alone has doubled in the UK between 1995 and 2015 (Paddock et al. 2017; Warde et al., 2020), recent studies in Europe depict the practice of eating out as still essentially organized around the ideal of eating together, especially concerning dinners and weekends (Díaz-Méndez and García-Espejo, 2017; Lund et al., 2017; Paddock et al., 2017). Women in particular prefer to eat out in company (Warde et al., 2020). But again, inflections emerge, and according to Warde and his colleagues (Warde et al., 2019), frequent restaurant-goers (“major omnivores”) especially are not averse to eating out alone.

The literature on solo dining is burgeoning. The scholarship on business and management has identified solo diners as a neglected customer segment whose needs should be better catered by restaurants (Her and Seo, 2018; Lai and Lim, 2017; see also Hwang et al., 2018). A large part of the social scientific research has theorized the practice from the gender/feminist viewpoint (Goode, 2018; Heimtun, 2010; Jonsson and Pipping Ekström, 2009; Lahad and May, 2017). This stream of research has focused specifically on women solo diners who are understood to pose a particular challenge for the traditional restaurant conventions (Goode, 2018; Lahad and May, 2017). Yet, even if entering restaurants alone is described as especially painful for women, all solo diners face the fact that restaurants traditionally privilege the experiences of couples and families (see Lai and Lim, 2017).

The literature on solo dining has provided some support for viewing the practice as a bundle of aloneness and togetherness. One might not need much proof to accept the claim that some sort of aloneness is inevitably included in solo dining, and the practice certainly celebrates the de-stigmatization of public (female) solo participation (see Jonsson and Piping Ekström, 2009). But the research has also emphasized the non-solitary aspects of the practice. Solo diners have not been described as passive victims of the above-mentioned restaurant conventions. Instead, they allegedly find ways to mitigate the marketplace exclusion and become part of the restaurant community (Lai and Lim, 2017). Solo dining may also contain concrete social interaction with other diners or staff members, and Goode (2018) demonstrates how through such doings solo meals may contain more commensality or conviviality than the meals shared between silent couples sitting at the same table. Moreover, Lahad and May (2017) argue that solo dining, supported by the rise of solo-friendly restaurants such as the Dutch Eenmal, opens up new forms of public belonging since solo diners may feel anonymous connectedness to other solo diners.

Solo dining has not been, however, thoroughly theorized in the context of the foodie culture and/or the aestheticization of eating (out). To the best of our knowledge the only exceptions are Jonsson and Pipping Ekström’s (2009) mention of
foodies as one of potential consumer segments to enjoy solo dining, and Goulding’s (2012) short essay about the pleasures of eating alone in a restaurant. Goulding illustrates that dining alone may enable a thorough, aesthetic restaurant immersion since the diner may pay full attention to the little, attractive details composing a restaurant. He also demonstrates how entering a restaurant alone may facilitate meaningful and enjoyable conversations with the restaurant staff.

The literature touching upon eating out has represented foodies as consumers for whom the aesthetics of a restaurant meal matter on a level with (De Solier, 2013; see also Warde and Martens, 2000) or even more than social interaction (Watson et al. 2008). More generally and bearing on mind the role of commensality in defining a group (Grignon, 2001), foodies have been depicted as consumers who use food to “develop relationships with food professionals and fellow foodies” (De Solier, 2013: 27). However, perhaps partly due to understanding being a foodie as a social activity (see Johnston and Baumann, 2015: 57) and representations of foodies as social experts “who love socializing for its own sake” (Ambrozas, 2003: 53), studies have not thoroughly considered the option of dining alone for the sake of aesthetic immersion nor the possibility that the goal of social/foodie-connectedness could be achieved alternatively through practices such as solo dining.

**Data and method**

The primary data consists of twelve semi-structured interviews of Finnish solo diners. The informants were recruited through the second author’s Facebook publication, in which he searched for consumers who dine out regularly for recreational purposes and find solo dining as an enjoyable and at least an occasionally preferred mode of restaurant consumption. The set of interviewees consists of eight women and four men, aged between 32 and 52. Ten of them possessed at least a master’s degree. Most worked in the usual professions of the urban, educated middle-class (e.g. project director/manager, artist), and a few contributed to the aestheticization of eating also through their current job. Except for one, each resided in at least a close proximity of the major cities of Finland (most lived in the capital, Helsinki). The informant who did not reside in one of the main cities had nonetheless lived there earlier, and she reported of constant (in part food-focused) travelling (as did many others), both to Helsinki and to other European cities. The living situations of the informants’ varied.

The interviewees found it difficult to report exact figures concerning the frequency of public (solo) eating (see also Warde et al., 2020). For instance, some described eating solo meals daily when travelling for work but “only” fortnightly otherwise. A few reported having dined out alone previously “a lot”, but that the altered circumstances (e.g., children, economic/time constraints) had temporarily affected the frequency. The explicit estimates for the frequency of solo dining (in proper, “good” restaurants or upmarket wine bars) anyhow varied from “daily” to “2 – 4 times in six months”. For the purposes of a cultural analysis like ours,
crucial in our view is that each informant more or less identified with those who dine out frequently (for recreational and aesthetic purposes, see below) and insisted that the availability of company does not and should not drastically affect the frequency of such activity.

As hinted above, our aim was to examine solo dining from the viewpoint of aestheticization, not in its entirety. It is thus only logical that the demographics of the data resembles the social characteristics of food enthusiasts as reported in other studies (Johnston and Baumann, 2015; Warde et al., 2020). The interviews indeed indicated that each informant (albeit in varying degrees) viewed food through an aesthetical lens, and particularly, understood restaurants as aesthetically inspiring venues. This is not exactly the same as considering them as foodies, although this label would surely characterize many of our informants as long as the term is not used to refer to some sort of an extreme or “sensational foodie culture” as the movement is often represented in the media (De Solier, 2013). In any case, in this paper the occasional references to “foodies” are made for practical purposes.4

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Finnish by the second author of the paper. Interviews took place as a written chat on Skype, and they lasted from one to two hours. The interview themes ranged from the general consumption of (upmarket) restaurants to the moments of solo dining. For instance, we asked the informants to describe the ideal types of (past or upcoming) dining experiences as a solo diner. We also discussed their more general views about “good” eating and restaurant consumption, as well as the conditions of everyday/urban life that might be interlinked to the desire of dining alone. After the interviews, the informants were given an opportunity to get back in touch through Skype or e-mail in case they would like to add something. One returned via Skype, and one through e-mail. Both accounts were included in the data. In the presentation of the results the interviewees are referred to as numbers to protect their anonymity. The excerpts are translated by authors.

The analysis and interpretation of data draws on practice theoretical scholarship on consumption and eating (e.g. Halkier and Jensen, 2011; Warde, 2016) first in a sense that we define solo dining as a social practice. Furthermore, in practice theory, interviews may be understood as a suitable method to study practices as multifaceted nexuses of doings and sayings, coordinated by certain types of components (Halkier and Jensen, 2011). Hence, following many other practice theoretical studies on consumption (see Warde et al., 2017), the analysis of the interview performances of solo dining was informed by the notion of practices as consisting of materials, doings, and meanings (Magaudda, 2011). In the analysis and reporting of such performances we concentrated on revealing the collectively (among restaurant enthusiasts and exponents of solo dining) shared ideals embedded in the practice of solo dining instead of focusing on the individual level differences (that surely always exist). Although our primary focus is on shared meanings, an analytic category that we use here rather loosely and interchangeably with “general understandings” and “engagements”, we nonetheless paid attention to their linkages with materials and doings (or skills, competences, and “practical
understandings”) (see Warde et al., 2017), as well as to the ways the interviewees perform the practice of solo dining as interconnected to other practices of restaurant consumption and urban life (Warde et al., 2020).

Worth explication is also that as secondary data, we have utilized our own experiences as solo diners (interested in restaurant aesthetics). We had some prior experience of the activity, but after the start of the research we entered different restaurants and conducted participant observation (Thurnell-Read, 2018) with a more reflective mindset. We then exchanged thoughts, during the meals and afterwards, of our personal feelings about the occasions, the material conditions of the restaurants’ (from the perspective of solo diner), the service etc., as well as of the doings of other possible solo diners and their interaction with staff. We utilized the information while planning the interview themes, and it surely helped us to deepen the discussion with the informants as well as the analysis of the interview data.

**Solo dining as eating alone**

Mirroring other studies touching upon foodie dining (De Solier, 2013; Warde et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2008), the desire for dining alone relates essentially to the goal of focusing on the restaurant aesthetics. That is, “good” meals eaten out are not understood instrumentally, as just a source of “fuel” or as a way to meet family members or friends, but as an opportunity for aesthetically rich experiences. In practice, however, the execution of the goal of concentration is not that straightforward and unproblematic. For instance, the informants mention the electronic gadgets that are sometimes used to ease the potential pain of consuming food publicly alone. Yet, despite the occasional presence of such materials many underline that they are planning on reducing the use of the mobile devices in the future when dining alone (using them to discuss the experience with one’s peers is another story, to which we return later).

“When ‘eating well’, you must be able to focus […]” (3)

“I have been learning to get rid of all the excessive actions and just try to focus on food and the atmosphere.” (2)

“I like to go to eat [out] well and to enjoy and appreciate the food.” (8)

Digging deeper to the goal of aesthetic concentration, the search for extraordinary, food-focused and perhaps more “artful” experiences can be distinguished from the aesthetics of the “pleasant urban whole”. These intertwine in the interview performances of solo dining. Thus, on one hand, solo dining contains an understanding of restaurants and skilled chefs as capable of producing extraordinary experiences and deeply moving emotions comparable to any form of “high” art (see Charters, 2006). A few informants represent solo dining as especially suitable for testing the new and exciting restaurants with
innovative food since these sorts of experiences are understood to require additional concentration.

“I do think that where there are different sense-stimulating experiences, there can be (and must be) art, why not also in everything related to food.” (6)
“A restaurant experience can fully equal going to opera or a magnificent exhibition.” (10)
“For me, art is all the creative work in which a human being brings about something that is an ennobling experience for the other. Or a fine experience somehow. Can be a bad experience if that's the goal. Art is experience.” (1)

On the other hand, the performances of solo dining essentially revolve around the less extraordinary and less food-focused types of aesthetic immersion. While adhering to a claim that restaurants may provide extraordinary experiences and that high-end restaurants matter, the informants commonly celebrate the less extraordinary aestheticization of everyday life and achieve this by frequently entering restaurants that symbolize the casualization of upmarket dining (Pearlman, 2013). In this view, the consumer engages with aesthetically pleasing “urban atmospheres” (Reckwitz, 2017), consisting for example of the comfortably decorated and lit spaces, all kinds of urban movement both inside the restaurant and outside of it, and “nicely” cooked but not excessively intellectual or otherwise extreme food. Food intertwines with the overall fascinating urban atmosphere. For instance, an interviewee who celebrates the “pieces of art” delivered by many contemporary restaurants also embrace the less extraordinary types of experiences and describes her best solo dining experience in a way that invites us to note the importance of the “pleasant urban whole”.

“I randomly stopped by a small restaurant close to Norreport. It was immediately like stepping into a whole new world: warm, soft light, candles on a table, a friendly but not intruding server, suitable amount of people, low-volume jazz in the background […] Food wasn’t memorable though, although not bad either.” (4)

Both interweaving interpretations about the aesthetics of solo dining, the more and the less extraordinary, encompass the view of the social interaction as embedded in the traditional notion of commensality as somehow threatening the aesthetic immersion. Dining alone is an attractive option since it is believed to deepen the connection between the diner and the aesthetic/artful objects or environments, whereas eating with others requires compromises, distracts the aesthetic rhythm of consumption, and generates anxieties. In our data, these sorts of views are elaborated not only in the context of restaurants but also in relation to other types of cultural consumption.

“You enjoy food more without social interaction.” (5)
I also like to visit exhibitions alone, because I often enjoy the mere atmosphere and I feel like wandering aimlessly and lingering and in case I’m accompanied by others I just keep thinking that they get annoyed[...].” (8)

The desire for dining alone must be also understood beyond the actual moments of dining. Relating to the casualization of upmarket dining, our data reveals an understanding or a normative goal of spontaneous and individual restaurant consumption. In other words, solo diners celebrate the freedom for being able to spontaneously choose when and where to dine, according to one’s own (temporary) preferences. Furthermore, many informants weave this sort of freedom with the wider search of the aesthetic urban experience. Informed by Reckwitz’s (2017) theorization about the aestheticization of cities and the centrality of urban atmospheres in late modern society, solo dining might be seen as a perfect constituent in the sequence of activities aiming at aesthetic urban immersion. Again, eating with others requires compromises and work-like efforts, which are seen as not quite fitting the goal of spontaneous, frequent, and aesthetically oriented dining out.

“I will tell about an experience I had once when visiting Paris. I visited an art-exhibition, in a small bookstore [...] and found a small charming café, in which I sat and started my new beautiful booklet. I always search for such atmospheres in any city...An art-exhibition or other experience that you want to reflect on in a fitting café/restaurant...” (7)

“I wanted to make the free-time more flexible and somewhat more surprising, so I started drinking coffee or beer more alone, eat alone etc. [...] you don’t really want to do too much efforts for a Friday/Saturday dinner [...]” (6)

“So I rather go to a restaurant with short notice, so I don’t feel tempted for calling friends and fixing things. It would reduce the ambience and in the end I would stay at home.” (1)

While embracing the ideal of dining alone, the aesthetically oriented slice of the practice of solo dining may also be interpreted as containing an underlying desire to eat with one’s peers as illustrated in studies about foodies. Namely and intriguingly, embedded in the foodistically oriented solo dining is the understanding of a “proper co-diner”. This figure is represented as someone who knows how to practically dine in a way that does not destroy the pursuit of an aesthetic experience. Organizing such table companion may be a tricky task bearing on mind also the above-depicted goal of frequent dining. Besides the busy schedules of potential co-diners, an informant mentions the “social norms” that prevent her from dining with a married foodie friend of opposite gender. In this sense, the desire for dining alone should be at least partially understood, not as a pure goal in itself, but as a practical and perhaps as a second-best solution resulting from the difficulty of organizing foodie-to-foodie dining occasions.

“In solo dining it all comes down to the fact that I search for certain mood with food and drink that a co-diner [...] could unknowingly jeopardize in a minute. So I rather go to
experience a perfect culinary pleasure alone than take a risk with some, as such nice human being, who doesn’t approach food and drink as sensitively as I do. I don’t consider my approach as better, rather find it to differ so clearly from that of my close circle of friends and relatives that I don’t even try to combine these [...] “(1) “I prefer doing it (eating lengthy meals) alone than in company which doesn’t appreciate the situation.” (10)

Besides, worth clarifying is the fact that our informants do not deny the pleasures and benefits of eating out together with friends and family members, and report also doing that frequently. What they do seem to claim, however, is that commensality in its literal sense should not be considered as a major organizing principle of “good” restaurant consumption. And, as we elaborate next, there seems to be “more commensality” in solo dining than first appears.

**Solo dining as eating together: Commensality redefined?**

The aesthetically oriented approach to the consumption of food and restaurants serves simultaneously as a starting point for viewing solo dining through the lens of a new type of commensality. Despite the above-depicted celebration of eating alone, our data does not portray solo dining as a solitary activity. Instead, in what follows we elaborate solo dining as a culture of togetherness which builds on an understanding that commensality may potentially occur between solo diner and restaurant staff/other diners (present or not) who share an aesthetic approach to objects of food and drink. We also unveil some of the crucial doings and materials that intertwine with the understanding.

Let us first elaborate the choice of a proper restaurant. Besides friendly service and other such self-evident characteristics of a good restaurant shared by the majority of consumers, crucial here is that the restaurant must genuinely stand for the core values of the contemporary gourmet food culture. Hence, our informants dine solo mostly in small, personal, and passionate restaurants that for many seem to essentially embody the aestheticization of eating (out). The detection of such restaurants is an easy task in one’s home town. When travelling, natural wines and other such symbols may facilitate the identification of solo friendly restaurants.

“I only use places that serve natural wines. These places are usually qualified also when it comes to food so that the food doesn’t destroy the experience.” (1)

These restaurants gather the tribe. When an aesthetically oriented diner enters such a place, s/he instantly feels being among the peers, whether staff members or other diners, perhaps just in the “anonymous” sense (Lahad and May, 2017). For our informants, this sort of belonging does not occur at the less personal restaurants. In the following excerpt, an informant reports how entering a wrong type of
a (chain, impersonal) restaurant may turn solo dining into a truly solitary experience that it is otherwise definitely not.

*I remember when I once had my arm plastered and went to that horror [chain] place [...] and two waitresses stared when I tried to take off my jacket [...]. That was when I felt quite lonely." (9)

On the contrary, after entering the “right” restaurant, solo diner enjoys the connectedness to the place and to the other people, present or not, who carry the similar approach to food and drink. Hence, the sense of belonging does not just occur between all kinds of solo diners as in the study by Lahad and May (2017), but between a specific type of solo diner and other, similarly oriented staff members or other diners (who might but must not be alone). The aesthetically oriented solo diner finds pleasure in “consuming” the traditional commensality produced by the other tribe members at a restaurant but is freed from the burden of actively participating in such production. S/he is simultaneously alone and with others, striving for a balance between togetherness and aesthetic immersion. This is not to suggest that aesthetic immersion would not be possible when concretely eating with others, nevertheless, solo dining provides an alternative, less or differently sociable but far from unsociable way of organizing commensal eating while increasing the likelihood of a thorough immersion.

Our data represents solo dining also as a practice with many types of concrete social interaction (Goode, 2018). In some rare cases, such interaction might occur between solo diner and other restaurant guests. However, much more importance is allocated to the interaction between the diner and staff members (Goulding, 2012). The relatively short and food-focused conversations with staff members are understood to provide just the right amount and type of social interaction for a perfect public meal, again maintaining the proper balance between aloneness and togetherness.

“Yes, I do communicate. The staff is often very interesting and the discussion topics stay at food and drink. They are also busy, so they don’t have time for endless chatting.” (10)

Worth highlighting here are also the profound material changes in the upmarket restaurant spaces over the last decades. Open kitchens and other such designs have physically connected those who cook the food and those who consume it (Pearlman, 2013; Ribbat, 2017) and demonstrate the contemporary chef-consumer intimacies (Abbotts, 2015) more generally. These material changes have acted as catalysts for the diner-staff interaction, and perhaps in part reduce the need for concrete table companion. Indeed, for example in Finland, at “the small and personal” venues, a solo diner with an aesthetic orientation oftentimes notes having “eaten” the meal together with staff members. As our secondary data demonstrates, while eating a dish (and before and after it), the ingredients and the preparation of dishes are discussed, and personal tasting notes exchanged.
Lastly, our data also reveals an alternative form of commensality that occurs between solo diners and like-minded others who are not present. This form is assisted by the rise of digital technology (Masson et al., 2018) and exemplifies the wider, contemporary eating culture obsessed with sharing food experiences online. Unlike in the major part of the history of dining out, most consumers these days dine out with a chance to take high-quality pictures of food as well as the option of discussing the experience in real time with absent friends (through e.g. WhatsApp). For instance, the informant who reported the social norms that prevented her from dining with the married foodie friend of opposite gender, explains how they eventually dined commensally over the phone. In her depiction of the major doings while dining out, other things are involved, yet chatting with a friend is listed as an essential ingredient of the perfect solo meal.

“a) exchange messages with a friend that I can’t dine with because of the social norms (and who understands the essence of visiting natural wine bars) b) chat with the bar staff c) read a book d) watch out of the window.” (1)

In fact, the authors of this paper ended up performing this sort of commensality over the research process. One of us dined alone at a restaurant, paid attention to the aesthetic qualities of the meal and to the overall performance of the restaurant. Through instant messaging, including pictures and text, he then conveyed those observations to another of us in real time, which led to a lengthy chat about the meal. While we did not eat the same food in the physical sense, at that moment we interpreted the act in many ways as eating together.

Solo dining as seen from the viewpoint of the carriers of food/restaurant aestheticization thus appears to contain understandings and many types of skillfully orchestrated social interaction that instruct to view the practice from the perspective of commensality. The interaction occurs in both concrete and anonymous ways between the consumers who embrace the aestheticization of eating (out). In many interview performances of solo dining, the types of social interaction interweave (although in the particular case below we lack information about the level of the food/restaurant enthusiasm of the person the informant is chatting with).

“I was in amsterdam a month ago. At a nice hotel. I went out for a run, it was snowing. I didn’t want to go outdoors anymore and the restaurant at the hotel looked nice, lovely lighting, a 3-course menu. I sat first at the bar counter and had a gt after having discussed all the options with the bartender. Then I went to the table, ate those 3 dishes and chatted with a friend.” (9)

This vision of commensality interconnects with the ideal of eating alone as elaborated earlier, and it supports the creation of a perfect balance between social interaction and the goal of aesthetic immersion. Resembling De Solier’s (2013; see also Warde and Martens, 2000) depiction of foodie dining, the aesthetic
and the social still interweave, but in part differently since the latter manifests itself alternatively.

“The best thing in dining out alone is that I can share the space with like-minded others who may simultaneously experience something totally similar – in such a way that we don’t have any pressure for social interaction. So, I get it all at once: company and privacy. Understanding and presence. That’s what makes solo dining perfect.” (1)

Conclusion and discussion

This paper used the emerging practice of solo dining to explore the relationship between the aestheticization of eating (out), the emerging desire for dining publicly alone, and the diversifying forms of (public) commensality. We have argued that the aesthetically oriented slice of solo dining interweaves the desire for dining publicly alone with emerging forms of commensality that occur between the like-minded consumers. That is, firstly, solo dining contains an understanding according to which “good” (but multiple types of) restaurants provide (extra) ordinary aesthetic experiences worth full immersion and are thus viable targets for solo consumption. We have also argued that the desire for dining alone relates crucially to some of the more general virtues of contemporary upmarket restaurants supporting and illustrating the aestheticization of eating out: the spontaneous, individualized, and “everyday” consumption of upmarket restaurants. Secondly, we have depicted both anonymous and concrete ways through which commensality manifests itself alternatively in the aesthetically oriented slice of the practice of solo dining. Drawing on Grignon’s (2001) point about the interlinkages between the diverse types of both social groups and commensality in contemporary society, we could conclude that the emergence of loosely structured, enthusiasm-based social groups (such as foodies) has surely contributed to the possibility of understanding the aestheticized fragment of solo dining as eating together.

As for the theme of “eating together” as discussed in the earlier literature on solo dining, the results support the view of social belongingness or togetherness as a vital part of the practice (Goode, 2018; Lahad and May, 2017). Regarding the claim about the “anonymous” connectedness between solo diners (Lahad and May, 2017), we have demonstrated that such togetherness may occur not just between any solo diners but relevantly and perhaps even more intensively so between solo diners and other diners (solo or not) who share similar passions around food and restaurants. With an open mind this type of togetherness can be interpreted as supporting the image of a “social foodie” (e.g. Johnston and Baumann, 2015); although executed alternatively, solo dining contains the goal of eating with one’s peers. Yet we find our results as enriching the prevailing views about the social aspects of the aesthetic food movement since our informants’ performances definitely deviate from the portrayals of foodies as social experts.
performances definitely deviate from the portrayals of foodies as social experts about the social aspects of the aesthetic food movement since our informants of eating with one's peers. Yet we find our results as enriching the prevailing views (Baumann, 2015); although executed alternatively, solo dining contains the goal be interpreted as supporting the image of a “social foodie” (e.g. Johnston and May, 2017), we have demonstrated that such togetherness may occur not just between solo diners but relevantly and perhaps even more intensively so claimed about the “anonymous” connectedness between solo diners (Lahad and Goode, 2018; Lahad and May, 2017). Regarding the interlinkages between the diverse types of both social groups and commensality in contemporary society, we could conclude that the emergence of loosely structured, enthusiasm-based social groups (such as foodies) has surely contrib-
tuted to the possibility of understanding the aestheticized fragment of solo dining and the social still interweave, but in part differently since the latter manifests itself alternatively. For practical reasons and given the theoretical framework of the study, we were boundedly a global trend, yet it might be that the Finns were especially well-equipped to absorb it. The introductory section of the paper gestured at Nordic (hyper-)individualism, the Nordic habit of living alone right after reaching adulthood, and the relative normality of public solo meals in Finland. While presenting the preliminary results of our study in Finland and abroad, the differing audience reactions have corroborated our impression of our results as representing something truly “Finnish” or “Nordic”. In any case, we are tempted to conclude that in Finland, perhaps the trend of recreational solo dining is empowered by the individualist Nordic (consumer) culture, and it expands the already normalized habit of eating publicly alone into the sphere of leisure and other types of venues. Solo dining is undoubtedly a global trend, yet it might be that the Finns were especially well-equipped to absorb it. For practical reasons and given the theoretical framework of the study, we were forced to bypass some “deviant” cases as well as intriguing perspectives that might relevantly still add to our understanding about the phenomenon of solo dining. For instance, many of our informants intriguingly weaved the desire for eating alone with their “introvert personality”. That is, mirroring Klinenberg’s (2012) account about the “singleton society”, many viewed the contemporary world as overly social (for “introverts” particularly) and reported using solo dining as a chance to recover from the pressures of the socially demanding and otherwise chaotic everyday life. This explicates the perhaps obvious fact that the desire for eating publicly alone is definitely not solely caused by the process of aestheticization. Instead, various types of practices external to the practice of eating (out) and its aestheticization may entice consumers into entering restaurants alone, and as we found, the moments of solo dining may then deepen the aesthetic relationship between consumers and food/restaurants. Thus, we suggest that the consumption scholarship building on practice theory could explore the desire for public solo dining more broadly and systematically in the nexus of various kinds of practices of everyday and urban life.
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Notes
1. A field containing multiple types of (not just expensive or “fine”) restaurants representing the contemporary, omnivorous gourmet food culture (see DeSoucey and Demetry, 2016).
2. When Lund and his colleagues (2017) asked who their respondents ate with “when eating out yesterday at a café or restaurant”, they found that 23% of such meals in Finland had taken place alone, more than in Sweden (14%), Norway (13%), and Denmark (7%). As the authors mention, though, restaurant consumption in Finland (and Sweden) is more linked to work.
3. At the time of recruitment, the interviewees were not told about the idea of conducting the interviews as a written Skype chat. Thus, and this is relevant in regard to some of our results, there is no particular reason to suspect that our interviewees would possess more digital enthusiasm or skills than the average middle class / educated / urban / foodie audience.
4. Like in the seminal literature on foodies (Johnston and Baumann, 2015), many of our informants hesitated when asked about their identity as a foodie.
5. We eventually found this technique fruitful for our purposes since the interviewees expressed themselves in substantial length and depth (with some variation between informants and interview themes). This surely relates to their enthusiasm about the topic as well as to the capability of discussing it in written form (education).
6. Alternative and partly overlapping versions of the “components/elements of a practice” exist (see Arsel and Bean, 2013; Gram-Hanssen, 2011; Torkkeli et al., 2018). Our aim here is not to delve into the subtle yet in many cases important differences between the versions. The decision to speak here of materials, doings, and meanings is predominantly motivated by the easy-to-understand nature of these particular terms.
7. For instance, one of the informants worked full-time in the upmarket restaurant sector. He, although clearly being a passionate (professional) foodie, used after-work solo dining to distance himself from the restaurant/work aesthetics.
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