

A Study On Consumers' Perception Of Vegetarian Restaurants In Romania

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Abstract

The food industry is an important link in the system of economic and social activities aimed at improving people's material and cultural standards.

Globally, more and more people are choosing a vegetarian diet that includes the consumption of vegetables, fruits, legumes and cereals. For all those who want to take a break from animal foods, there are extremely many healthy and tasty food alternatives that will encourage them to do so. The vegetarian or even raw-vegan current is not a novelty, but the scale it has taken in recent years has also led the food industry to reorient itself, so that more and more restaurants with vegetarian dishes have appeared worldwide. For vegetarian restaurants, the Romanian market is a challenge, most Romanians being large consumers of meat and animal products.

This paper aims at presenting the current state of development of vegetarian restaurants in Romania, the strategies adopted in their administration and the degree of consumer satisfaction with the quality offered. In order to highlight the opinions and behaviors of Romanians regarding the quality of services and dishes of restaurants with this specific, the authors conducted a quantitative marketing research among the Romanian population, revealing that vegetarian restaurants have a real potential of development in the near future.

Keywords: Consumers, Marketing research, Restaurants, Strategies, Vegetarian

Introduction

Globally, more and more people are giving up eating animal products and are doing so for ethical, religious, environmental or even health reasons.

Vegetarian food includes all possible fruits and vegetables, in the freshest possible state, because a very brief preparation of them keeps the nutrients in almost perfect condition. Vegetarians also eat cereals and legumes.

Vegan food is gaining, every day, more and more followers, the segment of those who try to lead a healthy and moral lifestyle is growing, and for all those who want to take a break (smaller or larger) from meat dishes, there are extremely many healthy and filling food alternatives that would encourage them to do so. The vegetarian or even raw-vegan current is not a novelty, but the scale it has taken in recent years has also determined the food industry to reorient itself, so as to be as pleasing to consumers as possible. Thus, 2016 has been declared the Vegan Year worldwide, and restaurants around the world tend to align with these requirements.

For vegetarian restaurants, the Romanian market is a challenge, most Romanians being large consumers of meat and animal products. This paper analyzes the development of vegetarian restaurants in Romania and

the perceptions of Romanian consumers towards these restaurants, towards the quality of the dishes offered and towards the management strategies approached by their managers. In order to highlight the opinions, perceptions and behaviors of Romanians regarding restaurants with this specificity and the factors that underlie the choice of vegetarian restaurants by consumers, the authors conducted a quantitative marketing research. The method of survey conducted in the electronic environment was used to collect data. The survey was conducted based on a questionnaire designed on the Google Forms platform. Data collected from respondents were processed with SPSS statistical processing software.

The paper is organized as follows: the next section reviews the main publications in the literature on consumer perception of vegetarian restaurants; section 3 contains the research context and methodology, section 4 emphasizes the results, discussing and interpreting them, and the last section presents the concluding remarks.

Literature Overview

The hospitality industry has been studied in the literature, from different points of view. Some of these studies have addressed consumers' perceptions of this industry and what are the most important criteria that consumers take into account when choosing a restaurant. The research in this field analyzed various aspects related to the quality of dishes, hygiene, ambiance, decor, location, view, prestige, taste, presentation, prices, customer experiences, and analysis of how they react to restaurant evaluations (Harrington, Ottenbacher, Way, 2013). Lately, rating systems have helped consumers choose the restaurant that comes closest to their preferences. Currently, rating systems act as guides that help consumers find the perfect restaurant according to different criteria (Kaviya, Roshini, Vaidhehi, Sweetlin, 2017). The importance of restaurant ratings in consumer preferences has grown rapidly, especially when selecting a luxury restaurant (Cheng, Peng, 2018). It is important for managers to identify the importance and performance of the factors underlying customer selection of restaurants (Liu, Tse, 2018). Restaurants are evaluated according to different criteria, such as food, service, restaurant atmosphere, etc. (Christensen, Strandgaard, 2013). The elements that constitute the atmosphere of a restaurant are: interior design and decoration, aesthetics, ambiance (music, lighting, temperature), staff, spatial planning (Heung, Gu, 2012). The quality of the physical environment, food and services is quite important in the image of the restaurant, and the perception of value has an impact on the physical environment and the quality of food (Ryu, Lee, Gon Kim, 2012). Operators involved in the hospitality industry, including restaurants, make a significant contribution to creating unique experiences (Matson-Barkat, Robert-Demontrond, 2018).

Other studies targeting the restaurant industry have focused on measuring customer satisfaction and loyalty (Gupta, McLaughlin, Gomez, 2007), the quality of dishes and customer experiences (Berry, Carbone, 2007) and consumer perception of brands (Ekinici, Sirakaya-Turk, Preciado, 2013). In general, some of the most studied aspects in this field are customer satisfaction, restaurant management (Thompson, 2009, Upneja, Hua, 2006), corporate social responsibility and green marketing (Ham, Lee, 2011).

Recently, vegetarian restaurants have become a subject of study in the literature. There are studies that have tried to identify the factors that determine the choice of vegetarian tourist destination. Among the millions of tourists there are vegetarians and other people who opt for a vegetarian diet during their travels, whether for health, religious or other reasons. Understanding the factors that shape the decision to choose the destination of a vegetarian tourist can help us appreciate the importance of this tourism sector, which is currently developing, but which still has a long way to go (Gomez, Ruiz, Mele, 2018). Other researchers have identified factors that influence various categories of consumers to choose vegetarian restaurants. One such analyzed category was that of students. Based on their experiences, the factors that

influence university students' perceptions of vegetarian restaurants have been deeply identified (Kim, Lee, Goh, 2017). Other studies have focused on the correlation between consumer lifestyle change, through the consumption of vegetarian foods, and the ecological impact on the environment, through greenhouse gas emissions (Krpan, Houtsma, 2020).

Cheng, Lin, Tsai (2014) investigate consumer preferences in choosing vegetarian restaurants. In their study they show that, in general, restaurant foods are often high in calories deriving from animal fat and protein and resulting in a high risk of cardiovascular and other chronic diseases. These authors also avert that a diet high in animal products contributes to global warming. Thus they recommend a vegetarian diet and try to understand and evaluate the consumers' preferences when selecting vegetarian restaurants.

Materials and Research methodology

Research context

Alternatives to animal products have been introduced in Mintel's Global Food and Drink Trends 2016 report, which claims that an increase in new sources of vegetable protein and various meat substitutes are quite attractive to omnivorous consumers, leading the market to a direction in which what was previously considered an alternative, can now be the main one. A study from the beginning of this year, also belonging to Mintel, shows that 30% of millennials in the United States consume alternative products to meat almost daily and, although American culinary culture cannot be compared with the Romanian, the vegetarian trend is found in Romania especially among the young population. Baum + Whiteman, a global food and restaurant consulting company, has also included vegetarianism on its 2016 trend list, and Yahoo Foods talks about it in its list of 16 food trends. The reasons why a large percentage of the population goes in the vegetarian direction are related to both health and alignment with a fashionable trend. Sustainability, ethics, but also the various allergies to animal products, increasingly common among the population, are some of the most common reasons why customers choose the "green" option. Vegetarian restaurants have multiplied, earned Michelin stars (not too many though: only one in 2300 restaurants selected in Italy and 3 out of 1700 selected in the UK and Ireland, for example) and entered the top restaurants in the world. In Bucharest, the oldest vegetarian restaurant is Barca. Other restaurants have opened and closed, being a niche that hardly survives in the Romanian society, still oriented quite a lot towards a diet based on animal products. In fact, it seems that among the most popular dishes in vegetarian restaurants are those that fool the eye and imitate traditional meat-based dishes. Currently there are few restaurants in Romania that offer a varied and healthy, vegetarian menu, so those who are vegetarians or follow different diets, do not have many options available. More such restaurants would promote a healthier lifestyle, and for entrepreneurs, this idea means a very good business opportunity, especially if they come with affordable prices, as there are very few vegetarian shops and restaurants in Romania; therefore, they face a new market, ready to be explored and exploited.

The most appreciated vegetarian restaurants in Romania are: Barca, Raw Vegan Bistro, CăsuțaNaturii, Cris Restaurant, Rawdia, Super Falafel, Delicious raw, Radha Cuisine, Little Tyke, Vegan Time, Biofresh, Home Cocktail Bar. Thus, the Barca restaurant offers at least a diversified raw vegan menu and is located in Bucharest. Whether customers have already chosen a healthy diet, or want to experience vegetarian or raw vegan cuisine, the diversity of the menu is essential both from the perspective of nutrients and from the perspective of combinations of tastes and flavors.

The Raw Vegan Bistro restaurant has the widest range of raw vegan dishes, from soups, sushi, lasagna, to cakes, smoothies or breads, in a friendly digital bistro. In Bucharest, there is also the possibility to order dishes online.

Rawdia is a vegetarian and raw-vegan restaurant and shop where you can find both predominantly raw-vegan dishes and ingredients as well as friends who share with you the same beliefs about a healthy and clean lifestyle. It sells live food and superfoods, mayonnaise bread specialties, raw breads, snacks, creams, pâtés, soups, salads, desserts and juices & smoothies, all super delicious. It is different from classic restaurants due to the quality, diversity, consistency of products and unique exterior design, conveying the idea of premium. The interior design of the Rawdia restaurant and the visual identity elements attract the young audience and help the points of sale to be easy to remember and memorize (painted in green, the color of nature, with many decorative plants, with wooden furniture, relaxing music and pleasant atmosphere).

Delicious raw is a take-away restaurant, located in Brasov (an important city in Romania) and offers vegan food. The menu is changed daily and the dishes can be picked up from the two shops in the city. Customers can also choose from a selection of raw vegan desserts. Soups, vegan pasta, vegan burgers, stews, pots and other 100% natural dishes can be found here. Orders can also be delivered at home.

Research methodology

The mere existence of restaurants is no longer enough to attract and retain customers. In Romania, a very low percentage of the population is vegetarian, but during periods of fasting and from the desire to have a healthy diet, an increasing part of consumers also consume vegan and vegetarian products in addition to those of animal origin. The research conducted and presented in this article was quantitative in nature and aimed at identifying the opinions and behaviors of consumers in Romania regarding the services and dishes of restaurants with this specific vegetarian. Considering the issue of the paper, the specific objectives pursued by our research were:

- Identifying consumers' opinions regarding vegetarian restaurants;
- Determining consumers' perception of the quality of services and dishes in vegetarian restaurants in Romania;
- Identifying the opinions of consumers towards the strategies adopted in the administration of these restaurants;
- Identifying the factors that determine consumers to choose a vegetarian restaurant.

In the present paper, the sampling method being non-random, the voluntary sampling of the respondents was put into practice, based on a survey (Catoi et al., 2009). The method of survey conducted in the electronic environment was used to collect data. The questionnaire (which includes 25 questions) was designed on the Google Forms platform. The period in which this study was conducted is May - June 2021. Data collection was based on a questionnaire answered by 558 people. Data collected from respondents were processed with SPSS statistical processing software.

The structure of the sample according to the sex of the respondents is presented in Table 1 and shows that 49% are men and 51% are women. Regarding the distribution according to age, the age range in which the respondents fall is 18 - 70 years. Most respondents live in urban areas, 76% of respondents come from urban areas and 24% from rural areas.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

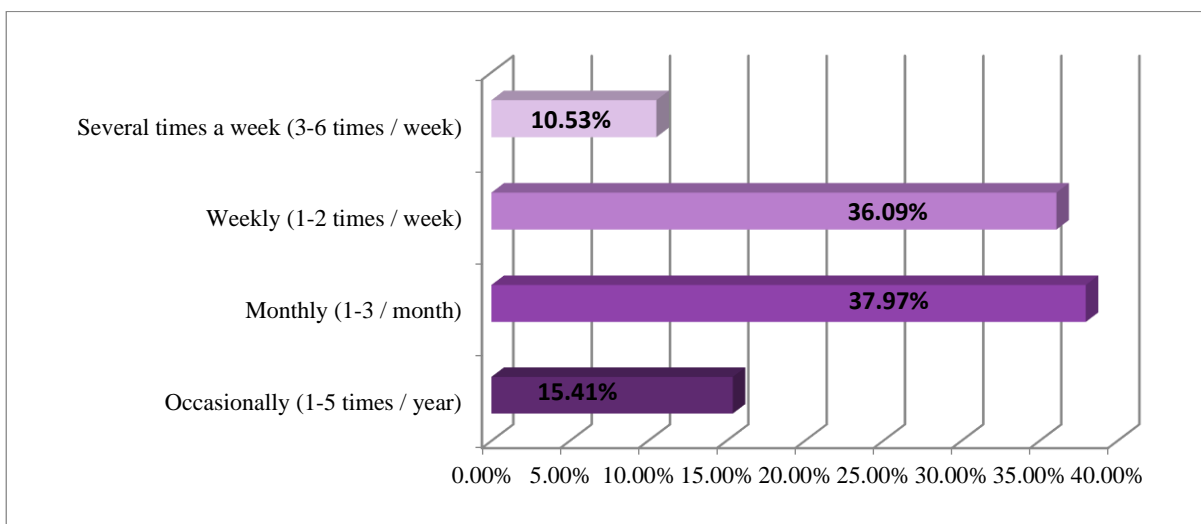
Percent (%)		Percent (%)	
Sex		Age	
Male	49%	25 or below	17%
Female	51%	26-35	22%
Education		36 – 45	24%
High school or below	19%	46 – 60	21%
Bachelor’s	41%	60 or above	16%
Master’s	31%	Place of Residence	
Doctorate/ Postdoctoral	9%	Rural	24%
		Urban	76%

Source: Own research of the authors

Results and Discussions

To begin with, the research wanted to identify the percentage of respondents who eat in the city, at the restaurant. After answering the first question (if eating at the restaurant), it turns out that the vast majority of respondents (95.34%) use public catering services. Regarding the frequency of consumption in public places, the results show that most respondents choose to eat in the city, on average 1-3 times a month (37.97%), 1-2 times a week (36.09%). On the other hand, the lowest percentage was occupied by subjects who choose to dine in the city occasionally, 1-5 times a year (15.41%) and those who eat often in the city, 3-6 times /week (10.53 %) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Frequency of restaurants by respondents



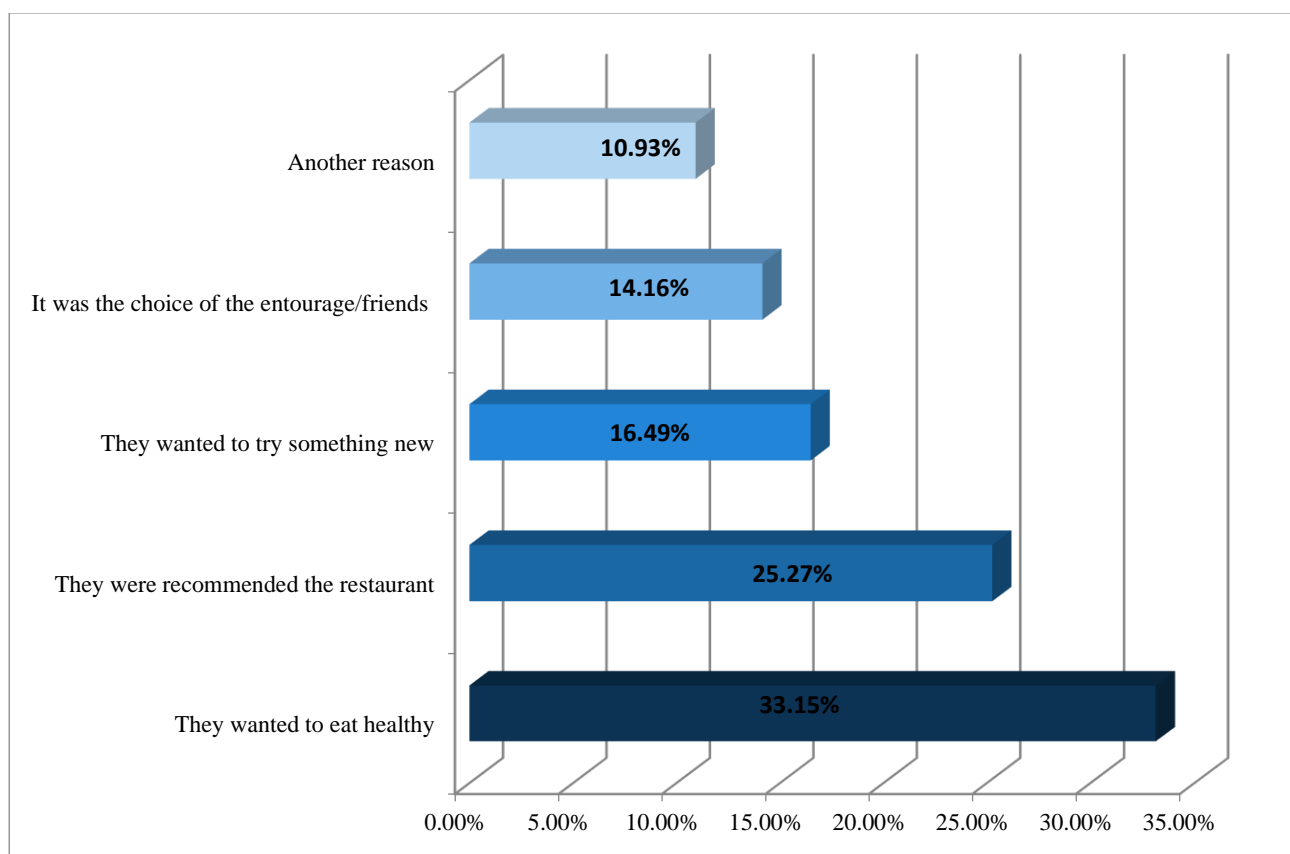
Source: Own research of the authors

Of the subjects, 6.8% stated that they are vegetarians and for this reason they frequently serve meals at vegetarian restaurants. The majority of respondents (63.8%) are not vegetarians, they frequently consume

both animal and plant products. A percentage of 29.4% of the subjects stated that at certain times they adopt a vegetarian diet for various reasons (religious - fasting, dieting, etc.).

Even if the majority of respondents are not vegetarians, 70.25% of the subjects stated that they used the services of a vegetarian restaurant at least once. They were asked what were the reasons and factors behind their decision to dine at such a restaurant. The main reason selected by the respondents was that they "wanted to eat healthy food" (33.15%), followed by the reasons that "they were recommended the restaurant" (25.27%), "they wanted to try something new" (16.49%) and that "it was the choice of the entourage / friends they served with" (14.16%). (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Reasons that led respondents to choose a vegetarian restaurant



Source: Own research of the authors

Respondents who attended a vegetarian restaurant at least once were asked to express their agreement/disagreement with a number of statements (Table 2).

Table 2. Degree of agreement of the respondents

Statement	Total disagreement (1)	Disagreement (2)	No opinion (3)	Agreement (4)	Total agreement (5)	Score
A. I am satisfied with the variety of the	2	39	43	198	110	3.957

menu in the vegetarian restaurants						
<i>B.</i> The quality of dishes in vegetarian restaurants is high	-	28	63	189	112	3.982
<i>C.</i> I am satisfied with the hygiene and cleanliness of the vegetarian restaurants	4	35	87	181	85	3.786
<i>D.</i> I am delighted with the level of hospitality in vegetarian restaurants	7	52	134	137	62	3.497
<i>E.</i> I am delighted with the design and ambiance of the vegetarian restaurants	19	46	94	168	65	3.546
<i>F.</i> I am willing to recommend vegetarian restaurants to friends/relatives	9	51	133	152	47	3.452
<i>G.</i> I am delighted with the experience I had when I ate in a vegetarian restaurant	21	55	147	126	43	3.293
<i>H.</i> I intend to return to a vegetarian restaurant	6	38	89	185	74	3.722

Source: Own research of the authors

Statement B, according to which “The quality of dishes in vegan restaurants is high” obtained the highest score, 3,982, being followed by a small difference by statement A (3,957), according to which “Customers are satisfied with the variety of menu in restaurants with vegetarian specific”. The results obtained by these two statements show that the subjects are satisfied with the dishes in the vegan restaurants they frequented, which justifies the high score (3,722) obtained by the statement H, according to which customers want to return to these restaurants.

Of the eight statements, the lowest score was obtained by the statement G (3,293), according to which "Subjects are delighted with the experience lived when they ate in a vegetarian restaurant." This result shows us that vegetarian restaurants in Romania should improve the experiences they offer their customers, so that they are unique and memorable. In a market with strong competition, such as

restaurants, the quality of the dishes offered is a mandatory condition, but the difference is made by the experience that the customer lives.

The fact that in Table 2 the "Agreement" column records the highest figure of the five answer options (1) - (5), (except for the statement G, where the highest figure is recorded by the indefinite answers), denotes that, in general, the interviewed consumers are satisfied with the vegetarian restaurants in Romania and that this type of restaurants have real chances and potential to develop in the near future.

The majority of respondents (61.65%) consider that the prices of dishes in a vegetarian restaurant do not differ significantly from the prices of dishes in a classic restaurant that is located in the same area. Only 18.28% of respondents consider that the prices of dishes in a vegetarian restaurant are higher than those in a classic restaurant and attribute these higher rates to high quality ingredients and raw materials.

Respondents (64.7%) consider that vegetarian restaurants are an alternative to classic restaurants for those who want to make a change in lifestyle or for those who want to serve healthy dishes. They associate vegetarian dishes with healthy and nutritious food. According to the respondents, the main strategies that led to the success of vegetarian restaurants are: the quality of the dishes, the diversified menu and the experience offered to the customers who served the meal in these restaurants.

The authors used the Chi-Square test to determine whether there was a link between the respondents' place of residence and their habit of attending vegetarian restaurants. Expected values were calculated (Table 3).

Table 3. Observed and expected frequencies

		Place of Residence		Total	
		Urban	Rural		
Do you dine at vegetarian restaurants?	No	Count	53	113	166
		Expected Count	126.14	39.96	166
	Yes	Count	371	21	392
		Expected Count	297.86	94.14	392
Total		Count	424	134	558
		Expected Count	424	134	558

Source: Author's calculation based on collected data

The Expected Count line has the expected frequencies. From the summary analysis of the differences between the absolute frequencies (Count) and the expected ones (Expected Count) there are differences at the level of all subgroups.

Among respondents living in urban areas, the expected values for attending vegetarian restaurants are higher than the absolute values. For rural respondents, the expected values are lower than the absolute ones. For people who do not attend vegetarian restaurants, among those in urban areas there is a higher value for absolute values than expected, while among people in rural areas, the expected values are higher than absolute. To test the significance of the differences, Chi-Square Tests are used.

For the significance threshold $\alpha = 0.05$ and χ^2 with 1 degree of freedom the value $\chi^2_{\alpha} = 3.84$, so that in this case the critical region is the interval $[3.84, \infty)$. The calculated value of χ^2 is 250.6975. Applying the Chi-Square test and comparing the calculated significance level of 250.6975 with the theoretical one of 3.84, we conclude that there is a link between the place of residence of the researched population and the frequency of vegetarian restaurants. This connection can be explained by the existence of vegetarian restaurants in major cities in Romania, and by the fact that they are non-existent in rural areas, as well as by the fact that the urban population has higher incomes and a higher frequency of dining in the city.

Conclusions

In a competitive market, consumers pursue not only the general and particular characteristics of the existing range, but also the possibilities they have in connection with the choice of quality foodstuffs that are safe for consumption. In other words, they are increasingly concerned about the issues of quality assurance and safety of the goods they purchase. It must be acknowledged that economic agents do not always respect the code of ethics and do not constantly resort to the most honest practices, aspects that require the intervention of state bodies - through various regulations (laws, norms, standards, etc.) - regarding taxation. specific requirements throughout the food chain, giving consumers confidence that the goods they purchase will not affect their safety, health and legitimate interests. It can be said without fear of being mistaken that in a market where quality and safe foodstuffs are circulating, it will have significant potential.

The ability to attract and retain customers is essential to the success of a restaurant. Restaurants are developing a clientele as a result of their reputation and marketing efforts. When people are looking for a place to eat, the marketing of any restaurant needs to be strong enough so that they have heard of the restaurant and want to try it.

The study highlighted that there are several factors that underlie the choice of a vegetarian restaurant by customers: the quality of the dishes, the diversity of the menu, the quality of services, customer satisfaction, the atmosphere and the experiences lived by consumers. Restaurant managers should pay more attention to these factors, which also influence the level of intention in the future behavior of consumers. Especially in the case of specific restaurants or small restaurants, customers focus on the lived experience, the authentic experience, and the feeling that remains after consuming the service (Zhang, James, 2020).

A future direction of research could be to study the experiences of consumers in vegetarian restaurants in Europe and how these experiences could be improved to attract an increasing number of customers (even if they are not vegetarians, but choose restaurants with this specific for a healthy diet and a unique experience)

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