MICROGREENS IN GASTRONOMIC OFFER OF BELGRADE RESTAURANTS

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Abstract

The use of microgreens in Belgrade restaurants was analyzed based on a questionnaire sent to managers of 200 restaurants with different rating on the portal Tripadvisor. A questionnaire containing eight questions about the use of microgreens was answered by a total of 60 managers. Their answers indicate that majority restaurant managers (87%) are familiar with microgreens. Many of them (60%) confirmed that they use microgreens for food decoration, while only 2% use it for food preparation. Most of them use microgreens because of the attractive appearance of food (69%) and fashion (28%). Dominant microgreens in Belgrade restaurants are red cabbage (44% of total answers), followed by sunflower (28%) and pea (22%), while other types are used in 6% of restaurants.

Key Words: *Belgrade restaurants, food decoration, microgreens, Tripadvisor*
JEL classification: *L83*

Introduction

Belgrade, as the capital of Serbia, is one of the most popular tourist destinations in this country. Although the involvement of the hotel industry in promotional activities of this destination is unsatisfactory (Đurović & Božić, 2018), foreign tourists from many countries visit Belgrade. Except for cultural and art monuments and various events, this destination is very popular for the high-quality of nightlife (Mizdrak et al., 2005), while hospitality plays a primary role in achieving guest satisfaction (Božić et al., 2018). But, as numerous studies indicate, the importance of food for the marketing of a tourist destination (Okumus et al., 2007, Vuksanovic et al.,

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2016), the restaurant offer has an important contribution to the guest attraction. Due to the significantly improved availability of information about food and service quality through communication via social networks (Božić & Zubanov, 2018), managers show an increasingly serious approach to the day-to-day operations of restaurants. The expectations of guests are increasing because they compare the quality of service with the experiences from foreign objects (Chen & Elston, 2013). Because of that, *travel lays the motive to get to know that which is different and as yet unexperienced, hence diversity as an imperative in tourism* (Škrbić, Jegdić, Milošević, & Tomka, 2015:231). So, in order to provide the level of service that a modern customer expects, it is necessary to implement modern trends and innovations in hospitality. In addition to the pleasant ambience and great memories, the contemporary guests wish new tastes in a restaurant (Gagić et al., 2013).

Modern trends in the hospitality industry which are the most obvious to the users of the services are changes in gastronomic offer. As healthy food is very popular, a lot of attention is directed to a healthy diet that requires the use of a larger amount of fruits, vegetables and salad, or vegetable fibers (Public Health Agency, 2001). Generally, restaurants must attract consumers with good taste and an interesting look. But, the relationship between the real biological needs of people for energy and the energy contained in meals in restaurants often is not in agreement. Namely, there is evidence that diseases which are result of poor eating habits such as obesity, type II diabetes and heart disease are higher in consumers who frequently visit restaurants (Kant & Graubard, 2018). All of this, as well as trends that favor a healthy diet, stimulate the use of healthy food in restaurants, especially if they want to attract guests with these problems.

The essence of every tourist destination is comprised of three groups of elements: attractions and attributes that attract tourists, services of accommodation and food for guests, and activities practiced by the guests (Jegdić, Škrbić, & Milošević, 2017). Food can be a major motive for tourist trips, which has led to the development of special forms of tourism (gastronomic tourism, culinary tourism, gourmet tourism, food and beverage tourism, etc.), which are recognized as trips motivated by various food-related attractions. The gastronomic offer can be the main reason for traveling to a destination, either for the consumption of gastronomic specialties or for acquaintance with the technology of preparing traditional or specific dishes and drinks. Folorunso Adeyinka-Ojo & Khoo-Lattimore (2013) consider gastronomic tourism to be an integral part of any tourist

journey, no matter which tourist destination they visit. Namely, tourists regardless of a destination have a physiological need for food, which can be used to better experience the destination. Through the gastronomic offer of the destination, tourists get to know the local culture, and above all the food culture (Jimenez-Beltran et al., 2016). For foreign guests, very attractive are traditional dishes, which are usually part of the catering offer of rural areas, while the gastronomic offer of urban restaurants includes modern and attractive dishes. But, one of the most interesting contemporary trends in gastronomy is the application of microgreens in food preparation and serving. This modern trend is typical for exclusive restaurants, with very creative chefs who add exotic flavors, colors and creative presentation to dishes by using just several days old plants. In view of that, the aim of this paper is to analyze the use of microgreens in the gastronomic offer of Belgrade restaurants.

Use of microgreens in restaurants

Due to the need for nutrition based on the use of fresh foods, rich in nutrients and high content of plant components, a new product known as microgreens appeared on the food market. "Microgreens" is a marketing term for young edible seedlings, which can be used for food and beverage preparation and decoration. The idea about the use of microgreens was born at the beginning of the 1980s in the menus of restaurants from the San Francisco (Bliss, 2014). But, serious commercial production of these forms of eatable plants starts in the second half of the 1990s in the Southern California (Di Gioia & Santamaria, 2015). The production of microgreens can be considered an innovation in vegetable production (Di Gioia & Santamaria, 2015). Microgreens represent eatable young plants of vegetable, herbs or other eatable plant species that are harvested 7-14 days after germination when only cotyledons (Xiao et al., 2012) or a pair of true leaves (Stoleru et al., 2016) developed. The microgreens are usually grown in controled environment with high light, low humidity and intensive air circulation and are usually cut minutes before usage, which guarantees a longer shelf life and assures freshness and high nutritional value (Di Gioia & Santamaria, 2015). These young plants possess higher nutritional value than their full-sized counterparts due to higher content of macro- and microelements, vitamins, polyphenols, antioxidants and other useful compounds. Some the most used plant species for production of microgreens are cabbage, radish, turnip, carrot, beet, chard, pea, broccoli, kale, bok choy, celery, sesame, amaranth, cress, lettuce, endive, arugula, mustard, sunflower, alfalfa, clover, sorrel, canola, chia, flax, fennel, dill,

basil, cilantro, and chervil (Stoleru et al., 2016). It could be produced in greenhouses, but also directly in the kitchen of a restaurant or at home. Growing microgreens directly in the restaurant is becoming more and more popular because young plants produced in that way are more fresh than plants bought from microgreen producers.

The interest in fresh, functional and nutraceutical foods has been on the rise generally in society. Namely, consumers prefer new products in gastronomic offer that have positive effect on health and longevity (Drewnowski & Gomez-Carneros, 2000). In spite of the fact that microgreens often use in gastronomy and that have contribution to the popularity of the restaurant and attracting consumers, there are no papers dealing with this modern trend in scientific literature in the field of gastronomy and hospitality. Much more on this issue can be learned from the agronomic literature, but in this case, the emphasis is placed on the methods of production, species selection and a nutritive value of the microgreens.

Very often microgreens are described as a culinary specialty of top-class restaurants (Stoleru et al., 2016). In developed countries, chefs use microgreens, sprouts and edible flowers to give exotic tastes, colors and appearance to food, and thus attract consumers who care about health (Ebert, 2012). Although microgreens are often presented as culinary specialties used as an ingredient for preparation of dishes in kitchens of high-end restaurants, they are more and more popular in wider use as human food. Interest in microgreens has been generated by the findings which indicate that microgreens may have the amount of some nutrients and vitamins 4–40 times higher than the vegetables mature plant would produce, but nutritional quality vary among microgreen types (Xiao et al., 2012). Therefore, the popularity of the microgreens lies in vibrant colors, delicate texture and unique properties that enhance the taste, for example salads, sandwiches, soups, desserts and drinks, but also high content of useful substances and their potential bioactive value (Xiao et al., 2012, Sun et al., 2013, Xiao et al., 2015).

At the beginning of use of microgreens in restaurants, it was not unusual to start with their usage as a garnish, although they could be component of different dishes and beverages. In Serbia, where microgreens are not as popular as in developed countries and not known to the public, they are used just as a garnish in fine dining restaurants. They are popular due to creative presentation, fresh appearance, and distinct flavor elements. New

gastronomic trends strongly influence the supply and demand of microgreens, while species selection relies on the interaction between producers and chefs, as well as on consumer familiarization with their sensory attributes (Koppertcress, 2016). So, it is necessary to study the use of microgreens in gastronomy and to consider the possibilities of their use in order to improve the catering activity and increase the competitiveness of the restaurant in a demanding market.

Methodology

The research was conducted in April 2019. A selection of Belgrade restaurant for analysis was done based on the data from the most popular internet portal for traveling called Tripadvisor. The restaurants for the analysis and distributing questionnaires were selected based on average score of guest reviews/comments on this portal. Guests use a five-point scale (one circle mean very bad; two circles mean bad; three circles mean average; four circles mean very good and five circles mean excellent) to estimate restaurants on Tripadvisor. This scale based on evaluation of food and service quality, relation price-quality and comfort. A numeric score means certain number of laps that symbolizes eyes of owl, which is present on the logo of portal Tripadvisor (Mašić et al., 2014a). The analysis of Belgrade restaurants present on Tripadvisor were focused on collection and analysis of different parameters (total number of restaurants on this portal, average rating and type of cuisine in that restaurants).

All restaurants present on Tripadvisor were divided into four groups based on their ratings on this portal. The groups of restaurants include restaurants with rating 5, 4.5, 4 and <4. A total number of randomly selected restaurants was 200, including 50 restaurants per group. A questionnaire was sent to managers of selected restaurants by e-mail given on Tripadvisor as a contact e-mail, asking them to fill it out and return it to the sender. The filled questionnaires received from managers were analyzed and presented descriptively. Questionnaire contained eight questions: 1) Do you know what microgreens are?; 2) Do you use microgreens for food decoration in your restaurant?; 3) If answer to question 2 was negative: Do you plan to include microgreens in food decoration?; 4) Do you use microgreens for food preparation in your restaurant?; 5) If answer to question 4 was negative: Do you plan to include microgreens in food preparation?; 6) If answers to questions 2 and 4 were positive: Which types of microgreens do you usually use in your restaurant?; 7) If answers to questions 2 or 4 were positive: Do you produce microgreens directly in the restaurant? and 8) If

answers to questions 2 and 4 were positive: What is the reason for using microgreens in your restaurant?. To each question three or four answer were offered to round up. All participants were asked the same questions in the same order.

The analysis of Belgrade restaurants on Tripadvisor

Considering the tendencies of tourism and hotel development and better positioning of Serbia on the tourist map of the world, it is necessary to create adequate conditions for satisfactory competitiveness of our restaurants in modern hospitality. The development of tourism contributed to the expansion of restaurants that were necessary to meet tourists' needs for food and drink. On the other hand, the development of the restaurant industry contributes to an even more intense development of tourism due to the fact that food and drink have become a significant factor affecting travel. Also, the gastro and food tourism has become one of the most dynamic and creative segments of tourism. Meler & Cerovic (2003) estimated that food and beverage costs account for more than one-third of total tourism spending, while Hall et al. (2003) point that food represents an essential component in destination choice. Therefore, restaurant offer has a very important role in tourist attraction. Information about restaurants could be found using different sources (the internet, newspapers, recommendations of other people, TV advertising etc.). Also, Rainie et al. (2011) concluded that the internet is the main source of information about local restaurants, bars and clubs. There are many travel and restaurant web portals, on which is possible to find information about a restaurant (menu, specials, happy hours, parking, contact info etc.) and make online reservation and online reviews (Božić & Janićević, 2016). One of the most popular is Tripadvisor, which has an important role for hotel and restaurant reputation (Čačić and Mašić, 2013, Flores et al., 2014, Mašić et al., 2014a, Božić & Janićević, 2016).

The results obtained from our survey of Belgrade restaurants on portal *Tripadvisor* shown that 1522 *restaurants in Belgrade can be found on this portal (Table 1). Based on visitor comments, most of them (1300) were* ranked according to one to five point scale, while for 222 restaurants there were no visitor comments and there were no ranking. *Most of* ranked restaurants *(87.77%) were estimated as very good or excellent (four to five circles). The average score for all ranked restaurants was 4.39. This score is better then the average score obtained for restaurants from 10 the most*

visited Serbian spas, which present on the same web portal (Božić & Janićević, 2016).

Table 1: Ranking of Belgrade restaurants *on Tripadvisor based on visitor comments*

Number of restaurants	**Restaurant rating**
412	*5*
451	*4.5*
278	*4*
95	*3.5*
43	*3*
11	*2.5*
7	*2*
0	*1.5*
3	*1*
222	*NA*

Source: *TripAdvisor, 2019*

Type of cuisine affects the success of restaurant business (Parsa et al., 2019). Taking into account that the type of cuisine in local restaurants is very important for gastro or food tourists, types of cuisine in Belgrade restaurants present on Tripadvisor were analyzed. Different types of cuisine were highlighted (Table 2), but dominant were European (in 532 restaurants), then Italian (in 257 restaurants), International (in 251 restaurant) and Eastern European (in 231), followed by grill (193), Mediterranean (185) and Central European (182). Other types of cuisine (American, Asian, Chinese, French, sea food, health food, Japanese, etc.) were offered in a fewer number of restaurants. It is important to note that some restaurants offer different types of cuisine. Williams et al. (2014) indicate that many tourists travel with the aim to experience traditional foods and local beverages. Although many Belgrade restaurants offer traditional dishes, no one highlighted that on Tripadvisor.

Table 2: *Type of cuisine in Belgrade restaurants on Tripadvisor*

Type of cuisine	**Number of restaurants**
European	*532*
Italian	*257*
International	*251*
Eastern European	*231*
Grill	*193*
Mediterranean	*185*

Type of cuisine	Number of restaurants
Central European	*182*
Fast food	102
Sea food	*77*
American	58
French	*48*
Health food	*46*
Asian	45
Chinese	*40*
Greek	*24*
Sushi	*24*
Japanese	*22*
Spanish	*21*
Mexican	*18*
Latin American	*12*
Turkish	*12*
German	*11*
Croatian	*9*
Lebanese	*7*
Other	*55*

Note: *Some restaurants offer several types of cuisine*
Source: *TripAdvisor, 2019*

The use of microgreens in Belgrade restaurants

Modern lifestyles (accelerated pace of life, reduced physical activity, stress, etc.) have led to the emergence of new trends in nutrition, which are primarily reflected in the fact that more and more food is consumed outside the home. Also, previous studies have shown that the perception of food as 'healthy' is a basic quality attribute that positively influences guests' attitudes toward food (Kim et al., 2013, Hur & Jang, 2015). Food prepared in accordance with many modern trends in gastronomy, has a positive effect on human health, disease prevention and contributes to improving the quality of life. Among the many trends based on the preparation of dishes from specific and healthy ingredients (algae, whole grains, edible insects, sprouts, organically produced food products, fresh-cut fruit and vegetables, etc.), very popular is the use of microgreens in food preparation and decoration. Although commercial production of microgreens in the USA began 30 years ago (Di Gioia & Santamaria, 2015), in many parts of the world, including Serbia, these foods are not sufficiently known to the

general public. As the first step to using these young plants in a meal preparation is to become familiar with these foods and their high nutritional value. Many researchers studied the nutritional value, chemical compositions, and biological efficacies of microgreens (Xiao et al., 2012, Xiao et al., 2015, Pinto et al., 2015, Mir et., 2016, Weber, 2017, Tan et al., 2019), while its use in food offer in restaurants has not been studied so far.

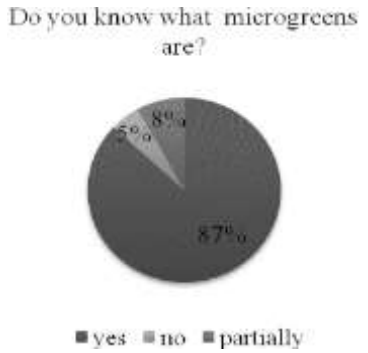
A questionnaire containing 8 questions about the use of microgreens in a restaurant, which was sent to the e-mail address of 200 Belgrade restaurants, was answered by a total of 60 managers, of which 22 were from a restaurant with a rating of 5, then 20 managers from a restaurant with a rating of 4.5, then 14 managers from restaurants with a rating of 4 and 4 managers from restaurants with a rating below 4. Their answers (Figure 1) indicate that many restaurant managers (87%) are familiar with microgreens. Only 5% did not know what microgreens are, while 8% were partially informed about this foodstuff. Almost all managers from restaurants with the highest rating (5 and 4.5) gave a positive answer (95% and 100%) (Table 3). Most managers from restaurants with category 4 responded affirmatively (71.5%), while managers from lower-level restaurants (grades <4) were less informed about microgreens (50% responded negatively).

It is well known that at the beginning of their use in restaurants microgreens usually use as a garnish. Considering that these foodstuffs have not been used in Belgrade restaurants until recently, it can be assumed that the restaurants which use microgreens focuse on food decoration with those young plants. Due to that, restaurant managers were asked if they used microgreens for food decoration and very high percentage (60%) of them gave a positive answer, while the others (40%) acknowledged not using them (Figure 2). The managers of better-categorized restaurants (5 or 4.5) had a positive response (86% and 80%, respectivelly), while restaurant managers with rating 4 or below generally responded that they did not use microgreens for food decoration.

Managers, who gave negative answer to the question "Do you use microgreens for food decoration in your restaurant?", in a relatively low percentage (17%) indicated their intention to start using microgreens for food decoration in the restaurant they manage, while a large percentage (46%) said they had no such plans and a prominent percentage of managers (37%) gave an answer that he/she was unsure about the plans to introduce microgreens to meal decoration (Figure 3). The managers of the restaurants

with rating 4.5 and 5, who did not use microgreens at the moment of the investigation, generally expressed their intention to use microgrens (50% and 67%, respectively) or they were unsure about it (50% and 33%, respectively) (Table 3). The managers of restaurants with rating 4 or less expressed disinterest in including microgreens in food decoration, giving answer "no" (rating 4: 62%; rating <4: 75%) or "I am not sure" (rating 4: 38%; rating <4: 25%) (Table 3).

Fig. 1: *Answers to question no.1.*



Source: *Authors´research*

Fig. 2: *Answers to question no.2.*

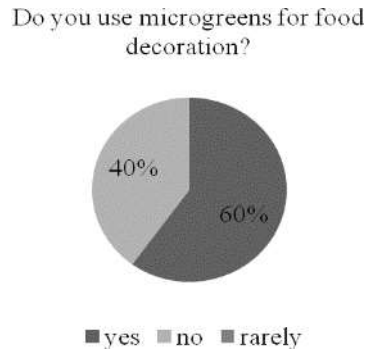


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Fig. 3: *Answers to question no.3.*

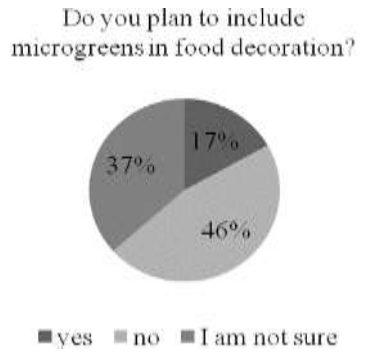

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Fig. 4: *Answers to question no.4.*

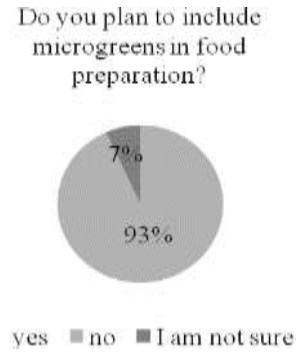
Source: *Authors´research*

Although microgreens are used for food decoration in high-end Belgrade restaurants (rating 4.5 and 5), the responses of the surveyed managers indicate that in food preparation, microgreens were almost not used. Only 2% of the total number of respondents gave a positive answer, which practically means that in only one restaurant microgreens are used for meal preparation (Figure 4). This positive answer was given by a restaurant

manager with a rating of 5, which is almost 5% of the total number of responses (22 responses) by a restaurant managers of the same rating (Table 3). Managers of all other restaurants in this category, as well as restaurants in the other categories analyzed, gave a negative answer to the question "Do you use microgreens for food preparation in your restaurant?".

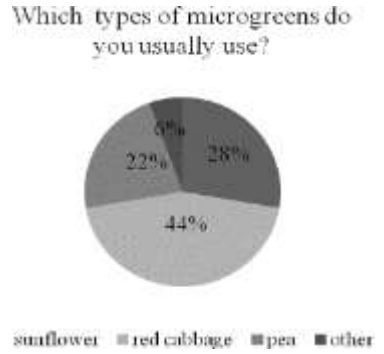
Among managers (59 managers from all restaurant categories) who gave negative answer to the question regarding the use of microgreens for food preparation, to question "Do you plan to include microgreens in food preparation?" also mainly negative answers were given. Namely, 93% of all managers who answered this question had no intention to start to use microgreens for food preparation, while the rest of them (7%) were not sure (Figure 5). Although most of managers (85% from restaurants with rating 4.5 and 95% from restaurants with rating 5) did not plan to use microgreens in food preparation, some of them (15% from restaurants with rating 4.5 and 5% from restaurants with rating 5) were not sure about that (Table 3). On the other hand, all managers (100%) from restaurants with rating 4 or less do not plan to use microgreens in food preparation (Table 3). On question "Which types of microgreens do you usually use in your restaurant?" only the managers from restaurant with rating 4 and higher answered, because in restaurants with rating less than 4 microgreens were not used (Table 3). Based on answers of all managers answered red cabbage (44% of total answers) were estimated as dominant, next were sunflower (28%) and pea (22%), while in 6% restaurants some other species usually used (Figure 6).

Fig. 5: *Answers to question no.5.*



Source: *Authors´ research*

Fig. 6: *Answers to question no.6.*



Source: *Authors´ research*

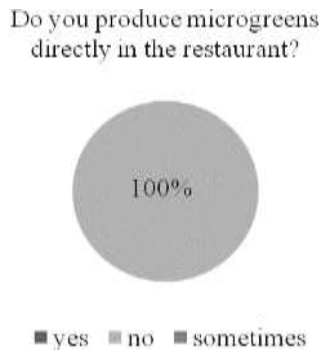
Based on the answers of the managers in Belgrade restaurants with rating 5, red cabbage is the main microgreen species (63%), then sunflower (21%) and pea (5%), while a significant number of managers (11%) highlighted the use of other species of microgreens (Table 3).

On the other hand, in restaurants with rating 4.5 the main species is pea (44%), after that is sunflower (31%) and red cabbage (25%), while in restaurants with rating 4 mainly use sunflower microgreens (Table 3).

Although the microgreens produced directly in the restaurant are fresher than the plants bought from microgreen producers, all managers who used microgreens gave a negative answer to the question "Do you produce microgreens directly in the restaurant?" (Figure 7, Table 3).

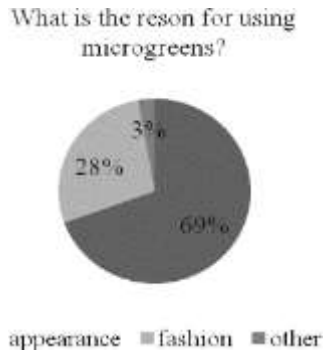
Most of them (69%), as a reason for using microgreens, stated "attractive appearance of food", while 28% managers used microgreens out of fashion and 3% because of other reasons (Figure 8).

Fig. 7: *Answers to question no.7.*



Source: *Authors´research*

Fig. 8: *Answers to question no.8.*



Source: Authors´research

The highest percentage of the managers from restaurants with rating 4.5 (56%) and 5 (84%) use microgeens in order to achieve attractive appearance of food, while less of them use it for fashion (rating 4.5: 44%; rating 5: 11%) (Table 3).

Only 5% managers from restaurants with rating 5 use microgreens due to other reasons. The only reason for using microgreens in restaurants with rating 4 is fashion.

Table 3: *Respondents´answers to questionnaire*

Question	Answer	Restaurant rating			
		5	**4.5**	**4**	**<4**
Do you know what microgreens are?	yes	95	100	71.5	25
	no	0	0	7	50
	partially	5	0	21.5	25
Do you use microgreens for food decoration in your restaurant?	yes	86	80	7	0
	no	14	20	93	100
	rarely	0	0	0	0
Do you plan to include microgreens in food decoration?	yes	67	50	0	0
	no	0	0	62	75
	I am not sure	33	50	38	25
Do you use microgreens for food preparation in your restaurant?	yes	5	0	0	0
	no	95	100	100	100
	rarely	0	0	0	0
Do you plan to include microgreens in food preparation?	yes	0	0	0	0
	no	95	85	100	100
	I am not sure	5	15	0	0
Which species of microgreens you usually use in your restaurant?	sunflower	21	31	100	/
	red cabbage	63	25	0	/
	pea	5	44	0	/
	other	11	0	0	/
Do you produce microgreens directly in the restaurant?	yes	0	0	0	/
	no	100	100	100	/
	sometimes	0	0	0	/
What is reason of use microgreens in your restaurant?	attractive appearance	84	56	0	/
	nutritional value	0	0	0	/
	fashion	11	44	100	/
	other	5	0	0	/

Note: *Calculations for answers 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 were done based on the number of respondents who answered the question.*

Conclusion

Based on the research carried out in this paper, it can be concluded that the managers of Belgrade restaurants are familiar with microgreens, which are mainly used in restaurants with higher ratings (4.5 and 5). A dominant way of microgreens use is food decoration, while almost no one uses them for food preparation. The species usually used in restaurants are red cabbage (in 44% of restaurants), then sunflower (in 28% of restaurants), followed by pea (in 22% of restaurants), while in 6% of restaurants other plant

species are used as microgreens. The main reasons for using these young plants are an attractive appearance of food and fashion.

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