Article

Sustainable Development Practices of Restaurants in Romania and Changes during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Codruța Adina Băltescu [1,*] , Nicoleta Andreea Neacșu [1] , Anca Madar [1] , Dana Boșcor [1] and Alexandra Zamfirache [2]

[1] Department of Marketing, Tourism, Services and International Affairs, Transilvania University of Brasov, 500084 Brasov, Romania; andreea.neacsu@unitbv.ro (N.A.N.); ancamadar@unitbv.ro (A.M.); dana.boscor@unitbv.ro (D.B.)

[2] Department of Management and Economic Informatics, Transilvania University of Brasov, 500084 Brasov, Romania; alexandra.zamfirache@unitbv.ro

[*] Correspondence: codruta.baltescu@unitbv.ro; Tel.: +40-728994278

Abstract: Sustainable development is a constant and a necessity of daily life in the restaurant industry. The restaurant industry has high consumptions of energy, water, detergents, and consumables, together with tremendous food waste. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted many acute sustainable development problems. In this context, this article analyzes the practices identified by restaurant managers that define their responsible behavior, and the significant changes made towards sustainability during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article presents the results obtained through qualitative research, carried out by semi-directive in-depth interviews, conducted with 56 restaurant managers from Romania. The answers obtained are based on five topics of discussion highlighting the managers' growing interest in finding solutions to counteract negative effects on the environment, to ensure the wellbeing of customers and employees, and to increase the profitability of their company. The results obtained from the research reflect the thoughts and actions of restaurant managers in Romania, contributing to the body of knowledge in the understanding of sustainability practices in the foodservice sector.

Keywords: sustainable development practices; restaurants; green restaurants; COVID-19 pandemic; qualitative research

1. Introduction

The tourism industry was among the economic sectors most severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistics showed that 2020 was the most difficult year in history for the global tourism industry, with three out of four visitors uninterested in traveling for tourism purposes [1]. The second pandemic year, 2021, was marked by widespread efforts to return to normality, and under these circumstances, UNWTO announced that tourism activities organized throughout June and July 2021 showed a positive trend in the recovery of world tourism [2].

The use of certificates showing the vaccination status of individuals, as well as reducing the travel restrictions for certain holiday destinations, have allowed people to travel once again, and many companies from the tourism industry reopened their units to full capacity. However, the global experience regarding travel and health restrictions has dramatically influenced the population's behavior, therefore entrepreneurs from the tourism industry face new challenges.

Sengel et al. (2015) pointed out that tourists spend about a third of their holiday budget on food, which highlights the importance of food activities in the tourism industry [3]. As local entrepreneurs often offer traditional food, obtained from fresh local ingredients, and served in an atmosphere specific to the visited area, food consumption is an authentic tourist attraction, meant to complete tourists' travel experience [4–6]. Thus, through food

services, tourists relate to the culinary traditions of the visited destination [7], strengthening the national identity [8].

In the current framework, where the concept of sustainable development is a fundamental pillar of the evolution of society, the food sector is moving towards what we call "sustainable food services" [8] or "green restaurants" [9–11]. This orientation is more relevant as the foodservice sector has been found to have the lowest degree of sustainable development of all economic sectors [12,13]. Meal production, in all its stages, from field production to serving food to customers, affects the environment [14–16]. High consumption of electricity and water, CO_2 emissions, considerable amounts of garbage, and food waste are among the most significant harmful effects [12,17,18]. Managers' interest in applying sustainable practices in restaurants has increased recently [11], but it is not yet possible to talk about their large-scale implementation [11,19].

In Romania, food establishments are classified by the national authority with stars from 1 to 5. The main classification criteria assess the buildings in which these establishments operate, the internal organization, the facilities and equipment used, and staffing issues [20]. Based on these criteria, in Romania, there are five types of food establishments, namely restaurants (with various profiles, such as classic restaurants, specialized restaurants, and restaurants with various specifics, breweries), bars, fast food establishments, cake shops, and pastry shops. The statistical records of the Romanian Ministry of Economy show that in Romania, 8994 food establishments operate, most of them being restaurants, followed by specific restaurants, pizzerias, bars, and cafes. [21]. The high number of food establishments justifies the differentiation of products and services to capture a high percentage of the market. For food establishments located in areas with high tourist traffic, their success largely dependent on their ability to adapt to existing global trends and to their capacity to highlight national and local gastronomy.

The Romanian tourist market has experienced a general descent: tourist arrivals in accommodation establishments decreased dramatically, and, according to Eurostat, the numbers registered in Romania were below the European Union average [22]. Moreover, according to official statistics, the structure of expenditures of non-resident tourists accommodated in hotels or similar accommodation units in the first half of 2021 included: expenses with accommodation (26.8%), expenses incurred in restaurants and bars (26.1%), expenses with transportation (23.3%), and expenses with cultural, sports, and leisure activities (10.5%) [23] (p. 7). In Romania, food expenses have a significant share in the travel budget of tourists. Another relevant aspect for the analysis of the Romanian tourism market is the earnings of employees in this domain. In the last 5 years (2016–2020), the earnings from the hospitality industry (food establishments and accommodation establishments) are ranked last in the hierarchy of activities of the national economy [24], which explains the acute shortage of staff in this field.

This study proposes an analysis of the sustainable development practices implemented by Romanian restaurants and highlights the changes adopted by managers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though this topic was extensively studied, we intended to discover if the COVID-19 pandemic forced restaurant managers to take any different measures related to sustainability practices. Research was conducted in the summer of 2021, when restaurants were reopened and operated at full capacity according to the restrictions imposed by authorities due to summer vacations. The relaxation after such a difficult time needs to be followed by consideration of the future and the companies' economic, social, and environmental behavior.

This paper is organized as follows. First, a review of the literature on the specificity of sustainable restaurant practices and major changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is presented. Next, the research methodology is detailed, followed by the Results and Discussion sections. In the final part, conclusions are highlighted based on the findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Specificity of Sustainable Restaurant Practices

To underline the importance of sustainable practices in food establishments, the concept of "green restaurant" is used. A non-profit organization, the Green Restaurant Association (GRA), was founded in 1990 and is a pioneer of the movement that encourages the spread of green restaurant practices [25]. This association uses a certification scheme for green restaurants that is applied in 47 countries and points out the content of the eight standards that must be achieved: (1) water efficiency; (2) reducing and recycling household waste; (3) the use of sustainable construction products and materials; (4) sustainable culinary preparations; (5) energy; (6) the use of reusable and environmentally friendly consumables; (7) reduction of chemical pollution; and (8) transparency and education [26]. Wang et al. (2013) detailed the standards for managing a green restaurant and established three categories: (a) green food—based on organic raw ingredients, cooked according to the operating criteria of organic cuisine, organic menus, and organic consumables for the delivery of food; (b) the use of environmentally friendly equipment; and (c) green management and social responsibility [13]. Compared to a traditional restaurant, a green restaurant focuses on the three Rs (reduction, reuse, and recycling) and the two Es (energy and efficiency) [27,28]. Other authors consider that a green restaurant offers green menus with organic, local, and sustainable food [29].

All these aspects can no longer be ignored by restaurants, because, as consumers become more responsible, they will buy products and services that affect the environment as little as possible [30,31]. Customers who favorably perceive the sustainable development efforts of restaurants are willing to pay more, wait longer, and make longer trips for the culinary experience in a green restaurant [32]. Recent studies have also highlighted the idea that, in turn, restaurants that implement sustainable development measures induce responsible behavior in their customers and ensure their loyalty [33].

The analysis of the negative impact of restaurant activities on the environment is the starting point for identifying desirable practices of sustainable development. Among the factors with the most harmful effects are excessive consumption of electricity and water, food waste (raw ingredients and uneaten food), excessive household waste, and poor storage, as well as major pollution due to the detergents used, various chemicals for refrigerators, and noxious substances emitted in the transportation used for the operation of restaurants [12–14,28,34–38]. Starting from the model proposed by Colares et al. (2019) which analyzes the sources of sustainable practices in different consecutive stages of the food production process [39], the authors will examine the following aspects: (a) the origin of the raw ingredients used, and the content of the menus offered to consumers; (b) the ecological footprint of restaurants in the preparation and serving process; (c) food waste; (d) the role of staff in implementing sustainable development measures.

2.1.1. Origin of Raw Ingredients Used, and Content of Menus Offered to Consumers

The raw ingredients and their sources of supply represent the foundation of the quality and safety of dishes offered in restaurants. The origin of raw ingredients is the most important criterion for improving the operational activities and the strategic results of a restaurant [40]. Procurement of local or seasonal raw ingredients and their inclusion in organic dishes are the prerogatives of restaurants that value sustainable measures [12,41,42]. Moreover, the use of raw ingredients provided by local producers is a decision that generates beneficial effects in all dimensions of sustainable development, namely environmental, social, and economic [42]. These effects include shortening delivery times and supply chains, significantly reducing the carbon footprint, encouraging and sustaining the work of local producers, reducing intermediary commissions, and properly increasing restaurant revenues while meeting green consumer requirements [38,43–46].

However, the use of local raw ingredients is a challenge for restaurant managers because the supply does not ensure the necessary pace of delivery, as they are produced by small businesses, with low production capacity, and which depend on climatic condi-

tions [44,47]. Sometimes, these products do not meet the quality criteria imposed, and their marketing price may be uncompetitive [47]. Opposite situations cannot be ignored, which argue lower purchase costs [48,49].

Meals obtained from local raw ingredients are considered more natural, fresher, and healthier [50]. To the extent that these dishes also emphasize regional characteristics, their inclusion in restaurant menus generates additional benefits, including a specific contribution to preserving culinary traditions, a source of increasing the attractiveness of the restaurant among consumers, and a statement of the implementation of responsible behavior by restaurants [5,9,31,41,42,50–52]. The inclusion of traditional dishes in the menus is a practice appreciated by tourists, who, through their consumption, complete their tourism experience, and by locals, mainly because the dishes are obtained from local and fresh raw ingredients, increasing their level of confidence [44]. Finally, it is important to note that they are considered tastier [53].

The menu is an important tool for restaurants, being the essential means to communicate with customers, and to influence their decisions [42]. Nowadays consumers are interested in finding in menus complete information related to the impact of the dishes on their health, the environment, and the local economy [9,54]. Responsible restaurants include nutritional information and label the dishes in the menu as part of a broad spectrum of efforts to reduce the rate of obesity and morbidity [55]. Moreover, through the specific mechanism of detailing the information about the dishes, the menu composition can influence the selection of organic dishes, made from local raw ingredients [56].

Preparing menus based on the principles of healthy eating is a specific way to improve sustainable restaurant practices. These include reducing portions [57], increasing the share of vegetable ingredients [58], innovative use of vegetables, especially local ones, and creatively introducing vegetarian or vegan dishes [15], reducing the amount of meat consumed [15,59,60]. Animal farming activities have a massive harmful effect on the environment, being responsible for 18% of human-made greenhouse gas emissions [12,59–61]. On the other hand, raw plant ingredients have negative effects on the environment, as they generate much waste, being bought mostly fresh [61].

Another relevant aspect describes the concerns of managers to adapt the menu content based on factors such as season, location, or type of customers [9]. According to Jang et al. (2011) young consumers are much more interested in ordering a wide variety of dishes, based on newly created recipes, while enjoying traditional and international culinary dishes [9].

The above-mentioned analyses explain the importance given to the use of locally obtained raw ingredients, in conjunction with the introduction of traditional dishes in the menu, as part of the sustainability process.

2.1.2. The Ecological Footprint of Restaurants in the Process of Preparation and Serving

Reducing energy and water consumption, as well as excessive gas emissions, especially CO_2, are emergencies facing human existence in the 21st century [12,62]. Restaurants have the highest energy consumption compared to other types of buildings, with consumption values per m^2 being five times higher than in other commercial activities [63]. Doğan et al. (2015) analyzed the restaurant industry in the USA and determined that it is responsible for the consumption of 33% of the total electricity used, and the average consumption of water/restaurant is 1136 L each year [37]. Wang et al. (2013) showed that CO_2 emissions in food establishments are also high, which is mainly due to the equipment and facilities used which are low in energy efficiency [13]. Daily, restaurants generate more waste than any other retail company [37]. Waste management has changed into a major managerial challenge for restaurants, and their selective collection proves to be a defining sustainable practice [12,17].

The eco-friendly measures implemented by restaurants are numerous. Among them, the most frequently used are renewable energy resources (solar, wind) with very low polluting effects, installation of water meters and automatic batteries that substantially

reduce water consumption, installation of hood filters to prevent the spread of pollutants in the air, selective garbage collection and storage systems, reuse and recycling of certain materials, predominant use of cloth napkins or reprocessed paper napkins, replacement of disposable tableware and glasses with reusable products, sustainable materials for restaurant maintenance and for construction or arrangement [12,16,34–38,64]. Restaurants that resort to such measures manage to cope more easily with various economic, social, and environmental problems, and confirm the direct link between the application of sustainable measures and restaurants' competitiveness [38,65].

Summarizing these studies, it is obvious that investments in sustainable development measures should be an important objective for restaurant managers. It is noted that these practices are globally known and implemented, but in the absence of a concrete set of rules and regulations, it is up to each establishment to decide the level of engagement.

2.1.3. Food Waste

Another relevant issue to the sustainable management of restaurants is the monitoring and reduction in food waste. Food waste in restaurants occurs due to preparation and consumption processes [66]. Principato et al. (2018) pointed out that the storage process is responsible for 21% of the total food waste; due to the alteration of raw ingredients, preparation processes generate 45% of the total food waste in the restaurant while serving and consuming the food has a specific contribution of 34% [67]. It was also found that there is a direct correlation between the size of the restaurant and the amount of food waste [68,69], vegetables and fruits, followed by bakery products, having the highest share in total food waste [69]. Previous research has shown that serving customers in the "à la carte" system generates higher levels of food waste than other types of food service [66].

Measures that can help prevent food waste in restaurants are various; the most commonly used are the downsizing of portions served to customers, packaging leftovers, accurately forecasting daily activities to avoid overproduction, digital systems for placing orders before the arrival of customers in the restaurant with many beneficial consequences for reducing waste, distributing uneaten food to employees, and strengthening collaboration with NGOs to deliver food to disadvantaged people [14,66,69–72].

Food waste is a contemporary reality. The literature highlights the importance of being aware of this problem and finding the most appropriate managerial answers to reduce the amount of wasted food.

2.1.4. The Role of Staff in Implementing Sustainable Development Practices

Familiarizing employees with the goals of sustainable development and the specific training play a key role in implementing sustainable strategies in the restaurant industry [73]. Organizations that manage to train staff to apply green principles will adapt easier to environmental management [74], and the implementation of environmental training of employees exerts a positive and direct influence on the environmental management maturity of the organization [75]. Learning the basics of sustainable management and specific implementation measures are the attributes of managers, as effective leaders will inspire employees and will motivate them in achieving the goals set [76].

For the restaurant industry, human resource is the most important factor in achieving performance and sustainable development goals [77–79]. Wang (2016) found that restaurant employees who embrace the goals of environmentally responsible behavior are more disciplined and responsible [80]. This is also true in a broader context, as it is proven that the efficiency of employees depends, to a significant extent, on their continuous professional training [81]. Ahmed et al. (2021) explained the causal relationship between staff loyalty and specific motivation to effectively apply sustainable management measures in the hospitality sector [79].

Research conducted in restaurants has shown that the proactive attitude of managers on the use of green measures is crucial for staff involvement and that motivational measures are intended to support the necessary effort [65]. Nevertheless, among employees, chefs are

considered the engine of the application of green measures in restaurants [38]. However, it is often the case that a significant number of restaurant managers do not promote nor create conditions to ensure the visibility of sustainable practices, thus significantly reducing the number of customers who behave responsibly [82].

In conclusion, the process of sustainable development in the restaurant business is primarily influenced by the labor force factor. The attachment of managers and employees to the application of sustainable practices and specific training are the key elements for shaping their responsible actions.

2.2. Major Changes Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic on Sustainable Restaurant Practices

The COVID-19 pandemic had an extremely negative impact on all tourism activities. Song et al. (2021) considered that the restaurant industry, which is generally an area with a high level of commercial risk, was severely affected during the pandemic, requiring rapid adaptation and recovery [83]. Some restaurants decided to shut down, others continued to operate [84], but those who found ways to stay open had a much smaller number of customers and, consequently, revenues were significantly reduced [85].

The most affected resource in the restaurant industry during the COVID-19 pandemic was the human resource. Creating, in this context, the wellbeing of employees and their emotional balance is a priority goal of sustainable development [86]. The restaurant sector has become extremely unattractive during this period, especially for new hires, as the existing staff have either been laid off, had a fragmented work schedule, received financial assistance during periods when the restaurant was closed, or accepted significant salary reductions [87]. Studies have shown that, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the friendly attitude and personalized advice of employees are elements that generate high levels of consumer satisfaction in restaurants, which highlights the imperative nature of maintaining a high standard of staff training [77,88]. In this context, proper training and career development programs are necessary solutions that can contribute to the superior capitalization of the contribution of each employee as a member of the organization, but also for staff loyalty [89]. In addition, maintaining the physical integrity of employees and the application of all hygiene and health protection measures are constant priorities throughout this sector [90].

Managers have understood that crises are overcome through exceptional measures. In this regard, the drastic reduction in production costs, the daily inventory of key raw ingredients, and the reduction in consumption, especially electricity, were the main measures implemented by managers [90]. Regarding the supply of raw ingredients, the process has not undergone significant changes, mostly in the case of restaurants that use personal relationships, strengthened over time with the vast majority of suppliers [90]. At the same time, the role of restaurants in the survival of local producers was highlighted [91].

Other practices used for sustainable development during the COVID-19 pandemic have been to reduce food waste, closed restaurants have donated surplus food to employees and NGOs, new protocols were introduced on production and serving processes, and digital order and payment techniques have expanded [87,90–94]. Changes were made in menu planning, recipes were re-evaluated and optimized, menu standardization proved to be a solution to support the business, portions were reduced, and the digitization of catering services had significant positive effects on improving restaurant business planning and reducing food waste [94]. The results of published studies confirmed the positive effects of using digital applications that, in the short and medium-term, allowed restaurants to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the long term, provide the fundamental prerogatives to achieve sustainable development goals [95,96].

It is obvious that the COVID-19 pandemic urged restaurant managers to take special measures to be able to continue their activity, both in terms of health and sustainability.

Table 1 summarizes the themes, topics, and subtopics analyzed in the literature review section highlighting the characteristics of sustainable practices in the restaurant industry.

Table 1. Main characteristics of sustainable development practices implemented in the restaurant industry.

Theme	Topic	Subtopic	Selected Sources
The specificity of sustainable restaurant practices in different consecutive stages (Colares et al., 2019)	Origin of raw ingredients used, and content of menus offered to consumers	Origin and procurement of raw ingredients	Maynard et al., (2020); Iamkovaia et al. (2019); Cho et al. (2021); Giani et al. (2020); Shafieizadeh and Tao (2020); Roy and Ballantine (2020); Ozturk and Akoglu (2020); Kwok and Huang (2019).
		Traditional dishes and meals obtained from local raw ingredients	Bǎltescu (2016); Arun et al. (2021); Giani et al. (2020); Shafieizadeh and Tao (2020); Memery et al. (2015); Boas et al. (2021); Cömert and Özata (2016).
		Menus' drawing up and details influence over responsible consumption	Maynard et al. (2020); Lopez, Teufel, and Gensch (2020); Amato and Musella (2017); Auma et al. (2019); Ranke et al. (2015).
	The ecological footprint of restaurants in the process of preparation and serving	Reducing energy and water consumption	Wang et al. (2013); Maynard et al. (2020); Ham and Lee (2011); Doğan, Nebioğlu, and Demirağ (2015); Wang and Ge (2020); Cantele and Cassia (2020).
		Waste management	Maynard et al. (2020); Martin-Rios et al. (2018); Doğan, Nebioğlu and Demirağ (2015).
	Food waste	Food waste	Bharucha (2018); Papargyropoulou et al. (2016); Principato et al. (2018); Filimonau et al. (2022); Munir (2022).
	The role of staff in implementing sustainable development practices	Familiarizing employees with sustainable practices and specific trainings	Munir (2022); Haddock-Millar, Sanyal, and Müller-Camen (2016); Jabbour (2015); Tajeddini, Martin, and Altinay (2020).
		Proactive managers	Iamkovaia et al. (2019); Cantele and Cassia (2020); Nimri et al. (2021).
Major changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on sustainable restaurant practices	COVID-19 pandemic impact on restaurant industry	Effects	Song, Yeon, and Lee (2021); Tuzovic, Kabadayi, and Paluch (2021).
		Staff changes	Jang (2021); Kumar et al. (2020); Abbas et al. (2021); Huo (2021).
	Measures to overcome crises	Specific measures in the restaurant industry	Burhan et al. (2021); Ou, Wong and Huang (2021).
		Food waste reduction	Filimonau, Derqui, and Matute (2020); Burhan et al. (2021); Neise, Verfürth, and Franz (2021); Strotmann et al. (2021); Nemes at al. (2021).

The literature review outlined the most important directions of sustainable development in restaurants. These are: raw ingredients and the extensive use of organic raw ingredients obtained from local producers; the revaluation o menus; the reduction in the ecological footprint; the reduction in food waste, and the support of the responsible behavior of managers and all employees in the restaurant. At the same time, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the attention paid to these subjects increased considerably.

Based on these coordinates, the objectives of the research are the following:

O1. Identifying the concerns of restaurant managers in Romania regarding the origin of the raw ingredients used, the content of the menus offered to customers, and the relationship they have with suppliers.

O2. Analysis of the measures and practices applied in Romanian restaurants on the reduction in the ecological footprint within the preparation and serving processes.

O3. Identifying measures and practices to reduce food waste in restaurants in Romania.

O4. Analysis of procedures for implementing sustainable behavior among the restaurant staff.

O5. Determining the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic has led to changes on the sustainable restaurant practices.

3. Materials and Methods

Following the objectives of the study, the authors conducted a research on the topic: "Study on sustainable development on the restaurant market in Romania, following the organizational aspects and changes generated by the COVID-19 pandemic". The qualitative research method was used, the technique used for data collection being the semi-directive in-depth individual interview. The purpose of the research was to find out as much information as possible about the Romanian restaurant market and the concrete sustainable development measures and practices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research took place in June–August of 2021. The chosen period coincided with the holidays and summer vacations when the restaurants in Romania were reopened and allowed the collection of the necessary information in optimal conditions.

The sampling used meets two requirements, namely the volume and the technique of case selection. Regarding the sampling technique, it is not the representativeness of the sample that matters, but its relevance to the topic addressed [97]. As a result, the data cannot be extrapolated to the entire population. For the number of cases studied in the research, to ensure the finding of the appropriate answer to the researched problem, we resorted to convenience sampling [98], it being the most appropriate and most used in practice [99]. Of the 16 ways of sampling convenience [99], the authors chose to use the technique that ensures the greatest variability of cases on the research topic.

As with the sample volume, the number of cases studied must ensure that an appropriate answer is found to the problem investigated. Thus, the main criterion in the selection of research participants is the number of restaurant employees, because, as presented in the Literature Review section, in the process of the sustainable development of restaurant business, labor is the most important factor. As a logical extension, the sample takes into account the structure of food establishments in Romania [21]. Using the sampling technique and the steps detailed above, the researched sample included 56 restaurant managers from Romania (Table 2). From the list of Romanian food establishments [21], authors selected 142 restaurants based on type, location, and size criteria. The restaurant managers were contacted by telephone/email and only 56 managers expressed their consent to participate in the research process (response rate 39.44%). Restaurants were selected from all of the nine Romanian regions, and the sample members operate in major cities (București, Brașov, Sibiu, Timișoara, Iași Constanța, Cluj-Napoca, etc.), popular tourist destinations (Poiana Brașov, Sinaia, Mamaia, Băile Felix, Tușnad, Vatra Dornei, etc.), and rural areas (Bran, Moeciu, Viscri, Vama Buzăului, Breb, etc).

Table 2. Restaurants' distribution and managers' response rate.

Region	Number of Contacted Managers	Number of Restaurants Included in the Sample	Response Rate
Banat	8	2	25%
Bucovina	10	3	30%
Crisana	5	1	20%
Dobrogea	11	6	54.55%
Maramures	9	2	22.2%
Moldova	17	6	35.29%
Muntenia (including Bucharest)	48	21	43.75%
Oltenia	4	1	25%
Transilvania	30	14	46.67%
Total	142	56	39.44%

Source: Authors' own research.

Before the interview, a pre-selection questionnaire was applied to ensure that the proposed objectives were achieved. The most important questions in the questionnaire concerned the number of employees and the specifics of the restaurant, as mentioned above.

An interview guide was used, designed based on the established objectives of the research, which allowed the respondents' answers to be recorded. The time required to complete each interview was 50–60 min, the interviews being conducted with each subject separately. To ensure the objectivity of the content, the operators did not express any personal feelings at the time when the subjects discussed the guide topics. The interviews took place at restaurant premises. The authors of the article were the interview operators, which ensured the good coordination of the interview and the observance of the interview guide.

The structure of the restaurants whose managers were part of the sample is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics.

Percent (%)		Percent (%)	
Number of staff		Restaurant type	
Under10	19.6%	Classic	41.1%
10–20	51.8%	With specific	33.4%
Over 20	28.6%	Specialized	16.5%
Managers' education		Fast-food	3.6%
		Others	5.4%
High school or below	26.8%	Restaurant capacity (places)	
Bachelor's	39.2%	Under 30	25%
Master's	30.4%	30–60	41.4%
Doctorate/Postdoctoral	3.6%	Over 60	33.9%

Source: Authors' own research.

4. Results

The analysis of the answers obtained following the in-depth interviews conducted among the 56 restaurant managers in Romania shows their views on sustainable development in the restaurant market, organizational issues, and changes generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, debated on each topic.

4.1. The Origin of Raw Ingredients Used, Menu Composition, and Relationship with Suppliers

Regarding the importance given to the origin of the raw ingredients used, all managers said that they pay a lot of attention to this issue. Of the managers, 5.36% preferred to turn to small producers, even wanting to help them become legal, especially if they managed to ensure high-quality products. A high percentage of managers (85.71%) claimed that the

major importance given to the origin of products is the basis of the whole business, and the preference towards local suppliers and, especially, to individual agricultural producers is in the obtainment of raw ingredients, especially from dairy, vegetables, and fruits groups. A significant percentage of respondents (67.86%) bought products directly from the peasants' farms. However, the acquisition process is difficult, as there are fewer such producers offering delivery guarantees. The sector of small local producers of food raw ingredients was considered by respondents as endangered, especially because they have been considerably affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the permanent concerns for ensuring the necessary raw ingredients following the preparation recipes were emphasized, aiming at obtaining an optimal quality/price ratio.

Regarding the use of local raw ingredients, more than half of the respondents (57.14%) stated that they turn to local producers. In this context, the research revealed that the basic raw ingredient for most restaurants is meat. One of the managers stated that this is part of the culinary culture of Romanians, saying that "the main vegetable of the Romanians is meat". The advantages mentioned by managers regarding the use of local raw ingredients are their freshness, the high quality of these products, and the use of a very short distribution channel. Among the disadvantages, all managers highlighted, first, the higher price, followed by deliveries in insufficient quantities, the small number of suppliers, and the inability of these small producers to offer raw ingredients throughout the year in the case of seasonal products. Most of the interviewed managers stated that, of the total raw ingredients used, a percentage of 30–45% comes from local producers, 5–15% from cash and carry stores (Metro, Selgros, etc.), and 40–50% from other specialized suppliers. Equally, the responses showed that the supply of local producers is considered by respondents a measure of sustainable development, which contributes to increasing the quality of food offered to customers and the development of local communities.

From the elements underlying the selection of raw ingredients, respondents were asked to choose between price, taste, freshness, and supplier. All respondents mentioned that the price is ranked last (some of them claimed that they ignore the price of raw ingredients, yet this aspect will be found in a higher price of products offered to customers. Moreover, the taste and freshness features of the raw ingredients are evaluated by respondents as extremely important.

To the question "What do you do with unused raw ingredients?" the answers fall in three directions, respectively:

1. Preservation of raw ingredients. Investments made by restaurants for the purchase of a large, refrigerated room (containers) where raw ingredients can be stored.
2. All raw ingredients are used completely. Raw ingredients are sized based on experience and statistical analysis at the average consumption level of the period (noting that permanent gaps in stock are covered by direct purchases from cash and carry stores, and transportation costs incurred by these accidental supplies are much lower compared to the value of any damaged perishable products).
3. Unused raw ingredients are used to provide meals to employees.

A significant part of the respondents (42.86%) mentioned that, for economic reasons, they try to keep the costs of unused ingredients at a reasonable level (below 2%), and consequently, they have implemented several measures:

- They have developed a daily supply planning;
- They have developed and strengthened contractual relations with suppliers who can deliver rhythmically but in small quantities;
- They have developed an integrated management information system that provides, in real time, information on stocks and allows the periodic recalculation of the planned level for safety stocks;
- For organizing events, they have encouraged close collaboration between sales staff and kitchen staff to promote menus that contain raw ingredients available in stock.

Most of the restaurants in the sample (91.07%) use "à la carte" menus. As with the composition of the menus, managers stated that they use 100% raw ingredients of controlled origin that comply with the standards imposed by authorities. However, when asked about the share of organic or natural raw ingredients, the percentage of their use is lower, the resulting values being in the range of 75–90%. For a large part of the respondents, a strong point is represented by products preserved in their kitchen, based on traditional recipes (vegetables/fruits purchased from organic sources during the summer/autumn and prepared as: stews, tomato juice/broth, jams, jams, sauces based on natural ingredients).

The menu revision was another topic of discussion and there were various answers. These were grouped as follows: most of the respondents (71.43%) reviewed the restaurant menu at a maximum of six months, being adapted to hot and cold periods, a small part of the respondents (23.21%) periodically reviewed it, but without mentioning a predetermined time frame, and the smallest part of the respondents (5.36%) did not change the menu.

The introduction of new dishes in the menu highlighted the very different opinions of the respondents:

- Of the managers, 26.79% did not consider it necessary to apply a program of permanent change of menus by introducing new recipes (from time to time, before the COVID-19 pandemic, they resorted to several new recipes), and the promotion of a new dish was based on a careful analysis of the market and of competitors' offers. This category mainly included traditional restaurants. Being characterized by the concern for the promotion of traditional dishes, the tendency to permanently change the menu was not a necessity and does not favor the attraction of new customers;
- Of the managers, 73.21% customized the restaurant's offer and adapted it to the new requirements of the market, by encouraging chefs to use their skills and personality by reinterpreting classic recipes, adding new ingredients available on the market (avocado, mango, pineapple, soy sauce, balsamic vinegar, olive oil, etc.).

All respondents claimed that they have a very good relationship with suppliers, built over many years of collaboration. Approved suppliers are contacted based on an audit and then certified. The basic criteria for the selection of suppliers used by restaurant managers are: the list and the quality of the products sold, the delivery to the unit's premises in at least two-weekly periods, the prices, and commercial facilities granted.

The results of the research, regarding the raw ingredients, the composition of the menu, and the relationship with the suppliers, are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Synthesis of answers corresponding to topic 1 of the research.

Topic	Subtopic	Results	Synthesis of Answers
The origin of raw ingredients used, menu composition, and relationship with suppliers	Choice of ingredients	Fresh and unused raw ingredients	• Preservation of raw ingredients in large cold rooms • Full use of all raw ingredients • Use of unused raw ingredients to provide meals to employees
	Raw ingredients selection process	The use of controlled origin raw ingredients	• 100%
	Menu composition and menu renewal period	Menu revision	• 71.43% review the menu at an interval of no more than six months (hot and cold period) • 23.21% review periodically, but without mentioning a predetermined time interval • 5.36% do not change the menu

Source: Authors' own research.

4.2. Actions of Restaurant Managers in Romania to Reduce the Ecological Footprint in the Preparation and Serving Process

For the topic of discussion on measures designed to save consumption of water, detergents, and electricity, a high number of respondents (71.43%) said that they try to save

as much as possible, mainly in the conditions of rising electricity prices, which will lead them to implement measures to reduce these consumptions. Of the respondents 28.57% mentioned that it is a problem on which they focus their attention, but the implementation of specific measures is carried out gradually, and the reduction in consumption is a wish not only for electricity but also for water and detergents.

When it comes to the use of renewable energy sources, almost all managers (94.64%) said they do not use such sources. Only one restaurant had tried to apply for the electricity system apps, but unfortunately, there must be a very high consumption of electricity to justify the investment. Although managers are open to the use of renewable energy sources, some of them (67.86%) need to find more ways to support this. Only one restaurant tried to submit a project to receive support in the use of renewable energy resources, which failed to be completed, the consulting firm with which they collaborated was not involved or serious. Researchers were able to see a growing interest of managers in the future use of green energy and specific environmental protection measures.

The vast majority of respondents (78.57%) stated that they use biodegradable consumables, especially in the case of packaging. EU law requires the future use of only biodegradable consumables, so it is only a matter of time before all restaurants will adopt this type of consumables.

A majority of the managers, 67.86% of them, mentioned that they collect waste selectively in large bins, but that the process is difficult, and they face several problems, including:

- Problems caused by the operation of waste collection companies and the management and organization systems established by them;
- Communication being cumbersome and difficult with waste collection companies;
- Problems due to lack of labor at the level of waste collection companies, which are felt by restaurants (collection hours are not obeyed, especially for restaurants operating in the central area, although managers recycle waste separately, the collection company takes over together the waste and even mix them).

The most significant responses of the managers regarding the concerns of reducing the ecological footprint of the restaurant are highlighted in Table 5.

Table 5. Synthesis of answers corresponding to topic 2 of the research.

Topic	Subtopic	Results	Synthesis of Answers
Actions of restaurant managers to reduce the ecological footprint in the preparation and serving process	Organizational aspects to reduce the ecological footprint	Measures to save water consumption, electricity, and detergents	• 71.43% try to save consumptions as much as possible • 28.57% state their intention to invest in the reduction in water, electricity, and detergents consumption using the system of small steps
	Strategic decisions to use renewable energy	Use of renewable energy sources	• 94.64% do not use

Source: Authors' own research.

4.3. Measures for Food Waste Reduction

When asked about the culinary dishes that remain unconsumed, all managers answered that they try to make the stocks according to the peaks of demand they have, thus trying to have the lowest possible losses. Most respondents (83.93%) mentioned that they offer products that are not consumed to social causes, for the customers to take away, various associations, or their employees. A small percentage of respondents (16.07%) mention that they hand over these unconsumed preparations as biodegradable waste.

Almost all managers (92.86%) said they are involved in social actions. Most of them (83.93%) collaborate with various associations, among the most mentioned being the associations that deal with orphans.

There are further summarized answers showing the most important aspects linked to food waste reduction in the activity of restaurants from Romania (Table 6).

Table 6. Synthesis of answers corresponding to topic 3 of the research.

Topic	Subtopic	Results	Synthesis of Answers
Measures for food waste reduction	Managerial decisions regarding unconsumed food	Means to reduce food waste	• 83.93% offer products that are not consumed: to social cases, customers, various associations, or their employees • 16.07% hand over these unconsumed preparations as biodegradable waste

Source: Authors' own research.

4.4. Procedures for Implementing Sustainable Behavior among Staff

All respondents mentioned that the most difficult issue for the restaurant during this period is to ensure the necessary staff, both in number and level of qualification.

Most managers (87.5%) have internal procedures that identify the rules on employee behavior, but that they are unwritten (the reason being that they do not have enough time to draft them). Most managers (80.36%) say that they discuss with employees how customers should be treated, mentioning that the services offered to customers and the attitude of employees take precedence over any activity. Respect for clients, colleagues, and superiors is discussed. Conciliation settlement is encouraged, based on discussions between people involved in various misunderstandings, and if this is not successful, the unit manager/administrator will mediate the conflict. A small part of the respondents (10.71%) mentioned that they have a system, through which, at three warnings received within 3 months, the employment contract is terminated.

A small part (8.93%) of the restaurants included in the research establish precise rules for each stage of the serving process, as follows: the welcoming and dining procedure; how to present the menu list, to take orders, the way of serving, the priorities ensured, and the mode of addressing customers.

To the question regarding the existence of procedures on the conduct and sustainable attitude of the employees, the answers of the respondents took two directions:

1. There is no such procedure (83.93%);
2. There are several rules, but not a complex, complete, and written procedure (16.07%).

All respondents argued that they had major difficulties due to the lack of staff for all positions. Most of the respondents (85.71%) stated that there are often several vacancies for which crisis solutions are permanently improvised. Respondents mentioned that they also record periods with intense activity in which they failed to operate at full capacity, precisely due to lack of staff. The managers explained that they used various methods, of which the most representative are:

- For restaurants with multiple locations, staff rotation is used to cover the needs of all units;
- Workforce employed from abroad (one of the restaurant managers said that they currently have two chefs from Venezuela and wants to ensure the necessary staff in the restaurant in this alternative);
- For the school holidays or on weekends, it appeals to people with part-time programs, pupils, and students; however, they cannot fully meet the requirements of the activity;
- Reimbursement of transport expenses for all employees and even providing, with the help of a minibus, personal transport from the place of residence to the place of work;
- Offering attractive salaries compared to the average registered in the field;
- Applying strategies to attract young people and investing in their qualification in the unit.

About the provision of the necessary staff, in 71.43% of the restaurants in the sample there is a shortage of staff, an employee is fulfilling more responsibilities, but through this

organizational alternative only emergencies can be solved. Another important aspect is the lack of staff, especially in the areas of ancillary services (maids, dishwashers, etc.) where most respondents (76.79%) say they fail to build a coherent policy of staff.

In terms of employee loyalty, the most frequent method mentioned by respondents (69.64%) is the bonus system that strongly motivates employees. The following places are ranked: restaurant schedule—12.50% (no very late hours at night), creating a pleasant environment—10.71%, and supporting employees—7.14% (including personal issues).

For the selection of new employees, all respondents mentioned that they differ depending on the position available. For example, there are not too many demands on support staff (the requirements are to show up for work and want to work). Instead, there are several criteria for sales staff (waiters), shift manager, and kitchen manager. Most managers (83.93%) said that waiters must know English and if they know another foreign language they already have an advantage. All these selection criteria are reflected in salary income or other bonus systems. In the actual job interviews, most of the respondents analyze the character, availability, and abilities of the candidate.

A synthesis of the results obtained at this topic is shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Synthesis of answers corresponding to topic 4 of the research.

Topic	Subtopic	Results	Synthesis of Answers
Procedures for implementing sustainable behavior among staff	Internal procedures for employees	Procedures to enhance the sustainable attitude of employees	• 83.93%: there is no such procedure • 16.07%: there are a lot of rules, but not a complex, written procedure
	Staff recruitment	Lack of staff	• 100%
	Methods to retain employees	Employees loyalty	• 69.64%: bonus systems • 12.50% restaurant program (without late hours) • 10.71%: creating a pleasant environment • 7.14%: employee support (including personal issues)

Source: Authors' own research.

4.5. Changes Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic on Sustainable Restaurant Practices

The most important change generated by the COVID-19 pandemic is related to the way restaurants operate. Thus, the respondents indicated that regarding the operation of the restaurants they run in this period of crisis, there were three organizational options:

1. Restaurants that closed during travel restrictions, the staff being technically unemployed: 7.14%;
2. Restaurants that have reduced their activity and operated mainly based on online orders. Indispensable employees continued their activity, while the rest of the employees received technical unemployment: 53.57%;
3. Restaurants that focused exclusively on online orders and delivery and delivery to the customer's home and that kept all employees at work: 39.29%.

In the second category, there were several situations in which managers said that they initially kept all employees, but changed the work schedule, allowing employees to work less.

Most of the respondents (80.36%) explained that the support measures offered by the government helped them the most, during this extremely difficult period. Despite efforts made by the employers, several employees decided to leave the HORECA field. Managers claimed that some of them have retrained themselves (because they were financially affected but also because of so many uncertainties). The common denominator of all respondents is that, after the reopening of the restaurants, they will face a massive staffing crisis (the two main reasons mentioned by managers being: lack of staff in the period before the COVID-19 crisis and retraining of employees during this period).

To the question "Did you make any changes to the content of the menu list?" all the answers show that managers did not make any changes. The reason given highlighted the major concern for the survival of the business and, accordingly, the absence of a well-defined strategy in this direction.

The restaurant managers stated that they did not give up the suppliers they had, but that they had to significantly reduce the level of purchases. The majority of respondents (76.79%) pointed out that they preferred to collaborate with local producers, to support the local community, but also to address issues specific to delivery in this different period.

Related to other changes implemented by managers during this period, the majority (82.14%) said they had introduced health protection measures required by law. Only one manager wanted to mention the fact that, now, they aim to apply scenarios and strategies related to the revival of the restaurant activity, using, in this respect, loans (mentioning the access to the SME INVEST program). At the same time, the idea of the rigidity of banks during this period was emphasized, as they introduced additional precautions and no longer provide funds.

The summary of responses to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the changes it has generated in the restaurant industry are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8. Synthesis of answers corresponding to topic 5 of the research.

Topic	Subtopic	Results	Synthesis of Answers
Changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on sustainable restaurant practices	Organizational elements during the COVID-19 pandemic	Restaurants' schedule	• 7.14% closed the entire activity during the lockdown period • 53.57% restricted the activity and operated based on online orders • 39.29% operated exclusively based on online food ordering and delivery
	Menu composition during the COVID-19 pandemic	Menu changes during COVID-19 pandemic	• 100% have not changed the menu
	Other changes	Other changes due to the pandemic	• 100% sanitary changes imposed by law

Source: Authors' own research.

5. Discussion

This paper analyzes the most used practices for sustainable development among restaurants in Romania, while also reflecting, what were the changes that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study is one of the many conducted on this topic, discussing the situation of restaurants in Romania. Analyses on this topic have had an obvious upward trend, both in number [25] and in significance, as the implementation of sustainable practices contributes to the recognition and certification of restaurant services [12].

The results confirmed that all managers attached great importance to the origin of the raw ingredients and 57.14% of respondents said they turn to local producers. The situation found in Romania is encouraging, given that the supply of restaurants with organic, local, and seasonal raw ingredients encounters many difficulties and is therefore often avoided [38]. The study highlighted the involvement of Romanian restaurant managers in supporting local producers, the results obtained being in accordance with the conclusions of other studies [43,46]. In this context, supporting local producers and encouraging them to practice sustainable agriculture, especially by the authorities, is a solution with many benefits. The purposes of sustainability are multiple. On the one hand, the number of jobs in the area and the income of the locals are increased, and on the other hand, healthy food consumption is favored and the prerogatives of responsible behavior in public catering activities in the area are ensured [52].

The research identified a negative aspect related to the high consumption of meat in restaurants in Romania. This reality is due, in part, to the consumption habits of Romanian

customers. However, culinary habits are important barriers to changing food intake, and reducing the amount of meat consumed is a difficult goal to achieve [60]. The declining trend of meat portions in the recipes used, the creative use of local vegetables, and the ongoing training of chefs are considered actions specific to sustainable food systems with beneficial effects on public health and the environment [12,15]. One solution in this regard is to increase the consumption of meat supplied from local, sustainable sources [60].

Another important aspect of the research explains the increased interest of managers for the periodic change of dishes included in the menu, as a method of capitalizing on local raw ingredients, seasonal, but also manifesting the creativity of chefs, conclusions that can be found in previous studies on this topic [9,81]. It should be noted, however, that during the COVID-19 pandemic, pre-employment in this direction was virtually non-existent, the main motivation invoked by respondents being the focus on finding financial survival solutions. It is relevant to mention that other research on this topic emphasized the importance of changing menus as a means of optimizing activity in times of crisis [15,94].

The measures for saving consumption of electricity, water, detergents, and those specific to waste management are not top management priorities, but it is worth mentioning that there is an increase in the interest of managers to find and implement the most appropriate solutions. The results obtained are similar to the conclusions from previous studies [35,37,38]. In Romania, as in other countries, these concerns are the first reported in the portfolio of sustainable development practices implemented by restaurant managers [36]. Yet, regarding the use of renewable energy sources, the responses showed that almost all managers do not use such sources, but it is considered a major future goal for the development of the units they lead, thus demonstrating an increased attachment to environmental protection. The results of other studies show a different situation, with the share of restaurants using renewable energy sources being about 50% [36]. It is important to note, however, that the results of previous studies have been identified at the level of large companies, with public catering activities developed internationally and which have the financial means to purchase specialized equipment. At the same time, the major fear that exists regarding the application of specific procedures for green management in restaurants is the increase in production costs and increased difficulties in covering them, the conclusion of which is in line with previous studies [13]. On the other hand, the success of these investments involves the organization of benefit campaigns, along with increasing customer satisfaction and confidence in the opportunity to continue these measures, which determine the expansion of financial burden [35,65].

Research conducted among Romanian restaurants has signaled the idea that the process of selective waste collection is considered an important measure for sustainable development in the restaurant sector, which highlights many similarities with the results of previous studies [36–38]. However, we cannot ignore the numerous shortcomings reported in the waste collection process, especially due to the poor organization of the companies specialized in carrying out this activity.

Food waste is a major global issue. In Europe, restaurants are second in the hierarchy of companies responsible for food waste [67]. In Romania, due to the high percentage, over 90%, of the restaurants that serve à la carte menus, the food waste registers very high values. Regarding the application of measures meant to contribute to the reduction in food waste, the situation found in Romania does not differ significantly from other countries, restaurant managers being concerned to apply one or more measures for this purpose [67]. The most common practices are to evaluate the daily activity as accurately as possible and to avoid over-supply, pack uneaten food to be picked up on departure by customers, and donate unused food to employees or associates. Other measures could be applied, which have proven their effectiveness in international practice. These include vacuuming and rapid cooling, followed by freezing of unconsumed food [67].

Moreover, another aspect emphasized by the research is the lack of use of clear procedures regarding the sustainable behavior of employees in restaurants in Romania. Comparing the results obtained with those highlighted in previous studies, the situation in

Romania is not different from other countries. Ham and Lee (2011) re-emphasized that the specific training of employees for the implementation of sustainable procedures is not a priority at the restaurant level [36]. However, in recent studies, experts revealed the need for education and training of employees both to understand the importance of sustainable behavior and to apply specific measures [37,79,80,100].

This study also identified the fact that, in Romania, the restaurant managers do not have specific training for the implementation of sustainable development measures, a situation explained by the low involvement of the authorities for general awareness of the importance of responsible behavior. The role of centralized and coordinated measures at the national or local level for educating restaurant managers to the application of sustainable measures is also mentioned by other authors [80,101]. At the same time, the situation in Romania confirms the idea that managers should assume the role to promote responsible behavior among employees [65,76].

All respondents pointed out that they have major difficulties due to the lack of staff for all functions, and the improvisation of crisis solutions is a constant in restaurant management. This problem is not exclusively due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the provision of staff being a major impediment to the operation of restaurants. As a result, many managers in the field have had to turn to workers from other countries (Venezuela, the Philippines, Vietnam, etc.) to fill this gap. The results of the research support the massive importance of state support measures, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The common denominator of the respondents' response is the fear that, after the reopening of the restaurants, they will face a massive staffing crisis, the two main reasons being the lack of staff and reshaping of employees who were fired during this time of crisis. Regarding the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the direction of sustainable development of the restaurant sector, two directions can be distinguished. On the one hand there are positive aspects, among which the most significant are compliance with health rules and expansion of the delivery system. On the other hand, the negative aspects of the period were the increase in the amount of non-degradable packaging (plastic) and pollution (more delivery vehicles) due to the intensification of home delivery, as well as the dismissal of a significant number of workers in this field.

The findings highlighted, in essence, the idea that the period of crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic did not produce changes in mentality among restaurant managers in Romania. Their concerns focused on the economic aspects of the business, namely maintaining the costs of unused raw ingredients at a resettable level, implementing, for this purpose, a series of measures, such as daily supply planning, development, and strengthening of contractual relations with suppliers, use of integrated management information systems. The findings confirm the results of research on the same topic [90,91,94]. A sad conclusion is that restaurant managers, due to the focus on resuming normalcy, do not find the time they need to consistently approach sustainability issues, which represents a real and acute contemporary challenge. Previous findings argued the idea that collective green efficacy relies extensively and decisively on individual proenvironmental behavior (consumers first, but also managers, staff, etc.) [102].

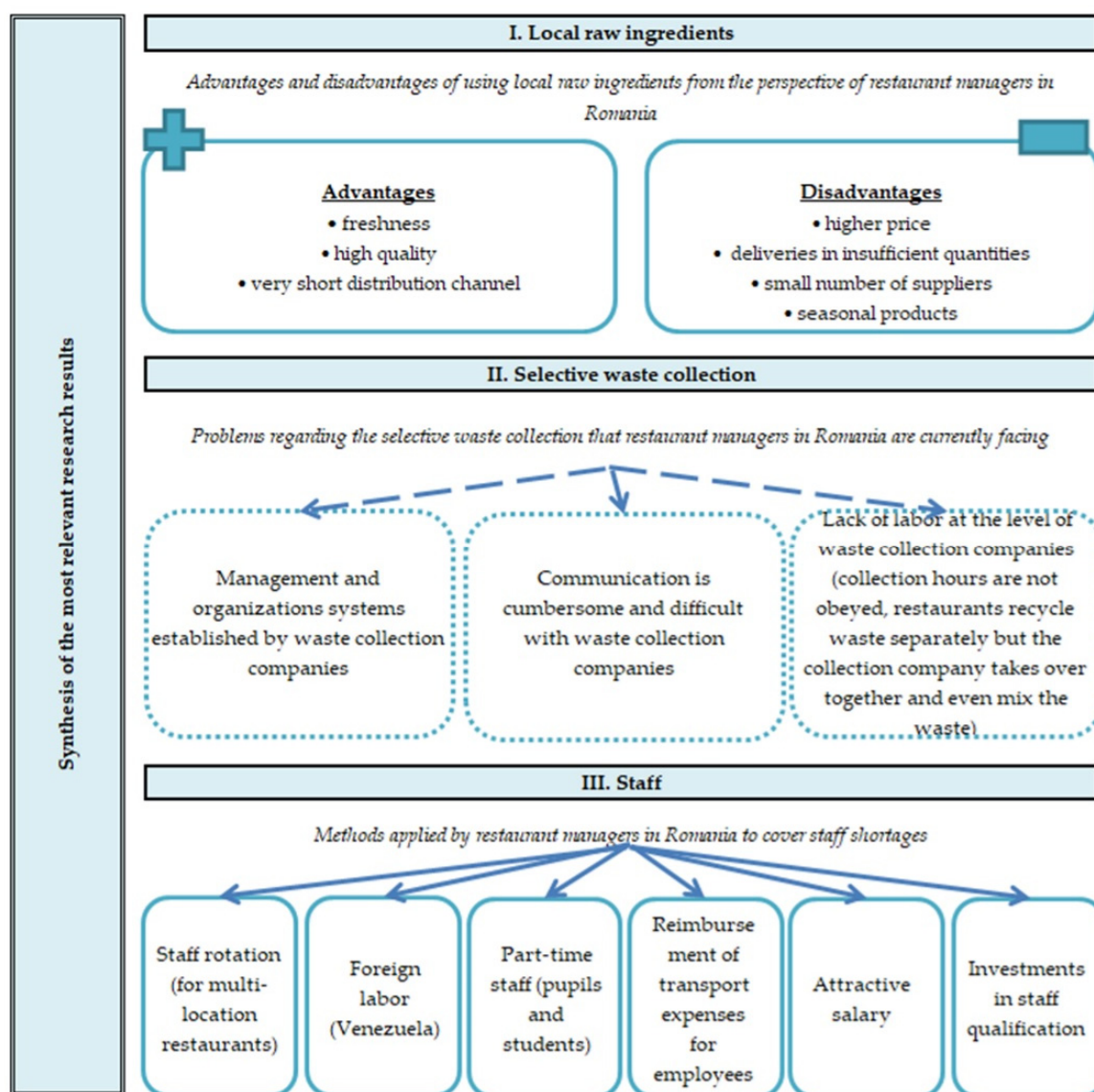Figure 1 summarizes the most relevant results of the research.

Figure 1. Synthesis of the most relevant research results.

6. Conclusions

Restaurants face numerous organizational problems, an acute shortage of qualified staff, but also the growing pressure exerted by customers and the external environment to implement specific measures of sustainable development. During the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions were imposed globally, limiting the possibility of population movement, etc., severely affecting the activity of restaurants. Many of these units thought that they could not operate in these conditions and chose to stop working, and the staff were sent to technical unemployment or were on leave. Others chose to cope with the new conditions and operating restrictions, greatly restricted their activity, and provided terraces for warm weather, which they then tried to keep open in the cold season by using folding curtains, or blanket heaters, and were mainly oriented towards home delivery, etc., solutions that allowed them to survive.

The implementation of sustainable development measures is not a priority for restaurant managers in Romania, but the economic and social context requires them to adopt some specific practices that focus mainly on reducing consumption of electricity, water, detergent, consumables, selective waste collection, food waste reduction, adapting menus to contemporary consumer demands, the use of fresh raw ingredients supplied by local pro-

ducers, the introduction of intelligent systems to improve supply operations, management, operationalization of activities, and on the wellbeing of their staff.

A general conclusion that emerged from the analysis highlighted the shortcomings in the responsible education of restaurant managers, which is, in essence, the main obstacle to the application of sustainable development practices. Managers aware of the importance of these elements will become the main vectors of responsible actions and will create the necessary conditions for the formation of sustainable behavior among employees. This paper reiterates the role of managers in shaping the responsible behavior of restaurants, especially in the post-pandemic period. This requires a long-term commitment, but also a capacity combined with a desire to adapt versus change. On the other hand, there is obviously reduced concern of authorities on the general awareness of the population in the direction of sustainability, on the specific education of the administrators and managers of companies, and on the financial support of the necessary actions for this purpose.

The contribution of this research is based on the results obtained from qualitative research and reflects the thoughts and directions of action of restaurant managers in Romania, especially in the context of major changes generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The results presented in this study were collected based on an interview guide designed in accordance with previous research conducted internationally. The findings provide a contribution to the body of knowledge by improving the understanding of sustainable restaurant practices and their implementing processes. The results obtained could also contribute to the development of a package of good practices for the sustainable development of restaurants. To this end, the authors propose a basic guide of sustainable managerial practices to be implemented in the restaurant sector. Subsequently, the guide can be extended by representatives of authorities, NGOs, decision-makers, etc. The study showed that there are three pillars on which the activity of a restaurant involved in supporting the principles of sustainability is based, namely the raw ingredients, the staff, and the relationship with the environment. In Figure 2 a graphic scheme of this guide is presented. All strategies that will be implemented by restaurant managers will have to consider important factors such as size, typology, specifics, and number of employees. The research results and the guide proposed by authors might apply to several international restaurant industries.
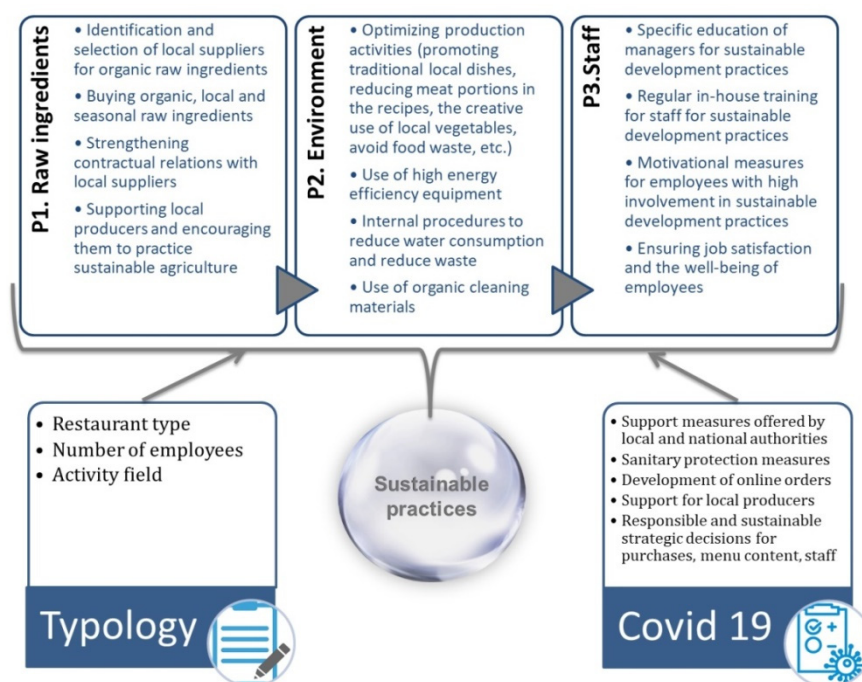

Figure 2. Minimum elements to be introduced in the guide of good practices for sustainable development of restaurants and responsible behavior of managers.

The limitations of the research refer to the low number of respondents who participated in the qualitative research conducted. This is due, on one hand, to the lack of openness on the part of restaurant managers to communicate on this topic, and on the other hand, to the small number of restaurants that have introduced practices specific to sustainable development and, therefore, a selection base of reduced respondents.

This paper did not analyze the aspects involved in the extended development, during the COVID-19 pandemic, of the delivery system, following the expansion of digital ordering and payment procedures, with numerous effects, some positive and others negative, on the sustainable development of restaurants. The authors intend to focus, in future research, on the analysis of the negative effects of delivery systems: CO_2 emissions, high fuel consumption, excessive consumption of non-degradable packaging used by restaurants, and the effects felt by the employees involved in carrying out these activities.

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