

Fair Culinary Comparison: When Is a Ranking Defensible?

A methodological proposal by Ahmad Issam Maadarani for constructing comparisons and explaining rankings

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A description of a dish can be accurate while its comparison with another remains unfair. This article proposes separating the quality of observation from the validity of comparison, grounding rankings in a declared task, equivalent conditions and reviewable reasons. It is a professional framework for testing, not an accredited standard or a finding from an experimental study.

1. The problem precedes the score

When judges taste two dishes, they decide more than which is more enjoyable: they decide which deserves to advance within a particular task. One dish may excel in execution, another in clarity of identity, a third in suitability for service. If the meaning of excellence changes during tasting, the ranking reflects movement between different

criteria. Fairness therefore begins by defining the question the comparison must answer, before seeing the entries.

2. The unit of comparison: performance within a brief

The proposed unit is performance within the brief, rather than appearance or complexity. The brief specifies resources, time, requirements and constraints, and states whether originality, technique or consistency belongs to the task. Complexity earns no automatic bonus; judges ask whether it serves a declared function. Any criterion unrelated to the brief requires justification before entering the ranking.

3. Equivalence does not require similar dishes

Proposed equivalence means comparable opportunities to demonstrate performance, rather than a single culinary language. Height or a large number of components cannot automatically signify excellence when the brief permits an economical dish. Features grounded in a cultural context need their function described before evaluation. Deliberate coarseness cannot be judged by the smoothness required of a different dish. The question remains whether the intended texture was achieved and served the experience permitted by the brief.

4. Hypothetical case: economical and complex dishes

Consider a dish with three components and another with nine, both addressing a brief centred on balance and precise execution. The first offers flavour clarity and stable texture; the second offers enjoyable transitions but one component disrupts the finish. Counting components cannot justify favouring the second, and celebrating simplicity cannot justify favouring the first. Evidence relating to the declared criteria must decide. If the brief instead requires several specified techniques, their absence becomes relevant: the brief has changed, not the value of the observation.

5. A test of defensible ranking

Before confirming a close result, judges restate the reason for the difference without invoking the cook's name or status. Would that reason remain valid if serving order were reversed? Is the same criterion being applied to both dishes? Is the observed difference

sufficient to justify a clear lead? This test does not require ties contrary to competition rules, but it requires acknowledging fragile distinctions when numerical precision exceeds the strength of the evidence.

6. An applicable working protocol

Write the task, criteria and weights before assessment, and provide necessary information equivalently. Document service conditions and material differences. Each judge records initial observations independently before discussion. Link scores to specific descriptions, then review close differences using the same reasons. Discussion should preserve reasoned disagreement rather than impose artificial consensus, and identify the rule that resolved the ranking. A subsequent change in weights requires reassessing every affected entry.

7. How could the proposal be tested?

A training study could compare explanations from judges using a written brief with those from a group receiving general instructions, balancing dish presentation order. Define the outcomes in advance: consistent use of criteria, clarity of reasons for differences, and ranking changes on repeat presentation. Agreement alone cannot establish fairness, since a group can agree on an unsuitable criterion. Explanations must therefore be examined for relevance to the brief, and findings cannot automatically be generalised to every context.

8. Conclusion and limits

A defensible ranking begins by examining the legitimacy of the comparison that produced a number. This framework neither removes differences in taste nor guarantees neutrality; it asks judges to disclose criteria, conditions and evidence. Fairness becomes a reviewable practice: the cook of any dish should be able to understand the result, and the same reason should apply when names and forms change.

9. A concise working sheet

Field	Review question	What to record
Brief	What performance is required?	Write the task before seeing dishes.

Field	Review question	What to record
Equivalence	Are information and opportunities comparable?	Document differences affecting comparison.
Difference	What evidence justifies the lead?	Link observation to a declared criterion.
Review	Does the distinction exceed its evidence?	Record fragility without changing rules.

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