In an English county in the greater London area, the opening of a new and very exclusive restaurant and bar has caused controversy for its dress code, requiring women to wear strappy high heels and tight dresses. At a time when questions of gender and inclusion are shaping the new contours of our society, this controversy reopens the debate on the appropriateness of requesting that women wear certain kinds of clothes, but also on the legitimacy of restaurant owners requiring their customers to dress in a certain way.

It's what's sometimes known as bad buzz. Because, while the promotional campaign for the opening of the Beluga Bar in Leatherhead, Surrey, has got everyone talking, it hasn't necessarily been in the way that its owners might have hoped. The establishment, slated to open February 11, published a dress code online with a particularly sexist slant. The policy in question asked women to wear "skinny jeans with sexy black ankle-strap heels and with a form-fitting top." The dress code then went on to state that female customers could alternatively opt for a dress, going as far as to suggest "midi or bodycon dresses" as acceptable styles.

The establishment's guidelines received an avalanche of criticism on social networks. Internet users accused the owners of being misogynists, and labelled the dress code as appalling. Many felt that Beluga Bar should be ashamed to publish such recommendations. Faced with this backlash, the bar finally decided to remove its "mistakenly published" guidelines, and posted an apology on Instagram. "We wish to clarify that our policy is a smart dress code for men and women," said the establishment, which serves sushi, scallops and caviar.
This recent case raises two questions: that of imposing a specific dress code on women, but also whether it's necessary to ask guests to respect certain rules of dress. For upmarket restaurants such as Jean Imbert's eatery at the Plaza Athénée hotel in Paris, it's clearly stated that caps, tracksuits and shorts are forbidden. The Parisian palace on Avenue Montaigne takes care not to give any specific instructions to female diners, and clearly states that men must wear a jacket. Sneakers do not appear to be forbidden, however, given the star chef's latest Instagram post, where he is flanked by celebrity friends Kylian Mbappé and Omar Sy.

On the question of whether it's normal for a restaurant to require a dress code, specialist site Atabula interviewed Michelin-starred chef Alain Dutournier of Carré des Feuillants in 2016. At the time, the chef considered that the matter should essentially be self-regulating, without having to go as far as to require customers to wear a jacket or tie. "People should have a basic idea of how to dress when they come to starred establishments," he said. A brief glance at the requirements of the restaurant owners, from the Ritz in London to the famous Jules Verne at the Eiffel Tower, suggests that shorts and sportswear are the most feared (and therefore the most forbidden) looks at classy eateries.