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2019

Do It for the Culture

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Recommended Citation

Iyer, Priyanka, "Do It for the Culture" (2019). *Dean James E. McLeod Freshman Writing Prize*. 7.
<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/mcleod/7>

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ABSTRACT:

This researched argument essay grapples with one of the most difficult questions in the field of foodways: what does ethnic authenticity (in a culinary context) truly mean? In it, the author argues that the term is widely misunderstood and usually comes from a Euro-American, coded white, racialized point of view that colors how consumers see other cultures. Ultimately, the author contends that "limiting restaurants to what is often a subjective definition of 'ethnic authenticity' damages cultural understanding and bolsters stereotypes." In other words, globalization and culinary fusion have had a profound effect on how we define and understand other cultural identities, particularly with those who have been historically oppressed. This oppression continues in the form of racial stereotyping and an expectation of cheap restaurant fare (Chinese food is used as one of a few examples).

Further, rather than challenging these preconceived notions about culture, so-called ethnic restaurants entrench culinary and cultural expectations. Using a 2018 gastronomic preservation project, sociological and cultural studies research, and San Francisco as a metropolitan case study, the author concludes that "[i]nstead, it is the conscious pursuit of culinary fusion combined with time that elevates multicultural awareness in society the most," preserving both culinary tradition and cultural understanding.

Priyanka Iyer

Do It for the Culture

The residents of San Francisco enjoy the perks of living in America's capital of culinary diversity. From falafel to injera to moussaka, the city hosts the most offerings of any major American city at 14 different cuisines per household (Food Republic) and attracts some of the world's most voracious foodies committed to novelty and innovation. Indeed, in an effort to sway readers into visiting the culinary wonderland that is San Francisco's food scene, the writers over at San Francisco Travel declare, "Whether you're in the Mission, SOMA or North Beach, you'll have the chance to sample everything from Sicilian pizza to mulligatawny soup to butternut squash quesadillas" ("5 Reasons"). What makes San Francisco unique isn't its variety or even its ethnic and racial diversity; it is its proclivity for piecing together seamless, fascinating fusions of different cuisines.

For many restaurant-goers, the question that follows is one of urgent concern: What is the fate of culinary and cultural authenticity in San Francisco? Indeed, for these individuals, it is this word—*authenticity*—that lies at the heart of a truly immersive cross-cultural experience. But what does authenticity and, in this case, *ethnic* authenticity truly mean? Easily one of the most widespread descriptors of culture-specific cuisine, "ethnic authenticity" is a misunderstood term. In fact, limiting restaurants to what is often a subjective definition of "ethnic authenticity" damages cultural understanding and bolsters stereotypes. Instead, it is the conscious pursuit of culinary fusion combined with time that elevates multicultural awareness in society the most.

In theory, the word “authentic” is used to describe food and restaurants that accurately reflect their homeland—from the dishes’ ingredients and preparation to the restaurants’ music, décor, and atmosphere. Global Gastros, a project organized by the Institute for Culinary Preservation and Research that is dedicated to the preservation of culinary tradition and diversity, fervidly upholds the value of authenticity, writing “it’s important that we don’t forget that the international foods we eat, no matter how far they have traveled or how much they have become a norm in our communities, have their own ‘cultural DNA.’ ... When you don’t appreciate [this DNA], you run into problems and risk ‘culturally whitewashing’ the cuisine” (“Food Culture”). As is asserted later in the article, international restaurants’ authenticity is central to the advocacy of the Global Gastros project because it believes that straying from a cuisine’s tradition diminishes that cuisine’s distinctive flavors and subtleties—whether exemplified by the fact that 85% of all Japanese restaurants are “owned and run by non-Japanese chefs and owners” or the homogenization of American-Mexican food (“Food Culture”).

The ultimate impact of globalization and culinary fusion, as advocates of authenticity argue, is on how we define and understand other cultures. Indeed, Global Gastros argues that by failing to preserve the authentic flavors, traditions, and subtleties of international cuisines, and to remember the people who created them, there may come a day when “food cultures have blended and overlapped so much that finding their roots, their cultural DNA, is impossible” (“Food Culture”). In this context, Global Gastros argues that authenticity is culture’s savior; without the preservation of traditional recipes and tools, the globalization of cuisine will wipe out not only culinary diversity, but also the appreciation of *cultural* diversity.

To be sure, culinary diversity is certainly important. But limiting restaurants and culinary connoisseurs to singular definitions of “authenticity” is more harmful to cultural appreciation and understanding than beneficial. Indeed, the meaning of authenticity in practice often differs from theory; in practice, a restaurant’s authenticity is relative to the beliefs, expectations, and stereotypes held by its customers rather than to the food itself. To study the dynamics of ethnic authenticity, Ph.D. student Shun Lu and Sociology Professor Gary Alan Fine at the University of Georgia examined the presentation of ethnic food in four Chinese restaurants in Athens, Georgia. In their research, they identify that no matter the sort of international cuisine, “adjustments are made to accommodate the values of the host society. ... What constitutes Americanized food is a social construction, as is what constitutes Chinese food. Despite the changes, food is often presented by the ethnic restaurant as being ‘authentic’—for many consumers, a socially desirable image in a competitive and differentiated market” (Shun 5). In other words, authenticity cannot rightfully be used to describe cuisines—no matter what culture they originate from—because those cuisines are naturally adjusted to the culinary and cultural contexts in which they exist.

As an example, Lu demonstrates how the supposedly “authentic” offerings of all four restaurants had been significantly altered to meet the economic, social, and cultural expectations of their customers. Consumption-oriented restaurants, whose customers primarily desire quick, tasty meals, rarely focus on using “authentic” ingredients, techniques, or recipes. Under these constraints, the restaurants tend to purchase the most economical ingredients (for example, American vegetables such as carrots, broccoli, and green peppers versus traditional fresh bamboo shoots, garlic bold, and wax gourds) and add more sugar than their Connoisseur-oriented counterparts. This latter variety of restaurants tend to cater to diners with more time, resources, and “cultural capital”; subsequently, their consumers tend to have elevated expectations. These

restaurants provide more formal service, options, and complicated dishes with specialized ingredients and preparation procedures. Interestingly, however, even connoisseur-oriented restaurants, “while responsive to the taste of their customers,” do not operate with “an allegiance to authentic recipes or fixed styles of preparation” (Shun 13). In fact, all four restaurants curate meals to fit the expectations of their customers—regardless of their background or “cultural capital.” Chow Mein, in which the noodles are first dry-fried rather than boiled, and Mongolian Beef, in which a significant volume of sugar is added, are two examples of how the restaurants alter definitions of authenticity according to the tastes of their customers. As one of the interviewed chefs describes, once these changes are made, customers not only enjoy the food more, but also recognize it as true Chinese food (Shun 9). Here, it wasn’t just the “Chinese food” itself that had significantly transformed, but also the consumers’ *perceptions* of authentic Chinese food. In effect, by advertising their meals as being “authentic,” these restaurants actively reinforce the culinary and cultural expectations of their customers rather than challenging them.

Evidently, the authenticity of a cuisine *in practice* significantly differs from in theory. Despite Global Gastros’s idealized view of authenticity’s role in restaurants, in practice, it is often defined by “some platonic ideal of what a dish should taste like” (Ray, Ramanathan). Indeed, according to Krishnendu Ray, the chair of the Food Studies Program at NYU, these expectations are closely tied to how we perceive those cooking the food. For example, when the term “ethnic” first began to be used to describe food in the 1950s, it was a subtle way to acknowledge difference in a racially-charged, Anglo-Protestant dominant culture. Over the years, however, the groups that we refer to as “ethnic” have also changed. As immigrants from eastern and southern Europe (namely, Italy and Greece) arrived in waves, they were largely considered ethnic; not only were their cultures starkly different from that of contemporary

(white) America, but they also worked low-paying jobs and settled into communal ghettos. As Italians and Greeks opened restaurants, their cuisines generally had lower price ceilings (regardless of the effort and ingredients that went into making the dishes) and were viewed with disdain. In fact, as Ray notes, “social workers and nutritionists cautioned that Italian food was too garlicky and spicy—which they said increased the craving for alcohol” (Ray). This parallels the “ethnic” distortion many more recent immigrants experience today. As Roberto Ferdman, a food reporter for the *Washington Post*, puts it, “When we call a food ethnic, we are signifying a difference but also a certain kind of inferiority. French cuisine has never been defined as ethnic. Japanese cuisine is not considered ethnic today” (Ferdman). Just as we were not willing to pay high prices for the immigrant cuisines of the early 1900s, we refuse to pay high prices for the cuisines we regard as “ethnic” today. Indeed, “One of the big constraints, say, for Indian food or Chinese food is that, if it is expensive, it cannot be authentic.” Immigrant chefs “are trapped for that kind of demand for authenticity — cheap authenticity” (Ray, Ramanathan).

If the way we perceive another culture’s cuisine is so heavily shaped by our perception of the cultural group, our definition of “authenticity” follows the same pattern. That is, when we approach restaurants with the mindset of authenticity—a set of defined expectations—we freeze that restaurant in a certain altered version of its own culture. General characteristics of a food—like spiciness or greasiness or color—become defined and measured; and cuisines as ancient and complex as Chinese food can seem, as Krishnendu Ray recalls a recent graduate from the Culinary Institutes of America once stated, “one-dimensional” (Ferdman). This applies to not only the cuisine, but the cultural groups we associate with that cuisine. Suddenly, we are willing to trap Chinese people, Ethiopians, Indians, and Pakistanis into well-defined, often exoticized stereotypes. Cultures are homogenized, and cross-cultural understanding is halted.

In 2011, Sean Brayton and Brad Millington, researchers at the University of Lethbridge and the University of Bath, respectively, studied this phenomenon on the popular Canadian reality show program, *Restaurant Makeover*. Specifically, they studied its recent shift to ethnic restaurant renovations to observe how “culinary multiculturalism may be symptomatic of wider political and social changes” (Brayton 1). Over the past three seasons, the show’s experts force restauranteurs—from a Somalian refugee to an amateur chef from Mexico—to exoticize and homogenize the sorts of food and experiences they offer to their (predominantly white) customers in order to save their businesses, families, and entire livelihoods. In one episode, for example, Chef Long advises Richard, who immigrated from Peru over twenty years ago, to “return to the ‘roots,’ ‘soul’ and ‘traditions’ of ethnic cuisine ... to ‘balance it out and go back to the culture’” (Brayton 10). Despite living in Canada for more than twenty years, Richard, his family, and his restaurant are firmly positioned within the Caribbean immigrant experience. The role of the show’s Western experts is to “tease” out the ethnic “otherness” and “authenticity” of the restauranteurs, all the while entrenching their constructed perceptions and stereotypes of the culture (Brayton 11). As Brayton puts it, “Ironically, the program imagines an instinctive connection between ethnic identity and culinary authenticity, even as it underscores the constructedness of both. ... Under these terms, ethnic difference is presumed to be both fixed and foreign” (Brayton 11).

In truth, culture, ethnic difference, and true “authenticity” is not fixed; just as cultures undergo a constant process of evolution, cultural cuisines, ingredients, and styles of preparation are constantly changing. Despite Global Gastros’s contention that “there may come a point where food cultures have blended and overlapped so much that finding ... their cultural DNA, is impossible” (“Food Culture”), the fact is that a culture’s “DNA” is rarely

stagnant, but instead in a continual process of blending and overlap. As Lu puts it, “Contributing to the contingent nature of authenticity is that the culture of any social group is in continual flux. ... The vitality of a culinary system depends on its adaptability and flexibility” (Shun 5). The question, then, is how do we embrace the constant evolution of cuisine and avoid our societal tendency to fall back on one-dimensional descriptors?

Ultimately, the most effective way to preserve culinary tradition and, in tandem, bolster multicultural awareness and understanding is through constant innovation and fusion of culinary styles. Fusion cuisine can be traced back to the 1980s when restaurants in increasingly gentrified New York, Los Angeles, and London attempted to disguise Asian cuisines to cater to affluent, urban white people. Back then, and still today in many locales, fusion often resulted in an unsavory meld of one-dimensional, stereotypically *ethnic* flavors and traditionally Euro-American foods. But fusion has come a long way.

Michelle Tchea, a writer at the *Post*, presents the accounts of several up-and-coming Asian chefs whose work centers around fusion food. One such chef is Xavier Hsu, a chef located in the city of Taipei whose goal is to change people’s perceptions of Taiwanese cuisine. In describing Hsu’s style, Tchea states, “Although Hsu’s cuisine is unconventional – he calls it ‘fire’ – there is something exciting about the uniqueness of his dishes. Using mainly ingredients native to Taiwan, such as Magau peppercorn and vegetables foraged on the island, Hsu has taught his regular customers to expect the unexpected” (Tchea). When done in this way, fusion accomplishes what authenticity does not: it shatters the expectations and stereotypes held in the public consciousness around what a cuisine is and *should* be. Jean Houston, the author of “The Bright Side of Globalization,” writes about the mixing of different culinary styles:

The complex music of the new cuisine is so unexpected that eaters are enticed to leave behind the sensory expectations of the familiar and take off for new territory. A great fusion meal demands that we meet the world's flavors from a new place in consciousness. When we eat familiar foods, we know what to expect; our response is comfortable and well established. (Cohen)

In other words, by combining ingredients, preparations methods, and flavors from one or more culinary traditions and/or innovating upon existing traditions, chefs can force us to reevaluate (and perhaps, elevate) not only our expectations of, but *appreciation* for, a distinct cuisine. When traditionally Asian flavors are added to tacos and burritos, we are forced to reconsider whether all Asian food needs to be extremely spicy, brimming with soy, or some combination of spring rolls and noodles. When a restaurant unabashedly commits itself to presenting new, innovative foods derived from traditionally Mexican flavors, we are forced to recognize that our perception of Mexican cuisine can include more than beef tacos, cheese-drenched enchiladas, and jumbo-sized burritos. Such a process of innovation calls for us to discard our pursuit of authenticity because it calls for us to discard our biased expectations.

Of course, over time, as cultural groups intermingle, and stereotypes are broken through natural processes, our perceptions of other cuisines and, naturally, other cultural groups, often naturally follow this course. As Lu writes, "Late modernity has produced certain homogenizing effects as well as strong tendencies toward cultural heterogeneity (Shun Lu); it has blurred the borders of ethnic groups but also provided an open atmosphere for recognizing the value of diversity and the desire to participate in the cultural life of groups outside our own" (Shun Lu). Indeed, as the Greeks and Italians who arrived near the turn of the century climbed the socioeconomic ladder, society reevaluated its lowly perception and token appreciation for their food and culture. Culinary innovation, however, accelerates this process of cultural and societal integration of new cuisines by consistently developing the public's interest while preventing the

accumulation of expectations. As Ray states in an interview with the *Washington Post*, *interest* often translates into a sort of continual, dynamic appreciation for other cultures; our societal “hierarchy of taste is also a hierarchy of interest” (Ferdman).

Decades of culinary innovation in San Francisco is illustrative of this interest. There, in one of the most culturally diverse and integrated cities in the world, individuals are drawn together in a dynamic, continuous process of trying new things, learning about new traditions and cultures, and reframing expectations. Indeed, those in cities like San Francisco, Sacramento, and NYC are less prone to the destructive effects of restaurants’ and individuals’ futile pursuit of authenticity; in the end, by limiting food to singular definitions of ethnic authenticity, we trap not only the restaurants and cultural groups of our community, but ourselves. In our rapidly diversifying communities, we cannot limit ourselves to stagnant definitions of what we, they, or that culture *should* be. Neither can we make the mistake of forgetting our complex history of cultural mistreatment, appropriation, and integration. In the coming decades, then, it is up to us to continually shape the stories—culinary or otherwise—that we tell ourselves. To overlap and innovate them so that someday, we may appreciate the one-of-a-kind ideas, products, and foods forged out of the stew of our differences.

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