Taste and space: eating out in the city today

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Pleasure and accomplishment stem from enjoying and celebrating the specific amongst a proliferation of difference. Adopting, adapting and transforming, we can literally nourish ourselves with the diversity and constant change that characterize contemporary urban society. These are adventures in a very large kitchen.

(Miles, 1993, p. 202)

My cooking should represent my city, the place we live, in the ingredients but also in the culture.

(Puck, 1996, p. 63)

My aim in this chapter is to think through some of the issues that the contemporary geography of urban eating out raises: the essay is not a comprehensive review of the causal links between space and taste, but instead sketches some of the practices and processes that mark Western city eating today. My motive for doing this is to provide a thinking-frame – a few

catalysts for further exploration of how city living and eating out are commingled, and how that commingling illustrates broader processes at work in urban environments. The contemporary city is a space of consumption and a site of spectacle, but it is also a space of contestation, a site of refusal. Played out on the streets and plazas, the political dramas of everyday life are materialized in the practices of city living. The sociological transformations of the late modern age – all that postmodernization, deterritorialization, globalization – get worked through at the level of the everyday, the commonplace, the banal. As a concentration of these processes, eating out gives us a way into thinking through the city as a node in the disjunctive flows of contemporary culture, including global 'foodscapes' (Appadurai, 1990; Ferraro, 2002).

At the heart of my argument is the need to see contemporary cityscapes as maps of distinction, in Bourdieu's (1984) sense of the term. In analysing the taste habits of the middle classes, Bourdieu suggested a dynamic and complex dance of positional goods, moving up and down a class-inflected taste hierarchy (see also Featherstone, 1991). This process – the circulation of goods driven by the motor of cultural capital accumulation in the never-ending game of status-marking is, I want to suggest, clearly played out across urban space. Loft living, gym joining, haute cuisining: these are the habits and habitats in which distinction is most vividly mapped out (Zukin, 1995). This is a postindustrial story, of course, of cities redefining what they are once their economic base is stripped out and – if they are lucky – substituted by the symbolic economy. Place promotion, city marketing, imagineering – these are the new industries that now give shape to cities. And rising in the ranks of promotional tools in this symbolic economy is food.

The endless dance of class struggle – the struggle of manners, tastes and lifestyles – makes and remakes the metropolitan landscape as a movie set for self-presentations, for fashioning the self out of bespoke tailoring, deli counters and personal grooming. The new middle classes – taste-makers and trend-spotters *par excellence* – make fullest use of their savvy in this setting, disdaining through the subtle movements of bodies and wallets the *passé* and *déclassé*. The game is always stacked in their favour; their lifestyle journalists know it, their

restaurateurs know it, their 'purveyors of fine foods' know it … The new middle classes, as we shall see, take on the crucial role of cultural intermediaries, identified by Bourdieu as the drivers of the system of distinction. And the city is laid out before them, ripe for the tasting.

Cosmopolitan dining

The city is bountiful (as we shall see later) – it is one huge eating-out adventure, literally and figuratively, but it is not without a price: the price of exclusion, or of condescension, or of exploitation. As Hannerz (1990) has observed, the endless safari of the cosmopolitan, searching out the exotic and the authentic, is essentially a predatory practice: the pillage of resources, the scouring of habitats, the uprooting and repackaging of the foreign, the novel, the dangerous. It is summed up in an advertising slogan from British TV, to be taken only partially tongue-in-cheek: discover the world – and eat it. For a time, it was cosmopolitan enough to move outwards, to visit the Earth's four corners for new consumer choices. Now, however, the whole world has been reached and reaped, so the hunt turns inwards; more accurately, it looks to the 'other within', rediscovering (or reinventing) 'lost' (or invented) traditions, from home baking to offal eating (Visser, 1997). So, although Warde and Martens (2000, p. 91) suggest that, in the UK today, '[d]istinction is entailed in the taste for foreign food', I think this oversimplifies the relationship between 'foreignness', distinction and taste. Crucially, in a cranking-up of the dance of distinction, the quest for the 'other within' turns to habits and tastes jettisoned by the lower classes on their own upward path, as they chase the tastes of those who continually out-step them. The foods prized by the taste-makers are the same ones that, a generation ago, they sought to distance themselves from (James, 1996). A recent manifestation of this in the UK is the dramatic rise in popularity of farmers' markets, which bring to urban locales a comforting rustic nostalgia, making them a favoured haunt of new-traditionalist consumers (see for example Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000).

Farmers' markets are an interesting illustration of the broader processes I am seeking to explore here: their introduction into

an increasing number of UK and US city centres testifies to the ready market for their goods – and for urban consumers' quest for new culinary experiences. Culinary-cultural capital – a subspecies of Bourdieu's generalized formulation – is on display and up for grabs at these markets, as it is in many sites for urban eating. Also at work in this space, literalized in the offering of tastings by vendors, is the related practice of cultural omnivorousness.

In their sociological exploration of British urban middle-class eating out, Warde, Martens and Olsen (1999) identify this tactic of cultural omnivorousness as endemic among particular social groups, most notably the new middle classes (see also Warde and Martens, 2000). Their argument is that the potential overload of contemporary consumer culture is the cause of considerable personal anxiety: with so many products on the market, constructing a personal identity becomes fraught with unlimited choice. Out of the proliferating brands, *which one most accurately communicates who I am?* Cultural omnivorousness is thus a 'coping strategy' based on information maximization: the reassurance that comes from knowing the choices we make are as informed as we can make them. In a twist of Bourdieu's thesis that taste is used to mark distinction from other social groups, Warde et al. suggest instead that the proliferation of cultural symbols makes this kind of inter-group differentiation increasingly difficult. The complexity of the codes is such that we can never attain a decent working knowledge of the role of commodities in other social groups' identity work. In its place, taste is used as a marker of *recognition*: 'cultural judgement has its primary effect through its capacity to solidify and entrench social networks' (Warde et al. 1999, p. 124). Taste is turned inwards, to define membership rather than mark distinction – we recognize likeminds through what and where they eat, and gain comfort from the homecoming every time we walk in through the restaurant's door, and know that this is *our kind of place*. Commensality here confers equality among fellow neo-tribe members, secure in our ability to recognize shared cultural codes – a safe haven, as the antidote to the flickering confusion bombarding us when we try to make sense of others: *you are who you eat with*.

Reading between the lines of this analysis, omnivorousness starts to appear like a compulsion, a particularly middle-class

eating disorder: the compulsion to eat everything, to be open to everything, to chow down on it all, in the hope that the 'best bits' can then be assembled into a new you – or, rather, *a better, more accurate reflection of the real you*. Like Hannerz's (1990) discussion of the cosmopolitan sensibility, we can see cultural omnivores as machines for taste-based self-making: omnivorousness as cultural mastery through incorporation. Only once we have processed it all can we pick those places, those plates, which say what we want them to say. The *faux pas* is to be seen dining out of place: 'ignorance of socially meaningful items might be shameful, a preference for vulgar items revealing, display of intended markers misleading, interpretation of signs mistaken' (Warde et al., 1999, p. 119). The test, as Hannerz points out, is *how far will you go to mark your social location?* What will you eat, and what remains too distasteful – either to our palates or our peers (French, 1995)? Given the anxieties of misrecognition and misinterpretation, this is a doubly tricky question, risking both a bad taste in the mouth and being marked as a person of bad taste by our peers. Negotiating these intricacies is a never-ending problem, of course, given the migration and devaluation (or strategic revaluation) of foodstuffs and eating-holes up, down and across the social (and urban) landscape. The cultural omnivores are compelled to find *all you can eat* – and to eat it – in assembling culturally legible market biographies, lifestyles and identities. So, while Midas Dekkers (2000, p. 253) is right in one sense when he says that 'people who cook a lot have more prestige than people who eat a lot', for this group, eating out is 'a perpetual experiment' (Warde and Martens, 1998, p. 120), and the (potential) source of culinary-cultural prestige.

The never-ending feast of cultural omnivorousness is facilitated – even necessitated – by the city's role as that 'very large kitchen' of which Miles writes: a site of abundance, of 'diversity and constant change' – the urban *smorgasbord*. Of course, let us not forget the poverty, the hunger, the scarcities and inadequacies – the problems of feeding the city. Abundance, however, works as a *motif*, laying out the city streets as an endless banquet, a consumer's Eden: all that choice, all those new experiences to be sought. The cultural omnivore is literalized here, eating the city, nourished by difference never-ending.

Related terms: availability, variety – food is abundant in being ever-available and always changing. The palate need never grow tired by the repetitions that marked industrial eating: the mass produced sameness spilling out of factories. That kind of abundance feeds the body but not the soul, or so it is said. Industrial food, like modernist architecture, might once have been seen as an answer to social problems, but now seems only to bring new troubles, new indigestions. Of course, abdudance-as-sameness still has a prominent place, most notably in fast foods, where it is matched by super-sizing as a double abundance. Bearing the legacy of Fordist food preparation, fast food outlets produce super-abundance and hyper-regularity, under the mantra of McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1993). This process produces the Fordist consumer, too – the McBody: 'Americans are conscripted to the unseasonable pursuit of abundance. The impossibility of the dream is saved by the translation of quality into quantity and the identification of availability with desirability' (O'Neill, 1999, p. 49). 'All you can eat' must never be *all you can eat* if you are an omnivore and not a McBody.

Abundance-as-quantity and availability-as-desirability misses so much of the distinction formula, flattening out taste to render it a predictable element. Against this there is the abundance of variety, the desirability of scarcity – or, at least, the prospect of a kind of elite scarcity that cultural capital requires. If McDonald's represents the democratization of taste, then its opposite is to be found in the paradise of the high-class food hall, or on the menu of the 'best' restaurants. Making the rare available, selectively abundant even, marks this mode of culinary production and consumption as the flip-side of the drive-through super-sized McMeal. Unpredictability instead of predictability, difference rather than sameness: twin modalities of abundance that work to produce their own urban culinary geographies – twins that need each other to exist, if only to define themselves through their absolute alterity.

As part of the lifestyling of cities, key cultural intermediaries assume a prominent role. Among this taste-making group, chefs take centre-stage – the word 'stage' being particularly apt, given the slide between cooking and performance: 'In a sense, the restaurant is a forerunner of the contemporary entertainment

industry' (Finkelstein, 1998, p. 203) – though lots of chefs are disdainful of the new image their profession has acquired (while often simultaneously trading on it). Moreover, the mediated image of celebrity chefs and their cooking also produces a 'pseudo-professional' knowledge among consumers, who then rub workers in the food industry up the wrong way, as they seek to trade on that knowledge by criticizing any food served for them that does not match the airbrushed and photoshopped gastro-porn images of the food media (Fattorini, 1994). Consumers famously want – and often get – only sanitized product knowledge, purged of the (often grimy) realities of the production and distribution process (Cook and Crang, 1996). The city mapped by celebrity chefs on their sojourns book-signing tours, and the city mapped by the food miles many ingredients travel: here are two peculiar cartographies of eating today.

Eating 'other' spaces

Of course, the city is a map of culinary tastes and status-driven eating habits in countless other ways. Even its spatial layout reflects the dance of culinary-cultural capital, and the territorial forces of urban development are transformed into taste zones as surely as class maps the city's residential districts. So-called ethnic quarters exemplify this process. The settling of immigrant communities in cities has often resulted in the formation of clusters; ghettos and neighbourhoods, Little Italies and Chinatowns. These districts mark simultaneously the desire for familiarity in a strange city and the practices of exclusion that keep social groups confined. The balance between elected and enforced concentration is context-specific, and requires thick historical reading to unravel. One thing is clear: assimilation is not always desirable nor achievable (Young, 2000).

As a way of rebranding ghettos, the practice of designating urban quarters has become a prominent re-imaging strategy for cities (Jayne, 2000). Here we are concerned with so-called ethnic quarters, though we can see this process expanded to 'quarter' other social groups – in gay villages, for example – as well as production and consumption activities, as in jewellery quarters, cultural quarters, etc. (Bell and Jayne, 2003). What is

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the meaning and purpose of quartering? As I have already said, it is partly a spin on residential and commercial segregation. But it also makes over those districts, profiling their distinctiveness, and thereby ambivalently celebrating or commodifying them (Gorman, 2000). Quartering is, therefore, a kind of theming – a way of producing the urban landscape as a readerly text (Gottdeiner, 1997). The readers are visitors, of course. The imperative to quarter is economic as much as it is cultural: by cooking up ethnic quarters, we render them visible and accessible. To the communities that inhabit them, of course, no such visibilizing is necessary. This is making those districts available for consumption, as stages for the playing out of cultural omnivorousness:

> We spend a Sunday afternoon walking through Chinatown, or checking out this week's eccentric players in the park. We look at restaurants, stores, and clubs with something new for us, a new ethnic food, a different atmosphere, a different crowd of people. We walk through sections of the city that we experience as having unique characters which are not ours, where people from diverse places mingle and then go home. (Young, 1990, p. 239)

That's Iris Marion Young, cosmopolitan intellectual, enjoying the *frisson* of wandering out of her own neighbourhood, but not noticing that other people live there: 'people from diverse places mingle *and then go home*', leaving the people that live there to tidy up, ready for the next influx of culture-hungry omnivores. The Sunday stroll through Chinatown is here cast as the new-middle-class equivalent of the drive-through – a strategic strike that minimizes the uncomfortable contact of more sustained engagement. Ghassan Hage (1997) vividly describes these excursions of denial – denying the labour that produces the goods and places consumed. Jean Duruz (1999, 2000), however, cautions against oversimplifying things here, noting that relations between consumer and producer in these sites are complex. Reading ethnic quarters as either fabulous sites of multi-cultural difference or as spaces of continuing colonial fetishism and appropriation misses the intricacies of encounters that occur there. True, both those imperatives can be present,

but the relative push and pull of each is unpredictable and subject to change. As with countless other 'encounters over the counter' in multi-cultural urban eating places, identities are produced and consumed in nuanced and contingent interactions (Ferraro, 2002; Parker, 2000).

Given the movement of cultural capital, socially and spatially, quarters are prone to fads and fashions that make them trendy one moment and *passé* the next. A British Sunday newspaper with an omnivorous readership recently ran a tour guide to the cuisines and foodstuffs of the UK's major 'ethnic groups'. It laid out for readers the way to negotiate 'ethnic supermarkets', telling us what to look for, and what to do with the ingredients we find there. That's the paradox of democratizing culinary-cultural capital, however – the paradox that cultures can suddenly be dumped, as the taste-makers notice the downward spiral of culinary-cultural capital. So this laying bare of the secrets of the Japanese supermarket marks the beginning of a process that can lead, in some cases, to the total *indigenization* of cuisines, such that they no longer confer any authentic ethnic 'exoticness'.

We can watch this process in action as individual foodstuffs migrate across the foodscape, from the 'obscurity' of ethnic foodstores to the deli counter, from there to the supermarkets' 'ethnic food' aisles, and then out into the collective shopping basket and belly. The migratory movement of something like olive oil in the UK tracks this democratization, ending with olive oil sitting on shelves shoulder-to-shoulder with other cooking oils, such as the lowly vegetable oil. While there might still be a cultural cachet attached to olive oil here – signified by its price, for one thing, as well as by its packaging – it has become emptied of much of its cultural signification. One no longer need venture to Little Italy to source it. Another Italian anecdote illustrates this point, too: Italian restaurants, newspapers tell us, are soon to be subject to authentication by Italian government reps, keen to maintain the quality of their food service by linking it back to the homeland. As a defensive response to the percolation of Italian cooking and eating out from Italy and all its global Little Italies, this initiative neatly highlights the democratization problem: once Italian food is so disembedded from its source, the culinary-cultural value attaching

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to the signifier 'Italianness' begins to devalue, and thus needs some shoring-up through nationalist authentication. Eating Italian now comes with a guarantee, re-embedding it in its origin – or at least to its origin's outposts, the ethnic quarters. Again, this cements the connection between ethnic identity and food production, since only Italians can make quality-assured Italian food – but this can also mean the reverse, too: that Italians can make *only* Italian food.

If ethnic quarters are therefore (ambivalently) celebrated for mummifying immigrant cuisines in a protective coating of authenticity, making available a kind of cosmopolitan tourism-at-home, then they have to be read as one particular culinary-geographic strategy for making up the city-food equation. From another angle, nothing sums up the postmodern metropolis better than the frantic commingling of cultures and cuisines – making fusion food a culinary cypher for *multi-culti/cosmo-metro* life. Instead of preserving distinct ethnic cultures, they are here mixed, or rather *allowed to collide*: not blended in some melting pot out of which comes an indistinct melange, but cultures rubbing up against each other, jostling, making new and surprising juxtapositions. Syncretic combinations emerge that hybridize and creolize diverse ingredients, playfully pick-and-mixing (James, 1996). Here's Elizabeth Miles on one US star of fusion food: 'Wolfgang Puck creates cuisine that both expresses his own identity(ies), and mirrors what he perceives as the identity(ies) of his customers … [T]hese identities reflect the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-gendered, nomadic paradigms of post-modernism' (Miles, 1993, p. 193) – the dishes articulate 'points of identification' (p. 195), complexly and playfully combining ingredients and cooking practices: 'No "real" nor "intended" meaning emerges from this accretion of foods, vocabularies and techniques, but rather a pastiche of possible readings' (p. 196). Like the postmodern architecture of many metropolitan centres, subject of endless urban theorizing, Puck's equally postmodern food plays with consumers' expectations, flattering them for their sophisticated deconstructive eating habits.

Of course, for some folk it is not very far from fusion to *con-*fusion, and reactions to fusion food can play up the boundary-blurring dangers of over-fusioning – again mirroring writing on urban postmodernism (e.g. Jameson, 1991). This is often

disguised as a clash of tastes, but can be read as distaste about the clash of cultures, too. Against this, the purity and authenticity of distinct cuisines practices a subtle but nonetheless insidious form of ethnic (palate) cleansing. Eating 'foreign' food is okay, so long as the borders are not breached; culinary miscegenation threatens confusion in the same way as other multiculturalist moments. Moreover, the jump from fusion to confusion invokes the con-trick: the suspicion that repackaging cuisines in this way is some kind of sleight-of-hand, some act of dishonesty. Fusion is in this reading a weak or lazy way of conferring one's own multi-culti sensibility: safer to be in Spago than trying to enact creolization in other spheres of life (Ferraro, 2002; Hage, 1997).

Miles includes another useful dimension in her reading of Puck: that his dishes also speak of the relationship between the city and nature: 'These recipes presume a great, diverse natural bounty magically melting from specific farmland and ocean locations into the decentered city. This is the postmodern landscape, where nature meets city in a seamless continuum of goods and commodities' (Miles, 1993, p. 199). Abundance and availability are here factored in, domesticating nature by cooking and eating it. The city is the stage for this process: the place where nature turns into culture and nurture. The farmers' market can here be figured as the flipside of (con)fusion food – in the space of the farmers' market, the country visits the city and offers itself up. Integrity, honesty, simplicity – the market offers a postmodern version of premodern eating, remaking formerly peasant food as the new feast of kings.

The case of fish and chips in the UK serves as a final illustration. Dethroned from mass tastes by the new dominance of US-imported coffee shops, fish and chips now appear gentrified, on the menus of slick seafood eateries, with a price tag to match (on the history of fish and chips in Britain, see Walton, 1992). If a New Labour politician famously once embarrassed himself by confusing the mushy peas on offer at a chippy with guacamole, confirming (so the press said) his lack of contact with the 'common people', it now seems he's more likely to be acquainting himself with 'pea guacamole' on his high-priced chip supper while his constituents nibble on an avocado-on-rye deli sandwich accompanied by a decaff latte. Such is the

turnover in positional goods and cultural capital – a turnover reflected in the streetscape, as chippies close and Starbucks open another franchise.

Conclusion

These cityscapes of eating out can be read as maps of broader urban social processes: trends in food consumption, such as the popularity of 'ethnic' eating or the taste for fusion foods, both reflect and are reflective of those broader processes. Cities are dynamic things, and so are tastes. The ebb and flow of capital, the impact of gentrification, attempts to rebrand cities, the temporary and permanent movement of people between and within cities – these processes can be traced through the eating-out habits of urban dwellers and urban visitors. Whether attempting to fix taste in 'fortress cuisines' (Duruz, 2000) or mix taste in postmodern *bricolage*, these food fashions are played out spatially: new districts become trendy, fast food joints get clustered on peripheral sites, Turkish kebab vendors in Germany become Italian restaurateurs to keep pace with taste trends (Calgar, 1995). Just as classical urban theory sees capital as the motor of urban transformation, so we can hear see *cultural* capital driving change in cityscapes. The cultural intermediaries – like the urban pioneers associated with gentrification (Smith and Williams, 1986) – have as important a role to play as urban planners, estate agents and architects. For in defining taste, and identifying its spaces within the city, they are actively remoulding the neighbourhoods and districts that come in to and fall out of fashion. Recent interest in the so-called creative class (Florida, 2002) reveals the increasing awareness of the role of cultural intermediaries in changing urban fortunes: footloose capital and cultural capital are here channelled in the same direction, and it is not stretching a point to suggest that indices of 'culinary diversity' have a part to play in locational decisions among this group.

In this chapter, then, I have attempted to suggest some of the logics at work in the spaces of contemporary Western urban eating out. Maps of restaurant locations tell us much more than stories of the land market or of happenstance: they reflect the territorialized taste cultures of interest groups with forms

of power (especially cultural capital). Today, perhaps more than ever, the new middle class (or creative class) is at the heart of this process, in making and placing taste hierarchies. These hierarchies are both economic and cultural – just as neighbourhoods within cities witness changing fortunes as they feel (or are sidestepped by) the forces of gentrification and urban renewal, so individual eateries, types of eatery, and areas associated with different kinds of eating are also shaped and reshaped by the forces of culinary gentrification and gustatory renewal. As I said at the outset, eating out is thus a concentration of much broader processes working at a whole set of different spatial scales: at the scale of the plate or the dining table, their power is no less acutely felt.

Notes

Some of these ideas were first worked through, somewhat sketchily, in 'All you can eat: fragmente fur eine neue urbane kulinarische geographie', in Regina Bittner (ed) *Urbane Paradiese: zur kulturgeschichte modernen vergnugens*, 2001, Frankfurt/New York: Bauhaus/Campus.

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