Gender and culinary taste

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Any examination of the relationships between gender and culinary taste (and especially women's food tastes) in the public arena of dining, faces two distinct problems. First, there is comparatively little research on the topic. Second, any adequate conceptual framework for investigating the topic is necessarily dependent on understanding something of the development of the sociology of food and eating as a distinctive field of inquiry. In practice, this means focusing on a body of literature characterized by the study of the nature of meals and meal taking in an emphatically *domestic* context. In this chapter, an effort will be made to 'mine' this literature for appropriate concepts, linking these to the limited available research information and some informed speculation on gendered differences in taste in public dining.

Gender and domestic dining

Meals can demonstrate the nature of status differences and relationships in society. The distribution of food as a means of articulating social status is

common in many societies. In their seminal collection of social anthropological essays, Jerome, et al. (1980) and their various contributors offer many examples of how in tribal, agricultural and otherwise non-industrial communities, women are disadvantaged in terms of access to food. One of the collection's most memorable observations is contained in a paper by Rosenberg (1980, p. 184) who reports Simoons' (1967) comments on the skinning, cutting up and preparation of reindeer for eating by women of the Siberian Chukchee tribe. In return for this service Chukchee women receive leftovers and bones once men have selected and consumed the choice cuts of meat. This distributive policy is encapsulated in a Chukchee saying – 'being woman, eat crumbs'.

Gender inequalities in food relationships are no less evident in industrial societies. Within the family, status and power differences according to gender can be reflected in the distribution of food. Kerr and Charles (1986) found that very high consumption of meat was almost totally confined to men while very low meat consumption was associated primarily with women and children. Social class differences were important here, with professional/management males consuming less meat than others and manual unskilled workers evidencing the highest consumption. Several other studies have shown that women often give priority to male preferences at the expense of their own, and sometimes even go without food, particularly in families where there is financial hardship.

These status differences tend to be focused through notions of what constitutes 'appropriate' role performance expectations for women and men. In terms of the analysis of gendered food relationships, a critically important study here is that of Murcott (1982) on the social significance of the cooked dinner among Welsh working-class families. Murcott's (1982) achievement was to focus on both the structure of meals and the relationship of these structures to male/female relationships. She found that central to positive perceptions of general family health and well-being was the 'cooked dinner' comprising meat, potatoes, at least one additional vegetable and gravy. Structurally, the cooked dinner was thought of as a meal in itself, and in its proper form was heavy, hot, savoury and generous in size. Meat had to be fresh, fish was not acceptable

for the meal to be regarded as proper. Although a succession of courses in a meal was permissible, the cooked dinner could stand as a meal in its own right.

According to Murcott, a symbolically important feature of cooked dinners is the extent to which their preparation validates women's roles in the marital context. There may be some parallel sharing of responsibilities in meal preparation but where this does occur, the male adult is normally construed as simply helping. Women's responsibility for the cooked dinner extends beyond cooking itself to include the process of accommodating family food preferences, especially those of the husband or male partner which invariably take priority. A woman's ability to produce a cooked dinner validates her socially and economically. In Murcott's words:

> If a job defines how a man occupies his time during the working day, to which the wage packet provides regular testimony, proper provision of a cooked dinner testifies that the woman has spent her time in correspondingly suitable fashion … the cooked dinner in the end symbolizes the home itself, a man's relation to that home and a woman's place in it. (Murcott, 1982, p. 693)

Women's complex relationship with food

Murcott thus links food and eating to the pattern of power relationships within the family and these are essentially gender relationships. Since Murcott's study, a large number of similar, domestically oriented studies have appeared (see Wood, 1995, for commentaries on many of these). The key issues arising from this body of work may be summarized as follows.

- Women's relationship with food is problematic. Most women choose what food is purchased for family consumption (Kerr and Charles, 1986, found this was true in 85 per cent of their cases) but this is often considered a burden rather than a power to determine the domestic dietary cycle. This is because of the need to balance a range of considerations: family tastes and preferences, food cost, variety and nutritional values among them. Women frequently subordinate

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their own food preferences to those of male partners who are more often than not regarded as unadventurous – though not necessarily fussy-eaters.

- While the vast majority of studies of meals have been undertaken among traditional British working-class or American 'blue collar' families, Charles and Kerr's (1988) work indicates the cooked dinner type meal is certainly common in the British middle-class dietary system. Women's responsibility for the cooked dinner appears to be socially generalized. The cooked dinner is significant across social class and the role of women in the preparation of meals is also widespread.

- Women continue to be the main cooks in most households. The 'absence' of cooked dinners or a female to cook for men can disrupt the (male) social fabric. Ellis (1983) observes that the centrality of food in marital relationships can often lead to violence when men perceive women as in some way failing in the performance of those tasks which are regarded as properly theirs, especially the preparation of meals. Coxon (1983) studied a male cookery class and observed that men only usually learn domestic cooking and have to practise that skill when they have no woman to cook for them. The students Coxon observed contained many absolute beginners who had found themselves womanless through being widowed, divorced or having lost the female relative who cooked for them (e.g. their mother or sister).

Myths of greater democracy

One of the most frequently vaunted 'commonsense' objections to studies of women's roles in food purchase and preparation is that greater marital democracy means that men now play a larger role in these activities than would be suggested by the preceding commentary. This argument is always current, and its history is considered expertly by Mennell et al. (1992). In her study, Dare noted that:

> The mean time per meal … reveals quite starkly the unequal division of labour and the way convenience foods may play a role in reducing women's work time. Breakfasts and snacks are meals featuring a high

> proportion of convenience foods, where time is some-
> what less unequally divided between family members,
> suggesting such meals are prepared by household
> members other than the woman. Yet other meals reveal
> the same high proportion of convenience foods used
> with a grossly unequal division of time. Indeed in prepar-
> ing Sunday lunch women spend 14 times longer than
> men and children combined. (Dare, 1988, pp. 149–150)

A 1993 study by the Mintel Market Research Organization (see e.g. Erlichman, 1993, p. 6) found that around 85 per cent of working women said they were entirely responsible for cooking their household's main meal, a point at least partly supported by Warde and Martens (2000). The brutal truth is that even where male and female partners are in paid work, responsibility for food preparation tends to fall to women. There is evidence of social class variation in this phenomenon. Charles and Kerr (1988, p. 176) found a significant class variation in the gendered division of domestic labour. In both shopping and cooking, Charles and Kerr note, 'men in classes I and II were much more likely to help out with these tasks than their working-class counterparts'. The term 'help out' may be significant in this context as it lends support to the notion that where men are involved in food preparation, it is in an ancillary way, a view also partially recognized by Warde and Martens (2000).

Gendered food tastes and preferences

As noted in the introductory remarks to this chapter, remarkably little is known about women's food tastes. The problem is actually worse than that. Our knowledge of gendered food tastes in general is fairly limited and, for the most part, based on inferences drawn from studies like those reviewed above. Although concepts of taste exist implicitly in much of the sociological literature on food (and sometimes explicitly, see e.g. Bourdieu, 1984; Finkelstein, 1989) there has been little in the way of explicit reflections on the meanings of 'taste' in a culinary context. In part, there is a suspicion that this is because food specifically, and consumption in general, are not yet seen as 'comfortable' or legitimate subjects for sociological analysis (Warde and Martens, 2000, pp. 163–168). This contrasts, for

example, with sociological and other disciplinary analyses of 'art' (a not altogether spurious comparison given the frequent allusions to food and cooking as an art form, see Wood, 2000) where the concept of 'taste' is central to an understanding of the social production and consumption of art.

Most sociological discussions of taste embody as a key referent (however implicitly) a hierarchical ordering of taste produced according to social relations of 'class'. Even post-structuralist and postmodernist perspectives with their empha-sis on consumption as a phenomenon characterized by the circulation of signs and signifiers rely, however reluctantly, on some notion of the stratification of taste according to socio-economic class. Away from the opaqueness of these postmod-ernist commentaries, Bourdieu's (1984) seminal work on French 'tastes' attempted a fusion of neo-Marxist and structuralist analysis centred on notions of 'cultural capital' in taste (refer to Chapter 1 for a detailed exposition of Bourdieu's work). Bourdieu's contention was that different social classes embraced different cultural tastes. Such tastes were culturally repro-duced and reinforced by a variety of institutional and eco-nomic pressures, 'high culture' tending to be defined by social elites as a means of differentiating themselves and excluding those possessed of less cultural capital, as part of the repro-duction of cultural and economic power. This is, of course, a vulgar caricature of Bourdieu's arguments but if nothing else it serves to illustrate a more explicit approach to the role of economic class in the stratification of taste. Such approaches have become diluted in much of the self-indulgent postmod-ernist tidal wave of sociological analyses of consumption.

One of Bourdieu's areas of interest was, of course, food, and a further purpose served by reference to his work lies in the observation that despite the development of multiple feminist/ sociological analyses of gender relations and the growth of 'gender studies' as a field of relatively distinct social scientific enquiry, it is difficult to get past socio-economic class as the principle and primary determinant of many life behaviours, choices and opportunities. This is definitely not to say that gender is unimportant but rather that there are continuing (and positive) creative tensions in class/gender analysis that make it extremely difficult to disentangle the relative effects

of each on aspects of the micro-social, including consumption, and especially the consumption of food. In many ways, the force of class as an influence on consumption is still afforded analytic priority over all others, rightly or wrongly, in many discussions of taste and consumption.

This can be seen for example in Mennell's (1985) landmark research but can also be detected in the more recent work by Warde and Martens (2000, p. 126) who noted from their survey research findings that there was little to suggest 'a great deal of difference in taste between men and women, either as regards which restaurants to use or what type of dishes to eat'. This is not the same as saying that class has a greater priority in determining food taste but Warde and Martens' study gives the appearance of being influenced, methodologically, by the assumption that it is. Their work represents a 'sensibilist' empiricism that acts as an antidote to stimulating yet perhaps more fanciful sociological commentary on food and eating. More importantly, it reinforces a question implicit in much literature on food and eating as to whether to talk about gender and taste in food given the comparative state of research ignorance, is in itself sensible?

Women's food tastes

A response to the preceding question is to note that while class and gender values are difficult to disentangle, with some irony the 'domestic food literature' reported earlier has tended to be quite effective at describing, within limits, male tastes, but less effective in outlining those of women. As noted earlier, Charles and Kerr (1988, p. 195) found that women in higher social classes attached less importance to meat as part of meals than women in lower social classes. Among the higher social classes, meals were often egg or cheese based, and included beans and other pulses 'without this being felt as a social deprivation'. Charles and Kerr also note that: 'Spaghetti and other pasta and rice-based meals were more frequent and took the place of the traditional meat and two veg'. Both Douglas (1972) and Mennell et al. (1992) claim that middle-class diet is more varied and has greater range than that of the working class. This is supported by Hornsby-Smith (1984) who notes constancy

but significant class variations over time in the UK distribution of household expenditure on meat, fish and eggs; dairy products and fats; fruit and vegetables; cereals and other foods. Higher income groups are more likely to drink coffee than tea, purchase pork in preference to lamb, and spend more on wholemeal bread and fresh fruit and vegetable produce. Tomlinson and Warde's (1993) analysis of UK Family Expenditure Survey data for 1968 and 1988 show that there are persistent class-based trends to purchase particular types of food irrespective of price changes. Further, they suggest that though smaller in size in 1988 than in 1968, the manual working class retain distinctive dietary practices supportive of specific class tastes. At the same time, Wilson (1989), among others, has suggested that women have much greater capacity for dietary change than men. The tension between beliefs about what are good for the family in terms of food consumption are constantly tested against women's perceptions of 'good nutrition' and their personal, preferred, ways of eating.

One issue with all the above is that preferences are not the same as 'taste' or indeed 'choice'. The latter in particular remains a problematic concept in that 'choice' implies a state of freedom in consumption that is rarely attainable (see Wood, 2000a). Preferences, like choices, are constrained by economic, social and cultural factors. I may wish to express a preference for eating caviar with my meal tonight but my available income to spend on that meal permits of only a can of sardines. Even my preference, however, is not necessarily linked in any direct way to my taste. I might *prefer* caviar because of its elite social connotations, but I might not *like* it. Anyone who has attended a meal, whether in a domestic residence or restaurant has faced the dilemma of having to eat or not to eat items on the menu for which they have no 'taste'. Such a view of course resonates with that of Finkelstein (1989) who portrays dining out as a mannered act in which participants conform to the edicts and social conventions of the restaurant in an unthinking way. In other words, they behave as they think they should rather than as they wish.

This rather simplistic vignette aside, to talk of class, gendered or other differentiated tastes is to a great extent to put the sociological cart before the philosophical horse. Sociologists

of consumption in general, and of food in particular, have yet to address the wider social scientific and humanities literature on taste in a meaningful way (but see Gronow, 1997). Even the strongest and most sustained analysis to date of food taste, Mennell's (1985) magisterial work on the evolution of food taste in France and England, arguably fails to persuade because its analysis relies on Elias' concepts of figurationalism and figurational change, concepts which never seem to be followed through in a consistent way to a clear conclusion. In social research, as in life, definitions are not to be agonized over at the expense of genuine advances in knowledge. Yet responsibility cannot be avoided for making some explicit inroads into definitional questions. The alternative is, as at present in the sociology of food consumption, to abandon such responsibilities in favour of a disconnected multi-inferential melange.

To summarize thus far, we know relatively little about food tastes and preferences in general, let alone how these are differentiated by gender. There is no shortage of hospitality industry mythologies about women's food preferences or indeed general dining behaviour. Women are generally believed to prefer:

- lighter foods, especially lighter meats such as chicken and pork in preference to beef, lamb or game;

- smaller portions than men because they are likely to be more health and/or diet or body conscious;

- fewer courses at any meal, tending to eschew desserts.

Various surveys of customer food selection and dining experience in restaurants have largely failed to differentiate differences according to gender. Even other, better documented aspects of female dining behaviours are also slightly suspect. For example, Mars and Nicod (1984) in their now classic study of waiters found that men were perceived by waiting staff to be better tippers than women because they were more experienced diners (as opposed to, because women have less economic power). Slightly harder evidence comes from Golding (1998, p. 18) who reports a survey where lone businesswomen claimed to frequently 'experience leering waiters and patronising managers with more than 70 per cent feeling that service

was "secondary" purely because of their gender'. Also when dining with a male, 74 per cent of those women surveyed said that waiters assumed the man to be settling the bill and selecting the wine, while 41 per cent claimed to feel uncomfortable dining alone and 62 per cent chose to eat in their rooms.

Women dining out – some contextual considerations

If, in the absence of extensive hard evidence on women's food tastes, we are looking for Mertonian-like middle range explanations of how such tastes might be identified and analysed, then existing social contexts of analysis provide the only real clue to taste and preference formation. Of undoubted importance in the eating out context in this regard is the concept of the meal experience promulgated by Campbell-Smith (1967) which is to be found, explicitly and implicitly, as a reference point in most major commentaries on dining out as a social phenomenon. The concept of the meal experience as defined by Campbell-Smith posits that customer satisfaction in dining out can be attributed to multiple environmental factors and not simply food choice and food quality. This view has long dominated marketing theory and practice in the hospitality industry despite, in the last 10 years, becoming increasingly suspect as research evidence accumulates suggesting that available food choice, price and quality are exactly what consumers prioritize when dining out (see Wood, 2000b for a review).

Finkelstein's (1989, p. 3) provocative sociological analysis of dining out begins from the point of view that restaurants offer a 'meal experience'. According to Finkelstein, contemporary dining out has much to do with self-presentation and 'the mediation of social relations through images of what is currently valued, accepted and fashionable'. Culturally, restaurants are regarded as places where excitement, pleasure and a sense of well-being will be experienced and these and other images such as wealth and luxury, are represented iconically within restaurants through such means as ambience, décor, furnishings, lighting and tableware. So important are these iconic representations of people's emotional expectations, Finkelstein (1989, p. 3) argues, that the 'physical appearance of the restaurant, its ambience and décor, are as important to the event of

dining out as are the comestibles'. Individuals believe themselves to be acting from choice when they dine out and they have expectations that restaurants will help them realize certain desires. These are not simply 'objective' desires – for good food and service – but expectations that restaurants will satisfy deeper emotional desires for status and belongingness. The fact that restaurants in all their varieties claim to be able to offer such satisfaction and indeed embody these desires is, however, indicative of how emotions are transformed into commodities and 'sold' back to individuals as if they were consumer items.

Finkelstein's analysis has attracted its supporters (see Wood, 1995) but also its detractors. Warde and Martens (2000) take issue with Finkelstein, the evidence derived from their study claiming to show that restaurant diners not only exercise control over the dining context but profess and demonstrate multiple forms of independent enjoyment when dining out. In short, both Finkelstein and Warde and Martens adopt an approach based on the idea that motivations for dining out centre on some concept of a 'meal experience'. However, a close reading of both Finkelstein and Warde and Martens does raise the question of whether the position developed in each study is of sufficient methodological sophistication and rigour to support a genuine contrast or conflict of empirical evidence.

Warde and Martens' position is to some degree reached by the rejection of claims made, *inter alia*, by Wood (1995) that domestic and public dining have increasingly converged. This convergence takes the form of public menus coming to increasingly represent the structured dining of the home, with greater similarity between home and external menus and a concomitant overall reduction in the choices available to consumers (see also Wood, 2000b). This 'interpenetration' of private and public dining is supported by advances in technology which support the illusion of choice but have increasingly allowed foods previously available almost exclusively in the public domain to be purchased at the supermarket and consumed at home. Warde and Martens (2000) are unhappy with this view, instead agreeing with Mennell (1985) that increasing variety is a feature of both public and private dining. They claim that writers on convergence have exaggerated trends in convergence and the reduction of choice.

The rejection of convergence views of dining is a necessary condition for any theoretical and empirical position that valourizes bourgeois notions of human choice, preference and individual (or individually derived) models of taste. Indeed, the whole edifice of market segmentation and product differentiation is not only critical to academic marketing theory but to the very maintenance of capitalist–bourgeois notions of individuality and difference. Warde and Martens are quite correct to remind us that trends in both theorizing and the identification and analysis of data can easily be derailed and diverted. These authors, however, are uncomfortably short of persuasive evidence to support their tentative rejection of the convergence thesis (actually multiple convergence theses in the sociology of consumption). This need not matter if an emphasis on convergence can be shown, in the context of food and eating, to be theoretically and empirically partial, incomplete or plain wrong. The problem is, this has not (yet) been the case.

A perhaps more important limitation of all the literature on dining out is the tendency to treat the concept of the 'meal experience' as a hermetically sealed black box with inputs and outputs but no discernible insight into the workings of the box itself. Campbell-Smith (1967) provides the inputs, and is echoed by Finkelstein among others. These two authors are, however, concerned with two very different types of input. For Campbell-Smith, inputs into the meal experience are interior to the restaurant, that is, generated by the restaurant itself, presumably through the interpretation of the external world by the restaurant operator. For Finkelstein, as might be expected, inputs come in the form of the extent to which the restaurant is firmly located within society and societal influences permeate and shape the restaurant. In their study, Warde and Martens tend to concentrate on what they construe to be positive outputs of control and enjoyment, or the consumer's experiential record of the meal experience, a trend present in other studies as well (see Wood, 2000b for a short summary).

If there is a missing link in the dining out literature it is between production and consumption. In respect of gender, as the earlier discussion of sociologies of domestic dining demonstrated, there is a clear relationship between the gendered division of labour and food consumption. Comparable analyses

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for public dining exists in fragmented strands in human resource management studies of the hospitality industry (see Wood, 1997) but have not yet been fully worked through in the context of the sociology of food and eating. Consumption-oriented studies arguably underplay production–consumption relationships even where they articulate different arguments about the experiential aspects of dining out, as is the case with Warde and Martens (2000), and Finkelstein (1989). In contrast, one of the strengths of convergence views of choice, taste and selection in human behaviour is the way in which links are maintained between production *and* consumption. This is noticeable, for example, in recent debates about McDonaldization (Ritzer, 2000). However flawed the concept of McDonaldization may be (see Wood, 1998) it offers a holistic view of dining relationships which is absent from consumption-oriented studies like those by Warde and Martens, and Finkelstein.

In general however, it must be conceded that attempts at holistic analysis of food systems, embracing systematic investigation of production–consumption relations have themselves not been noticeably successful. The term 'food system' is commonly construed to mean the totality of production, processing, distribution, retailing, consumption and disposal of food. No wonder, then, that analysis pitched at this grand level has been limited in investigative utility. The problem of scale is, not, however, the only difficulty, as Beardsworth and Kiel remind us:

> The use of the term 'food system' may conjure up an idea of a formally organized set of links between food production, distribution and consumption which is arranged according to some well-thought-out plan or scheme … such a model is inappropriate and unworkable. However, if we are careful not to assume that there is some underlying plan which informs its organization, the term food system can be a convenient way of drawing attention to the particular character of the complex of interdependent interrelationships associated with the production and distribution of food … (Beardsworth and Kiel, 1997, pp. 32–32)

In short, food systems are not normally mechanistically intentioned: serendipity can play a role in both the form and

action of a system. Beardsworth and Kiel (1997) add to this the observation that in discussing systems, there is a tendency to prefer simplistic conceptions of stasis, that is, systems are depicted at a moment in time, with little regard for how they change over time. Temporality is of course at the heart of the 'diminishing contrasts, increasing varieties' argument of Mennell (1985) and there is a temptation to assert that any understanding of gendered food tastes can only realistically be achieved if we engage in longitudinal analysis, hardly a practical proposition.

From context to actuality

If longitudinal analysis has its problems, then holistic approaches to the production–consumption relationship based on a macro-systems approach are not the only analytic alternatives available to us. More pragmatic models that sustain a focus on the relationship between production and consumption are possible. In the context of gendered food tastes, and women's food tastes in particular, this may in the short term add little in the way of new knowledge but it does provide a model for future investigation. Arguably, more such models are needed as investigative tools in the sociology of food and eating, the development of which over the last 25 years has been characterized in both empirical and theoretical terms by piecemeal empirical contributions and largely partial theoretical syntheses.

To pursue this strategy is to some focus on a number of questions designed to establish comparisons between production and consumption in the private and public domains. The former we have already explored in terms of women's domestic roles as purchasers and preparers of food. We have seen that the evidence points to these roles being influenced by economic and class concerns but that in general there is a *prima facie* case that notwithstanding these influences, women are in terms of equality disadvantaged in their relationships to these roles vis-à-vis men. What is less clear is whether women's roles in this respect create differences in taste. In the public domain it is necessary to acknowledge that a number of facets of the production–consumption relationship differ. In general, men

are public cooks (chefs) while women tend to dominate the 'server' category as waiting staff, but often in marginal, poorly paid part time jobs. The hospitality industry has one of the highest proportions of women managers of any, yet most are concentrated not in positions of senior operational responsibility but in functional roles such as human resource and marketing management.

On the consumption side of the equation, the 'domestic literature' tells us that the production role is a complex one for women, often involving denial of their own pleasures and/or tastes in terms of the choice and selection of foods as they cater for their male partners and families. Purchase and preparation of food is experienced as a form of powerlessness, as an onerous duty and responsibility rather than freedom. Social context seems to admit that the performance of these functions involves a 'setting aside' of women's own preferences as one means of reducing the complexity of decision making in the process of provision.

The situation is far less clear in the public domain. Conventional research wisdom suggests that women are less likely to dine out independently than men, with women's presence in restaurants more often than not attributable to them accompanying husbands or male partners or as part of a family unit. Women's (lower) discretionary spending power has also been identified as a factor in their reduced incidence of public dining. Golding's (1998) comments noted earlier suggest that it is harder for women to dine in public and that they are treated less favourably than men, a point which links closely to the control of 'space' for women in public hospitality settings. In her seminal paper on this topic, Carmouche (1983) indicates how the history of British hospitality charts the 'separation' of women in public hospitality organizations, not least in the public houses where women have in the past been both explicitly and implicitly excluded from the public bar and 'confined' to the lounge.

Of course, much has changed in the UK in the last 20 years, although the position in other countries is less clear. Despite this, there is remarkably little that the locational context of dining tells us about gendered taste. The context of provision is another matter. The 'domestic literature' yields the important

observation that menus are planned around male tastes, with an emphasis on 'heavy' foods that are 'typically male'. Any inspection of restaurant menus, even allowing for variations in local and national taste, reveals similar forces at work. Although women have made inroads into the world of professional cookery, it is still dominated by men. A menu is, by definition, a statement of what a restaurant is prepared to offer – the customer's possible range of choice is predetermined. Independent restaurateurs appear to adopt and change their menus only slowly and then by reference to local competition rather than wider social influences (Auty, 1992). The menu is, in the broadest sense, a male artefact. Even where it makes provision for gendered differences in food taste, such provision is a male conceptualization of such taste or perspective on it.

Such a view invites an almost instinctive negative response, an 'harrumphing' of risible disbelief. How might it be, the question could be posed, given the plurality of food styles, cuisines and individual tastes, that such a distorted view of restaurant food provision can be sustained? The point is, of course, that the plurality of food styles and cuisines in a world characterized by global agribusiness, strong global and regional food chains and a growing gap between rich and poor is a lot less plural than at first appears, as indeed is the supposed plurality of food tastes which are conditioned by the very cultural influences that have become embattled by these forces. As Roland Barthes (1973) noted, taste in food and eating, including public dining culture, is a matter of national and other identity. By definition, a national identity mediated through food must constitute a framework of permissible tastes that draws in the majority of people. When Warde and Martens (2000) find that there is apparently little difference between men and women's tastes in food selection when dining out it is an indicator not of increased variety or pluralism but of increased homogeneity, an irony that escapes them. Those who argue a 'more choice' or 'some choice' position in relation to food consumption are guilty of promulgating a liberal delusion in a world where the manifest trend is towards 'little choice' or 'no choice'. We may have to contend with the possibility that gendered differences in taste (if they exist at all) might disappear as a result of levelling. One thing seems certain, if gendered differences in taste

exist, there is no reason to suppose they are any less amenable to analysis in terms of patriarchal relations than any other social phenomenon. Unless, however, a stronger and more coherent research agenda can be developed to replace the existing patchwork of theoretical speculation and occasional empirical insight, we may have to reconcile ourselves to the possibility that we will never know.

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