
Introduction

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The broad purpose of this text is to examine the construction of culinary taste, and associated consumer behaviour, as displayed in the international restaurant sector. It is often noted that sociological commentary on food and eating is dominated by studies relating to domestic settings. The recent emergence of more literature which examines aspects of dining out has begun to redress this imbalance (see e.g. Finkelstein, 1989; Warde, 1997; Gronow, 1997; Beardsworth and Keil, 1997; Warde and Martens, 2000; Wood, 2000). This text adds to this growing body of knowledge.

Discussions about the construction of taste, and culinary taste in particular, are undoubtedly fascinating in their own right. However, it is important not to overlook the potential practical benefits of extending our knowledge in this area. Business texts often assert the importance of restaurateurs meeting customer needs and wants, yet few tackle the complex question of what actually influences customer choices. Where this question is addressed it is often done so in a rather formulaic manner which encompasses consideration of issues such as price versus quality.

The first two chapters provide an introduction to alternative theoretical perspectives on the construction of culinary taste. Subsequent chapters, the content of which is more explicitly

applied to consumer behaviour in the international restaurant sector, examine specific aspects of influence on culinary taste.

The initial discussion, which centres on the contribution of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, examines the proposal that our taste is socially constructed; specifically the extent to which our position in the socio-economic class hierarchy predisposes us towards adopting and displaying particular forms of culinary taste. The subtleties of Bourdieu's arguments are addressed, in areas such as the role of taste as a signifier of class distinction (including of distinction between intra-class fractions); the use of taste acquisition by the socially aspirant; the achievement of cultural legitimacy through expressions of taste; and the role that taste plays within struggles for class domination.

Chapter 2 examines the postmodern perspective. Sociologists such as Bauman and Beck have argued that rigid class hierarchies, which emerged to support modernist industrial systems, are no longer in place, and the proposition that taste is influenced by adherence to class conventions is, therefore, redundant. Instead, what has supposedly emerged is an individualized society in which self-identities, and their expression through consumer behaviour, are constructed on a personal rather than collective basis. Chapter 2 goes on to examine whether in our aestheticized, consumerist society, new forms of social alliance are emerging which are signified by adherence to various forms of lifestyle. In addition, is our growing preoccupation with lifestyle characteristic of a democratized society in which more traditional forms of social distinction are becoming less visible?

Lifestyles, and their influence on culinary taste within cosmopolitan urban settings, are analysed by David Bell in *Taste and space: eating out in the city today*. Bell argues that in our post-industrial cities, which have now adopted symbolic economies, dining out is representative of wider cultural characteristics. Cultural status marking is played out through restaurant dining and the acquisition of cultural capital results from association with particular restaurants and restaurant sectors. While opportunities for the development of cultural capital and a credible self-identity might seem appealing, Bell notes that the proliferation of choice in the restaurant market can be a source of anxiety and confusion. In addition, while restaurateurs can undoubtedly benefit from understanding current consumer

preferences, they have to remember that fashions are fickle. Bell highlights this point in relation to ethnic cuisines, the perceived authenticity and fashionability of which can diminish as they become progressively more accessible.

In *Chic cuisine: the impact of fashion on food*, Joanne Finkelstein explores the proposal that dining out in the postmodern era is as much to do with fashion as it is to do with culinary appreciation. Beginning with a deconstruction of the meanings of artworks, which have been constructed using food products, Finkelstein establishes that food can have significance beyond that which is obvious. She asserts that much about contemporary life can be understood through observation of dining practices, particularly the widespread desire to display fashionability and sophistication.

Roy C. Wood's *The shock of the new: a sociology of nouvelle cuisine*, was originally published back in 1991 in the *Journal of Consumer Studies and Home Economics*. Its inclusion in this text seemed highly appropriate, not least because Wood examines whether the emergence of *nouvelle cuisine* represented a rebellion against Escoffierian cuisine being regarded as the epitome of good taste. To this end, Wood undertakes a cultural, rather than a culinary, analysis of *nouvelle cuisine*. He identifies associations with individuality; creativity; superiority; and distinction, which signify the extent to which *nouvelle cuisine* had an impact on perceptions of tastefulness.

In *Contemporary lifestyles: the case of wine*, Marion Demossier begins by identifying what has led to greater accessibility, variety and consumer knowledge in the wine market. She goes on to discuss what the nature of wine consumption reveals about our cultural environment. For example, to what extent does wine knowledge and an ability to master the rituals of wine consumption signify the possession of cultural capital? Conversely, is the distinction that is the prize for wine consumers heightened through the intimidation that the inexperienced might suffer?

Maureen Brookes, in *Shaping culinary taste: the influence of commercial operators*, investigates whether restaurants can actually shape culinary taste, or whether they simply respond to culinary taste. Brookes begins by identifying the impact of changing demographics and work patterns on consumer preferences. This

provides the context in which to examine how consumers construct their preferences. Brookes proposes that the role of the meal in the process is declining as more intangible issues, such as the symbolic meaning we attach to branded restaurant chains, come to the fore.

In Roy C. Wood's second contribution, *Gender and culinary taste* he notes that despite the existence of popular assumptions regarding women's culinary taste there is actually little empirical evidence in this area. Even when the issue is raised in relation to domestic dining, it tends to be entangled within commentary on social class. However, drawing on the commentary on domestic dining, Wood provides convincing speculation about the influence of gender on culinary taste. In particular, he discusses the consequences of dominant patriarchal systems on areas such as food choice, food production and menu construction.

David Fouille, in *Developing a taste for health*, highlights the extent to which dietary awareness and respect for high quality ingredients are positive trends, which appear to have been encouraged recently by various high profile food-related crises. He presents the relatively optimistic view that the maintenance of such trends requires greater culinary awareness, which might signify a long-term commitment to quality among restaurant customers.

Finally, Conrad Lashley, Alison Morrison and Sandie Randall provide a fascinating insight into influences on contemporary culinary taste through a study of the dining experiences of a group of students. Using semiotic analysis, Lashley et al. reveal the meanings hidden within the students' narratives about their most memorable meals. Their analysis displays the powerful cultural and social associations which exist within the students' commentary and, to an extent, the subordinate role of food within the meal experience.

Readers are likely to identify a common theme that runs through each of the chapters. In essence, it should be clear that our culinary taste, and our associated consumer behaviour, are greatly influenced by the wider cultural context in which we operate. All contributors to this text are in agreement that culinary taste is socially constructed. However, what this text also reveals is that the nature of social influence is highly complex.

Bibliography

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