

The relation between the wealthy and using atmosphere as a factor in augmenting authenticity, and consequently the perception of quality of an ethnic cuisine affair

Max Timm

Many factors and elements contribute to a culture's identity. These features include elements regarding entertainment, such as literature, film, and music, as well as features closer to home, such as language, food, and clothing. Upon migration to another country, an ethnic group may be hard-pressed to find and utilize many of the familiar elements of their culture in order to retain an identity in their newfound home. In the United States, many ethnic groups find it increasingly difficult to maintain a cultural identity particularly with generations that are not born in the native homeland. For the majority of these groups items such as traditional food, clothing, language and music keep alive a lifestyle that was once vibrant in their native lands. Parama Roy, an Indian businesswoman living in the United States explains, "Language and food are two ways to retain our culture. Now that the kids are in school, they're forgetting their Gujarati. But the least I can do is to give them one Indian meal a day."¹ The reliance on food to retain culture places stores and restaurants that provide an ethnic food as a public place to express and experience traditions that may be lost in the day to day lives of the members of an ethnicity.

The existence of these ethnic food places have also captured the attention of nonmembers or outsiders to ethnic groups, and the allure of experiencing another people's culture has resulted in the rise in popularity for many ethnic cuisines in the Anglo culture. Although many out-group members enjoy the quality of the food at these food places, some of the allure of an authentic ethnic restaurant resides in the atmosphere, providing an opportunity for an authentic experience and insight into another culture. Wall and Berry show that even though food quality and service

¹ Purnima Mankekar, "'India Shopping': Indian Grocery Stores and Transnational Configurations of Belonging," *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating: A Reader* (2005).

are dominant indicators of ambiance, the atmosphere of a restaurant can also influence a customer's perception of quality. The role of atmosphere is mainly due to two psychological factors. First, people lean on their surroundings for meaning and behavioral guidance and secondly, an environment can trigger feelings that consequently assist in the perception of quality of the place, in this case a restaurant.² Ha and Jang placed the relationship between atmosphere and perception of quality in the context of an ethnic Korean restaurant and found similar results, namely that the perception the quality of a restaurant is more greatly affected when food quality is lowly perceived rather than atmosphere.³

However, this relationship can also work in reverse. An experiment at a British restaurant displayed the effects of adding ambiance to the perception of and acceptability of food quality. In the study, a restaurant in England changed its décor to fit an Italian theme and asked their customers to rate the ethnicity and food quality. In addition, food selection was tracked. The results found that under an Italian theme, orders for pasta and dessert increased while fish decreased. Furthermore, customers rated the British pasta items higher in perceived ethnicity when the restaurant was decorated with an Italian theme.⁴ Clearly, atmosphere is a contributing factor in augmenting authenticity in the context of ethnic cuisine, and consequently the perception of the quality of a restaurant. This conclusion proposes the following question: since ambiance is a factor in the perception of the quality of an ethnic cuisine affair, who promoted the role of atmosphere in a food place, and when? This paper seeks to prove that members of the wealthy, high socioeconomic class at the turn of the twentieth century promoted the concept of

² E.A. Wall and L.L. Berry, "The Combined Effects of the Physical Environment and Employee Behavior on Customer Perception of Restaurant Service Quality," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2007).

³ Jooyeon Ha and SooCheong Jang, "Effects of Service Quality and Food Quality: The Moderating Role of Atmospherics in an Ethnic Restaurant Segment," *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 29, no. 3 (2010).

⁴ Rick Bell et al., "Effects of Adding an Italian Theme to a Restaurant on the Perceived Ethnicity, Acceptability, and Selection of Foods," *Appetite* 22, no. 1 (1994).

authenticity as being augmented by an “ethnic” atmosphere, because they were willing to pay more to attain a complete cultural experience.

Between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, learning and experiencing exotic cultures became popular with the social elite of the United States. Theatrical gatherings by the social elite were a common attraction for the wealthy seeking to transport themselves into another realm. For example, in 1916, a Spanish ball was held at the Hotel del Coronado for the New Orleans society. The *Los Angeles Times* described the event as “the biggest fashionable event of the year. The Veranda will be made into a bower of Chinese cosy corners. The palm court will be hung with Japanese lanterns to resemble the interior of the court in the royal palace at Tokio. Many beach residents have ordered costumes from San Francisco’s Chinatown.”⁵ A tourist hotspot to engage in the exotic Oriental culture, Chinatown was a popular place for the daring members of the upper class to visit. Advertisements for Chinatown implore tourists to “visit Chinatown and spend an instructive evening studying oriental life,” with the hint of danger, “includes views of opium smoking.”⁶ The restaurants of Chinatown before its 1906 destruction and consequential upheaval were generally three or four story buildings, with each story separating class, the top floor reserved for the social elite. Lisa Hsia explains, “This elegant room was a far cry from the sawdust of the ground floor, decorated as it was with intricate carvings, traditional Chinese motifs in eye-catching golds and reds, and calligraphic scrolls hanging on the walls.”⁷ As seen in the restaurants in Chinatown around the twentieth century, the addition of atmosphere and cultural performance increased the perception of authenticity to the social elite’s dining experience.

⁵ “Big Oriental Ball,” *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 2 1916.

⁶ Lisa L. Hsia, “Eating the Exotic: The Growing Acceptability of Chinese Cuisine in San Francisco, 1848-1915,” *Clio’s Scroll* 5(2003).

⁷ Ibid.

By hosting large and extravagant parties that focused on an “authentic” cultural experience, the elite of the wealthy class influenced members of the high-middle class, particularly women, to hold smaller parties of their own. In 1888, *Good Housekeeping* claimed that “national suppers” were “much in vogue” and, beginning in the late nineteenth century, cookbooks began to supply instructions not only of ethnic food preparation but also taught lessons in foreignness, urging its viewership to use chopsticks for Chinese food or to eat spaghetti the way the Italians do.⁸ During the early twentieth century, costume parties became very popular for housewives to host, turning to games and music to provide a more encapsulating experience of the exotic. “Foreign” entertainments were common attractions at many fund raising events and fairs. One such fundraising event entitled “Japanese Day” held by a women’s club in the Chicago area included bringing in two Japanese women to entertain club members by singing Japanese songs, speaking to members about the customs of Japanese women, and demonstrating how to serve a cup of tea in a proper Japanese etiquette.⁹

For commonfolk, the world fairs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century provided the opportunity to experience an exotic culture in an encompassing manner as the wealthy have done. Tents dedicated to foreign cuisine included a complete experience, with traditional music in the background, and merchants wearing traditional clothing.¹⁰ Although commoners could experience exotic culture at the fair, there was still a separation in class with the pricing of certain restaurants, for example at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, lunch prices ranged from 25 to 60 cents.

⁸ Kristin L. Hoganson, “Entertaining Difference,” in *Consumers’ Imperium: The Global Production of Domesticity* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

⁹ “Rogers Park Club Women Have Lesson in Japanese Etiquette,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 2 1904.

¹⁰ “Official Guide to the World’s Columbian Exposition,” (Chicago: The Columbian Guide Company, 1893).

Today, Americans are still looking to explore new ways to experience exotic cultures. In a world where the contemporary modern supermarket's ambiance includes music that is purposely slowed to a beat of 60 beats per minute in order to slow down the speed of consumers, wealthy Americans are still targeted as consumers of atmosphere and authenticity in the context of ethnic cuisine.¹¹ Advertising authenticity for a high-priced item is commonplace today in order to distinguish a commodity. For example, "Fire Roasted Zuni Zalza" conjures an image of an old patron for potential consumers who, "walked down the mountainside overlooking the jalapeño field. He paused, turned to young Josélito and said 'Make me a salsa, make me a salsa I can't refuse.'"¹² While the higher class is willing to pay the extra nickel for the addition of ambiance, thereby accentuating the quality of the dining experience, middle- to lower-class Americans are still influenced by the purchasing practices of the wealthy.

Bibliography

- Bell, Rick, Herbert L. Meiselman, Barry J. Pierson, and William G. Reeve. "Effects of Adding an Italian Theme to a Restaurant on the Perceived Ethnicity, Acceptability, and Selection of Foods." *Appetite* 22, no. 1 (1994): 11-24.
- "Big Oriental Ball." *Los Angeles Times*, Mar. 2 1916.
- Ha, Jooyeon, and SooCheong Jang. "Effects of Service Quality and Food Quality: The Moderating Role of Atmospherics in an Ethnic Restaurant Segment." *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 29, no. 3 (2010): 520-29.
- Hitt, Jack. "The Theory of Supermarkets." *New York Times Magazine* (1996): 10.
- Hoganson, Kristin L. "Entertaining Difference." In *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of Domesticity*, 105-51. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007.
- Hsia, Lisa L. "Eating the Exotic: The Growing Acceptability of Chinese Cuisine in San Francisco, 1848-1915." *Clio's Scroll* 5 (2003): 5-30.

¹¹ Jack Hitt, "The Theory of Supermarkets," *New York Times Magazine* (1996).

¹² Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "Eating Mexican in a Global Age: The Politics and Production of Ethnic Food," in *Food Chains: From Farmyard to Shopping Cart*, ed. Warren Belasco and Roger Horowitz (Univ. of Penn. Press, 2009).

Mankekar, Purnima. "'India Shopping': Indian Grocery Stores and Transnational Configurations of Belonging." *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating: A Reader* (2005): 197-214.

"Official Guide to the World's Columbian Exposition." Chicago: The Columbian Guide Company, 1893.

Pilcher, Jeffrey M. "Eating Mexican in a Global Age: The Politics and Production of Ethnic Food." In *Food Chains: From Farmyard to Shopping Cart*, edited by Warren Belasco and Roger Horowitz, 158-76: Univ. of Penn. Press, 2009.

"Rogers Park Club Women Have Lesson in Japanese Etiquette." *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 2 1904.

Wall, E.A., and L.L. Berry. "The Combined Effects of the Physical Environment and Employee Behavior on Customer Perception of Restaurant Service Quality." *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2007): 59-69.