

Authenticity of Ethnic Food in the American Restaurant

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Restaurants serve as public displays of ethnicity. They represent the boundary between private, ethnic customs and public, American practices. This relationship between ethnic food and the American market is complicated by the fact that a restaurant is, first and foremost, a business. Thus, it cannot be blind to the laws of supply and demand. To a large extent, these economic concerns determine the level of authenticity possible in a restaurant. While owners may have a variety of reasons for opening a restaurant that could involve introducing ethnic food to an American audience and maintaining authenticity, the restaurant must be profitable to survive. Thus, the environment must be taken into consideration when preparing meals, and the customers are an integral part of the food itself. Lu and Fine explain that, “The success of ethnic food depends on the participation of its audience.”¹ Since ethnic food is traditionally meant for a very different audience, it is impossible for it to be authentic in the public sphere in the United States.

Ethnicity and authenticity are, to a large extent, social constructions. It is impossible to define these terms without reference to a larger social context. In this paper I will take ethnic to refer to characteristics of an externally and internally recognizable group of people who share aspects of culture, religion, language, heritage, and/or history.

By externally recognizable I mean the group can be identified by members of society who are not directly associated with the group. In other words, there exists an “other” in contrast to the ethnic group. By internally recognizable I mean the members of the group accept their membership to the group as part of their identities.

I will define authenticity as “that which is believed or accepted to be genuine or real,”² with respect to ethnicity. For example, a tradition is only authentic if it is taken to be a genuine custom that is characteristic of the ethnic group. This is a subjective definition of authenticity since it refers to the perception of traditions, not just to the traditions themselves. I do not use a more objective definition of authenticity because traditions vary within a given ethnic group, and customs are constantly changing and evolving. Thus, it would be difficult to objectively define something as authentic.

There are many issues related to authenticity that ethnic food restaurant owners must address. These issues are easier to approach in an economic context. Ultimately, a restaurant is a business that must respond appropriately to supply and demand if it is to be successful. This determines, to a large degree, the level of authenticity of the food served. Many American customers eat at ethnic restaurants to satisfy a desire for an “exotic” experience. This use of ethnic food as an exotic experience is called culinary tourism.³ They want something new and exciting, but they do not want to be taken too far out of their comfort zone.⁴ The food served must reflect this demand for Americanized ethnic food. The balance between the exotic and the comfortable is crucial to appeal to an American audience.

American expectations extend past the food served in ethnic restaurants. For example, the format of the meal often conforms to American expectations. For example,

traditionally, soup is served at the end of a meal in Chinese cultures and meals are much longer with more of an emphasis on the social components of the meal than in the United States.⁵ While there are some restaurants that maintain the traditional format of the Chinese meal, most have adopted the American custom of serving soup at the beginning of the meal, and time-consuming traditional methods of cooking have been adapted to accommodate the faster lifestyle that is common in the United States.

Not only does demand determine the level of authenticity of food in ethnic restaurants, but supply also has a major influence. Restaurant owners are constrained by the options available. For example, many traditional Chinese vegetables are not readily available in the United States.⁶ Thus, they are much more expensive than vegetables that are common in the United States. To be successful economically, dishes must substitute American vegetables for more traditional, but less accessible vegetables.

Seafood is a great example of how both supply and demand together restrict authenticity. While steamed fish is a very popular dish in China, it is unsuccessful in the United States because there is little demand for it and it is not easily supplied. A restaurant owner in Georgia explains that “steamed fish . . . has a high requirement on the freshness of the raw material; ideally, it should be alive.”⁷ This requirement would be very difficult to satisfy in much of the United States, except in coastal cities. Additionally, Americans “do not care for the original flavor,”⁸ so there is little demand for the dish, even where it is possible to attain fish that meet the freshness requirement. Despite its abundance in traditional Chinese cuisine, at Mandarin Garden in Northfield, Minnesota, for example, there is no fish on the menu and the only seafood available is shrimp.⁹

Since restaurant food is so dependent on the clientele and on the environment, it is impossible to have truly authentic food outside of the country of origin. The United States is not China and Americans are very different from Chinese people. The food served in ethnic restaurants must reflect these differences. Of course, this may not be a bad thing. Authenticity is not necessarily what is desirable about ethnic food. Ethnic restaurants can serve many of the same purposes without serving perfectly authentic food. For example, the food can still bring people of similar ethnicities together and tie them to their heritage. It can still represent the culture it came from, and it can introduce Americans to new cultures and “represent a movement toward expanding the definitions of edibility and palatability and the horizons of the familiar”.¹⁰ This broadening of the American appetite also allows ethnic food to slowly become more authentic in restaurants. As more “exotic” food becomes accepted, it becomes increasingly profitable to serve more authentic meals. Thus, Americanized ethnic food serves as a stepping-stone towards greater authenticity in ethnic restaurants.

It is also useful to understand food as a perpetually adapting and changing entity. Food is continually changing based on supply and demand everywhere, not just in American ethnic restaurants. For example, John Wiederholt, owner of an American supper club in Hastings, Minnesota, explains that he has made “a lot of [menu] additions . . . we put scampi on the menu. Put Alaskan king crab on. I’ve added halibut, oh ruffie, salmon.”¹¹ When there is a shortage of a specific item, dishes adapt to incorporate alternative products. Traditional dishes represent a history of adaptation based on available ingredients, and in a world marked by an increase in globalblization, these

traditional foods change and develop much more quickly than before. Changes in food represent changes in food availability, environment and audience.

Authenticity and cultural pluralism are often considered intrinsically valuable; however, Americanized ethnic food restaurants serve a valuable role in communities despite their inability to be perfectly authentic due to their environment and their clientele. They serve many of the same roles that traditional food can serve, and they pave the way for more authentic food to succeed in the future. Additionally, they reflect their communities and incorporate both the past and the present. Finally, they can produce some delicious new dishes. An online poll conducted by Mandarin Garden found that cream cheese wontons are the favorite appetizer for 52% of voters, beating vegetarian egg rolls, fried chicken wings, potstickers, and to-fu and spicy garlic dip by far.¹² Cream cheese wontons are a delicious example of how ethnic food is Americanized to reflect the community and to increase profits. Despite their inauthenticity, I am quite grateful for their availability at Mandarin Garden Restaurant, and in Chinese restaurants throughout the United States.

¹ Shun Lu and Gary Alan Fine, "The Presentation of Ethnic Authenticity: Chinese Food as a Social Accomplishment," *The Sociological Quarterly* 36 (Summer, 1995): 548.

² Lu and Fine, 538.

³ Lucy M. Long, "A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness," in Lucy M. Long, ed., *Culinary Tourism* (University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 20-50.

⁴ Lu and Fine, 540.

⁵ Lu and Fine, 542.

⁶ Lu and Fine, 541.

⁷ The owner of Sichuan, as quoted in Shun Lu and Gary Alan Fine, "The Presentation of Ethnic Authenticity: Chinese Food as a Social Accomplishment," *The Sociological Quarterly* 36 (Summer, 1995): 540.

⁸ The owner of Sichuan, as quoted in Lu and Fine, "The Presentation of Ethnic Authenticity: Chinese Food as a Social Accomplishment." 540.

⁹ Mandarin Garden Restaurant, Northfield, MN, menu.

¹⁰ Long, 46.

¹¹ John Wiederhot (owner of Wiederholt's Supper Club, Hastings, Minnesota), interview by Charlie Carbery and Elliot Johnson, May 5, 2011.

¹² Mandarin Garden Restaurant, "What is your favorite appetizer," survey, <http://mandaringardennorthfield.blogspot.com>.

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