

To what extent is culinary taste individually constructed? essay

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To What Extent is Culinary Taste Individually Constructed? Introduction:

According to Sloan (n. d.), the number of meals Americans take at home continues to decline. A large proportion of dinners are comprised of convenience foods and restaurant/supermarket takeouts.

The most important factor continues to be convenience, and sandwiches remain the most popular, especially for lunch. In restaurants, foreign cuisine has made inroads, with sushi second on the list of most sought after entrée after pizza (Mintel 2005: cited in Sloan n. d.). The extent to which culinary taste is individually constructed, therefore, appears to be a group dynamic, prodded along by the media, industrialization of taste, and fashion.

Theoretical Debate: According to Seymour (n. d.

), the choices people make in the foods they eat are socially constructed. What food is eaten, how it is prepared, served, and eaten, varies between cultures. It occurs within rules expressed through cuisine among different regions, religions, cultures, class, caste, gender, and so on.

Therefore, an individual's taste can be different even within a family unit. In Pierre Bourdieu's "Social Construction of Taste", different social classes express their taste in the food they eat quite distinctly (Seymour n. d.

). They do this by being immersed in particular norms of their social class. Thus, the choices made derive from class and not individual personality. A social class will more than likely tend to concur on taste and make similar judgments on what to reject. It was Bourdieu's contention that judgments of taste are made on the aesthetic qualities of particular items, for instance,

food (Warde 2007). Further, higher classes consecrate their taste as good taste, in the process creating cultural hierarchy, class distinction, and a sense of belonging and solidarity within their class. Taste, therefore, is a symbolic struggle which plays a role in class formation. Thevenon (2008) sums up Bourdieu's views quite well; he quotes Bourdeau as saying that aesthetic choices depend on social origin, and in order to enter another social class, one must learn its norms of taste.

According to Van Deurzen (n. d.), post modernism has caused an uncaring attitude and information overload. Quality is now determined by what is perceived to be fashionable at the moment. Thus, allegiances and points of view switch according to the most fashionable perspective, for instance, on what foods to eat.

There are a number of contemporary influences on culinary taste that when merged, concur with Bordieu's view in so far as the dominant class is the working class. Thus, the choices people make on what foods to eat are determined by the factors which influence culinary taste within the working class. Culinary Tourism: According to Corigliano & Baggio (2002), tourism destinations develop features with distinguishing characteristics that will appeal to tourists. Among them is culinary fare whose interest can be attributed to increasing concerns on health and the ecology. Further, palate satisfaction forms an important part of the tourism experience. Thus, the after taste of a vacation may be strongly influenced by the local fare and it can determine the satisfaction level of the experience.

In a study conducted by the National Restaurant Association, sixty seven million travelers said that dining was the most popular activity when they arrive at a destination (Travel Industry Association 1998: cited in Corigliano & Baggio 2002). In Italy, for instance, tourists concur that food and wine are the most important characteristics of the country. According to the Director of International Tourism Research at the University of South Carolina, Dr. Rich Harrill, "Culinary Tourism is becoming an important subset of Cultural Tourism" (Hunter 2007). Culinary tourism can be defined as "eating out of curiosity" (Long 2007).

Thus, an individual tourist interprets the meaning of food according to how he acquired it. One aspect of culinary tourism is cooking classes where chefs offer tuition in food preparation. These packages take tourists to different cultural settings all over the world and the lessons learnt are often replicated in kitchens back home. Barbara Courtney, who took cooking lessons with her daughter in Tuscany, bakes foccacia and grills eggplant which she learnt during the trip. The company president of Food and Wine Trails, Mr. Larry Martin, posits the view that food offers a deeper understanding of the culture and environment of a destination (Hunter 2007). Fashion: In his article titled "Culinary Jane", Wilkes (2008) analyzed the moral economy that surrounded food in Jane Austen's novels and letters.

The analysis revealed that mealtimes were shaped by class and position, and it was fashionable for the elite to reign in their appetites for as long as possible; the later the meal, the more fashionable. It was also commonplace to serve toast, muffins, and rolls at breakfast, and etiquette had to be

maintained in the way meals were served, cutlery used, and the manners on display. Thus, what was fashionable during the Georgian period superseded concerns for culinary taste. The above scenario can be likened to the trend in Japanese food in Holland. According to Cwiertka (n. d.

), sushi and teppanyaki became popular in Europe, not so much for the taste, but because it was a food fad imitated from the U. S., and due to Japan's global prestige as an electronics and car manufacturer. In Holland, sushi bars project a modern futuristic image in the websites that is attractive to potential clients. It is a modern culinary experience rather than one fuelled by curiosity. According to the author, Japanese food is a fashion in London, a trend which has been picked up by the rest of Europe. The fashion for Japanese food is similar to the fast food fad which began in the U.

S. (Cwiertka n. d.). However, eating certain foods as a fashion can be a product of class distinction in which the upper classes define the taste; it is appropriated by the lower classes, and later discarded by the upper classes who thereafter develop a new one as a means to distinguish their social position from that of the masses (Meyer 2000). Thus, the fashion creates status for the individual and culinary taste is secondary. The taste is fashioned by a group and imitated by individuals in other groups seeking similar status. Ethics: Harper & Benson (2001), in their report on consumer concerns about animal welfare and the impact of food choice in the U.

K., Ireland, Italy, and Germany, found that consumer concern for animal welfare is driven by a need for better health and safer foods. Their view on animal welfare was defined in terms of humane deaths and natural lives.

Further, natural production methods were equated to safer food. However, even though most subjects indicated they were willing to pay more for natural foods, this did not translate itself into practice at the food counter. In addition, consumer concern for animal welfare was also not evident in practice.

They abrogated the responsibility to the government and animal rights groups, and consumed animal based food which is produced intensively. When consumers bought welfare products, they chose inexpensive products such as free-range eggs, shying away from the more expensive natural based foods. Thus, in the countries under study, the role of ethics in forming culinary habits was determined more by price and convenience. According to Niva (2005), consumers are increasingly aware of the benefits of healthy eating. Foods, such as functional foods, promise better health and a reduced risk of disease.

Unlike conventional foods, they have medicinal effects and represent a new kind of body healthfulness and attitude toward diet. There are foods which lower blood cholesterol, and others which lower blood pressure and other ailments. To realize the benefits of functional foods, they have to be consumed continually. Thus, individuals who opt for functional food products consume them as part of their daily diet and experiment with different

combinations to create innovative recipes. Slow Food: According to Manafo & Kwan (2007), food and cultures connect the human environment to the natural world. Further, the former are interwoven, and any change in one's diet from the traditional to the industrial implies a change in culture.

Thus, modern food industrial production systems disrupt local food cultures and identities. A modern food eater is therefore a passive consumer without knowledge of his food's history. Consequently, traditional forms of food preparation and knowledge have been eroded, and tastes, flavors, and smells have been lost in the modern world of artificial enhancers, preservatives, and chemical additives. This "McDonaldization" is being exported globally and is affecting local traditions and contexts. The Slow Food Movement represents the growing number of people actively responding to this threat. It aims to protect the heritage of food, tradition, and culture. Preserving recipes and flavors customary to traditional cuisine is at the heart of its ethos.

The movement offers a critique of "foods without identity" (Kjorstaad 2007). Media: Nutch (2007) points out that even though all social groups have a culinary culture, there also exists a status hierarchy of culinary cultures. For instance, French culinary techniques command a higher status than most culinary cultures. So too does gourmet cooking which is not rooted to any particular culinary culture? However, the origins of some of the popular gourmet dishes can be traced to humble, home kitchens. The role of the media in forming culinary habits is evident in the number of cookbooks and cookery magazines which commonly include a discussion on consumption of

foods produced in ethical agricultural methods (Brien 2009). They have to a large extent influenced the evolution of food pathways into mainstream practice.

A large proportion of such food related media is associated with celebrity mass marketing with a television chef accompanied with his branded products and cookbooks. This in essence acts as an advertisement for the chef's branded products and influences public behavior in eating, sometimes positively. Animal rights also act as another catalyst. For instance, when the conditions of battery raised hens were exposed in 2007-2008, sales of free-range poultry increased across the U. K. (Brien 2009). The mistreatment of animals in food production, brought home by Al Gore's film "An Inconvenient Truth", also influenced public perceptions of intensive food production methods, many people opting for sustainable foods. Restaurant reviews are another avenue for forming culinary habits.

Food commentary in the Philadelphia Inquirer is the province of specialists who articulate and redefine gustatory satisfaction, thereby making available to the public information on additional dishes in a domestic and commercial context (Hanke 1999). This has resulted in an increased curiosity for culinary experience popularized by food journalism. Recipes and news about food alleviate the monotony of everyday cooking, enhancing the enjoyment of preparing and eating food.

One consequence of this trend is that food habits today have been influenced by the popularization of gastronomy. According to Davis (2009),

what we know about food and restaurants is to a large extent shaped by the media. In America, for instance, the population is not heterogeneous and restaurant reviews and other media influence common culinary tastes, if any. An example is the rise in popularity of the Japanese dish, sushi.

However, a media report which broke in the New York Times about the high levels of mercury in blue fin tuna plummeted restaurant sales of tuna sushi, pre-empting the next gourmet trend.

Industrialization of Taste: The feminists movements of the 1960's and 1970's brought with them a shift from domestic cooking to more time efficient methods of cooking and the phenomenon of eating out (Epter 2009). More and more women have joined the labor force with the result that the old art forms of cooking have been lost and continue to be lost. With the shift from domestic cooking, the food industry has grown. Further, technology has introduced innovations that allow for faster cooking times and less labor intensive techniques in the kitchen. Examples of this are the microwave, pre-packaged foods, and technology to peel potatoes, among many other innovations (Epter 2009). According to the author, the food industry has introduced foods that are convenient and affordable to consumers, further increasing the labor force in the food industry and the number of consumers who depend on it. Thus, labor in industrial food settings has replaced labor in the home, resulting in a shift of culinary priorities; for instance, what to eat is to a large extent not determined by taste but by price and convenience. This has, however, led labor and ecological processes to transform foods from one state to another (Epter 2009).

It is a price the consumer has had to pay. Analysis and Conclusion:

Industrialization of taste, therefore, is the dominant influence in American culinary habits. The most important factor in America today continues to be convenience (Sloan n. d.), and convenience foods and restaurant takeouts dominate in a culture which is heavily influenced by the media and fashion. Sushi, a Japanese delicacy, has made inroads in the U. S. due to its pride of place as an exotic food fad, much like fast foods (Cwiertka n.

d.). A theoretical perspective, such as Pierre Bourdieu's " Social Construction of Taste", would apply in the American context if America is taken as a heterogeneous social class. According to the sociologist, individuals seeking to gain entrée to a class of higher status must learn all the norms in order to acquire acceptance. Thus, food fads, such as fast foods and sushi, have found a following in European countries from the American working class. However, American culinary taste has mainly been defined by exigencies of the fast pace of life. Women, who in the past have cooked meals for their families, are joining the workforce in ever increasing numbers, leaving them with little time, if any, to prepare elaborate meals.

Those tastes and flavors that are currently in vogue have been acquired and continue to be acquired through a process aided by the media and as a fashion statement. But the food industry, with its intensive production methods, will continue to set patterns of culinary taste in the U. S.

and other developed countries as long as convenience and price are the determining factors. References Brien, D 2009, 'Climate Change and the Contemporary Evolution of Foodways', *Media/Culture Journal*, Vol. 12, No.

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