

FRAGMENTS FOR A NEW URBAN CULINARY GEOGRAPHY

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APPETISER

This paper presents a series of fragments exploring particular aspects of the relationship between food and the city. My intention is not to provide a fully articulated thesis on urban culinary geography, but instead to present some random snapshots, some first thoughts. Some are better developed than others, which flash past like fast cars or subliminal blipverts; that's inevitable in such polymorphous sites as postmodern metropolises. Like that familiar publication that guides us round the urban landscape, the A–Z, the entries are arranged alphabetically, and each follows its own logic and trajectory. The disjunctures between them reflect the chaotic heterotopian shape of the contemporary city. Taken together, they represent the beginning of the project of rethinking how food and urban space come together in particular contexts, from the work of the chef to the scavenging of feral animals. Conscious of perpetrating the crime of generalizing 'the city', I would state that the cities of which I am tasting here are early twenty-first century 'world cities', the postindustrial metropolises, the themed, malled, mediatized urban sprawls—and I apologize for the exclusions and omissions that this inevitably means. Others can surely add to my lexicon with their own entries from diverse locations.

People confuse me.
Food doesn't.—*Anthony Bourdain*

MAIN COURSE

Food and the city: there are so many (maybe too many) ways of thinking about and thinking through this couplet. Like any attempt to grasp the complexities and intricacies of urban space and city life, one soon feels both exhilarated and overwhelmed, much as one does on arrival in a new city: awestruck by the size, the confusion, the strange names and unfamiliar streetscapes (and maybe by the unfamiliar foodscape). Travellers have their strategies, of course; and cities have whole industries geared to helping newcomers find their way around—if, that is, they're tourists with money to spend (the story plays out rather differently for economic migrants, refugees—whose movements to and between cities trace somewhat different patterns across the globe; see Appadurai 1990). But for the welcome guest, the city is to be made available: laid out in plan, led through by A–Z guides—and described and mapped in the books and leaflets coaxed into our hands as we disembark at airports and railway stations. High on the incomers' list of questions: *What can we eat? Where can we eat?* And here come the guide books, advising on restaurant districts, translating menus, explaining local delicacies, giving prices. The city is made available by eating it.

Of course, the tourist knows the city in a particular way, and wants from it particular things: to experience the city, to capture it in photographs and memories, and to bring it home in jars and bottles (Curtis and Pajaczkowska 1994). To tourists, the city is to be consumed, rather than to be lived. Read a guidebook written about the city where you live, and you'll see this clearly: the outsider's perspective packages your home as a tourist landscape. Hence the everlasting antagonism between host and traveller; the reluctant acknowledgment of mutual dependence and mutual exploitation. The hordes of sightseers know what they want, and we cannot avoid providing it: quaint "Olde Englande" teashops, or whatever. Things

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that exist solely to sell the city to visitors. This is a post-industrial story, of course, of cities redefining what they are, once their economic base is stripped out. Place promotion, city marketing, imagineering—these are the new industries that give shape to cities. And rising in the ranks of promotional tools in this symbolic economy is food.

But let's step out of the tourist trap a moment, and look from a different angle. There are so many potential angles to look from, but let's choose: the city and movement. It seems contradictory at first: cities as built landscapes, as fixed in stone and concrete and tarmac and glass. But consider the flows that skirt these structures, that ride on them, through them, under them. It begins to make more sense: *cities move*, their shapes shifting—traffic flows, demolition and renewal, people coming and going (Edensor 2000). And the contemporary urban foodscape, too, is all about food's mobilities. From fast food to immigrant cuisines, from cyber-cafes to home delivery, *food moves*, too. Attempts to halt it, or slow it, often seem out-of-kilter with the imperative of mobility; seem to want to freeze time, to museumify and to mummify, creating what Jean Duruz (2000: 299) calls "fortress cuisines"—safe havens to retreat into, as a way to escape the dizzying whirl of modern urban living and eating. Cities move, people move, food moves: tracing these movements creates a new focus on urban culinary geographies, on *cities as nodes in webs of flows* (Urry 2000).

How are we to write these new urban culinary geographies? Either by focusing in, to understand the complex dance that takes place at a particular location—and here I think of, for example, Elizabeth Miles' (1993) writing on Wolfgang Puck's "nomadic" fusion cooking as an emblem of the postmodern city, or Michael Maynard's (1995) story of "unclaimed bananas" at a food court. These instances enter my mind here as great examples of the *modest interventions* that can be made: staring down at a plate in Spago, or observing the wary treatment of a leftover banana at Veronica's New York Deli and Bakery, we can begin to see a minor literature, a micropolitics even, of this urban culinary geography. As Duruz (2000: 299) says, we can catch glimpses here of "the 'secret geographies' . . . of everyday shopping, cooking and eating—those moments of intervention in dominant discourses and power relations."

That is the approach I propose here, to map some secret geographies—and it's influenced by two things: first, a fine book that attempts to give a sense of how we think about and experience cities. Instead of a

master narrative, we glimpse only fragments, which we then piece together in our own ongoing montage, full of weird juxtapositions and constant surprises. The approach is that adopted by geographers Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift, for their book *City A–Z* (2000). The A to Z is, of course, a familiar object in city life: a way to find one's way around. But their A–Z, like mine I hope, works in something less than cartographic realism, and cannot in truth provide that same reassuring sense of location (or locatedness). Following Michel de Certeau (1984: 96), we can see the A–Z as addressing the "disquieting familiarity of the city," by looking at the grains and textures close up. Secondly, there is Jeff Weinstein's (1998) "A postcard history of the U.S. restaurant"—the result of scavenging, collecting. The cards Weinstein shows us do not produce a quantified analysis of his history; they are frozen moments, snapshots—"an oblique picture," as he puts it. It's one of my favourite essays on eating out for that reason. So, these *fragments for a new urban culinary geography* are just that: snapshots, half-formed thoughts, hazy memories, crumbs. But these crumbs are the things that build up everyday ways of knowing and experiencing cities and food: "culinary maps are produced by everyday inscriptions of the imagination—inscriptions that involve the senses, memories, rituals and moments of possibility" (Duruz 1999: 308). There's not space here to develop an entire alphabet of food-city fragments, either: consider this the first dispatch. Neither are they ingredients in the sense of mixing together to make a feast; they're more like a larder, out of which previously-unthought-of new dishes and menus might be concocted. *Alphabet soup for souls in the alphabet city*. Like the postmodern fusions of Wolfgang Puck, in fact, these fragments can meet and mingle in heterodox ways, producing new taste sensations, suggestive of the practices and meanings of eating in the city: "pleasure and accomplishment stem from enjoying and celebrating the specific amongst a proliferation of Difference. Adopting, adapting and transforming, we can literally nourish ourselves with the diversity and constant change that characterize contemporary urban society. These are adventures in a very large kitchen" (Miles 1993: 202).

ABUNDANCE

The city is that very large kitchen of which Miles writes: a site of abundance, of "diversity and constant change"—the urban smorgasbord. Of course, let us

not forget the poverty, the hunger, the scarcities and inadequacies, the problems of feeding the city. Abundance, however, works as a *motif*, laying out the city streets as an endless banquet, a consumer's Eden: all that choice, all those new experiences to be sought. The cultural omnivore is literalized here, eating the city, nourished by difference never-ending. Related terms: availability, variety—food is abundant in being ever-available and always changing. The palate need never grow tired by the repetitions that marked industrial eating: the mass produced sameness spilling out of factories. This kind of abundance feeds the body but not the soul, or so it goes. Industrial food, like modernist architecture, might once have been seen as an answer to social problems, but now seems only to bring new troubles, new indigestions. Of course, abundance-as-sameness still has a prominent place, most notably in fast foods, where it is matched by super-sizing as a double abundance. Bearing the legacy of Fordist food preparation, fast food outlets produce abundance and regularity, under the mantra of McDonaldisation (Ritzer 1993). This process produces the Fordist consumer, too—the McBody: “Americans are conscripted to the unseasonable pursuit of abundance. The impossibility of the dream is saved by the translation of quality into quantity and the identification of availability with desirability” (O’Neill 1999: 49).

However, abundance-as-quantity and availability-as-desirability misses so much of the formula, flattening out taste to render it a predictable element. Against this there is the abundance of variety, the desirability of scarcity—or, at least, the prospect of a kind of elite scarcity. If McDonald’s represents the democratization of taste, then its opposite is to be found in the paradise of the high-class food hall, or on the menu of the “best” restaurants. Making the rare available, abundant even, marks this mode of culinary production and consumption as the flipside of the drive-thru supersized McMeal. Unpredictability instead of predictability, difference rather than sameness: twin modalities of abundance that work to produce their own urban culinary geographies—twins that need each other to exist, if only to define themselves through their absolute alterity.

BODIES

Cities are full of bodies, and bodies are full of cities. Each constitutes the other. Bodies are markers used to express the self, and in the dense minglings and anonymous encounters emblematic of the urban

experience, the glance has to be met by a communicative body. The gym culture, diet regimes, techniques of the self—in cities, our bodies must be worked on, worked out. The aestheticization of asceticism, with its tropes of purity and control, is displayed on the *hard body*. Foods act as props to amplify this hardness: mineral water, which must be expensive enough to show it’s drunk through choice rather than economic necessity, low calorie foods that are pert and perky, against the fat-addled and gut-rotting excesses of modern diets. Gustatory regimes from vitamins to colonic irrigation suggest the body as out-of-place in the city, in need of prosthetic improvement: urban life is bad for the health, but the cure is also to be found in the city, whether we choose to pound its night streets as a jogger or ride to nowhere on a gym’s exercise bikes. Running in rings, cycling up imaginary hills, rowing dry rivers—these practices all too easily bring home to us that lack of fitness that is also a lack of *fit*, of bodies ill-equipped for office jobs, TV watching and car culture. Health and fitness is thus a corrective to urban excess, as when new social movements went back to the land, or back to nature in previous centuries.

It should not be necessary to point out the class dimension to this: whose bodies are worked on, toned and trimmed—and whose bodies are being rendered abject through the toning and trimming: “the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste” (Bourdieu 1984: 190). Being “overweight” carries a double stigma here, of being slovenly and out-of-control; the overweight body is to be pitied but also disciplined as deviant (Zdrodowski 1996). The inverse relation between the quality of diet and economic resources is well known to food policy researchers (Ralph 1998): the poor eat poor. In countries like the UK, poor bodies aren’t malnourished, they are *misnourished*, since the market stratification of foodstuffs ingrains eating habits that guarantee an imbalanced diet. Higher up the table, or at a higher table, eaters are equally twice blessed—with the economic capital to buy “healthy food” and then to live a “healthy life.” Only in America, writes John O’Neill (1999), do the rich eat worse than the poor, since they have mistaken quality for quantity—to eat better is to eat bigger. Conspicuous consumption can still work corporeally in that kind of system—just look at Elvis; elsewhere, *conspicuous discipline* (or, in Margaret Visser’s [1997] terms, *conspicuous competence*) is a more legible (and legitimate) bodily marker of status.

CHEFS

The chef is a cultural intermediary, a taste maker: in the UK, the rise of celebrity chefs—with their signature dishes, their TV shows, their best-selling cookbooks, their eponymous eateries—is a widely talked-about cultural phenomenon. Chefs have come to occupy central positions in the new symbolic economies of cities. Their centrality has arisen, some commentators suggest, as a counter to the McDonaldization of modern urban diets: “Reacting, no doubt, to the industrialization of food production and the depersonalization of comprehensive food systems, American consumers have rediscovered the elemental delights of fresh, varied cooked-to-order dishes” (Ferguson and Zukin 1998: 92). People want to eat better; to be fed by someone with more invested in making a meal than the McJob employee flipping burgers sullenly.

As part of the lifestylization of city cultures, then, chefs take centre-stage—the word “stage” being particularly apt, given the slide between cooking and performance: “In a sense, the restaurant is a forerunner of the contemporary entertainment industry” (Finkelstein 1998: 203)—though lots of chefs are disdainful of the new image their profession has acquired (while often simultaneously trading on it). Their extravagantly styled dishes, their setting of new food trends, symbolize either the refinements of urban life today, or its ostentatious excesses (Sedaris 2000).

In seeking to explore the world in the kitchens, Gary Fine (1995) provides an ethnomethodological account of chefs at work, focusing in on their conversations: “Culinary talk is an integral part of cooks’ work responsibilities and, in addition, this talk is satisfying to workers in persuading them that they are talented and competent craftsmen” (Fine 1995: 248). Compare this notion with a list of kitchen insults traded in Anthony Bourdain’s (2000: 222) account of New York restaurant life, *Kitchen Confidential*. Bourdain concurs with Fine that “cooktalk” is an art form, “like haiku or kabuki, defined by established rules, with a rigid, traditional framework in which one may operate.” So far, so good. However, *contra* Fine, here’s Bourdain’s rules: “All comments *must*, out of historical necessity, concern involuntary rectal penetration, penis size, physical flaws or annoying mannerisms or defects.” Here’s his list of common kitchen talk:

Motherfucker, cocksucker, sunofabeech, dipshit, scumbag, scumsucker, dumb-fuck, rat-bastard, slackjaw, idota, bruto, animale, asesino, mentiroso,

whining little bed-wetter, turd, tortuga, strunze, salaud, salaupard, chocha podrida, pendejo, silly cunt, seso de pollo, spazzy, goofball, bucket-head, chucha, papi-chulo, sweet-cheeks, cupcakes, love-chunks, culero, shit-stain, cum-gargler, and so on (Bourdain 2000: 226).

So, while Fine writes of the need for cooks to chat with each other about their “art”, to give and receive compliments and carefully considered aesthetic judgements, Bourdain writes that “it’s how *sensitive* you are to criticism and perceived insult—and how well you can give it right back—that determines your place in the food chain” (223). Even if clients might worry that such talk could sully, or sour, the dishes they are served (a kind of linguistic equivalent of the folk tales of waiters pissing in soup), Bourdain hears a kind of beat poetry in the kitchen. He does (I think) a superior job of thinking the role of this talk in the culture of cooking: “There are, it turns out, a million ways to say ‘suck my dick.’ . . . Like all great performances, it’s about timing, tone and delivery—kind of like cooking” (224).

COMMENSALITY

Eating together is widely acknowledged as a kind of social glue, helping to bind families, communities, populations together, either literally (the family dinner) or metaphorically (national dishes). But eating together is also a practice fraught with tensions, from the bickering of siblings to the beef wars: “the table is a social machinery as complicated as it is effective” (de Certeau et al 1998: 197). There are endless compromises to be made, as the alternative—eating alone—is unthinkable: “sometimes, for the sake of companionship, you just must have the prawn cocktail” (Warde and Martens 1998: 122). For some, the demands are just too much to bear, however: “The dinner party was invented as a form of torture” (Lette 1992: 57)—and eating alone becomes the only alternative (other than starvation). There is a freedom to eating alone, therefore, which is the obverse of the obligations of commensality: “Very few families would gather for a meal of tuna eaten out of the can with a fork while standing in the kitchen” (Lukanuski 1998: 117). On your own, you can chow down on whatever takes your fancy. Polite conversation, table manners . . . these things no longer matter. But the price to pay is privatization, since to eat out alone has come to be a difficult cultural practice in anything but fast food outlets and sandwich bars:

Eating alone is a separate behavior from eating with others. The societal signals are different and how solitary eaters eat is different. . . . For the solitary eater there is no sense of proper behavior. . . . The solitary diner is either a social misfit or the victim of some tragedy. . . . Solitary diners provoke us. That they are alone and participating in an activity that should be shared hits a chord in us. The onus is on the solitary diner: Why would anyone want to eat alone? (Lukanuski 1998: 115-6)

In what many believe to be an increasingly individualized society, it is surprising perhaps that more new modes of socially acceptable solo dining haven't been developed. New modes of commensality have developed, though for some critics these too are impoverished: the family sharing a Happy Meal, the boozy commensality of the post-pub takeaway (Bell 1999; O'Neill 1999). But, then again, perhaps this only serves to reveal the true function of eating together: the social work of sharing, the talking, the performance of taste, the rituals of dinner—the things that distance eating from mere feeding (Valentine 1998).

CULINARY CULTURAL CAPITAL

The contemporary city is a space of consumption and a site of spectacle. It is also a space of contestation, a site of refusal. Played out on the streets and plazas, the political dramas of everyday life are materialized in the practices of city living. The sociological transformations of the late modern age—all that postmodernization, deterritorialization, globalization—get worked through at the level of the everyday, the commonplace, the banal. As a *concentration* of these processes, the buying, cooking and eating of food gives us a way into thinking through the city as a node in the disjunctive flows of contemporary culture (Appadurai 1990). If the British have morphed from a nation of shop keepers into a nation of sushi eaters, if celebrity chefs are the cultural intermediaries that set trends and define taste, then urban life—no, make that *metropolitan* life—is the crystallization of a paradise crafted from late-modern sensibilities. Loft living, gym joining, haute cuisining: these are the habits and habitats in which distinction is mapped out (Zukin 1995). The endless dance of class struggle—the struggle of manners, tastes and lifestyles—makes and remakes the metropolitan landscape as a movie set for self-presentations, for fashioning the self out of bespoke tailoring, deli counters and personal grooming.

The new middle classes—taste-makers and trend-spotters *par excellence*—make fullest use of their savvy in this setting, disdaining through the subtle movements of bodies and wallets the *passee* and *declassé*. The game is always stacked in their favour; their lifestyle journalists know it, their restauranteurs know it, their “purveyors of fine foods” know it . . . The hidden injuries of class are played out in the turf wars over taste, on home improvement shows and cookery pages, where symbolic violence comes on a plate or the table it sits on; the name we give it: *connoisseurship*.

The city as bountiful, then, but not without a price: the price of exclusion, or of condescension, or of exploitation. As Ulf Hannerz (1990) has observed, the endless safari of the cosmopolitan, searching out the exotic and the authentic, is essentially a *predatory* practice: the pillage of resources, the scouring of habitats, the uprooting and repackaging of the foreign, the novel, the dangerous. It's summed up in an advertising slogan, to be taken only partially tongue-in-cheek: *discover the world—and eat it*. For a time, it was enough to move outwards, to visit the Earth's four corners for new consumer choices. Now, however, the whole world has been reached, so the hunt turns inwards; more accurately, it looks to the “other within,” rediscovering (or reinventing) “lost” (or invented) traditions, from home baking to offal eating (Visser 1997). Crucially, in a cranking-up of the dance of distinction, the quest for the “other within” turns to habits and tastes jettisoned by the lower classes on their own upward path, as they chase the tastes of those who continually out-step them. The foods prized by the taste makers are the same ones that, a generation ago, they sought to distance themselves from. Hence the relaunch in the UK of spam, or the fight to save Heinz salad cream, both projects riding a wave of culinary nostalgia (James 1996). Add to this that key weapon in this class war—*kitchen kitsch*—and we come to see the complexities of this ever-moving manoeuvre. The battleground? The supermarket aisles, the restaurant districts, the dining table. The players? Call them *cultural omnivores* (Warde, Martens and Olsen 1999). And the ammunition? To adapt a well-worn phrase from Pierre Bourdieu (1984), let's name it *culinary cultural capital*.

CULTURAL OMNIVORES

In their sociological exploration of British urban middle-class eating out, Warde, Martens and Olsen (1999) identify a tactic of *cultural omnivorousness* among particular social groups. Their argument is that the

potential overload of modern consumer culture is the cause of considerable personal anxiety: with so many products on the market, constructing a personal identity becomes fraught with unlimited choice. Out of the proliferating brands, *which one most accurately communicates who I am?* Cultural omnivorousness is thus a “coping strategy” based on information maximization: the reassurance that comes from knowing the choices we make are as informed as we can make them. In a twist of Bourdieu’s thesis that taste is used to mark distinction from other social groups, Warde et al. suggest instead that the proliferation of cultural symbols makes this kind of intergroup differentiation increasingly difficult. The complexity of the codes is such that we can never attain a decent working knowledge of the role of commodities in other social groups’ identity work. In its place, taste is used as a marker of *recognition*: “cultural judgement has its primary effect through its capacity to solidify and entrench social networks” (Warde et al. 1999: 124). Taste is turned inwards, to define membership rather than mark distinction—we recognize like minds through what they eat and where, and gain comfort from the homecoming every time we walk in through the restaurant’s door, and know that this is *our kinda place*. Commensality here confers equality among fellow tribe members, secure in our ability to recognize shared cultural codes—a safe haven, as the antidote to the flickering confusion bombarding us when we try to make sense of others: *we are who we eat with*.

Reading between the lines of this analysis, omnivorousness starts to appear like a compulsion, a particularly middle-class eating disorder: the need to eat everything, to be open to everything, to let it all in, in the hope that the “best bits” can then be assembled into a new you—or, rather, *a better, more accurate reflection of the real you*. Like Hannerz’s (1990) discussion of the cosmopolitan sensibility, we can see cultural omnivores as machines for taste-based self-making: omnivorousness as cultural mastery through incorporation. Only once we have processed it all can we pick those places, those plates, that say what we want them to say. The *faux-pas* is to be seen dining out of place: “ignorance of socially meaningful items might be shameful, a preference for vulgar items revealing, display of intended markers misleading, interpretation of signs mistaken” (Warde et al 1999: 119). The test, as Hannerz points out, is *how far will you go to mark your social location?* What will you eat, and what remains too distasteful—either to our palates or

our peers (French 1995)? Given the anxieties of misrecognition and misinterpretation, this is a doubly tricky question, risking both a bad taste in the mouth and being marked as a person of bad taste by our peers. Negotiating these intricacies is a never-ending problem, of course, given the migration and devaluation (or strategic revaluation) of foodstuffs up, down and across the social (and urban) landscape. The cultural omnivores are compelled to find *all you can eat*—and to eat it—in assembling culturally legible market biographies, lifestyles and identities. So, while Midas Dekkers (2000: 253) is right in one sense when he says that “people who cook a lot have more prestige than people who eat a lot,” for this group, eating out is “a perpetual experiment” (Warde and Martens 1998: 120), and eating a lot the potential source of culinary-cultural prestige.

DELIVERY

Movement around cities: food on the move. The business of importing food to the unproductive urban lands, where it can be transformed into meals. The circuits spanning the globe that bring peas onto a plate. Deliveries, on and on they go, feeding the demand, feeding the city. Everything must be delivered, from raw ingredients to finished meals. In today’s “car cuisine,” people can be delivered, too (Duruz 2000). The drive-thru delivers us to food and makes a restaurant—or at least a food “filling station”—out of our car (O’Neill 1999). Duruz writes of “fast food’s gentrification” in Australia: dial-up home delivery of prepared meals—no need for preparation or cooking; not fast food in the down-at-heel takeaway sense, this is “*Slow food for fast people: taste-rich for the time-poor*” (Duruz 2000: 289). (Though we are reminded here that before many lower class houses had kitchens, cookshops, street vendors and the like moved food round the streets; only later was it stilled, moving only between rooms indoors—see Valentine 1998). Diners as simultaneously nomadic, touring the drive-thrus, and sedentary, in need of home delivery. Mobility and inertia collide on the freeway, marking a particular time-space compression in the culinary economy. Slow food for fast people, fast food for slow people: a new index of the *cultural* politics of dromology (Virilio 1986).

DINERS

There is a photo-realist painting that I first encountered on the jacket of a reissue of Kerouac’s *The Town and the City*. It is called *Still Life with Hot Sauce*,

and was painted by Ralph Goings in 1980. It comprises an assortment of diner condiments jostling for position on a table, painted with exquisite hyperrealism: salt and pepper, sugar and syrup, milk, ketchup and hot sauce. The ketchup is Heinz—you can just make out the “57” motif on the neck—and has a label reading “Served by fine restaurants.” The hot sauce is by Crystal. The glass and chrome of the condiments gleam, and the painting is resonant with images of the diner, of eating midway through a long journey, of hot cooked food and endless coffee. The diner as a quintessentially American eating place; the stuff of teen flicks and road movies, stage for particular kinds of sociality. Lonesome travellers on their way through. Booths, jukeboxes, set menus, all-day breakfasts—the diner fills a distinct niche. And then there’s the cook, the waitresses, the customers—and the banter. Stuff of Tom Waits’ songs, crooked symbol of the American dream. Here’s Richard Pilsbury (1990: 41-2) describing the architecture and proprietor of Bert’s Diner:

The silver tube lay along the small southern New England side-street like a giant discarded lipstick case. . . . Sitting amidst the yawning parking lot of the surrounding jewelry factories, the diner seemed lonely and forlorn, as if dropped by accident by someone hurrying down this side-street. . . . Bert was standing at the grill smoking the last drags of a cigarette butt. In his early fifties, he was blessed with a splendid belly peeking out from beneath his yellowing T-shirt. Tattoos dotted his hairy arms; his giant calloused hands nicked and scarred in a hundred ways. His slow and purposeful movements were those of a man who spent as much time standing before a bar as before a grill.

As Pilsbury goes on to remind us, of course, the diner experience—once resolutely blue collar—has been reclaimed and rediscovered by “suburbanites search[ing] for their lost roots” (43)—establishments like the Fog City Diner chain attempting to capture a retro-chic diner ambience, though with food more suited to white collar palates. Pilsbury’s comment that this can be read as a search for lost roots reminds us of the problem of capital melancholy—the emptiness of a life of plenty, which means looking for the “other within” for a taste of the authentic. And Fog City Diner represents a heritized response to that search, scraping the grease away, *making the local into the lo-cal*.

ETHNIC QUARTERS

The settling of immigrant communities in cities has often resulted in the formation of clusters; ghettos and neighborhoods, Little Italies and Chinatowns. These districts mark simultaneously the desire for familiarity in a strange city and the practices of exclusion that keep social groups confined. The balance between elected and enforced concentration is context-specific, and requires thick historical reading to unravel. One thing is clear: assimilation is not always desirable nor achievable (Young 2000). As a way of re-branding ghettos, the practice of designating urban quarters has become a prominent city re-imaging strategy (Jayne 2000). Here we are concerned with so-called ethnic quarters, though we can see this process expanded to “quarter” other social groups—in gay villages, for example—as well as production and consumption activities, as in jewelry quarters, cultural quarters, etc. What is the meaning and purpose of quartering? As I have already said, it is partly a spin on residential and commercial segregation. But it also makes over those districts, profiling their distinctiveness, and thereby ambivalently celebrating or commodifying them (Gorman 2000). Quartering is, therefore, a kind of theming—a way of producing the urban landscape as a readerly text. The readers are visitors, of course: the imperative to quarter is economic as much as it is cultural: by cooking up ethnic quarters, we render them visible and accessible. To the communities that inhabit them, of course, no such visibilizing is necessary. This is making those districts available for consumption, as stages for the playing out of cultural omnivorousness:

We spend a Sunday afternoon walking through Chinatown, or checking out this week’s eccentric players in the park. We look at restaurants, stores, and clubs with something new for us, a new ethnic food, a different atmosphere, a different crowd of people. We walk through sections of the city that we experience as having unique characters which are not ours, where people from diverse places mingle and then go home (Young 1990: 239)

That’s Iris Marion Young, cosmopolitan intellectual, enjoying the *frisson* of wandering out of her own neighborhood, but not noticing that other people live there: “people from diverse places mingle and then go home,” leaving the people that live there to tidy up, ready for the next influx of culture-hungry

omnivores. Ghassan Hage (1997) describes these excursions of denial—denying the labour that produces the goods and places consumed. Jean Duruz (1999, 2000), however, cautions against oversimplifying things here, noting that relations between consumer and producer in these sites are more complex. Reading ethnic quarters as either fabulous sites of multicultural difference or as spaces of continuing colonial fetishism and appropriation misses the intricacies of encounters that occur there. True, both those imperatives can be present, but the relative push and pull of each is unpredictable and subject to change.

Given the movement of cultural capital, socially and spatially, quarters are prone to fads and fashions that make them trendy one moment and *passé* the next. A British Sunday newspaper with an omnivorous readership recently ran a tour guide to the cuisines and foodstuffs of the UK's major "ethnic groups." It laid out for readers the way to negotiate "ethnic supermarkets," telling us what to look for, and what to do with the ingredients we find there. That's the paradox of democratizing culinary cultural capital, however—the paradox that cultures can suddenly be dumped, as the taste-makers notice the downward spiral of culinary cultural capital. So this laying bare of the secrets of the Japanese supermarket marks the beginning of a process that can lead, in some cases, to the total *indigenization* of cuisines, such that they no longer confer any authentic ethnic "exoticness." We can watch this process in action as individual foodstuffs migrate across the foodscape, from the "obscurity" of ethnic foodstores to the deli counter, from there to the supermarkets' "ethnic food" aisles, and then out into the general population. The migratory movement of something like olive oil in the UK tracks this democratization, ending with olive oil sitting on shelves shoulder-to-shoulder with other cooking oils, such as the lowly vegetable oil. While there might still be a cultural cachet attached to olive oil here—signified by its price, for one thing, as well as by its packaging—it has become emptied of much of its cultural signification. One no longer need venture to Little Italy to source it.

FOXES

Nature reclaims the city in manifold ways: weeds, inclement weather, and both feral and wild animals. New ecosystems come into being, like the "insectopia" around litter bins depicted in the cartoon *Antz*: a mythical land of plenty for bugs, thriving on the waste of the human population. Foxes have made similar

adaptations, at least in the UK, as have other scavengers—or, rather, animals that can make a living from scavenging. I highlight foxes here purely for personal reasons, as they live together with me in my neighborhoods, and I recently had a close encounter with one as it trotted down my garden path late at night. The economy of food production and consumption therefore extends to a surplus economy and ecology, revealing the adaptive strategies that turn our cities into concrete jungles (Dion and Rockman 1996). As the flipside of sanctioned urban domestications of nature—pets, zoos—the return of the wild as crepuscular refuse collectors provoke ambivalent responses, from the wildlife aficionados advising us on what to feed hedgehogs (dog food, not bread and milk) to the moral panics about degradation and depredation: the war on pigeons or feral cats, for instance (Griffiths, Poulter and Sibley 2000). It is food that draws these creatures to risk city living, of course. Sea birds travel hundreds of miles inland, and take up residence around fish shops; foxes eke out a secret existence around bins and rubbish tips. The designation of urban nature as either vermin or wildlife works as a metaphor for the nature/culture split upon which urban living rests. (In February 2001, a fox was sighted wandering the halls of the Houses of Parliament in London, not long after MPs had debated the banning of fox-hunting in the British countryside.)

FUSION

"My cooking should represent my city, the place we live, in the ingredients but also in the culture" (Puck 1996: 63).

If ethnic quarters are celebrated for freezing immigrant cuisines in a protective fortress of authenticity, making available a kind of cosmopolitan tourism-at-home, then they have to be read as one particular culinary-geographic strategy for making up a city-food equation. From another angle, nothing sums up the postmodern metropolis better than the frantic commingling of cultures and cuisines—making fusion food a culinary cypher for *multiculti cosmo-metro* life. Instead of preserving distinct ethnic cultures, they are here mixed, or rather *allowed to collide*: not blended in some melting pot out of which comes an indistinct melange, but cultures rubbing up against each other, jostling, making new and surprising juxtapositions. Syncretic combinations emerge that hybridize and creolize diverse ingredients, playfully pick-and-mixing (James 1997). Here's Elizabeth Miles on one star of

fusion food: “Wolfgang Puck creates cuisine that both expresses his own identity(ies), and mirrors what he perceives as the identity(ies) of his customers . . . [T]hese identities reflect the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-gendered, nomadic paradigms of postmodernism” (Miles 1993: 193)—the dishes articulate “points of identification” (195), complexly and playfully combining ingredients and cooking practices: “No ‘real’ nor ‘intended’ meaning emerges from this accretion of foods, vocabularies and techniques, but rather a pastiche of possible readings” (196).

Of course, it isn’t very far from fusion to confusion, and reactions to fusion food can play up the boundary-blurring dangers of over-fusioning. This is often disguised as a clash of tastes, but can be read as distaste about the clash of cultures, too. Against this, the purity and authenticity of distinct cuisines practices a subtle but nonetheless insidious form of ethnic (palate) cleansing. Eating “foreign” food is okay, so long as the borders aren’t breached; culinary miscegenation threatens confusion in the same way as other multiculturalist moments. Moreover, the jump from fusion to confusion invokes the con-trick: the suspicion that repackaging cuisines in this way is some kind of sleight-of-hand, some act of dishonesty. Fusion is in this reading a *weak* way of conferring one’s own multi-culti sensibility: safer to be in Spago than trying to enact creolization in other spheres of life(style).

Miles includes another useful dimension in her reading of Puck: that his dishes also speak of the relationship between the city and nature: “These recipes presume a great, diverse natural bounty magically melting from specific farmland and ocean locations into the decentered city. This is the postmodern landscape, where nature meets city in a seamless continuum of goods and commodities” (Miles 1993: 199). Abundance and availability are here factored in, domesticating nature by cooking and eating it. The city is the stage for this process: the place where nature turns into nurture.

WASHING UP

The kitchen sink drama that unfolds every day, washing up is an important if rarely acknowledged part of eating. As part of the economy of waste, washing up represents a hygiene ritual fascinating in its detail. Not everyone agrees, of course, and the sink is often a war zone in domestic life. Washing away the mess, the leftovers; away, away they go, off to sea . . .

Maxine Hong Kingston (1992: 26) doesn’t like doing her dishes, but she has a plan: “I do enjoy washing other people’s dishes. I like the different dishes, different sink, different view out of the window. Perhaps neighbors could move over one house each night and do one another’s dishes.” Artist Ben Kinmont, who had a project where he visited people and did their dishes, would no doubt be welcomed into Kingston’s house. As he puts it: “I think it’s a good thing for people to do their dishes. . . . It slows people down” (Kinmont 1998: 138). Slowness: washing up as a still-point, as meditation with soap suds. This is not to deny that dish washing is *work*, of course—and work, moreover, that’s often unevenly distributed within households. But it is to revalue, redignify even, washing-up as a cultural practice.

But washing dishes as art? There’s artistry there already, of course: the everyday artistry of a job well done. Few things satisfy more than a clean plate and a clean table. Chefs might be able to make their names with signature dishes and cookery shows, but where’s the washing-up? Eve Jochnowitz (1999) records a rare example of washing-up as performance, from the New York World’s Fair, 1939-40. But this was merely a sideshow to demonstrate automatic dishwashers, that modern urban solution to the “drudgery” of dish-washing. I don’t like dishwashers, and I do like washing dishes. Why? Let’s leave that only partially answered, via two final quotations from our kitchen hands:

‘It is really fun and easy to talk about art while washing dishes. . . . How can you be pretentious while washing dishes?’ (Kinmont 1998: 141)

‘I have just entered the monastery. Please teach me.’

‘Have you eaten your rice?’

‘I have.’

‘Then you had better wash your bowl.’

‘At that moment, the new monk found enlightenment.’ (Kingston 1992: 27)

WASTE

All one can eat is something *other*—not just any other, of course, but the *nourishing* other. Yet all ingestion of nourishment is followed by excretion, the elimination of what even in the nourishing other cannot be assimilated. One can eat only the other, but the other can be consumed only with remnants, residues,

excrement, and leftovers—*les restes*. There are always bits and scraps of *caput mortuum* and effluvium to be purged and hidden away . . . For every restaurant has its *resterooms*. (Krell 1998: 78)

The city's food, then, matched by the city's shit: sewerage pipes, toilets, dustbins, litter, landfill . . . The waste products of feeding ourselves. A huge enterprise, getting rid of the stuff (Hawkins 2001). But it is gotten rid of. Overlooked, hidden away, washed up, recycled, buried—or eaten by scavengers; remember here that in nineteenth-century Paris (and elsewhere), posh-nosh leftovers were sold on, passing down the social order (de Certeau et al 1998). A neglected, almost shameful thing, waste: as Dekkers (2000: 253) writes, “no newspapers have defecating columns next to cookery columns; you defecate on the sly, as if it's illegal.” This denial of the act (and art) of shitting, for Dekkers, makes us miss much of what goes down the toilet bowl: “relieving yourself is a creative process. Something is created—unlike eating, which is only destructive. It's true that it's not a pretty sight; but nor is eating” (254). A tiny reminder, then, of *disposal* as part of consumption; and a further “secret geography”—of the urban waste lands: *shit in paradise* (Miller 2000).

WINDOW SHOPPING

That definitive activity of modern urban life—*flaneurie*—has been colonized by consumer culture, and transformed into a new game (and a new gaze): window shopping. For cultural omnivores, there's territories of taste to be scoured through the aimless meander. Trends to be spotted, new foods and kitchen styles to be logged in the memory for future use. Reading the menus displayed outside restaurants is a particular subspecies, a kind of *window eating*, and another opportunity to flex those culinary-cultural muscles, passing comment on entrees and set menus—from gazing to grazing, if you like (Duruz 2000). Menus as promotional materials of eateries have to be designed to suit particular readers, then—styled as objects in their own right, they must do more than merely list dishes (Visser 1997).

The importance of knowledge to cultural capital formation need not be reiterated here: knowing the right places to eat and shop requires the work of window-browsing, as well as keeping up with the critics—handily, their reviews are often displayed themselves in restaurant windows. Where once

window shopping might have been dismissed as a nonchalant activity (a way to fill time), or as the melancholic stroll of the economically marginal (a kind of masochistic walking dream of wishes that will never be fulfilled), we can see it here as essential reconnaissance in the class war that has occupied us repeatedly in this A–Z. Building up repositories of knowledge for the campaigns ahead.

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