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But is it Authentic? Culinary Travel and the Search for the "Genuine Article"

Lisa Heldke

Introduction

When Dorothy remarked to her little dog, "We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto," she uttered what has come to be the unofficial motto of those who travel outside of our cultural comfort zone.¹ Decoded, it means: "We have just encountered something that has reminded us that we are deep in unfamiliar territory and we're just not sure how to behave. Heck, we're not even entirely sure we want to *be* here anymore." The encounter with the unfamiliar might be as fleeting and as prosaic as attempting to use the telephone in a country to which one has never before traveled ("Is that the *ring*, or is that a *busy* signal I'm hearing?"), or something so profound and persistent that it challenges one's very identity—for example trying to participate in holiday traditions with the family into which one has just entered, and with whom one shares no ethnic ties. Whether one is a temporary traveler on holiday from one's own culture, or a long-term transplant away from one's cultural home for the foreseeable future, the experience is common to all travel. Indeed, such encounters are often taken to be the very reasons *to* travel.

According to a prevailing view in modern Western culture, we leave the familiar in order to encounter the unusual, unfamiliar, strange, exotic Other and to reflect on how this particular Other transforms our own identities. Understood in a context in which selves are set off sharply from each other and defined in terms of how we stand alone (not how we are connected), these encounters with Otherness have enormous power to "define our selves for ourselves." Given this understanding of how selves change, and given a traveler's yen to experience the greatest personal growth, it becomes

imperative that one be able to verify the authenticity of the experiences that affect oneself. For maximum personal effect, we desire encounters with truly authentic Others, not mediated, hybridized Others who are already "influenced" by the likes of us.

Not infrequently, the "We're not in Kansas anymore" feeling hits strongly when one has put some unusual or unfamiliar food item into one's mouth. Though it would be hyperbolic and unverifiable to assert that gustatory encounters with the unfamiliar are *the* most profound perceptual experiences the traveler can have, anecdotal evidence suggests that the terrors and delights of the tongue affect so dramatically that their memories remain sharp even years later. Unusual flavors address us in those most intimate places—the insides of our noses and mouths. (How do you "step back" from the sensation of a just-died mussel on your tongue? From the odor of durian?) In doing so, tastes both remind us of who we are and point out to us who we are not.² Given an understanding of selves as discrete units defined in terms of our differences from each other, such encounters with the foods of the Other come freighted with heavy baggage indeed.

Consider "Anne," the proper Anglo-American who overcomes her revulsion, learns to love garlic and saves her marriage to Italian-American Joe. Her story was included in an Italian cookbook written for English speakers in 1936 as a response to northern European Americans' vigorously maintained racist and ethnocentric prejudice that garlic was a food for "dirty foreigners," used precisely in order to mask the foul, inferior foods such foreigners purportedly chose to eat. (Riello 1936: 59). Today it may be the "ketchup of the intellectual," but a century ago, even the smell of garlic evoked virulent disdain in those whose cultures did not use the seasoning—and marked as "foreign" all those who smelled of it. Consider this passage, from *Bohemian San Francisco: Its Restaurants and Their Most Famous Recipes*: "Garlic . . . is a flavor and not a food, yet many of the lower-class foreigners eat it on bread, making a meal of dark bread, garlic, and red wine. It is offensive to sensitive nostrils and violates the taste when thus used . . ." (Edwards 1914: 108–9).

Flavors—be they unfamiliar or already "marked" as attaching to a particular ethnic culture—separate, with particular poignancy and power, the traveler from the culture in which she finds herself. For Anne, garlic was a pungent symbol of her outsiderhood, the gustatory emblem of who she was and wasn't. As an Anglo, her willingness to learn to cook with garlic stood as a genuine symbol of her love for her husband, for in embracing the flavor (as in embracing her husband), Anne was no doubt giving up some of her ethnic privilege. Her identity changed, in an important symbolic way, when she began adding garlic to her pasta sauce. Conversely, refusing to cook with, or even to ingest, such a symbolic savor serves to maintain one's ethnic and racial distinctness. Sometimes such refusal marks one's efforts to preserve membership in the privileged group (as exemplified by Edwards), but sometimes it constitutes an act of resistance, a refusal to be assimilated

into the dominant culture (as when an Eastern European relocated to the United States refuses to develop a taste for ketchup).

No doubt the symbolic power of flavor to demarcate cultures derives in part from the strong connections linking taste and smell, on the one hand, and memory and nostalgia, on the other. If patriotism is the taste of the foods of our childhood, then unfamiliar tastes must stand as instances of global cosmopolitanism—or acts of treason.³

The power of flavor must also derive from the intimacy of the senses of smell and taste, and the concomitant feelings of vulnerability such intimacy inspires. As Carolyn Korsmeyer argues, eating, as a "mode of operation[,] requires that objects become part of oneself. Its exercise requires risk and trust" (1999: 101). It feels much more risky to taste the food of an unfamiliar culture than to listen to its music, look at its art, or read its literature, and indeed it is more risky. There is always, in principle, a danger involved in eating food. Tasting something just might kill you—something that can happen only in the most bizarre examples of listening or looking.

Whatever the reasons, flavors possess surprising power to remind us of our identities. Considered against a conception of selves as hermetically sealed units, new flavors threaten—or promise—to challenge our very boundaries as we either admit them onto our grocery lists, or refuse them access.

The Exotic-Authentic-Other Chain

Elsewhere, I have explored the relationships between ethnic food, identity and cultural interactions in some detail.⁴ There, I suggest that, in tasting the foods of their Others, Euro-American culinary travelers often move along an implicit conceptual chain that begins with the recognition that one is in the presence of a flavor one has never before encountered, and ends with an "understanding" that this flavor stands as an authentic marker of the "true nature" of the ethnic Other—and, therefore, the thing that separates one most fully from this other.

Operating under the influence of this conceptual chain, the Euro-American food adventurer (the traveler for whom encounters with Otherness are not only welcome but sought after) sets out in search of authenticity—examples of the "genuine article" prepared "just the way they would do it," using the ingredients, cooking techniques, pans, even cooking fuel that would be used by a cook who is an insider to the culinary tradition. For the adventurer operating out of the particular understanding of the relation between self and Other I've identified, these encounters with the "truly" authentic cuisine of the Other serve the very purpose of travel. Here the traveler can make contact with the "not-me," and can hone the edges of her identity through the contact, either by absorbing the flavors of the Other into her own identity or by rejecting them as "what-I-am-not."

But the links in this conceptual chain won't hold. The first reason arises from the fact that, as culinary travelers, that which is new to us is taken to equal "exotic" and "exotic" to equal "authentic." "We mistake our interest in this [new food] for the discovery and appreciation of a truly authentic cuisine. What we identify as authentic in that culture is often simply what is new to us—which may or may not represent what insiders to that culture would identify as significant, traditional, or genuine elements of it" (Heldke 2003: 27). We paradoxically seek that which we are, by definition, least capable of identifying. Second, under scrutiny, the very notion of authenticity begins to break down; why, for instance, should "authentic" automatically and in principle mean that a dish was prepared exactly the way an insider cook would do it, in its "native habitat"? Such an understanding dismisses out of hand the possibility that an insider might regard it as "authentic" to *modify* a dish in order to respond to different local conditions and ingredients. Indeed, one might read the history of almost every cuisine on the globe as a history of just such modifications, made in response to new ingredients, new conditions, and new neighbors. There is no such thing as a cuisine untouched by "outside influences," and if what we really seek is a cuisine "untouched by the influences of people such as myself," then we ought to question the motives underlying our demand.

Tasting Authenticity

My earlier critique focused on problems of authenticity considered from the production side of things—the perspective of the cook. A separate but related set of problems arises if we analyze authenticity from the consumption side. Briefly stated, the idea that I can "really" taste the flavors of the Other is a simplistic reduction of the nature of taste, of what it means to experience a flavor. If, with Carolyn Korsmeyer, we understand taste as a cognitive activity involving memory, experience, emotion, etc., then we must necessarily be dissatisfied with any thin notion of authenticity that reduces it to a purely sensory and replicable quality of the food itself.⁵

These taste-related difficulties would arise for such a conception of authenticity even if we could somehow settle the matter of what constitutes authentic preparation. Even if we could agree, unambiguously, that a dish was prepared authentically, there is no guarantee whatsoever that the eater will be equipped to *experience* it as authentic (where authentic is taken to mean "the way it would taste for an insider to the cuisine"). A concept borrowed from John Dewey's aesthetics will help me to make this point—and will serve as the starting point from which to develop an alternative understanding of authenticity.

Writing in *Art as Experience*, John Dewey identifies a distinction between the art product, on the one hand, and the work of art on the other. He writes

that "the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience," and he emphasizes "the human conditions under which it was brought into being" as well as "the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience" (1987). The work of art "happens" as a result of the interaction of some product (a painting) with some perceivers (viewers).

Bracketing the matter of whether or not cuisine constitutes an art form, we can use Dewey's emphasis on the work of art as an *experiential* entity to develop a useful alternative notion of authenticity—one more effective than the view I've been describing thus far. (To guarantee that we bracket the question "But is it art?" I shall modify his terminology, referring to the work of cuisine for work of art, and the dish for product.)

Consider: The notion of authenticity I've been describing, a notion connected to the view of selves as independent, hermetically sealed packages, regards the *work* of cuisine as the *dish*, and understands that dish to possess stand-alone qualities that can be read from it by anyone trained to identify them (an insider to a cuisine, for example, or an outsider who has studied it). The meaning of the dish is inherent to it. One assesses authenticity, then, by determining whether or not the dish contains certain properties of taste, appearance, or preparation technique.

In contrast, an experiential conception of the work of cuisine understands that the work is (to paraphrase Dewey) what the dish is "in and with experience." On this view, the contributions made by the dish itself (via its creator) are just that—contributions to an experience, that are "met" by the contributions of the experienter (the eater). Eating, on this model, is a kind of conversation (Dewey often speaks of "transaction"), in which each party contributes. Just as it would be inaccurate, in describing a work of cuisine, to ignore the contributions of the dish itself (and the cook who made it), so too would it be inaccurate to ignore the contributions of the eater, who comes to this experience with a history and a set of experiences of her own. These shape and flavor the work of cuisine—quite literally, as it turns out. The culinary traveler will *taste* the dish differently from the diner who has grown up eating it.

Thus, the work of cuisine is a different work for the cultural insider than it is for the cultural tourist. As Dewey puts it, "Every individual brings with him, when he exercises his individuality, a way of seeing and feeling that in its interaction with old material creates something new, something previously not existing in experience" (1987: 113). But this is not to say that "It's all relative," or that one cannot appeal to anything like criteria in assessing a work of cuisine. To adopt this view would be to suggest that the dish itself (its creator, its cultural context) makes no contribution to the work of cuisine; that the dish itself is infinitely malleable.⁶

If we adopt this experiential notion of the work of cuisine, we can develop a useful alternative conception of authenticity with identifiable roles for perceiver and context. Authenticity comes to be a property of the work

of cuisine, which is itself a transaction between dish and eater (where the dish is understood to be a product of a particular cook operating out of an identifiable cultural context, and the eater is understood to be similarly culturally embedded).

When authenticity is understood to be a quality of this exchange, demands for authenticity end up being of a rather different sort. For instance, rather than identifying dishes prepared "just the way" they would be prepared "in their native context" as representing the "gold standard" of authenticity, we might valorize the gesture of a cook who recognizes the limited familiarity of her (non-native) diners, and cooks "to" them in a way that enables an interaction to develop. (She might do so by choosing flavors that introduce her diners to the most unusual features of her cuisine, or by choosing flavors that show the connections between her cuisine and that of her diners.)

Authenticity, conceived along these lines, differs from the view I'm rejecting in that it rejects the notion that properties of a dish inhere in the dish, independent of any perceivers, and instead conceives of taste or flavor as a property of the experiential work of cuisine. Authenticity is thus a property of the particular work of cuisine that is "happening"—a work that may involve cross-cultural elements, for instance. Rather than attempting to erase, minimize, or otherwise deny the "intrusion" represented by the non-native culinary traveler ("Just pretend you're cooking for your own family—don't do anything different for me"), this concept of authenticity begins with the understanding that *all* works of cuisine involve transactions between dish (cook) and eater—and calls us to *attend* to the particular kinds of transactions represented in the cross-cultural experience.

On the received view, the culinary traveler's own presence (in a restaurant, for example) always counts as evidence of the inauthenticity of the place; paradoxically, one's discovery of a "truly authentic" restaurant contains the very seed of the destruction of its authenticity. On the view I'm suggesting, the presence of an eater (with her own agenda) is always a given, in all contexts, cross-cultural or otherwise. While culinary travelers *may* "contaminate" a cuisine (by treating it as infinitely malleable, for example, and making endless demands upon it to change), they/we do not do so by definition, by our very presence.

It's important to note that all works of cuisine will involve this communication, and thus interpretation (and misinterpretation), on the part of the eater. It is not only works of culinary tourism in which there are gaps that must be traversed between cook and eater. Such gaps are part of the very nature of personhood and of interaction; we are always both comprehensible and opaque, both understood and misunderstood by others. In discussing culinary tourism, I simply draw our attention to one particular kind of gap that must be traversed. But the presence of eaters, of tasters (even ignorant ones) is necessary to the very existence of a work of cuisine. As such, our presence must be a part of any useful definition of authenticity.

To begin to imagine how this alternative view of authenticity might shape our desires and expectations (either as travelers or as the ones "traveled to") consider the following story.

Thai Ginger: Or, What Happens When Disparate Flavors Converge?

I vividly recall the first time I ate thom kha gai, a Thai chicken soup made with coconut milk and kha, or galangal, a knobby spice that also goes by the name Thai ginger. (Hold that fact for a moment.) The vividness of this sapid memory still brings me up short. This was not my mother's chicken soup—or the chicken soup of anyone's mother I knew. Today, this soup has achieved ubiquity in middle America; not only does it appear on the menus of *non-Thai* restaurants (a sure sign of its crossover status), but it also appears in powdered form on the shelves of ordinary mainstream supermarkets. In 1982, however, it was one hundred percent new, other, foreign, never before experienced—by me, anyway, and by most other Americans unaffiliated with a Southeast Asian community.

When I first encountered galangal, it appeared as dried, tough, woody chips floating in the hammered aluminum soup tureen. Though I was instructed not to eat them, I chewed on one and was rewarded with a flavor vaguely reminiscent of menthol. It was strange, exotic . . . and *sui generis*. There was nothing in my universe like kha—or so I thought.

I continued to think that for years—and then I saw it referred to on an ingredient list as "Thai ginger." "That's straining for comparison," I commented. "There's no relation between galangal and ginger. Is there?" Indeed there is. "Regular" ginger and galangal are both members of the Zingiberaceae family. Once I learned of the relation, the similarities in appearance were so obvious it was unfathomable that I hadn't suspected their connection all along: knobby, tan, fibrous. Dry ginger and float it in soup and no doubt it would behave a great deal like that galangal behaved in my first bowl of thom kha gai.

But would it have tasted the same? If that first menu had offered "chicken soup with ginger and coconut milk," what would I have tasted? As a young graduate student, I was at least noddingly familiar with the taste of fresh ginger and would not have been utterly surprised to see it used in something other than cookies or sweet cakes. While the taste wouldn't have been routine, it would at least have counted as familiar, recognizable.

What would I have tasted, had the menu simply said "ginger," but presented me with Thai ginger? Would I still remember this experience with the vividness that I do? What combination of things left me feeling that I had tasted something the likes of which I'd never encountered before? (After all, I *had* encountered the likes of it before; I'd eaten chicken, drunk coconut milk, and used the cousin of galangal in my own cooking.)

Surely I would remember, no? After all, my experience of the flavor was not wholly shaped by the unfamiliarity of the word used to describe it—was it? Of course not—but such unfamiliarity definitely did play a part in the way I experienced that soup. So too did the unfamiliarity of my surroundings: the clothing of the servers, those hammered aluminum soup tureens, the elaborate, swirly appearance of the Thai written language on the menus. Perhaps even my mother's chicken soup would have tasted utterly unfamiliar to me, were it being ladled out of such a tureen in such surroundings. Indeed, experience tells me that, given an unfamiliar enough context, I will *not* recognize or identify even the flavors most familiar to me—ketchup, for instance. Turns out that ketchup is frequently used in pad thai, a noodle dish found in virtually every Thai restaurant in the United States. Take it away from the French fry and ketchup becomes an entirely different substance, unfamiliar, unidentifiable, even—yes—"exotic." What I taste is very much a function of what the context leads me to expect (or cannot lead me to expect, in the case of an utterly unfamiliar setting).

This experience solidifies for me the importance of experience and the need for our theories of culinary interaction, culinary travel, to draw meaning from the transaction—not the dish, in isolation. It suggests a view of selves (culinary travelers, cooks) as always already in relation, and of cultural markers (Thai ginger) as dialogic elements, not static, embedded symbols. But what about the fact that food adventurers (eager to burnish our edges on the most Other dining experiences we can find) tend to be disappointed when we learn that "they" changed the food for "us?" Of course this practice disappoints (both culinary insider and traveler), if it always and only means a watering down and fast-foodifying of a regional cuisine. But if flavor is a kind of dialogic material—the medium of a conversation between two cultures—then I must take seriously the fact that you come from a particular location and so do I. On such a reading, the cook who considers her Euro-American diners' palates begins advisedly. We may go on to ask whether the resultant work of cuisine is an authentic one—but my point is that it is not rendered inauthentic in principle by the fact that the cook acknowledges the transactional nature of cooking-and-eating. Note that such an understanding challenges the notion that the culinary insider has some kind of obligation to preserve their culture "as is" and to present the traveler with the kind of experiences travelers take to be true to their culture, absent the tourist.

How might we use this transactional model of culinary travel to understand Anne's story? Anne has entered a new culinary conversation by marrying into an Italian-American family. She brings to that dialog her own prejudices and preferences—and finds them inadequate to accommodate the new experiences she's having. Frustrated by her inability to make pasta that tastes as delicious—even to her—as Joe's mother's sauce, Anne arranges a trip to her mother-in-law's house, in order to ask for her culinary secrets. When "Mother" asks Anne how she cooks her garlic, Anne replies, "I don't

like garlic. It smells so." "Why, my dear, it doesn't smell any worse than an onion and I know you like those. It's just because you are so used to an onion and you are not used to garlic," replies her mother-in-law (Riello 1936: 59). Of course that's not the only reason—onions don't have nearly the "dirty foreigner" reputation that garlic carries. Anne has likely been warned off the stuff by her own mother. But she gamely gives it a try and by the end of the story she has wowed her husband with her "macaroni" and vowed to use garlic "in all my cooking hereafter" (59). Anne's embrace of garlic comes through literal and culinary conversation with her mother-in-law—conversation that acknowledges already-existent relations, new cultural connections and her responsibility to both.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this chapter, I count as travelers anyone who moves into a cultural location other than one's own, either temporarily or more long term. This includes travelers in the traditional sense, but also those whose travel does not require a passport or even a plane ticket. In this latter sense, you might be traveling if you move to a neighborhood with an ethnic/cultural identity unfamiliar to you; spend time with a new friend in a racial community not your own; or even attend a cultural event or visit a restaurant representing an unfamiliar racial or ethnic group.
2. I refrain here from discussing a related point—namely, the different places at which cultures mark the divide between edible and inedible. The differences in the location of this line have been used by both colonizing and colonized cultures as evidence of the non-human status of their Other. ("They are the sorts of people who eat dogs/pigs/carnivores/cattle.") While the point is related to the matter of taste, it is also separable. I confine myself to a discussion of the cultural meaning of differences of taste in those cases in which all parties involved agree that the tastes belong to undeniable *foods*.
3. "What is patriotism but the *love* of the good things we ate in our childhood?" Lin Yutang.
4. See my 2003.
5. See, especially, chapter four, "The Meaning of Taste and the Taste of Meaning."
6. In his introduction to Dewey's work, Abraham Kaplan makes a related note: "The respondent cannot simply project onto the work of art what is in his own mind, any more than the artist can create simply by saying 'Let there be...!' Artistic vision has an objective locus for both artist and respondent; only there does the work of art have a determinate content. Misreading what objectively is said is as much a possibility as is misstating an intention. Both artist and respondent can fail, each in his own way" (1987: xxix–xxx).

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Succulent Selection

A Select Bibliography of 50 Further Readings

Juneko Robinson

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