

Sociology 1010-002

The Sociology of Ethnic Restaurants in Omaha

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Introduction

Cultures have traditionally come together over the shared experiences of eating and drinking. Food, and the traditions that surround it become an important part of our own personal identities. People may feel strong connections to the flavors of a food which they identify with their own ethnicity, or enjoy the feeling of being neapolitan caused by eating the food of another culture.

Contrarily, some people may just be interested in the hedonistic value of the flavors in the food or be interested in the art of the dish itself. People who call themselves foodies interest themselves in finding the best prepared foods, perhaps with respect to authenticity, or perhaps not. These people intellectualize the food by concerning themselves with specific flavors, textures, and presentations. Some ethnic restaurants attract these people, others do not.

In Omaha we have a variety of ethnic restaurants to choose from, but for the scope of this project we will research a small group of Mexican, Italian, and Arabic restaurants located in various geographic locations.

Methodology

To conduct our analysis, we first reviewed current literature on the sociology of food and drink to get an idea of what similar studies to ours are finding. During this we found much discussion of themes such as authenticity, ethnic identity, and the attitudes and expectations people have towards restaurants with respect to cost.

With these studies in mind, we pulled data from reviews on popular restaurant review websites in Omaha to get insight into the ideas people have with respect to ethnic restaurants of different background, price point, and location. We gathered data for the three Italian Restaurants: Olive Garden, Nicola's, and Villagio Pizzeria.

We also researched three Mexican Restaurants: Rivera's, Taco Bell, and Taqueria Tijuana. Finally, we pulled data from El Basha, and Ahmed's; two Arabic restaurants.

From reading these reviews, we found three themes in the things people were saying. First, the word "authenticity" was used over and over. We will analyze what it means, if it means anything, and talk about the implications of it. Second, we noticed varying descriptions of the Atmosphere at these locations, which we will look at, and find meaning in under the heading of "Atmosphere." Finally we will discuss price. Though these will be discussed relatively separately, they all are so closely related that it is difficult to isolate them. Because of this, each section will likely include some discussion of all three.

Authenticity

"I'm a big pasta fan. I'm a big Italian food fan. Anything Italian - I love cheese, mozzarella. Mozzarella is my favorite, so I have to say anything Italian, I'll take it."

This is a quote from the actress Malin Akerman. This begs the question, what makes food authentic?

Olive Garden was given the least praise for its authenticity, though very few reviews mentioned authenticity at all for the other two Italian restaurants. The other two restaurants (Nicola's and Villagio Pizzeria) are locally owned which is contrary to Olive Garden, who is nationally owned. Very few reviewers commented on authenticity at Olive Garden. One of the few who did writes,

"I don't care if it's not real Italian food, its amazing food. I'm not into the breadsticks but the risotto is amazing and their sauces are delicious, I would say you're probably safe ordering anything here, it's all good."

Mexican Restaurant customers showed much more concern about authenticity.

Taqueria Tijuana received much Recognition for It's authenticity. An excerpt from a raving review of Taqueria Tijuana touts the merit of the cheek, and mentions the tongue taco.

"The BEST authentic Mexican food in town!!! There tacos are excellent and the beef tongue tortas are to die for!!! Definitely a new hot spot for me... "

Not a single review of the 50+ reviews we gathered on Taqueria Tijuana called it inauthentic, and most reviews explicitly mentioned authenticity.

Taco Bell, had very little praise for it's authenticity. Most reviews didn't mention authenticity at all. In the reviews that did, it was dismissed as being unimportant and expected.

Rivera's received mixed reviews. One reviewer writes,

"If you sit down at a "Mexican" restaurant (Rivera's) and you see the word "wrap" or the phrase "covered in nacho cheese sauce" you are not in a real mexican restaurant. Get back in your car and immediately head for south omaha."

Roughly half of the reviews mentioning Authenticity were negative, and the others complimentary. Based on the reviews, it seems as though people who were happy with taste of the food, raved about it's authenticity, while those who were displeased slandered it.

The arabic restaurants we looked at had reviews both praising authenticity and also dismissing it. The important pattern we saw, however, matched well with what we have seen in the other ethnic restaurants and that is that people who wrote positive reviews cite authenticity, and those who disliked the food, often blamed the lack of authenticity. An example of a 5 star review from El Basha is below.

“ According to my wife the food is very authentic and tastes almost just like the food where she comes from.”

Reading the reviews gave some insight to the city's perspective of authenticity. The most interesting aspect of authenticity is the ambiguity of its meaning. Reading the reviews of Rivera's mexican restaurant, it seemed as though “authentic” meant high quality, or pleasing. The word was paired with other descriptions like delicious, great tasting, and excellent with no other context with which to define it. Contrary to this, in the review of Olive Garden above, the customer comments that she doesn't consider the food authentic, but does consider it high quality. This discrepancy may point to an idea that corporate owned restaurants cannot be authentic, adding another dimension to the definition. The restaurants that received compliments on authenticity were: Nicola's, Ahmed's, El Basha, Rivera's, Taqueria Tijuana, and Pizzeria Villagio. These are also all of the non-corporate establishments. From the evidence we've discussed up to this point, it seems for a restaurant to be authentic it must be high quality and non-corporate. This, however, is likely oversimplifying things. The menu's of the “authentic” (meaning they received some comment on authenticity) restaurants, like Taqueria Tijuana

and Nicola's, had dishes that are uncommon in the mainstream diet, like the tongue tortas at Taqueria Tijuana. Which could have contributed to their label of "authentic."

Despite the trends we found, the definition of authenticity is no more clear now than what it was when we began. We were able to recognize some patterns, but the term is infinitely ambiguous. Calling something authentic is much like calling something "cool." The definition changes from person to person, with no real governing body. The strongest of these patterns are that, like the word "cool," authenticity is generally considered a positive attribute. Up to this point we have ignored an important factor in authenticity, and that is the atmosphere which the restaurant creates with decoration and design.

Atmosphere

A restaurant's atmosphere sets the stage. It's about more than just a dining room away from home. Food takes the spotlight as guests become its audience. Factors such as music, lighting, artwork, and spacing combine to create comfort, romance or even the feeling of being in another country.

Atmosphere was mentioned in many reviews. It is worth noting that descriptions of decoration were similar within each ethnicity of restaurant. Nicola's and the other Italian restaurants were described romantically, as is illustrated by this reviewer who says,

“Nicola’s has a warm, inviting, atmosphere and is extremely cozy and charming. I sat at the bar and was immediately served.”

The Mexican restaurants were described more casually. This reviewer describes Taqueria Tijuana.

“Not fancy. Spanish TV blaring in the background. Clean, no nonsense atmosphere. I’ll definitely be a repeat customer.”

The differences in the descriptions can be seen in **Figure 1.0** and **Figure 2.0** below.

Both are pictures of the restaurant’s faces. It’s easy to see that the Taqueria has a very different, more utilitarian, low key design than that of Nicolas, which gives the impression of being a more fancy, fine dining restaurant. This comparison of the two restaurants alone could easily be ignored as coincidence, but looking at the other restaurants we found, the trend of Italian restaurants, even the more inexpensive establishments, are always more elegantly decorated than their Mexican counterparts. The reason for this pattern could be that a large portion of Hispanic people are blue collar workers, so Mexican restaurants create an atmosphere attractive to the blue collar worker. Contrarily, Italians have assimilated from a minority to being part of the mainstream culture, so Italian restaurants seem more attractive to more wealthy, white collar workers, and therefore use their decorations to create an atmosphere attractive to them. Alternatively, the difference in style may come from the difference in wealth of the origin country. Italy has a much higher standard of living than Mexico which likely has influenced the food traditions associated with Italian dining.

Figure 1.0



Taqueria Tijuana Store front. Photo credit to *Yelp.com*

Figure 2.0



Nicola's Store front. Photo credit to *Yelp.com*

Price

The cost of a meal is something reviewers cared about in all of the different restaurants. People's attitudes towards cost is a very interesting theme to analyze because it is a direct indication of the value they see in the food. We looked for consistent comments in each of the restaurants we analyzed. At Rivera's, which was easily the most expensive mexican restaurant we pulled reviews for, a fair amount of people mentioned that it was too expensive. The review below is one of these, and this woman was not alone in her feelings.

"Disappointing! So much hype for an expensive, crappy meal. For a four year old to eat and have a drink was \$8.25!"

Consistent complaints about the price of the meals at Rivera's is interesting because many of the reviewers of Nicola's, an Italian restaurant in a similar price range, received comments on how much the prices were appreciated. The review of Nicola's below illustrates this.

"For me, this was a total slam dunk and very much worth the price you were paying for. My wife had the Spaghetti Aglio & Olio and added the shrimp. The add on price might feel excessive, but these are butterflied shrimp and are far from wimpy."

This difference could be due to many things. For example, people are willing to pay for better location, people might be genuinely enjoying the food more, or people may be paying for the more romantic atmosphere. From our data, we see a pattern that people generally feel the experience of eating at a mexican restaurant is not as

valuable as eating at a similar Italian one. Prices in the Arabic restaurants we researched were generally inexpensive, and very few people complained.

Conclusion

Looking at each ethnic restaurant through similar lenses lets us see patterns.

People expect more authenticity out of more expensive restaurants. This is a loose rule however due to the ambiguity of the term authenticity. As mentioned earlier, it's possible that people have combined the terms quality and authentic internally and though they claim to seek authentic food, they really are looking for quality.

People also tend to see authentic as intrinsically valuable and to veer from authentic in anything but a fast food restaurant is met with some pretty sharp feelings of betrayal. The attitude seems to be that advertising as an ethnic restaurant implies authenticity, but if the price is low enough being inauthentic is permissible. Much of the literature available for the sociology of food focuses on the idea of ethnic identity. This idea that people connected to restaurants of their ethnicity was not nearly as prominent as we would have expected. The idea that people use restaurants to connect to their ethnic identity may very well still be happening, but people might not talk about it when reviewing a restaurant online. This is a very strong possibility. The atmosphere of an ethnic restaurant seems to be fairly consistent across an ethnicity, though all the factors which influence this are unclear. Furthermore, it seems that people in Omaha are interested in getting the best quality at the lowest price, and different ethnic restaurants intrinsically demand different prices. Though it is difficult to come to hard conclusions about

the sociology of ethnic restaurants, these restaurants serve as a wonderful window into the thoughts, feelings, cultures, values, and traditions of a society and would make excellent subjects for further research.

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