

A Taste for Ethnic Difference: American Gustatory Imagination in a Globalizing World

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Abstract

Ethnic, foreign, soul, etc. are a few ways in which American journalists writing on food have tried to capture difference within the national imaginary. These categories often have divergent connotation of difference from a presumed mainstream. This paper analyzes the print record and interprets the category of the “ethnic restaurant,” in the process of narrating the story of the American engagement with gustatory difference in the making of a national cuisine. My analysis is based on data from four sources. First, national American newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, analyzed qualitatively and in detail from 1851 to the present. Second, descriptive quantitative analysis of *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *The Los Angeles Times* to contextualize the narrow focus of the first source. Third, qualitative analysis of journals digitized in the American Periodical Series. Fourth, Zagat Surveys beginning in 1982. This paper makes an argument about taste, ethnicity and hierarchy as it relates to the gustatory imagination of American taste-makers through the twentieth century.

Ray, Krishnendu. 2010. A Taste for Ethnic Difference: American Gustatory Imagination in a Globalizing World. In *Globalization, Food and Social Identities in the Asia Pacific Region*, ed. James Farrer. Tokyo: Sophia University Institute of Comparative Culture.

URL: <http://icc.fl.sophia.ac.jp/global%20food%20papers/html/ray.html>

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This essay is the result of my attempt to engage with, elaborate, and specify Sidney Mintz's claim that Americans do not have a national cuisine (Mintz 1996). One of the reasons he cites is that Americans do not talk about "American cuisine." I have addressed that claim with detailed empirical evidence in "Nation and Cuisine: The Evidence from American Newspapers ca. 1830-2003" (Ray 2008). In it I show that in fact some Americans have embraced the notion of American cuisine, lately and unevenly to be sure, but they have done so with gusto since the early 1970s. Another reason Mintz gives for the absence of an American cuisine is the various waves of migration that have created numerous ethnic and sub-national culinary cultures. In this paper, I wish to draw attention to the second dimension of that discussion: what the print record reveals about the American conversation over gustatory differences as imagined through the category of ethnicity.

American taste-makers, that is, influential journalists and restaurant-reviewers, have framed American culinary cultures in two distinct ways: first, as high-status foreign foods, which were initially limited to Continental and French cuisines but eventually included Italian and Japanese cookery towards the end of the twentieth century; second, as low status and risky food of the immigrant poor, which they have classified as "ethnic fare." The first category is understood primarily in aesthetic terms of taste and masculine notions of skill, while the latter is understood primarily in terms of necessity arising from a history of undifferentiated toil.

My arguments here are based on data from four sources. First, national American newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, analyzed qualitatively and in detail from 1851 to the present. Second, descriptive quantitative analysis of *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *The Los Angeles Times* to contextualize the narrow focus of the first source. Third, qualitative analysis of journals digitized in the *American Periodical Series*. Fourth, Zagat Surveys beginning in 1982.¹ Based on empirical material from the above, this paper makes an argument about taste, ethnicity and hierarchy as it relates to the gustatory imagination of American taste-makers through the twentieth century.

Contingent Categories

I use the term "restaurant," as conceived by the French in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Spang 2000). In Paris, according to Rebecca Spang, restaurants had first appeared in the 1760s as "restorative palaces" and it was only by the late 1790s that the word was "set loose from its moorings in the culture of

1. This is part of a larger project that draws on data from the National Restaurant Association, occupational and birthplace data since the 1850 Census of the United States, and interviews with restaurateurs.

medicalized sensibility. “Restaurant” had now become the fashionable word used for any Paris eatery” (2000, 173). For a while the terminology was somewhat fluid, ranging between restaurants, inns with table d’hôte, and cook shops, and it wasn’t until the nineteenth century that the term, restaurant, was generally recognized and understood to mean separate tables, individualized table settings, printed menus, silverware, and attentive service. Spang suggests that the specificity of the restaurant is marked by the peculiarity of the term itself.

For decades into the nineteenth century, Anglophone authors and publishers continued to italicize the word restaurant and restaurateur, marking them and their referents not only as foreign, but as untranslatably so, evidence that something had happened in France that had occurred nowhere else on the planet (2000,175).

The argument is that people have eaten out for a long time and continue to do so in innumerable ways, such as in cook-shops and at food vending carts, but that they have eaten in restaurants only since the French Revolution. French restaurants have provided the template for fine-dining restaurants in the West, and I am provisionally using the word restaurant in this historical sense.²

I must also begin with a working definition of an ethnic restaurant. This would be a restaurant that serves “other peoples’ food,” as defined in its changing historical incarnations from the perspective of self-described mainstream tastes. I will begin by assuming that an ethnic restaurant is one that carries a diacritical ethnic marker—German, Polish, Irish, Jewish, Eastern European, Indian, Filipino, etc. Ethnicity of course is the record of a popular, practical, and changing American conception

of groups of people—our own kind and others. In fact, the terms “restaurant” and “ethnicity” have for a long time pulled in different directions, the former towards qualities of distinction and the latter towards cheap ubiquity. Let the rest of my story slowly reveal the problem of defining ethnic food within that logic of practice.

Hybrid Cuisines. This restaurant is owned by a Pakistani and the cooking is done by a Mexican and a Pakistani.
Photo by Krishnendu Ray



2. I am ignoring for now the problematic nature of that contention at the least for the cities of China under the Southern Sung 1127-1376 AD as suggested by Joanna Waley-Cohen (2006) among others.

“Our Wide Taste in Food”: Inventing the Ethnic Restaurant in *The New York Times*

Between 1851 and 2003 the words “ethnic” and “restaurant” were found in food articles in the *New York Times* (henceforth NYT) on 1,585 instances.³ The first article to use both terms separately was published on October 8, 1959 in the NYT under the title, “Use of Native Spices Adds Interest to Unusual Cuisine of Balinese” (written by the Times’ first serious restaurant critic, Craig Claiborne). On the other hand, the phrase “ethnic restaurant” can be identified 323 times with Claiborne again leading that category on July 15, 1964 with a NYT article entitled “Variety of French Food Sampled on West Coast.” There were 586 hits for “ethnic food,” with a lead article by James J. Nagle entitled “Tastes Widening for Kosher Food” on November 6, 1960 in the NYT. Thus the phrases “ethnic food” and “ethnic restaurant” were becoming popular terms in the NYT from the 1960s onwards, and neither of these foods was considered by the authors to be representative of mainstream taste.

There are no references to either of these phrases in the American Periodicals Series, a comprehensive collection of periodicals published in the United States from 1741 to 1850 (and quite substantial thereafter until the first decades of the twentieth century). “Ethnic” does appear individually in the periodical series in the March 1805 issue of *General Assembly’s Missionary Magazine*, except to distinguish non-Christians from Christians. That is consistent with the fact that “ethnicity” is derived from the Greek noun *ethnos*, meaning nation or people and is used to refer to people in general or “other” people in particular (Sollors 1996).

On October 8, 1959, Craig Claiborne wrote in the NYT, “Because New York is a city of sophistication and with tremendously different ethnic groups, the public here has extraordinary opportunities to dine on the ‘exotic’ fare of a hundred regions,” marking a new attitude towards gustatory difference, of valuable proliferation. He continues, “One of the most fascinating of the many Far Eastern restaurants here is *A Bit of Bali*....Since the management obviously has respect for authenticity, dining there can be a rewarding adventure,” he concludes, anxious that the thing barely grasped would elude his reach. This is a quintessential concern of our own times—the search for difference, yet the fear that contact will contaminate the exotic.

Of course there has been exotic food long before the 1960s but American taste-makers did not call it ethnic. On August 6, 1871 the NYT noted, “...the fact is patent

3. I end at 2003 because when I conducted the research for this piece in the NYT archives, articles as opposed to advertisements were clearly identifiable in the historical database up to that year. I wanted to restrict my research to articles so as to measure discursive valence (hence for the moment ignoring commercial speech).

that restaurants and boarding-houses are fast multiplying, and threaten at no distant day to usurp the place of the family dinner table as well as the family mansion.” Here difference is framed within a discourse of apprehension. Anxieties about intrusion into the “domestic” with its multiple connotations of family, home, hearth and nation were typical concerns in almost all commentaries on “restaurants” at this time. Most were referred to as “German, French, and Italian Dining-Saloons,” into the late 1920s. In those constructions, restaurants clearly belonged to the demimonde.

Yet, there was a hint of urban excitement accompanied by ethnic disgust. One can see evidence of this in an 1852 piece about Philadelphia subtitled an “Era of Saloonism,” which ends with the following:

Scores of waiters, like dumb mutes, stand ready to receive your orders, and to convey them to that concealed and invisible sanctuary whence issues so many multitudinous preparations, whose fantastic names tickle the ear, and whose superlative qualities please and exhilarate the palate.... You are persuaded that, lost in the mazes of the city, you have entered, by accident, into some secret avenue, which has conducted you into an elysian state of existence - some Mahomedian paradise, adorned with marble and gold; perfumed with frankincense and myrrh; and lighted by the brilliant eyes of beautiful houris (October 27, 1852, p. 2).

In fact, this mid-nineteenth-century urban excitement for the exotic, recedes by the 1880s, precisely when immigration takes off, but then in the 1920s, we meet people like Helen Bullitt Lowry, who feels compelled to rehabilitate the “old world” foods of Greeks, Jews and Italians in New York. According to Donna Gabaccia this is also the moment when American food was both nationalized as an outcome of technological developments in transportation and refrigeration, yet ghettoized in ethnic enclaves due to mass migration and disdain towards cultural minorities (1998). Until the 1920s, exotic food, if referred to at all, was a subject of disgust in such titles as “Found in Garbage-Boxes stuff that is utilized for food by some people” (July 15, 1883, NYT) and bizarre reportage as, “An Octopus Eaten by Chinamen” (Dec. 6, 1880, NYT). This sense of repugnance clearly marked the outer boundary of a self-conscious taste community, and it was only through the cultural transformations brought about by the Civil Rights Movement that such attitudes would appear to be crude and impolite.

By contrast, society restaurants such as Delmonico’s were welcomed with open arms. In fact, Delmonico’s new up-town location was warmly embraced by this NYT article, which appeared on April 7, 1862:

When the best families were clustered around the Bowling-green, and gentlemen dandies who promenaded on the Battery were expected to wear white kid gloves, the name DELMONICO first became known to the lovers of good living in the City... The establishment (which was formerly the mansion of Mr. MOSES II. GRINNELL) has been fitted up with faultless taste, and is without any exception, the handsomest place of this kind in the City [capital in original] (1862: 5).

Every new Delmonico's location is received with rapture and unfailingly contains some patrician reference, such as "formerly the mansion of Mr. Moses," and any society ball held in one of these venerated restaurants is announced in the dailies with much fanfare. In fact, the earliest references to restaurants are to be found either in the classified sections announcing various events (primarily balls), or ironically in reports primarily concerned with crime. And thus it happened that even a posh restaurant like Delmonico's could be highlighted in the NYT on account of a robbery committed on a September day in 1852:

...officer Lynch, of the First Ward Police, arrested an employee of Delmonico's Hotel, in Broadway, named Theodore Stuckhart, upon suspicion of robbery. At a late hour, on the previous night, the room of a West India gentleman, named Henry Pinnock, was opened and three leather portmanteaus broken into, with iron instruments; from one of the portmanteaus was abstracted nearly \$500 in gold coin, and some valuable articles of wearing apparel (NYT, Sep 4, 1852, p. 1).

Delmonico's is referenced before this incident, on February 3, 1852, but only in the announcement section for a Saturday night meeting by the Swiss Benevolent Society to elect its officers. It would take some time for Delmonico's to lose its ethnic affiliation and become a high society hotspot.

In general, German restaurants—considered different enough at this time to be ethnic—were unfavorably compared to Delmonico's, Sutherland, and Cable. Yet, on January 19, 1873, the NYT published a long and relatively even-handed piece entitled "German Restaurants." According to the unnamed author, German restaurants could be distinguished by their cheapness and abundance—a consistent ethnic marker—and were said to serve "the odd things that foreigners love," along with such popular American items as roasts, pumpkin pies and dumplings. For the Frenchman there was "lentil soup, in which masses of Bologna sausage are floating, while the Irishman is vigorously to [sic] work on something like fish-balls smothered in red cabbage," all of which was served with an "enormous supply of coarse German bread." One could also order "weiner snitzel—a tremendous name which, however, when brought, is only veal cutlet with the bone removed." Another says "He feels delicate, and will have

calf's tongue with raisins. This delectable dish, when it makes its appearance, is not very inviting in appearance." For all this, the author notes, the "...price marked on the carte is fifteen cents. Further investigation into the mysteries of German cuisine shows beef a la mode served with macaroni a very peculiar but highly satisfactory way of eating it," all served by waiters who are "clearly German" (Ibid). It obviously took some amount of practical knowledge of posture, gesture, and accent that the writer presumed to share with his readers, to be able to tell a German obviously from an Irishman or an Englishman.

By the interwar years we begin to hear difference dealt on a slightly different register. In a 1935 article entitled "Our Wide Taste in Food," Helen Morgan wrote, "Strange dishes have been taken from one home to another, until, as a consequence, an American family of 1935 might reasonably concoct a meal like this: fruit cocktail, sauerkraut, spaghetti, mutton or lamb or meat balls, corn on the cob, garlic salad and apple pie." She assured us at the end that "Undoubtedly any one subject to [such] nightmares would not survive, yet such a hodge-podge is not impossible" (October 13, 1935, Section Magazine p.17). From our vantage point, the menu seems perfectly normal but Morgan balances her enthusiasm for the exotic by referencing the "strangeness" of the collation. Nevertheless, the ethnic as exotic and as someone with slightly disgusting eating habits continues as a minor theme, but only as a minor theme, after cultural democratization brought about by the Civil Rights Movement. We can smell traces of that premise as late as May 16, 1999, when Richard Weir wrote in the NYT, "Not for the Faint of Palate. Guinea Pig, Cow's Spleen, All Part of City's Diet."

Measuring Discursive Valence of Cuisines: Counting Cats in Zanzibar?

Having used the NYT (and a few other periodicals) interpretively to develop some sense of ethnic eateries in the self-understanding of its reporters, I wanted to get a feel for the historical patterning, a bird's eye view if you will, of the talk on eateries that were marked with the diacritical touch of difference in major American newspapers with a national reach. So I set myself the task of classifying the talk on restaurants in the American print media as it relates to difference over the last 150 years. Why 150 years? Because that is about the outer temporal limit of any archived newspaper in the USA.

Figure 1 shows how French and German restaurants dominated the conversation on ethno-nationally marked cuisine at the time of the Civil War, but both receded dramatically near the end of the nineteenth century, gradually to be overshadowed by stories about Chinese and Italian restaurants. Chinese restaurants rose in public consciousness from a low of 10% of all articles concerning restaurants in the NYT

between 1861-1880, to a high of 35% between 1941-1960, then declined to about 20% by 2000 when, interestingly, Chinese immigration reached new heights. The renewal of Chinese immigration in the 1960s might have diluted its prestige. The volume of talk on Chinese restaurants may have also suffered due to cultural liberalization during the 1960s that created many more challengers to the category of legitimate differences. Italian restaurants also climbed in terms of American discourse until 1900 but then fell in the first two decades of the twentieth century (when Italian immigration peaked), again to slowly rise until the 1960s. This was followed by a rapid rise, precisely when Italian immigration fell off. French restaurants receded from a high point of 33.33% of all news articles between 1861-1880, to a low of 17.62% between 1921-1940. Then it climbed up to about 24% by 1980 only to decline, once again, to about 16% by 2000. Since emigration from France (or Canada) to the US played a relatively minor role throughout this period there were other reasons for the pattern, as I discuss below.⁴

Over the last 150 years, media discussion on German and Continental restaurants have declined precipitously. By contrast, Japanese and Mexican restaurants are becoming much more visible, the former even more so. Cuisine categories that increase in prominence after the 1960s are generally quite remarkable, given that the ratio for most cuisines tend to decline with the increase in the number of named cuisines, which is related to omnivorous tastes (Johnston and Baumann 2007). (It should also be noted parenthetically, that the categories in this figure include “ethnic,” “national,” or “foreign” cuisines, which are not so many different things as parts of diverse classification systems, each with its notable diacritical mark of difference).

4. It is important to clarify that these numbers are counts of media conversations, not places, as such. So it is possible to have much talk about a few places (e.g., Delmonico's) and little conversation about many eateries (mostly cook-shops). In this article I count numerous ways in which ethnic eateries show up in the discussion about food, but these numbers are not a count of the number of ethnic eateries per se; instead they measure their discursive valence. Over the duration that I am interested in, which is the last 150 years, we do not have counts for the number of eateries. Total numbers of eating and drinking establishments have been counted since 1929 but such establishments are not classified by ethnic or national markers. Telephone directories are useful for that purpose by about the 1950s, depending on the ubiquity of telephones (as studied by Wilbur Zelinsky 1985). Before telephone directories we have guide books, which are much more idiosyncratic by nature.

Figure 1: NYT coverage of ethnic restaurants 1861-2000

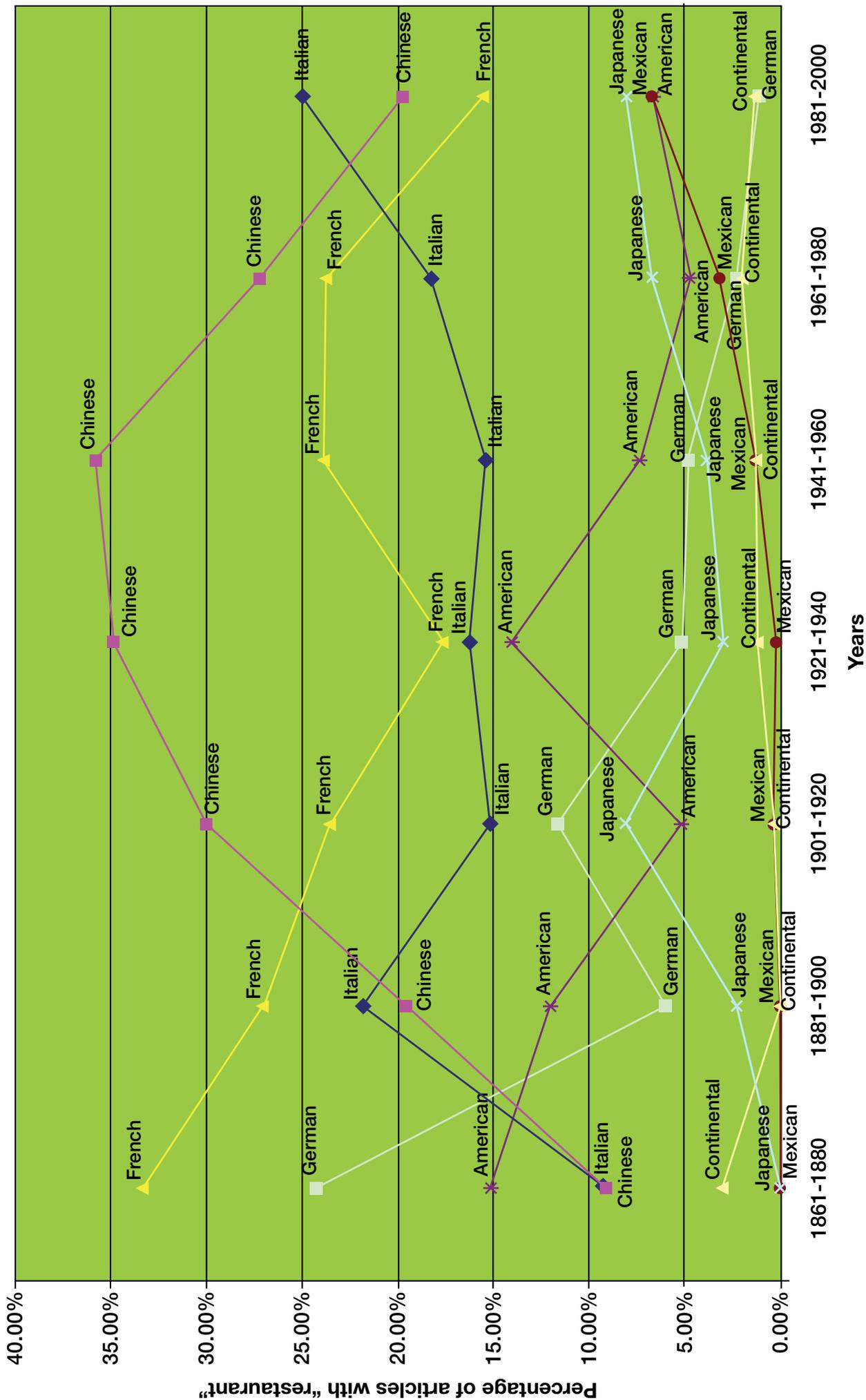
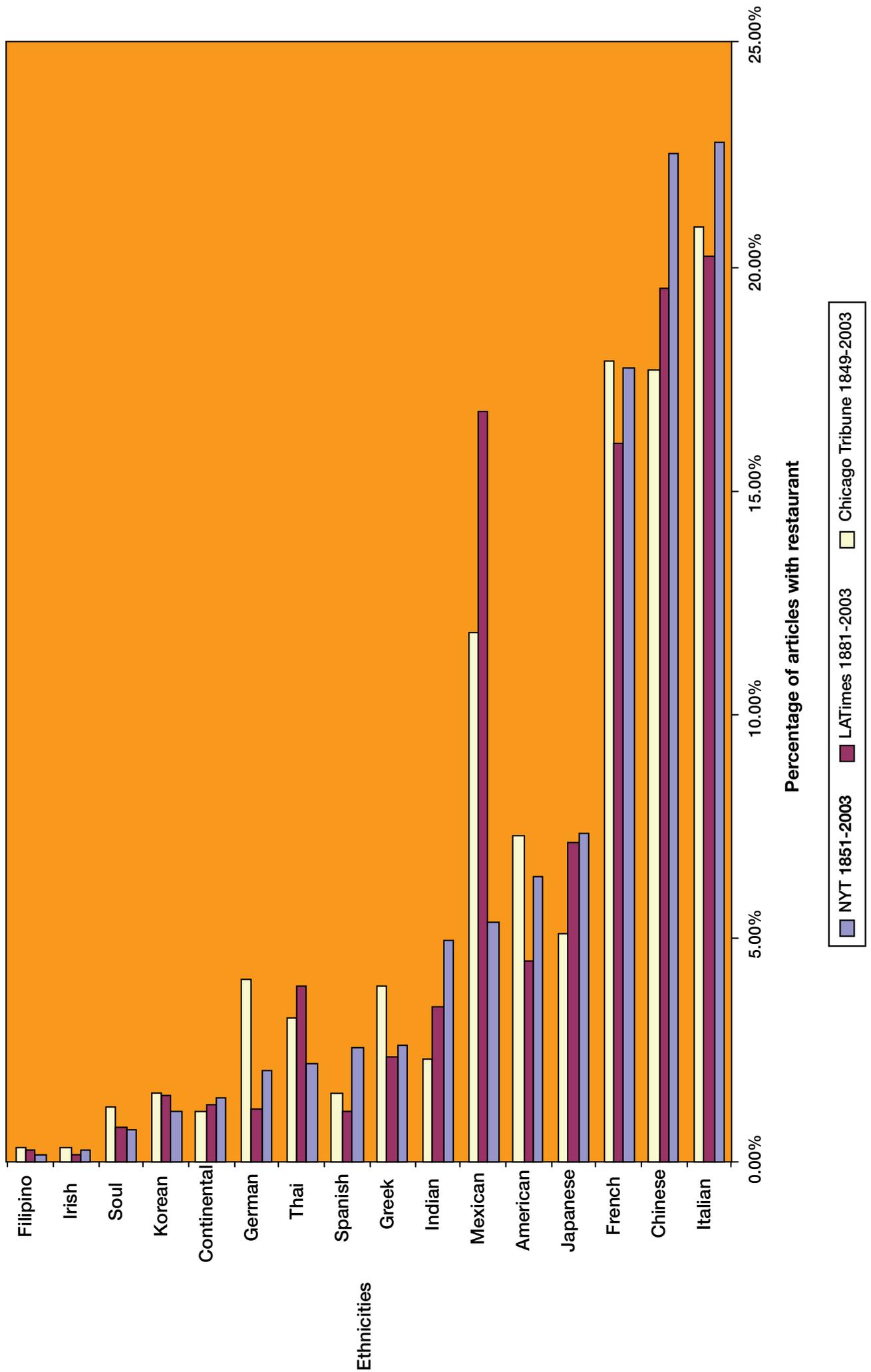


Figure 2: Coverage of restaurants in NYTimes, LATimes, Chicago Tribune



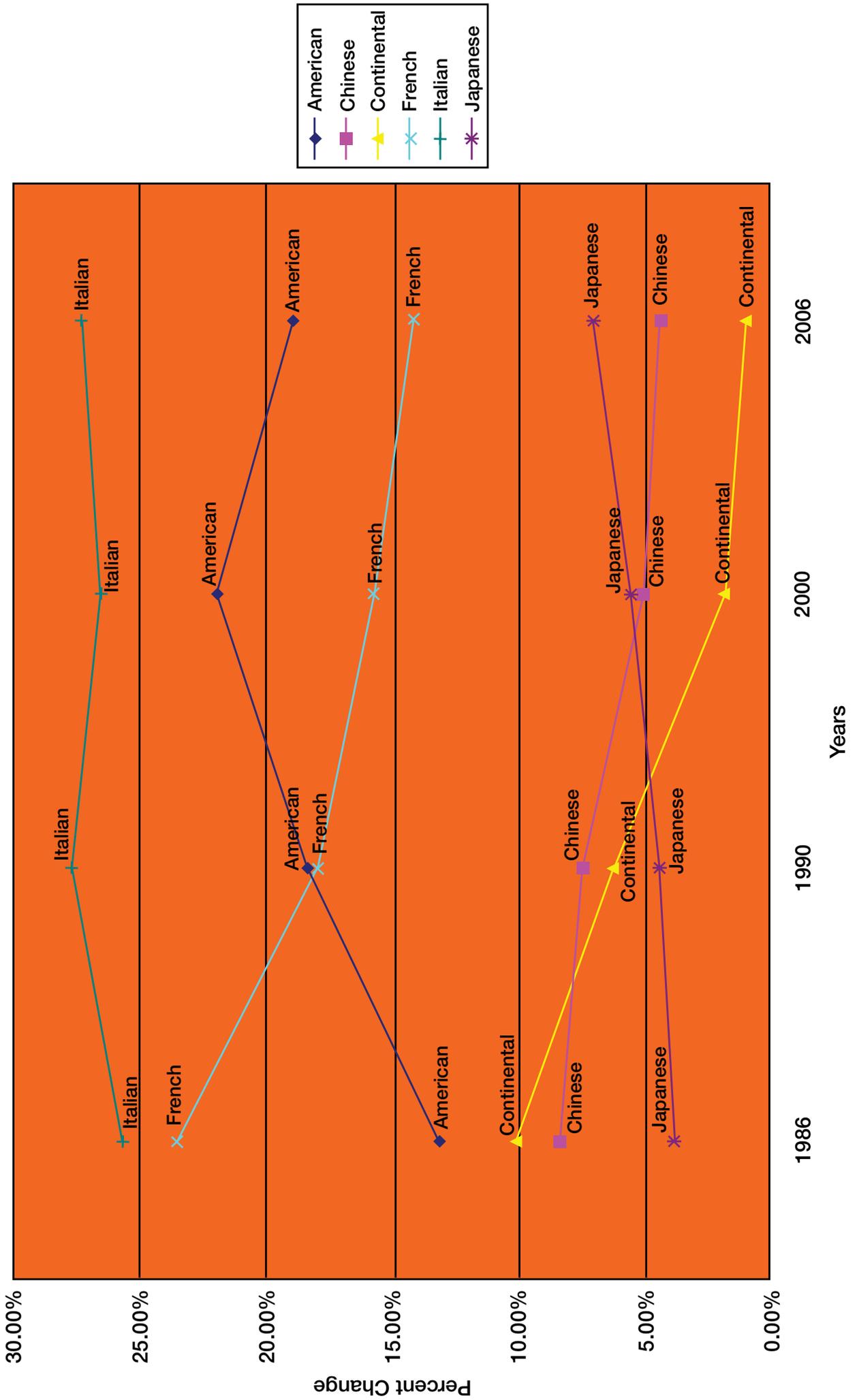
I wanted to see if there was any difference between the coverage of such diacritically marked restaurants in the NYT and other national newspapers. The result is presented in Figure 2. It turns out that there is little difference, with the exception of the number of news articles on Mexican and German restaurants. Figure 2 also shows that most articles about restaurants in major American newspapers pertain to Italian restaurants, which is a remarkable development that I have commented on elsewhere (Ray 2007).

If we add another measure—the much shorter duration of Zagat-rated evaluation of New York City restaurants—to the data from national newspapers, we find the following pattern in figure 3. It is important to note that the Zagat data-set does not begin until 1982 (informal ratings began in 1979 but were not published) and the earliest publicly available survey goes back only to 1986 in the Library of Congress. Zagat LLC is unwilling to share its archived material. More importantly for my purpose, Zagat coverage is much shorter than the 150-year NYT or Chicago Tribune data-set.

Despite that weakness, the Zagat New York City data shows that Italian restaurants have done consistently well and stayed above 25% in terms of all Zagat-rated restaurants between 1986 and 2006 (the trend persists in updated 2009 data).⁵ In contrast, French and Continental restaurants have declined precipitously in terms of percentage of all restaurants, the former to just under 15% of all Zagat-rated restaurants and the latter to just over 1%. Chinese restaurants have also declined, but less so, from a high of 8% of all Zagat-rated New York City restaurants in 1986 to a low of 4% by 2006. On the other hand, American and Japanese restaurants have improved their position to about 20%, in the case of the former, and 7% in the case of the latter. Most importantly for our purposes, it appears that (a) an American restaurant cuisine was born, at least discursively, within the last two decades of the twentieth century, and (b) as a foreign cuisine, Japanese cuisine is beginning to replace French cuisine in the estimation of American taste makers, if we follow the trend lines.

5. Again, since I am concerned primarily with the conversation about restaurants it really does not greatly matter whether my claims about Zagat-surveyed restaurants are universally representative. Zagat surveys are relevant for my analysis only because they are pertinent to the restaurant and a cohort of taste-makers in NYC.

Figure 3: Trend Lines for Major Cuisines: Percent of Zagat-rated NYC Restaurants 1986-2006



I place Japanese and French cuisine in the “foreign” rather than “ethnic” food category for a simple reason: demographics. In the U.S. 2000 Census, only 3% of the American population claimed French ancestry, and only 52,907 people in New York City did so, yet 14% of the Zagat-rated restaurants in NYC (out of all restaurants surveyed by Zagat with clear diacritical markers) are French. Similarly, only 22,636 people living in NYC, out of over 8 million people, claimed Japanese ancestry, yet 7% of the Zagat-rated New York City restaurants are Japanese (again, those restaurants with clear ethno-national markers). At the bottom of the social hierarchy of taste we see, for instance, that Mexican and Soul Food restaurants account for only about one percent, respectively, of all Zagat-listed eateries in New York City in 2006, and this is at a time when African-Americans—who are symbolically associated with Soul Food—constitute almost 2 million of New York City’s residents. Americans of Mexican descent account for another 186,872 (who are distinct from 2 million other Latinos in New York City). The data hints of a certain hierarchy of judgment among American taste-makers.

Hierarchy of Taste?

Concerns about hierarchy have dominated the discussion of taste in sociology after Pierre Bourdieu (1984; also see Lamont & Fourier 1992). In *Distinction* (1984) Bourdieu critiques considerations of aesthetic taste in Western philosophy as nothing more transcendental than durable class dispositions, which he polarizes between the tastes of necessity—heavy, sweet, rich, un-self-conscious comestibles—and tastes of luxury, which is the realm of choice and restraint, and involves the preference for smaller, bitter, lighter, subtler, flavors and portions. Parts of Bourdieu’s theory of distinction could be criticized for tying class too closely to certain foods eternally, when things such as polenta could begin as the heavy food of the poor, but over time climb up the class hierarchy, and whole cuisines could fall down the ladder, such as Continental or Chinese among American gastronomes. But Bourdieu’s more powerful argument is the one about relative position-taking in the field of gastronomy. Bourdieu’s field theory can account for such changes as polenta climbing up in the hierarchy and iceberg lettuce falling in estimation, or the French bourgeoisie’s love of Bordeaux and the American bourgeoisie’s love of Chardonnay. But the problem remains about how we are to measure and depict hierarchical relationships. Average prices in a certain class of restaurants may be one provisional measure of hierarchy. Since sales data is not available from every restaurant, we have to rely on the prices listed in the Zagat survey which identifies the price of a dinner for one, with a glass of wine, tax, and tips for every restaurant. Using that metric one can say a few things about hierarchy in the social landscape of New York City restaurants. Check averages in Zagat-rated New York City restaurants listed below (Table 1) gives one view of the hierarchy of

Table 1: Hierarchy of Taste. Check Averages of NYC Zagat-rated Restaurants 2006

taste between various ethno-national categories in the field of American gastronomy.

Ethnicity/ Nationality claimed	Number of people in NYC claiming an ancestry in 2000 Census	Rank in terms of decreasing check average	Average price of meal in current 2006 dollars	Total number of restaurants in printed Zagat 2006	Very Expensive Restaurant as % of all restaurants within that group (over \$66)	Expensive Restaurant as % of all restaurants within that group (\$41-65)	Moderately Expensive Restaurant as % of all restaurants within that group (\$26-40)	Inexpensive Restaurant as % of all restaurants within that group (up to \$25)
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
Continental	n.a.	1	51.07	15	27	33	40	0
French	52,907	2	47.81	202	12	47	37	4
Japanese	22,636	3	46.72	101	12	35	44	9
American	n.a.	4	42.83	270	9	44	34	13
Italian	692,739	5	42.27	389	3	49	41	7
Greek	80,145	6	38.71	32	3	31	56	9
Spanish	8,233	7	37.73	30	0	20	77	3
Indian	170,899	8	33.85	43	0	14	60	26
Mexican	186,872	9	32.88	39	0	21	49	31
Korean	86,473	10	31.43	17	0	18	53	29
Vietnamese	11,334	11	29.08	26	0	15	46	39
Thai	4,169	12	28.63	45	0	9	51	40
Chinese	361,531	13	28.47	63	2	17	32	49
Southern	n.a.	14	28.44	24	0	12	38	50
Average	8,008,278		28.14	2,003	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Soul	1,962,154 = Af.-Am	15	24.50	11	0	0	26	64
TexMex	n.a.	16	22.00	4	0	0	50	50

Note 1: The above categories of Very Expensive, Expensive, etc. are determined by Zagat metrics of typical expenses for a meal, with one drink, and tips.

Note 2: About one-third of Continental restaurants are also listed under other cuisines, mostly French.

Note 3: Seven out of 11 Soul Food restaurants are also listed under the category, Southern.

Note 4: The “Spanish” population in column 1 is distinct from Latino.

Note that the top three cuisines are, for the lack of a better word, “foreign” foods. “Foreign” though a connotative term, is applied here because the number of people whose ancestries (according to the U.S. 2000 Census) actually relate to the top cuisines is quite small. Among the top seven ethno-national cuisine identifiers, only persons of Italian lineage have significant demographic weight in NYC as of 2000. Also note that from column F to column I there is a pattern in terms of the distribution of the “Very Expensive” to the “Inexpensive” restaurants as they relate to ethno-nationality. The higher ranking cuisines—Continental, French and Japanese—are the only ones that reach double-digit figures in terms of percentage distribution of Very Expensive restaurants. American and Italian follow closely with almost half the restaurants in the Expensive category. The middle cluster (Greek to Thai restaurants, with rankings from 6 to 12), are grouped in the “Moderately Expensive” category, while most of the restaurants in the bottom section (from Chinese to TexMex, with ranking from 13 to 16), cluster in the “Inexpensive” category.

One important difference between Chinese restaurants and the others in this category is that there are a substantial number of “Expensive” Chinese restaurants, while this is not the case for the other restaurants in this category, including, Soul and TexMex. Furthermore, Mexican restaurants at ranking 9 (Column C) do much better than TexMex at number 16, affirming what I mentioned before about the prestige of foreign foods in the American imagination. This data would seem to suggest that proximity to poor ethnic groups undermines the prestige of a cuisine. Yet that is not the only way the variable between the self and the other gets weighted. “American” cuisine has also done very well among the taste-makers, at least since the 1970s, so there has been an upward adjustment in terms of American gastronomic self-conception largely in national terms. So we can see that American gastronomic nationalism has finally been born after a long gestation period and much self-doubt (contra Mintz 1996).



New Sensory Urbanism. A backdrop of the Chrysler Building for Pongal, a Kosher vegetarian Indian Restaurant
Photo by Krishnendu Ray

My preliminary hypothesis is that American taste-makers have a three-fold classification system by which they venerate a few foreign cuisines, Continental, French and Japanese (in that order—now adding Spanish and Greek), or they “slum it” by patronizing Soul, Mexican, Dominican food. Falling somewhere between the two poles are Chinese, Indian, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese foods—all Asian, by the way, which hints at a larger dynamic of cultural capital, that is, a global political-economy of signs, which I believe is unrelated to food per se. In such constructions ethnic foods never reach the epicurean heights of foreign foods, but some ethnic foods do better than others. Based on the preliminary data cited above, a related hypothesis is that the prestige of a particular ethnic cuisine is not analogous to the total number of people of a particular heritage; in fact the two may be inversely related.

American cuisine, on the other hand, evokes an association between culinary culture and nation that the French have had a monopoly on for so long. This national identification goes hand in hand with a complex love and loathing for ethnic interlocutors. Proximity, especially within a class hierarchy, can be a cultural liability much greater than foreignness. The intimate “other” is always disdained, while the distant “other” can be safely eulogized. These two polarities of identification—nation and ethnicity—mark a complex American relationship between the self and the other tamed within that national self.

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