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Fed by the Other. City Food and Somatic Difference

Excessive attention to territorialized taste – linked to *terroir* – has elided over the fact that tastes travel. They travel quite well, obviously in terms of produce as the history of potatoes, chilies, and tomatoes show, or as stimulants such as coffee, tea and chocolate illuminate, but also via immigrant-designed food businesses in global cities. Urban Americans have been fed by the foreign-born since we have historical records. Based on census data, newspaper records, and interviews with immigrant entrepreneurs and native consumers, this article takes the case of South Asian restaurateurs in New York City, to argue that transactions around literal tastes can provide an instructive window into power and urban cultures.

The earliest archival trace of South Asian food in New York is among a group of itinerant merchants selling textiles between Chittagong in East Bengal, New Orleans and New York at the end of the nineteenth century. In the United States they established the first settlements often in black neighborhoods, replete with cafés, restaurants, cook-shops and teashops. In *Bengali Harlem*, Vivek Bald draws a finely textured portrait of about two dozen such itinerant Bengali peddlers of *chikan* (a textile), circulating from Hoogly to New York in *fin de siècle* nineteenth century, sliding in the interstices between the dying throes of the British Empire and the birth of the North American emporium.¹ According to Claude Markovits, such peddlers may have added up to a quarter million merchants and financiers operating outside the subcontinent, mostly in the Indian Ocean world, between 1830 and 1930.² Caroline Adams provides us with an analogous handful of Bengali trading pioneers in the United Kingdom.³ When these

men left the Americas to return to the Bengal delta they left some of their compatriots behind to keep the tethering posts of their networks in place in distant cities. The people they left behind, in turn, out of pure necessity and unrestrained desire, built some of the earliest South Asian boarding houses, eateries and restaurants in their places of inhabitation, occupying the “thin edge between Indophilia and xenophobia”⁴

Transaction in Type

The first visible Indian restaurant established in 1913 in New York City, was named Ceylon India Inn on Eight Avenue and Forty-Ninth Street, where it became a center of Indian nationalist activity. But the owner, K. Y. Kira sought to re-orient its focus from inside the community to outside the community – as was becoming common with the demand for ethnic food among a new Anglo-American middle class by moving its location and discouraging Indian seamen and students from lingering too long. There is a rare reference to an Indian restaurant in the New York City newspapers until the 1940s. But by 1920s we see discussion about the takeover of the Royal British Navy by “little brown men” who eat rice and curry on board ship. In that article John Carter explains that “the shift of economic forces during and since the war [World War I] has left little of her British character, save the officers, who are English.”⁵ The “greatest change of all is the disappearance of the old-time English sailor. In place of the weather-beaten old tar... these are little brown and yellow men. They are pressing the white sailor hard. In the old days, employment of lascars and Chinese was confined to P. & O. packets and vessels in the China trade. With the war, however, British seamen were at a premium... In their place came the rising tide of color into the Atlantic trade, until now, seven years after the armistice, two boats out of three in the South and West African trade are native-manned; while in American vessels, the use of negroes and Porto Ricans [sic] in the Gulf and West Indies trade and of Filipinos and Chinese in the Pacific is rapidly driving the last of the Yankees from their age-old heritage of the sea.” He continues, “As Indians are more generally in use than Chinese, their customs have hitherto had the more decisive influence on British merchant shipping.” But among Indians as “few Hindus go to sea” owing to the caste taboo against crossing the seas, Muslims are in the majority, noted Carter. “Even when separated from the caste-problems brought up by the presence of Hindus,

Moslem sailors are exceedingly difficult to manage,” because they had to be assured by the *serang* and his assistant the *tindal* to follow all the rules of their religion. “Their religion demands that they shall eat no meat unless it has been slaughtered in accordance with the prescribed ritual. The diet of Indian Moslems consists of mutton, curry and rice: rice, curry and mutton ad infinitum. This mutton must be fresh-killed, by a Moslem, although it does not matter who cooks it. Accordingly, vessels with Moslem crews must carry a flock of live sheep aboard.” Sheep of course occupy valuable cargo space and require food of their own. “Every two or three days a sheep is killed by the *serang* in accordance with Moslem law. Just to feed the crew of the *City of Edinburgh*, twelve sheep were slaughtered between Cape Town and New York.” There were other perverse problems with these Orientals, Carter continues, specifically their propensity to contract strange ailments from curses and such others and promptly die from them, to the great inconvenience of the captain. If “you pay a Hindu ten shillings a month for a job for which a white sailor would demand three or four times the amount, you have made an enormous saving. Of this ten shillings the economical Indian, without such expensive vices as smoking and drinking, will save nearly all and can return from a single voyage rich enough to set up as a small farmer among the indigent Bengali peasantry.” Yet to Carter it wasn’t clear that Orientals were cheaper to run a shipping line because a crew of “fifty British will handle a vessel for which seventy lascars would be hardly enough. Moreover, Orientals, for all their philosophies of Nirvana and of indifference to death, nearly always grow panic-stricken in an emergency, with corresponding risk to vessel and cargo”. Along with the cowardly Indian we have the sneaky India who gave the Nazis a hard time. Sergeant Ralph G. Martin noted in *The Star and Stripes* in 1944 that at the “only Indian Y.M.C.A in all of Italy” he headed for the lunch bar “which featured rice and curry, chopped onions, pudding and tea – all for 25 lire”.⁶ That reminiscence included an appreciative discussion of these “small men whom the Nazis didn’t like at all because they came creeping in the dark, slicing off heads with their long, curving, razor-sharp knives” in contrast to the tall, turbaned Sikhs with “their ferocious looks on their faces”.

It appears from the sudden frequency of discussion about curry in the course of World War II that media coverage of the Indian National Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi, requirements of a low-protein wartime diet (with its flavor challenges), and exposure to the taste of Allied Indian

troops, conspired to put curry on the American palate, at least of gastronomes and journalists such as Jane Holt of *The New York Times*. She often worked in conjunction with The Civilian Defense Volunteer Office (with an interest in civilian nutrition, especially vitamin deficiency) and trade organizations such as The Spice Trader's Association. Where Jane Holt left off, Jane Nickerson continued in her "News of Food" column, announcing the "first direct shipment of curry powder since the war" to arrive from Madras on 7 September 1946.⁷ Informing us that "Chutney, by definition, is a relish that is equally sour and sweet, according to the proprietor of the East India Curry Shop, a restaurant that probably serves the most 'authentic' curries in town". In addition there was a Caribbean connection by way of the Harlem Renaissance. Richard Huey, who sang the hit "Bloomer Girl" opened Aunt Dinah's Kitchen in 1935 that served southern fried chicken, browned in a hot skillet and then slowly cooked in a Dutch oven, barbecue, Mexican chili, sweet potato pie and East Indian curry.⁸ By the late 1940s advertisement for Indian restaurants such as India's Garden Inn proliferate in the pages of the African-American *New York Amsterdam News*.⁹

The four Indian restaurants listed in the *Manhattan Telephone Directory* by 1949 – the earliest reference to a cluster of Indian restaurants in New York – are named India Bengal Garden, India Prince, India Rajah and India Restaurant. At the dawn of post-colonial nationalism such insistent use of "India" must have made sense both to their South Asian entrepreneurs and American customers. Perhaps that is why the categorization of India Rajah under the class "Hindu", in a 1939 *New York Times* advertisement, did not have staying power. "Hindoo" was a United States Census category used from 1910 to 1940 to classify Indians who were Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Parsee. Hindoo was an increasingly popular way to classify South Asians and distinguish them from Native Americans. Tobacco growers often branded their products as Hindoo, Mecca, Mogul and Bengal. Tin Pan Alley songwriters produced tunes such as "My Hindoo Man". Affluent men in American cities "outfitted their smoking rooms with plush Oriental rugs, hookahs, tiger skins, elephant tusks, daggers, scimitars and images of eroticized Eastern women".¹⁰ There was a certain exoticism to the category "Hindoo".

The classification of India Rajah as Hindu or Hindoo declined in the print record after 1940. The owner wasn't Hindu, the *chef de cuisine* was Ali Jan of Benares, and "India" may have been a better referent, both for the customer

and the entrepreneur.¹¹ But it took a while for the public and the experts to develop the necessary distinctions between Indian, Hindu, Parsee, Turkish and Arab as evidenced by the following confusion in an early restaurant guide for New York City titled *Dining in New York* by Rian James (1930).¹² The Rajah, classified as a “Turkish (Parsee)” restaurant in the 1930 edition, was described as a place where “a dingy little red sign swings high over the stoop of an erstwhile aristocratic brownstone front. Upstairs you will find The Rajah”.¹³ One of the clues that it was probably serving Indian food was James’ description of it:

The table d’hôte starts with Tamarind – a lemon-colored drink made from vegetables – as an appetizer. A watery, albeit true-to-type, native soup follows. Then, the real business of the Turkish dinner sets in. Choose lamb, chicken, or beef curry – oh, such a fiery curry sauce! A heaping plate of rice with an ample portion of cabbage is placed beside your curry. The trick is to pour your curried meat into the little well of the rice, mix thoroughly, and then enjoy [...] You’ll enjoy your dinner, speculating about the other queer-looking diners, and learn, astonishingly enough, that all sheiks don’t wear goatees, ride white horses and brandish swords.¹⁴

In ranging widely, James conflates the Arab world with Turkey and India in a classic case of early twentieth-century orientalism. Some of the comestibles – such as the drink called Tamarind – appear in contradictory guise in different sources. Robert W. Dana, author of *Where to Eat in New York* (1948), writes about it as “pomegranate nectar”, which “is a sweet beverage boiled from the tamarind roots that grow on Indian riverbanks”.¹⁵ Despite confusing two different fruits with very different taste profiles – tamarind and pomegranate – and displacing the fruit with the root of the tamarind, he did add the local color of “growing on Indian riverbanks” in a desperate attempt at verisimilitude.

Yet that parenthetical “Parsee” in the classification of The Rajah was too specific to be ignored. The Rajah was once owned by Rustom Wadia, a Parsee from Bombay, who came to the United States in 1923 to study engineering at Union College in Schenectady, New York. He ate his first American meal in an Indian restaurant in Manhattan around the transportation hub in midtown, eventually becoming its co-owner in 1926, taking it over fully in 1944. So the name, The Rajah, the provenance of the food, and the sign under which it was served, all had to be slowly sorted out over decades of transactions between immigrant proprietors and their own classificatory

systems engaging with real and imagined customers. American newspaper critics, census takers, advertisers, and guidebook writers slowly developed a shared lexicon. It took time before they could classify the people and the food in a comprehensible category. What appear at first glance to be mere errors of classification are also traces of a process of transaction in type.

By 1959, “India” can still be found in some of the restaurant names, such as Bombay India, Ceylon India Inn, Pakistan India, et cetera, but by the end of the 1960s, sub-national places and non-place names were added to the repertoire, such as Punjab, Karachi, Rajmahal, Koh-i-Noor, and Natraj. Yet, clear national identifiers had to be positioned in small print underneath the names, such as “unique Pakistani, Indian cuisine” under Rajmahalor and “Authentic Indian Curries” under Punjab.¹⁶ By 1979, newer restaurants such as Raga, Mumtaz, Nirvana, Shaheen and Tandoor no longer needed “India” in their names as the entrepreneur and the audience began to figure each other out, sometimes with the intermediation of critics. Perhaps the category had also become overcrowded. By 1989, the restaurant Dawat had to both explain itself and pull itself into gastronomic “discourse” by claiming that “*Dawat Means Invitation to a Feast*” and that they served “The ‘*Haute Cuisine*’ of India ... under the culinary supervision of Madhur Jaffrey, who has been called, ‘the finest authority on Indian cooking in America’ by Craig Claiborne.” They managed to say all that in their tiny advertisement in the *NYNEX Yellow Pages*.¹⁷

The logic of naming Indian restaurants in New York appears to be distinct from that of Chinese restaurants on one hand and French restaurants on the other, revealing their spatial and social location. The first recorded cluster of eleven Chinese restaurants in New York City in 1898, for instance, were named Hon Heong Lau, Me Heong Lau, King Heong Lau, Way Heong Lau, Gui Ye Quan, Mon Li Won and Kim Sun, all on Mott and Pell Street in Chinatown in lower Manhattan, marking their insider audience and subaltern status.¹⁸ Early Indian boarding houses, and a small numbers of eateries could initially survive with an orientation towards in-group customers. But the much smaller number of Indian immigrants, compared to the Chinese with their spatial concentration, made such a business model unfeasible and forced Indian entrepreneurs to orient themselves to non-Indian customers. Until the last quarter of the twentieth century, Indian population in the United States was too small and dispersed to support enclave eateries such as we find among the Chinese (that is true until the

first decades of the twentieth century when Chinese restaurants spill out of the Chinatowns). In another contrast, outwardly oriented but sending off signals of much higher status, were elite American restaurants in the first half of the twentieth century, which invariably had French names such as *Le Pavillion*, *La Côte Basque*, *La Caravelle*, *Lutèce*, *La Grenouille*, and *Le Périgord*, leading the New York restaurateur Drew Nieporent to characterize it as the *Le/La* phase of American fine-dining.¹⁹ Mere names of restaurants can provide a rich record of social location and transactions in taste.

Running an Ethnic Restaurant

Bread & Butter sits at the dense intersection of a cross-street and an avenue at the lower end of Manhattan. A crush of pedestrians weave their way to and from the subway station, stepping among untreated epileptics dozing-off mid-pavement, and mistreated schizophrenics reduced to panhandling. Robust Nigerian and slender Bangladeshi vendors peddle fruits and vegetables, knock-off handbags, pirated DVDs, cheap jewelry and knick-knacks. Much of this is a good thing for Muhammad Rasool. It brings the customers stumbling across the threshold of Bread & Butter.

This section is based on an ethnography to gain access to the everyday experience of small ethnic entrepreneurship that rarely leaves any archival trace. The interdisciplinary space of food studies, which is where I work, allows such transgressions of epistemological frames usually kept apart in history, anthropology or sociology, where methods are rarely mixed between textual analysis in archives and ethnographic forays. I interviewed Rasool, visited his restaurant, cooked with him, and followed him to get access to what he said he did and what he did. Rasool is a lower-middle-class Pakistani immigrant from Lahore who is typical of the three hundred Indian restaurant owners in New York City. Through numerous interrupted discussions I ask Rasool how he had gone about securing the place. "I sold some family property in Pakistan to pay down the \$20,000. I put in \$10,000 [...] may be \$15,000 to renovate the place." He is running a tightly competitive business with rent at \$8,000 a month. He sells on average \$6 per customer. He has about 100 customers a day: twenty for breakfast, sixty for lunch, twenty for dinner. He works six days a week from morning to night. He has two workers. One Mexican. One Pakistani.

Miabi Chatterji and Saru Jayaraman show how exploitative the

relationship often is between South Asian immigrant entrepreneurs and low-skilled restaurant workers who are sometimes co-ethnics, manipulated by rhetorics of kinship and care to fend off the regulatory reach of the state in terms of labor, safety, immigration and health laws.²⁰ Analogously, Mae Ngai shows in her study of one upwardly mobile Chinese American family in *The Lucky Ones* how the Tapes “broke into the American middle class by helping manage the continued marginalization of other Chinese.”²¹ A recent instance of hyper-exploitation that one need only reference, is the story of the Fuzhounese (from Fuzhou in Fujian Province) restaurant worker Yilin Zhuo whose wife and four children were stabbed to death by a mentally-ill cousin Mindong Chen, another Chinese take-out cook, who shared their Sunset Park apartment in Queens, New York. Belonging to a networked diaspora rather than a closed national space of about half a million Fuzhounese with low paying jobs with long hours in Chinese take-out, Chen complained to the police on his arrest that “everyone seems to be doing better than him”. After his family had borrowed tens of thousands of dollars to pay smuggling rings to get him into New York City, he is in jail today. His cousin is distraught over the consequences of his goodwill; his nephew, niece and sister-in-law dead by his over-worked hands.²² It was cook, sleep, wake to cook again for twelve hours a day, he complained. He was one of a vast invisible group. After their shifts ended at midnight they would watch TV and video chat with their families; six to a room or in internet cafes. The hope was that if they kept working hard they would own a restaurant or a house, maybe even get a green card. Chen Yixiang, Mindong’s father, had paid about \$100,000 to his son’s smugglers, and still owes them half, while his son is in jail awaiting trial for murder.²³

Often workers in South Asian immigrant owned enterprises are undocumented Latino immigrants, who are not only racialized and demeaned by everyday instances of homogenization by names such as “Amigo” and “Jose,” used to address all Latino men on their payroll without individual distinctions (a fate not shared by co-ethnics), but also exploited beyond the limits of the law. In one instance, one Latino worker, Santiago retorted, “It’s the same shit everywhere. If he’s not calling us amigo, he is calling us worse. They got nicknames for us at every restaurant – they only learn Spanish so they can swear at us!”²⁴

Bread & Butter sits at the lower end of the universe of Indian restaurants in Manhattan. Since we do not have access to check prices from most

restaurants we can approximate it by the average price of an entrée calculated for all the 158 restaurants that have prices listed on their menus (out of a total of 202 Indian restaurants in Manhattan and about 300 in all the boroughs), and that is \$11.16. There are twelve Indian restaurants in Manhattan with entrées under \$6.00, which is Bread & Butter's threshold. The most expensive Indian restaurants in Manhattan, such as Tabla (now closed), Tamarind, Junoon and Ada, have entrées at a little over \$25.00 (as an average of all their entrées), although some entrées in such establishments go beyond \$30. It is a tough, tight, risky business at the bottom end of the marketplace and it is understandable that Muhammad Rasool wants to dissuade his children from getting entangled in it. So, how did you get into the restaurant business, I ask him?

You see I did odd jobs. Worked in a gas station for a couple of months. I had been driving a Yellow Cab for six to seven months. That is when I ate at a restaurant on 42nd Street. It was very crowded and the people were rude. That is where I got the idea that I should have a restaurant. I drove taxi for nine more months, saved some money ... I drove taxi at night to pay my workers.

When asked to characterize his restaurant Rasool says, "Fast-food restaurant. Indian, Pakistani spicy food. I also carry less spicy Spanish-American food". To my question "Spanish-American?" he responded, "Yes, because you see we have rice and we have beans, and chicken of course everyone eats. It is the same food without spices. Spanish food". Here is Rasool reorienting himself to his specific Latino public at that street corner, as fewer and fewer South Asian taxi drivers (almost 80 percent of New York City's approximately 42,000 licensed Yellow Cab drivers – driving approximately 13,000 yellow cabs in multiple shifts – are of Bangladeshi, Pakistani or Indian origin) stop by his place. The discussion turns to cooking where we find Rasool struggling to keep his moral compass oriented to his gendered and class habits and expectations, in spite of the radical shift in his context.

I: Do you cook at home?

MR: No

I: Where did you learn how to cook?

MR: It is easy. I know it.

I: Did you train for it?

MR: No

I: You just know it?

MR: Yes ... It does not take a genius.

I: Who cooks at home?

MR: My wife

I: Did your wife give you the recipes?

MR: No

I: Do you consult cookbooks?

MR: No

I: Did you watch your wife cook?

MR: No, but she gave me confidence. She didn't tell me how to cook, but she gave me confidence. If you don't know how to cook then your partners take advantage of you. Once I called my wife on the phone and asked her how to make aloo-gobi and she told me how to do it. Then I did it. I ask her, how do I cook this, how do I cook that? She tells me. I do it. It does not take a genius you know.

MR: You see this Mexican guy who works for me? He learned just by watching me. Now he is my best cook.

MR: It is business. It is only business. It is not real. People come in, they take a look at it and think it must take all these people to make complicated things. But it is simple. It is business. It is just business.

Rasool's insistence that what we have here is mere commerce and not culture is echoed in diasporic newspapers' sparse coverage of commercial cookery in the features, although the commercial pages are brimming with advertisements for restaurants and cooks. Analyzing the two expatriate Indian weekly newspapers – *India Abroad* and *India Tribune* from 2001 to 2014 – I found that they carried about two dozen stories each year (in fifty-two weekly issues) on the culture of cooking, which typically conclude with a page of recipes written by women for women. The focus of the food articles is to collate a trans-national pan-Indian cuisine, introducing the readers to dishes from “elsewhere” in India – a theme Arjun Appadurai noted in his seminal article on cookbooks in the Indian national space (1988), which appears to have been extended to the expatriate community today.²⁵ Both newspapers have a cautious, middle-brow approach to food contained mostly within discourses of domesticity, and reflect the tastes of Anglophone, achieving, middle-class Indian men in the US. That was confirmed by interviews with other Indian middle-class immigrants. That

approach sits well with Rasool's valorization of his wife's home cooking (and his resistance to its commodification), the presumed realm of culture.

Eating and Judging

On March 12, 1939, we have one of the earliest discussions of curry in the context of gastronomic exploration in an article by Charlotte Hughes in the *New York Times*.²⁶ It goes into a long and sophisticated discussion with the promising opening; "Curry is a very ancient dish, antedating Hollandaise sauce and apple pie by centuries". She goes on to elaborate that "Curry powder is a blend of fifteen or twenty spices" that needs proper blending as explained by "Darmadasa, of the East India Curry Shop". In 1946 Jane Nickerson, another *New York Times* reporter, depended on the proprietor of the same shop to explain curry, getting an answer colored by the typical exaggeration and bravado that a native informant displays towards what he construes to be a naïve American – "fifteen to twenty spices".²⁷ In 1948, an anonymous American reporter depended on C. B. Deva, an "import-export trader", a transplanted native of Lahore and the proprietor of India Prince, to unpack the mystery of curry.

Until about 1961 an authoritative native informant is always invoked in discussions of Indian food by *The New York Times*. Craig Claiborne, often consecrated as the first American restaurant critic, depended initially on the exotic housewife as his tour guide. In his February 25, 1960 piece on Indian food Claiborne relied on Manorama Phillips, a mid-level Indian bureaucrat at the United Nations headquarters in New York City.²⁸ The article is accompanied by a six-by-six-inch photograph of Miss Phillips in her apartment, clad in a sari, and framed by exquisite Indian handcrafted textiles. Here, the brown body is used as evidence of authenticity. Furthermore, words need the aide of pictures, and pictures the help of a body, clothing, sari, artifact, to produce meaning. It points to the ratio of configuration between immigrant bodies, urban demand and cosmopolitan gastronomic dialogue that goes into the construction of a discourse barely hammered into place by numerous performers with real and borrowed authority.

In our own time, Jackie, a respondent I interviewed at Saravanaa Bhavan, an Indian restaurant in the Murray Hill neighborhood of Manhattan, reflects on the mercurial nature of power in the encounter between the customer,

the server, and the entrepreneur: “Much of the complexity surrounding Indian food comes from the difference in language,” she notes. At *Saravanaa Bhavan* she recognizes items like curry and chutney as they are assimilated into the Western lexicon, however “karadosa and bisibelabath are totally baffling. As karadosa is in the earlier section of the menu, I assume it is an appetizer. These blind guesses are made only on the basis that, as a restaurant operating in America, the proprietor would organize the menu according to local custom”. Without knowing how meals are eaten in India, she deferred to her own upbringing and ordered *medhu vada* (lentil doughnuts) and some naan first, then a curry for the main course, and *gulabjamun* and *masala* tea for dessert. Unfortunately she was,

[..] completely lost on whether the chaat (which I vaguely recall being chunks of things bound by some sauce) is a chunky dip, a side dish, supposed to be mixed into something else, or some other form of dish I don’t know about. Food arrives and I reach for my fork but stop. Is the proper way to eat this with one’s fingers? Do Indians eat with their fingers or is that a remnant image from British imperialism? Would I be foolish and insulting or respectful if I attempted it? How am I supposed to know how to eat this food?

This hardly looks like a cosmopolitan subject completely incharge of the transaction, as too much of the literature on cultures of consumption presumes.

Alexa, a thoughtful twenty-seven year old customer I interviewed, connected the discussion to a broader transformation in both demographics of American cities and division of labor at home. As a child she witnessed the transformation of Iowa City, and her palate. First, it was Mexican cuisine – with migrant workers beginning to settle. Then, Asian, with the expansion of the University of Iowa Medical Hospital and the influx of Asian students and families. “Most recently, Indian cuisine has come to dominate – every time I return home my mother takes me out for Indian.” She goes on to add that “Foreign ingredients are being shipped in – “fresh” in the “ethnic” aisle of our supermarket. As the taste for global cuisines increases, the frozen dinner aisle expands too – boasting frozen enchiladas, dumplings, and curry.” She concludes, “Ethnic restaurants are cheaper and more accessible to my mother. They validate going out – my mother could not make these dishes at home. So we had to go out to eat”.

The respondents above – who are illustrative of a broader attitude – point to the fact that value production in the realm of ethnic food is not

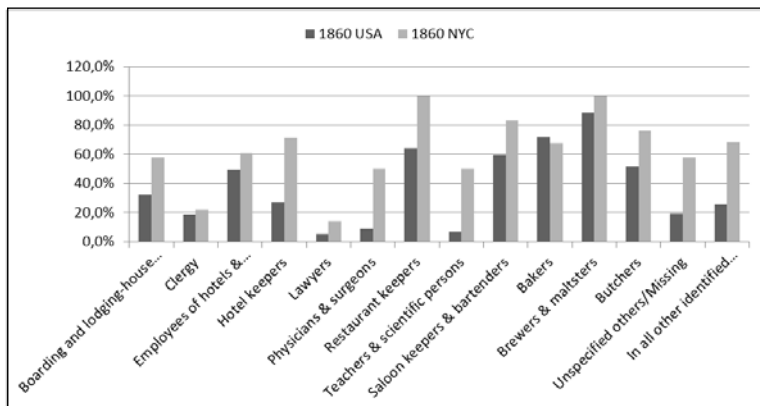
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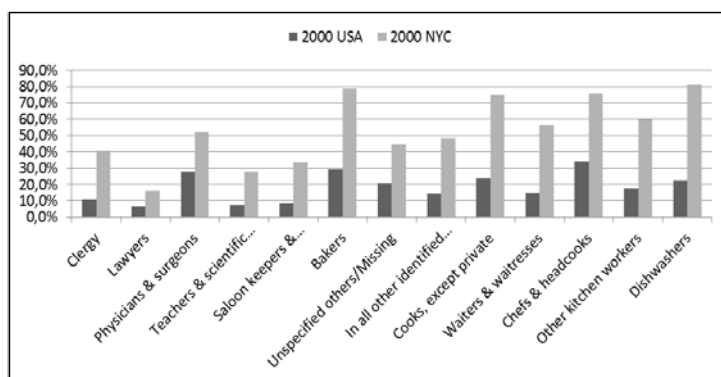
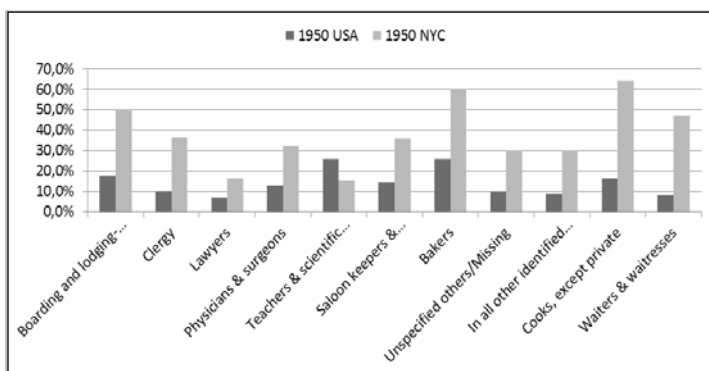
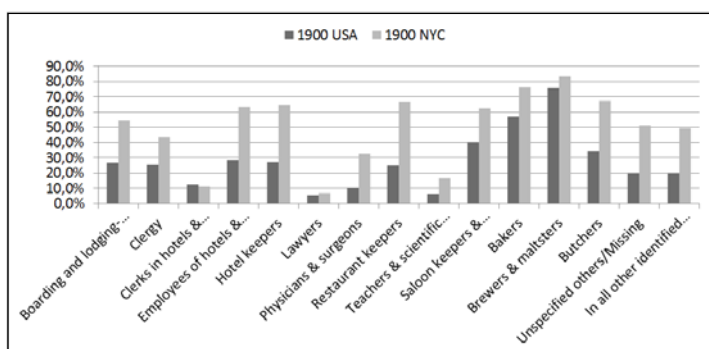
an Anglo monologue about hierarchies of taste and authenticity. It has never been so. It is even less so after the cultural democratization wrought by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States that has given many subaltern cultures (including those of the foreign-born) a robust sense of legitimacy and in fact even some slight disdain towards normative, mainstream American culture. The foreign-born have always participated in the negotiations, not as equal partners, but as substantial ones. The modern search for authenticity may have even strengthened their hand further in the trial of strength based on their capacity to bring new allies into their effort to wrestle value out of the transaction in taste.

The Broader Historical Pattern

Since occupations and birthplace have been identified beginning with the 1850 Census of the United States of America, data shows a strong correlation between food service occupations and new immigrant groups (used interchangeably with foreign-born here – see figures 1-4).²⁹ Although occupations cannot be directly compared across Census (because classifications have changed; for instance, cooks, servers, chefs have been added to the mix of occupations over the twentieth century changing the ratios between them), we know that the foreign-born numerically dominate certain occupations, such as domestic servants, hotel and restaurant

Foreign-born as a percentage of Selected Occupations for USA and New York City (1860, 1900, 1950, 2000)





employees, traders and dealers in groceries, bakers and butchers. In contrast, members of the so-called white-collar occupations, such as the clergy, lawyers, school teachers and government officials, have mostly been native-born. For example, in New York City on the eve of the Civil War, about 60 percent of hotel and restaurant employees and 71 percent of hotel-keepers were foreign-born, mostly of Irish and German heritage. (This is in a context where foreign-born constituted about a third of the labor force). Scotch-Irish bakers were increasingly replaced by German immigrants who were dominant by the time of the Civil War. By then, New York City was home to more than two hundred thousand Germans, who lived in “little Germany” along the Bowery, and they were the most numerous among the butchers, bakers and grocers. Germans constituted about 15 percent of the domestics shaping the kitchen and palates of their Anglo employers.³⁰

About half a century later, according to the 1900 Census, more than 60 percent of hotel and restaurant employees were Irish- and German born. Restaurant-keepers, a newly significant occupation by 1900, were 67 percent foreign-born at a time when foreign-born were about 50 percent of the population.³¹ At this time the vast majority of the city’s pushcart vendors were Jewish and they were moving up the social ladder to include groceries, kosher butchers, bakeries, coffee shops, delicatessens, and wine shops. At the same time New York’s Chinatown had more than one hundred restaurants, and a decade later a little over a hundred Greek-owned restaurants were counted on Seventh Avenue.³²

Even by the 1950 Census, after immigration had subsided due to restrictions of the 1924 law, sixty-four percent of restaurant cooks were foreign-born (Italians now at the top, followed by Greeks, Chinese and Germans). According to the historian Andrew Smith, this is when Italian American grocers would introduce various kinds of seafood, ice-cream, “olive oil, Parmesan cheese, anchovies, pastas, and coffees” to Americans.³³ Italians ran more than 10,000 grocery stores, almost a thousand butcher shops, and more than a thousand restaurants in the city.

According to the 2000 Census, that trend continued, with 75 percent of restaurant cooks in New York City foreign-born.³⁴ By 2013 almost 70 percent of small restaurant owners and more than 80 percent of grocery store owners were foreign-born.³⁵ Most of the approximately 9,000 street food vendors (out of a total of 25,000 street vendors) today are foreign-born with Bengali as the most common native tongue, followed by Cantonese/Mandarin, Fulani, Arabic, Spanish, Urdu, Wolof, and Swahili.

Given this kind of data it would be perverse to be interested in immigrant lives and uninterested in food, either as a matter of entrepreneurship or the cultural politics of transactions in taste. Yet that has been the norm until recently among scholars. For too long the quotidian business of feeding others have been dismissed as trivial by high-minded scholars, who relieved from the responsibilities of gender and class have often ignored care-work of cooking, feeding and serving as a legitimate domain of inquiry. Thankfully such an era of high-thinking is coming to an end, revealing the rich contours of urban life with robust transactions in taste across class, race and ethnic lines.

Notes

1. Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013).
2. Claude Markovits, *Merchants, Traders, Entrepreneurs: Indian Business in the Colonial Era* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
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