

Folk 267: Food and Culture

**JANUARY 25: MOLZ'S
"TASTING AN IMAGINED
THAILAND"**

Once again...

- Tourism is a quality of experiencing, not a particular behaviour
- The focus is on otherness
- The intensity of that experience is correlated to its authenticity
- “Authenticity,” the idea of what is “genuine,” is itself a construct, a judgment by the experiand
- Simultaneously, as an industry, tourism cultivates/constructs/anticipates the tourist’s expectations of “authenticity”
- There is a process of negotiation by the experiand (the tourist, the audience, etc.) on the authenticity of the experience
- What is authentic, and why do we / should we care?

Concepts:

- ◎ Dimensions of otherness (which overlap)
 - Culture, Region, Time, Ethos/religion, Socioeconomic class (also gender, age)
- ◎ Realms of culinary experience
 - Exotic $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ familiar; Edible $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ inedible; Palatable $\leftarrow \rightarrow$ unpalatable
- ◎ Strategies of negotiation (by food providers)
 - Framing, Naming or translation, Explication, Menu selection, Recipe adaptation

Molz and “Tasting an Imagined Thailand”

Authenticity: what is it?

Ethnic Restaurants

- ◎ Urry: “People are much of the time tourists”
 - Often employing the tourist gaze: deliberately seeking/seeing otherness as leisure activity
- ◎ Eating out as a form of “identity work”
 - The restaurant becomes “a theater for thinking and fashioning a self”
- ◎ Restaurant as “symbolic stage”

Stage

- Staged authenticity (MacCannell) derived from Goffman's social performance theories
 - We develop specialised spaces for specialised activities
 - We develop routine interactions between “actors” (performance teams) within those spaces to facilitate those activities

Front- and backstage

- Front: where one performance team (staff) adopts a 'script' for encounter with another performance team (clientele)
- Back: where the script can be dropped and the performance of the staff can be suspended, outside of the view of the other performance team
 - (My Louisbourg example is an extreme version of this)

“Performance of authenticity”

- ⦿ “Restaurant owners and designers obviously realize and attempt to cater to their customers’ desire for an authentic experience.”
- ⦿ (cf. Long’s strategies of negotiation)

The Menu

- Explicit statement that food is authentic or original, or ingredients and cooking techniques adhere to traditional recipes, as do styles of serving and eating
- Inclusion of famous ethnic dishes, or inclusion of slightly obscure with framing device of authenticity
- Silent omission of other dishes (sometimes available by request)

The Ingredients

- ⦿ Claims to inclusion of authentic ingredients
- ⦿ Silent substitution with local ingredients when (a) original not locally available and/or (b) when original considered unpalatable
- ⦿ Again, silent omission of certain ingredients altogether

The Décor

- “Use native artwork, decorations, and music to suggest that the restaurant really is an enclave of [...] culture.”
- Also, costume (of staff), table settings, color palette, etc.

“Negotiating Authenticity”

- ◎ CLAIM: the restaurant is a prepared “text” and a performance of authenticity by the performance team of the staff/owners
 - By virtue of it being a performance, it is not “authentic”
- ◎ BUT: this “text” is not passively received but actively interpreted by the performance team of the clientele
 - SO: the “authenticity” of the text is negotiated

The dilemma

- ⦿ What is important? The tourist having an authentic experience, or the tourist interpreting their experience as authentic?
- ⦿ Is “authenticity” a fixed, quantifiable, ontological thing, or is it always emergent, negotiated, and constructed?

The restaurant

- ◎ Owners stage authenticity based on their expectations, perceptions and anticipations of what their intended audience understands as authentic
- ◎ Clientele measure and negotiate the authenticity of their experience based on their expectations, perceptions, and anticipations of authenticity
 - Clientele construct a set of criteria for making that judgment

Esoteric and Exoteric

- ◎ 1st level (direct)
 - Esoteric: how we understand ourselves
 - Exoteric: how we understand others
- ◎ 2nd level (reflexive)
 - Esoteric: how we understand their understanding of us – what we think they think about us
 - Exoteric: how we understand their understanding of our understanding of them – what we think they think we think about them

Esoteric, exoteric, and culinary tourism

- ⦿ Restaurant owners frame an experience on their reflexive esoteric understanding
 - Thai owner: “What I think they think is authentically [Thai].”
- ⦿ Clientele judge that experience on direct and reflexive esoteric understanding
 - North American client: “What I think is authentically Thai; what I think they think I think is authentically Thai.”

Criteria

- Clientele who have travelled to Thailand use their travel experiences to set criteria
- Those who haven't base expectations on media images, etc.
- “Spiciness” as comparative measure (between two restaurants, e.g.)
- Perceived ethnicity of staff and other clientele

Criteria (cont.)

- ⦿ Some reluctant to judge authenticity at all
- ⦿ Thus is created an implicit, sometimes explicit, hierarchy of authenticity arbiters
- ⦿ Whether judged “authentic” or not, personal criteria of (relative) palatability becomes critical determining factor for return

Negotiated identity

- Voluntary participation in the experiencing of Otherness through (culinary) tourism is as much about the Other as it is about reaffirming the Self in relation to the larger, global cultural matrix

“Levels” of tourist

- ⦿ Existential – maintains a rigid set of expectations for judging authenticity (to get lost in the Other)
- ⦿ Experimental – Looking for truly Other
- ⦿ Experiential – Wishes for intense distinction from everyday
- ⦿ Recreational – More interested in pleasure than “authentic experience”
- ⦿ Diversionary – unconcerned with authenticity of their experiences

Post-Tourist

- Delights in the inauthenticity of the experience

Go away now.

- For next class: Pilcher's "From 'Montezuma's Revenge' to 'Mexican Truffles'"