

Folk 267: Food and Culture

**FEBRUARY 1:  
PILCHER'S "FROM  
MONTEZUMA'S REVENGE"**

# Before we proceed...

- ⦿ Because of last Thursday's snow
  - We will do both McAndrews and Rudy this Thursday
  - If this Thursday is snowed out too, we will skip Rudy, and Tuesday we will cover McAndrews and Rotkovitz
- ⦿ Also...
  - A stupid announcement from administrators

## ... and thoughts on post-tourists

- More discussion?
- The idea was that the issue of authenticity, being unanswerable, was therefore rendered moot
- The post-tourist revels in the experience as experienced immediately, irrespective of measuring it against some scale of authenticity

# Esoteric and Exoteric

- ◎ 1<sup>st</sup> 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.”

# Montezuma's Revenge

- A (perceived) slight by President Carter about an experience with diarrhea in Mexico
- Local regional food traditions undermined by sweeping negative generalization
  - Perception of “underdeveloped” or “lacking in sophistication”

# Ambiguity of regional cuisines

- From within context of two neighboring but culturally distinct countries
- Exoterically, Americans look to Mexico for “antimodern,” “old-fashioned,” “non-materialistic” food
- Esoterically, Mexican elites turn to previously disdained indigenous foods to create a “counter-cuisine”

# “Mexican truffle”

- AKA “corn smut” – a fungus that infects corn stalks
- Pre-contact, with few domesticated animals, Native population valued it as source of protein
- That it was part of the diet was “proof” to Europeans of a lack of civilization
- Perceived as “filthy Indian habit”



# (more)

- 1940s, used as ingredient by French-trained chefs
- Reframed (through reuse) as a palatable, edible, even elite food
- Prior to reframing, even if considered palatable, not considered appropriate for guests

# Reframing

- ◎ “The Mexican elite has embraced these lower-class foods because of their pre-Hispanic lineage, which, like the pyramids, help legitimate their claim to an ancient and sophisticated civilization.”
  - Can we think of parallel examples?

# History

- ⦿ Post-contact/conquest, traditional foods (derived from native population) not part of the mainstream.
- ⦿ A transplanted European cuisine dominated
- ⦿ By 19<sup>th</sup> century, and beginnings of American tourism, food still to exotic
  - Spicier than Northern European food
  - Move to processed foods made “natural” foods suspicious

# Restaurants

- ◎ Mainly European
  - French, Italian, German, English-American, and American-Chinese
- ◎ Press expressed regret at the “Mexicanization” of certain European foods

# Internal culinary tourism

- Local cuisine rediscovered
- Explored through a series of cookbooks, developing an interest in regional cuisine
- Vendors at train stations

# Still American ambivalence

- Popular histories implied savage food practices (cannibalism, etc.) among original peoples
- Association of spiciness with (wanton) sexuality
- But, development of industrial chili powder allowed for “pale imitation” of moles

# Post-war

- Building on extant restaurants in the border states, Mexican restaurants began appearing in the urban centers of other metropolitan centers of the U.S. and, more importantly, Mexico
- Cookbook publishing boom

# Whither the “folk”?

- Embraced new food technologies (refrigerators, ovens, blenders, etc.)
- **Used the technology available to them to make the food important to them**
- Access to globalization allowed for experimentation with new ingredients



# Dirty hippies

- ◎ 1960s: counter-culture in US looked for “counter-cuisine,” one expressly non-industrialized
- ◎ Inverted notions of health
  - Equating preservatives with contamination and microbes with health

# “Tex-Mex”

- ◎ Mexican American cuisine: traditional Mexican foodways augmented with European foodways
  - More beef
  - Wheat tortillas, not corn
  - Eventually, pre-formed taco shells

# Further moves to “authenticity”

- An ongoing process of locating “lost” dishes, mainstreaming them, changing them, and then abandoning them in favour of new “lost” dishes

# *Mexico Profundo*

- ◎ How does the “authentic” cuisine make itself available when
  - The locality of the foods precludes its export?
  - The simplicity of the cuisine undermines exoticism?
  - The “Folk” are no longer using the “traditional” methods of preparation?

# Go away now.

- For next class: McAndrews and Rudy