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A TASTE FOR NEW YORK:
RESTAURANT REVIEWS, FOOD DISCOURSE, AND
THE FIELD OF GASTRONOMY IN AMERICA

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DEDICATION

For Nate

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION: LET'S REVIEW

If you are in the food world, as I am, the first thing you turn to in Wednesday's *New York Times* is the restaurant review. Sometimes you even read it online late Tuesday night. If you're feeling game, you check the star-rating odds on eater.com at the beginning of the week. You are compelled to read the review not because you want to make reservations somewhere for dinner, but because you need to know what restaurant has been anointed or trashed. You read it because the *New York Times* restaurant review is a topic of conversation around water coolers and in chat rooms in professional and amateur foodie circles alike. And you read it because people will call you to ask your opinion, both about the restaurant and about the review. Have you been? Was it accurate? Do you agree? What did you think of the writing? The jokes? The reviewer's obvious flirtation with the hostess? Can you believe he didn't like those French fries? He obviously knows nothing about wine. You read the reviews because you had better have something to say.

Having something to say isn't just a social imperative, it is the mechanism through which restaurant reviews, like criticism of other cultural products, shape aesthetic judgments. Within the restaurant industry, most people believe restaurant reviews are important because they drive or detract from business. They are considered the most obvious, direct, and effective form of public relations. But studies suggest that only a fraction of the people who

read restaurant reviews ever act on them. Sure, some people will read a positive review and dial the reservation number immediately, hoping to secure a table at what will likely become the city's next hotspot. Others may make a mental note to avoid a place in the future. But the true locus of power of restaurant criticism exists outside the reviews themselves. Most people—well, in New York, anyway—read reviews because knowing about restaurants and chefs has become part of a modern, sophisticated, urban identity. Restaurant reviews enrich our cultural capital. As with book and theater reviews, a certain class of people has to know what the critics are saying about restaurants, even if they have not been to or tasted what's being criticized for themselves.

When it comes to creating some sort of consensus about taste, this meta-conversation about restaurants, that is, the discourse about restaurants that is generated by restaurant criticism, is in many ways more important than any individual assessment made by a critic about a particular dining experience. What we think about food and restaurants is largely shaped by what we read about them. This is particularly true in America, where a large, heterogeneous population from diverse cultural backgrounds has to negotiate its collective tastes in the public sphere. Without a common culinary tradition, many Americans have learned about food and restaurants through restaurant reviews and other food media, which, not coincidentally, are flush with chefs from restaurants that have been favorably reviewed. The nature of this relationship is different from what you find in older, more gastronomically minded countries, such as Italy or France, where a common basis of culinary knowledge mitigates the power dynamic between food writer and reader. How pasta should be prepared is something about which most

Italian readers of Italian restaurant reviews already have an opinion.

Both Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson and Stephen Mennell have shown how some 200 years ago in France, negotiations in the public sphere led to a consensus of taste that produced what today we consider French cuisine.¹ Enthusiasm for food and restaurants during the 19th-century and the discourse that enthusiasm gave rise to also contributed to a vibrant French field of gastronomy that blossoms to this day.² But France is not the only nation that can lay claim to a substantive field of gastronomy. Although Ferguson has argued against the existence of such a field in America because there is no easily identifiable American cuisine on which to base it,³ I contend that any sort of national cuisine is the product of, not the predecessor to, discourse about food and restaurants.⁴ The negotiations of taste represented in restaurant reviews and other food media indicate the existence of a field of gastronomy. In 1950s America, an enthusiasm for food similar to that in 19th-century France was engendered by writers, such as James Beard and Craig

¹ Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

² The term “field” here and throughout this dissertation does not refer simply to a profession, e.g., the field of medicine. Rather, it is used in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense of a field of cultural production, that is, a class-defined, multivariant sociocultural space in which cultural products are produced, valued, and consumed. Thus, “field of gastronomy” does not refer solely to the profession of food writing, per se, but to the realm in which food is treated as a cultural product, or rather, an aesthetic object, as opposed to a commodity or a source of nutrition. The field of gastronomy comprises but is not limited to food writing. For a complete explanation of the concept of the field of cultural production, see Chapter III.

³ Ferguson, *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine*, 106.

⁴ For an example of a discursive model of national cuisine, see Arjun Appadurai, “How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30, no. 1 (1988).

Claiborne, whose newspaper and magazine articles, cookbooks, and especially restaurant reviews taught a generation of middle-class Americans with newfound disposable income how to incorporate good food and fine restaurants into their sophisticated urban lifestyles. This education made restaurant reviews in America a particularly potent tool for the acquisition of taste, no matter one's social standing.

Focusing on restaurant reviews and their discursive relationship to taste, this dissertation explores the field of gastronomy that has developed in America during the last 50 years. The underlying model is that reviews disseminate socially coded information about food and restaurants that informs a discourse in which our collected tastes are constructed. This process both structures and is structured by the field of gastronomy. Although others wrote about food before and after him, several factors point to Craig Claiborne, the food editor and restaurant critic of the *New York Times* from 1957 to 1972 and the food editor from 1974 to 1986, as one of the most important figures in the solidification of the field of gastronomy in America. Claiborne's regular features about home cooks and food trends, his easy-to-follow, cosmopolitan recipes, and especially his influential weekly restaurant reviews, which debuted in 1963, invited new food enthusiasts to the table. Through his writing, Claiborne transmitted the information necessary to make the aesthetic judgments that distinguished certain tastes from others, and by extension, certain people from others. Importantly, it was not just diners who paid attention to Claiborne's remarks, but also chefs, who knew his reviews were not only good for business and for their careers, but also for educating the public about taste.

Unpacking the relationship between restaurant reviews, discourse, and

taste is necessary to understand how the field of gastronomy operates. Taste, as Pierre Bourdieu has shown, can be viewed as the product of cultural variables that include class, education, economic and symbolic capital, and the resulting positions and position-takings these variables produce in the field of cultural production.⁵ In Bourdieu's estimation, there is no cultural product that is *necessarily* better or worse than another, no aesthetic judgment *necessarily* more or less accurate when the social forces at work in the field are accounted for. Despite how personal and innate tastes may seem, what *tastes* good or bad is constructed by those with the economic and cultural capital to say so. The power to consecrate certain cultural products over others is the power to define taste. What's more, judgments of taste help reinforce the system that privileges the judgments these highly capitalized people have made. Thus, taste is as much—maybe more—about the person doing the tasting in a particular sociocultural environment as it is about the food being tasted.

The fact that taste is the product of various social forces is the reason I believe it is important to dissect and understand it. Just as in the realms of literature, theater arts, visual arts, and fashion, the designation of good and bad taste in the realm of food has serious and far-reaching ramifications. When a society develops a taste or distaste for something—the recent surge in the popularity of Japanese food is a good example—major systems have to

⁵ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), and also *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

change in order to accommodate it.⁶ In the case of Japanese food, due to the number of sushi restaurants opening in the United States in recent years,⁷ the fishing industry has had to provide the type and quality of fish Japanese chefs desired. As a result of an increase in demand for the Japanese staple black cod, which is also known as sablefish, the price of smoked sable at Jewish appetizing counters rose above the price of smoked sturgeon, a fish that is traditionally more prized in the Jewish appetizing idiom.⁸ To provide chefs with other ingredients they wanted, farmers grew new crops (e.g., soy beans to serve as *edamame*) and raised new herds (e.g., prized Kobe beef and *kurabota* pork). Once in the marketplace, these ingredients found their way onto restaurant menus of every ethnic stripe, especially those categorized as “New American.”⁹ Businesses that manufacture and import Japanese tableware and

⁶ Two books illustrate the interconnectedness of the global sushi business from different perspectives: Sasha Issenberg’s *The Sushi Economy: Globalization and the Making of a Modern Delicacy* (New York: Gotham Books, 2007), traces the recent and rapid spread of sushi around the world, while anthropologist Theodore C. Bestor puts Tokyo’s Tsukiji fish market under a lens to illustrate how such a curious microcosm has become a nexus of world fish trade in *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World* (Berkeley, CA: U. of California Press, 2004).

⁷ This phenomenon is demonstrated by an analysis of ethnic restaurants in *Zagat Survey* performed by Krishnendu Ray, “Ethnic Succession and the New American Restaurant Cuisine,” in *The Restaurants Book: Ethnographies of Where We Eat*, ed. David Beriss and David Sutton (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2007).

⁸ Marian Burros, “The Fish That Swam Uptown,” *New York Times*, 16 May 2001. This story was corroborated in a personal communication with Gary Greengrass, owner of Barney Greengrass, a traditional Jewish appetizing and restaurant on Manhattan’s Upper West Side.

⁹ Surveying menus prepared at the James Beard House reveals the popularity of Japanese ingredients and techniques, especially Kobe beef and *kurabota* pork, with American chefs. Of the 223 events held in 2008 at the house, 50 menus included Japanese ingredients and techniques and 31 additional menus included Kobe beef and/or *kurabota* pork. Out of the 265 chefs who cooked that year, only 10 were Japanese.

restaurant supply products also boomed.¹⁰ Suddenly, Japanese dishware began appearing on tables in all kinds of restaurants, including Latin American ones in New Jersey.¹¹

The impact of our taste for Japanese food extended beyond restaurants and their suppliers. Cookbook publishers put authoritative Japanese tomes into production.¹² Food styling in magazine photographs took on a minimalist Japanese aesthetic. Soy, ginger, and sesame found their way into frozen dinners. To bring the subject home, literally, an August 2002 article in the *New York Times* by Matt Lee and Ted Lee reported on the national trend in home entertaining of having guests roll their own sushi at dinner parties.¹³ In December 2004, Frank Bruni, the *New York Times* restaurant critic, put the bonito flakes on top by awarding the super-exclusive, super-expensive Masa restaurant in the Time Warner Building four stars, the paper's highest rating.¹⁴ This was only the second time in the paper's reviewing history that a Japanese restaurant received its top honor, and the first time in more than 20 years. Three years after that review, as if to bring closure to the cycle that had brought sushi and other Japanese food into the American gastronomic mainstream, Marian Burros broke a *New York Times*

¹⁰ Personal communication with Saori Kawano, owner of Korin Japanese Trading Corp., a Japanese restaurant supply business.

¹¹ Personal communication with Maricel Presilla, owner of the pan-Latin American restaurant Zafra in Hoboken, New Jersey, who purchased the dishware for her restaurant at a Japanese store in Edgewater, New Jersey.

¹² Elizabeth Andoh's *Washoku: Recipes from the Japanese Home Kitchen* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2005) and Hiroko Shimbo's *The Sushi Experience* (New York: Knopf, 2006) are typical examples of the new, comprehensive Japanese cookbooks available for American home cooks today.

¹³ Matt Lee and Ted Lee, "Rolling Their Own," *New York Times*, 14 August 2002.

¹⁴ Frank Bruni, review of Masa, *New York Times*, 29 December 2004, Dining In, Dining Out section.

cover story about the dangers of eating sushi caused by elevated levels of mercury found in bluefin tuna.¹⁵ Our taste for sushi had moved from the food page to the front page, contributing to a health scare with dangerous implications.¹⁶ A few weeks later the paper's public editor, Clark Hoyt, reported that one restaurateur said sales of tuna sushi dropped 30 percent as a result of the article.¹⁷ The field of gastronomy in America was ready for the next gourmet trend. Modern Korean cuisine, anyone?¹⁸

The case of Japanese food illustrates how the power of reviews extends far beyond a change in the number of reservation requests a restaurant receives after a review or the eventual economic impact that any one review has on a restaurant's business. Reviews establish, reflect, and refract trends in taste that have broad consequences in far-flung realms. The milieu in which they assert this influence is restaurant discourse. This discourse is predicated on cultural values about aesthetic judgment. These values are rooted in philosophy, informed by science, and negotiated in the field of cultural production.

This dissertation will show that New York City is the heart of the field of gastronomy in America. A combination of factors, including

¹⁵ Marian Burros, "High Mercury Levels Are Found in Tuna Sushi Sold in Manhattan," *New York Times*, 23 January 2008.

¹⁶ In December 2008, actor Jeremy Piven was forced to leave a much-anticipated Broadway revival of David Mamet's *Speed-the-Plow* due to "extreme mercury toxicity" caused in part by his being "an avid sushi eater for many years, regularly eating sushi twice in one day." See "Update: Jeremy Piven Quits Broadway, 'Extreme Mercury Toxicity'," *The Huffington Post* (2008), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/12/18/jeremy-piven-quits-broadw_n_151987.html?page=2.

¹⁷ Clark Hoyt, "The Doctors Are In. The Jury Is Out," *New York Times*, 17 February 2008.

¹⁸ The success of David Chang's Momofuku restaurants, whose menus have Korean undertones, has already spun off a few favorably reviewed Korean-inflected restaurants, such as Persimmon.

economic prosperity, the dominance of American media, and the increasing importance of a young, sophisticated, urban lifestyle in the global marketplace have made New York central to a particularly compelling type of social aspiration that extends far beyond the five boroughs. With the largest number of restaurants of any city in the country and the most diverse selection in terms of breadth and depth of cuisines and restaurant styles to choose from, New York is considered one of the great dining capitals of the world. The importance of New York in cultural matters and the concentration of food media in the city means that what happens in the restaurants in New York informs the food culture of the rest of the country. It is no coincidence that many of the most successful and most famous chefs in America today originate from restaurants in New York—Mario Batali, Daniel Boulud, Bobby Flay, Thomas Keller, and Jean-Georges Vongerichten, just to name a few. New York is known as one of the toughest places to succeed in the restaurant business. Renowned chefs from all over the country and all over the world test their mettle in the New York market. The potential payoffs are great, in terms of financial reward, media adulation, and personal sense of accomplishment. But the critics can be harsh, as global superstar chefs like Alain Ducasse and Gordon Ramsay learned the hard way.¹⁹ The journalistic standards of reviewing that Craig Claiborne set in place at the *Times* remain the goal of reviewers across the country. As I have argued elsewhere, this symbiotic relationship of restaurants and food media in the city means that New York cuisine has come to represent American

¹⁹ See Marian Burros, "For Ducasse, a Bumpy Beginning," *New York Times*, 9 August 2000, and Frank Bruni, review of Gordon Ramsay at the London, *New York Times*, 31 January 2007, Dining In, Dining Out section.

cuisine, at least as far as restaurant cooking is concerned.²⁰

We tend to take restaurant reviews and food discourse for granted. In some circles, especially in New York City, the level of enthusiasm for restaurants, food, and chefs has grown almost to a frenzy. Their fame predicated on positive reviews and top ratings, top chefs are everywhere—on 24-hour food television channels and even on Broadway.²¹ Most of the guest chefs appearing on the *Today* show are introduced by the number of stars they have been given by reviewers or the awards they have received from the James Beard Foundation, where I work. Profiles of starred chefs are now regular features in mainstream magazines, such as *People*, which now even includes chefs in its annual roundup of the sexiest people alive. Nationally broadcast television shows turn these chefs into celebrities, who spin off personalized lines of cookware and prepared foods to capitalize on their fame. Heavily trafficked Internet Web sites, such as eater.com, seriouseats.com, and egullet.org, are largely devoted to restaurant, chef, and review chatter. The popularity of user-generated-review Web sites, such as yelp.com, means the restaurant reviews and food discourse increase exponentially by the day.

This dissertation will also address the continued dominance of elite media in matters of opinion making about food, chefs, and restaurants. My

²⁰ Mitchell Davis, "Eating Out, Eating American: New York Restaurant Dining and Identity," in *Gastropolis: Food & New York City*, ed. Annie Hauck-Lawson and Jonathan Deutsch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

²¹ The 24-hour cable Television Food Network (TVFN) debuted on November 22, 1993. (It's now called simply Food Network, and it's included in Time Warner's basic cable subscriptions in Manhattan.) April 2004 saw the debut of *Chef's Theater*, a Broadway show that featured a different chef weekly, who cooked, danced, sang, or otherwise entertained while audience members ate a multicourse dinner paired with wines. (The show was scheduled to run through June but was cut short after it was panned by food and theater critics alike.)

research shows that traditional restaurant reviews, especially those in the *New York Times*, continue to exert a significant influence on taste that is demonstrated in a number of different ways, such as the similarity of the rankings of top restaurants across media outlets, including consumer plebiscites, such as Zagat Survey, expert-driven tribunals, such as the Michelin guide, and even user-generated review Web sites, such as yelp.com, which at times appears to be nothing more than a sounding board for consumer reaction to the opinions expressed by the *Times*. The continued importance of the *New York Times* reviews is also indicated by the way chefs and restaurateurs continue to covet the personal and professional acknowledgment these reviews afford and by the way influential institutions in the industry, such as the James Beard Foundation, rely on the information and opinions these reviews contain. Now, more than ever, a favorable *Times* review is what chefs and restaurateurs are hoping for, whether their restaurants are located in New York City, or not.

I will explore some of the reasons for the continued concentration of power of traditional reviews. They range from the loss of once-important restaurant reviews, such as those in *Gourmet* magazine, which concentrates the power of the few traditional reviews that remain, to the overwhelming amount of information of unknowable origin available online, which makes the opinions expressed in traditional reviews written with an adherence to journalistic ethics seem more trustworthy. Whatever the reason, this continued domination of elite opinion in food bucks a trend identified by social theorists, such as Arjun Appadurai and Manuel Castells, who argue that as the nature of contemporary society and individual agency within it changes due to globalization and access to technology, the power of elites to influence

public opinion has become dispersed and fragmented.²² These theorists suggest that such social transformations render class-based analysis of elite domination of opinion, such as Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production, obsolete. To the contrary, my research on restaurant reviews demonstrates that, in the field of gastronomy, the actors with the most economic and symbolic capital continue to exert the greatest influence on aesthetic judgments about food.

Whether we are talking about the textural subtleties of a piece of Japanese sushi, the precision in the execution of a classic French dish, the authenticity of an Italian dining experience, or the value of a Chinese meal, each of these assessments reflects and reinforces a particular world order, a set of societal values, a presumed hierarchy of refinement. When did raw fish go from being disgusting to being delicious? Why is French food still considered the standard against which all other cuisines are judged? How come we are preoccupied with Italian authenticity and why has there never been a four-star Italian restaurant? What keeps Chinese food in the budget dining category and why won't Americans pay more for it? The answers to these questions are embedded in the social and cultural construction of aesthetic judgments about food, of which restaurant reviews are an important medium. Sure, a favorable restaurant review can generate business. But any review, good or bad, generates discourse in the field of gastronomy that has the power to influence taste.

²² See, for example, Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 309–53, Arjun Appadurai, "Putting Hierarchy in Its Place," *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (1988), and Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 48–65.

Why Writing Is Integral to Gastronomy

The study of food is largely the study of writing about food. Unlike some other forms of cultural expression, such as painting, sculpture, and architecture, the perishability of food, both from decay and digestion, as well as the performativity of eating in public privilege writing in culinary matters. Besides the memory of taste sensations, all that we can hope to have after a menu is served or a dish is consumed is the recipe, the physical menu, a description of the food or dining experience, and commentary about all of the above—and then only if someone chose to record them. Like other performances, such as dance and live music, eating and dining are ephemeral. Unlike these other cultural art forms, though, everyone must eat every day. Even when people choose to eat the same food all the time, no two eating experiences are ever exactly alike.

Some social critics argue that without writing, food is confined to its biological purpose and economic imperatives, namely its nutrients and its commodity form. Writing about food releases it from these quotidian constraints and catapults it into the realm of intellectual pursuit. Via writing, food transforms itself from nutrition into cuisine and gastronomy. Ferguson describes the discursive relationship between eating, writing about food, and culinary culture:

Whereas food calls for eaters, a culinary culture contends with a different sort of consumer, the reader-diners whose consumption of texts rivals their ingestion of food. Reading and evaluating, like eating and cooking, are so many “taste acts” by which individuals “perform” their connections to a taste community. That participation in turn—the culinary practices, norms, and values that derive from and support the cuisine in question—sets us in a culinary culture.²³

²³ Ferguson, *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine*, 17.

Mennell distinguishes the word *gastronome* from *gourmet*, *gourmand* and other culinary cognates by including the act of writing about food in addition to consuming it as part of the definition. Mennell's *gastronome* is a "theorist and propagandist about culinary taste" who serves to democratize taste by disseminating "knowledge of elite standards beyond the elite."²⁴ Although Mennell notes that public opinion about chefs had already existed prior to the publication of the first gastronomic writings by the founding fathers of the field, Alexandre-Balthazar-Laurent Grimod de la Reynière (1758–1837) and Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755–1826), he underscores that "an informed and coherent public opinion generally necessitates more open and formal media of communication to supplement informal networks of gossip."²⁵ As the public opinion about food coalesced, writing about food became increasingly important.

Of course, these days, there are other ways besides writing to record ephemeral performances, such as photography, video, and film. In their digital incarnations, these recording formats are applied to food almost as often as people eat.²⁶ Witness the growing number of photos of food that are posted on Flickr—many of which are presumably taken by people with digital cameras sitting at tables in restaurants aggravating their neighbors with their constant flashes. Searching "restaurant dish" on Flickr yields more than 13,000 images; "plated food" brings up almost three times as many. These

²⁴ Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, 266–67.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 272.

²⁶ The culinary chronicler Tucker Shaw comes to mind. Shaw used a digital camera to photograph and record all the food he consumed in 2004. He compiled the photos in Tucker Shaw, *Everything I Ate: A Year in the Life of My Mouth* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005).

images are often accompanied by written commentary, but regardless, it is the motivation to record and the recording itself, whether written or visual, digital or analog, that is significant. Preserving food for posterity in any format so that it can be digested mentally as well as physically is an important step in the process of turning food into a cultural object. This transformation brings food into the realm of discourse and thereby provides the metaphoric distance and disinterestedness that allow for philosophic and other serious contemplation, as we will see in later chapters.

What every method of recording food that's been invented and employed thus far lacks, unfortunately, is taste. No photo, no blog, no restaurant review can convey the actual flavor of the food it describes or depicts.²⁷ Even if they could, because of the physical and cultural variations in taste perceptions that we will discuss in the next chapter, the aesthetic judgment of that taste sensation would differ from one person or group to the next. The gap between what is written or recorded about food and what taste perceptions, or rather, what memory of taste perceptions that recording conjures, is shaped by a combination of our personal experience and what we have learned about food. A shared vocabulary and common bank of experiences is necessary for the words or images to be transformed into useful information, for the recordings to make any sense at all. Restaurant reviews,

²⁷ Recording, or rather, recreating aromas is a different matter altogether. Technological advances in extraction and diffusion of scents allow many aromas to be recreated with relatively good accuracy. Given the close relationship of taste and smell and the importance of smell in flavor discussed in Chapter II, these advances suggests that perhaps one day we will be able to record the taste of food. Chefs are already interested in aroma technology. At L₂O in Chicago, chef Laurent Gras is working with an aroma technician to develop a unique fragrance for the dining room that will enhance the flavor of the food and wine served and increase customer satisfaction. (Personal communication.)

which, in addition to recording eating experiences, educate and inform us about how to culturally contextualize, judge, and compare eating experiences in both explicit and implicit ways—how to expand our vocabulary and fill up that bank, if you will—are an important locus of meaning in the realm of food.

Writing, of course, is not a neutral process. Putting taste into words, spoken or written, requires encoding a sense into symbols. “The palate...is always circumscribed by the limits of description,”²⁸ observes Allen Weiss:

“Language establishes and foregrounds gustatory relations, kinships, limits, determinations, specifications, nuances...Differences in taste may be dissimulated as well as revealed by language and culture: such determinations are made according to the manner in which the global systems of taste relations (in a given culture and cuisine) are established by a continual sedimentation of gustatory references and cross-references.”²⁹

Writing about food in reviews not only communicates the elite precepts of gastronomy to a mass audience, as Mennell notes, in a certain sense it actually creates them. Writing is *inaugural* vis-à-vis taste, to borrow Derrida’s term.³⁰ Therefore, understanding how food is written about, that is, understanding the process of writing reviews, is critical to understanding how we develop our tastes for food.

²⁸ Allen S. Weiss, “Tractatus Logico-Gastronomicus,” in *Feast and Folly: Cuisine, Intoxication, and the Poetics of the Sublime* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 93.

²⁹ Ibid., 96.

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Force and Signification,” in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 11.

The Historic Relationship Between Restaurant Reviews and Gastronomic Literature

Is there something distinct about restaurant reviews that separates them from other forms of food writing, from other forms of gastronomic literature? I believe the answer is yes and the difference is the overt power of consecration reviewers wield. The declaration that something is good or bad is the expression of this power, which has historically captured the attention of both diners' and members of the restaurant industry. But as we will see, this power to proclaim is not necessarily the most important or effective form of power reviews exert.

Certainly, restaurant recommendations have been integral to the genre of gastronomic literature since its inception.³¹ Grimod de la Reynière's first edition of the *Almanach des Gourmands*, published in 1803, included a Slow Food-worthy nutritive calendar that explained which foods were best to eat in which seasons, as well as a *Time Out*-like guide to restaurants and food shops in Paris. As Rebecca Spang notes, Grimod, a disbarred lawyer, and his *Almanach*:

Established a *code gourmand* as enduring as any of the legal codes over which Napoleon so famously slaved. Interspersing anecdotes about meals eaten (or missed) with helpful hints, hyperbolic descriptions, restaurant reviews and occasional elaborate recipes, the *Almanach des Gourmands* combined the Classical and Renaissance traditions of the symposium with the increasingly popular forms of the guidebook and the almanac.³²

³¹ Although coinage of the term *gastronomie* is attributed to Joseph de Berchoux, a French lawyer who used it as the title of a poem he wrote in 1801, the first practitioner of purely gastronomic writing is considered Grimod de la Reynière. Ferguson notes that the term was most likely in use before Berchoux appropriated it for the title of his poem. See Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, "A Cultural Field in the Making: Gastronomy in 19th-Century France," *The American Journal of Sociology* 104, no. 3 (1998): 602.

³² Rebecca L. Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 151.

The influence of this shopping and dining advice, beyond pointing the people in whose hands the 20,000 extant copies of the *Almanach* landed to the city's best purveyors, was "the threat of a further edition the following year [which] was an incentive to improve, or suffer the consequences."³³ An effective tool in the public sphere for inciting competition among restaurants in the burgeoning consumer society that pressured chefs to differentiate themselves, a process Mennell has explained fully,³⁴ the *Almanach* influenced not only what people bought, but more importantly, what they liked.

The overwhelming response to a request for submissions from restaurateurs and shopkeepers to the guide led to the formation of the Jury Dégustateur, a collection of Grimod de la Reynière's fellow Parisian gourmands, before whom restaurateurs and caterers would serve their signature dishes *à la russe* (one after the other) for adjudication—a sort of 19th century *Iron Chefs* judges' table. During the eight-volume, ten-year lifespan of the *Almanach* (1803–1813), the Jury met 465 times, judging thousands of dishes. Whether or not Grimod and his Jury did in fact direct the readers of the *Almanach* to the best food in Paris is beside the point. They solidified the importance of the restaurant review and, moreover, gave form and value to public opinion about restaurants, dining manners, ingredient quality, and cooking skill, and they legitimized the aesthetic pursuit of food while they did. Biographer Giles MacDonogh notes that the early recommendations in the *Almanach* made Grimod "the spiritual forefather of any modern reviewer

³³ Giles MacDonogh, *A Palate in Revolution: Grimod de La Reynière and the Almanach des Gourmands* (London: Robin Clark, 1987), 66.

³⁴ Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, 135–65.

from Egon Ronay to Messrs Gault and Millau.”³⁵

What is remarkable to today’s review junky is how contemporary Grimod’s early 19th century reviews seem. In the fourth edition of the *Almanach* (1806), for example, Grimod revisits one of his favorite dining establishments, the restaurant operated by M. Véry, located near the Tuileries. Using turns of phrase and wink-wink hyperbole you might expect to find in a modern-day magazine, Grimod describes the dining rooms, kitchens, and appointments as “the most beautiful in France, perhaps all of Europe.” All the dishes Véry serves show him “as an artist consumed by his art.” The selection of wines, he notes, “are in line with the quality of the cooking.” Grimod even touches on value, acknowledging that “the prices are high, but not excessive.” Although in New York we tend to think our lives are uniquely victimized by real estate development, in the same review Grimod laments that the building that houses Véry’s restaurant may be demolished to make room for the new plan of the Tuileries. Next, Grimod critiques a neighboring restaurant with more modest aspirations and therefore, he supposes, a more bustling clientele. Operated by M. Le Gacque, Grimod says this restaurant nevertheless offers excellent cuisine and good value, as well as a good, well-aged selection of wines “attuned to the tastes of the clientele.”³⁶ These early restaurant reviews are not prototypes; they are fully formed and strikingly similar to the weekly capsule reviews Craig Claiborne began writing for the

³⁵ Egon Ronay began publishing an influential annual guide to restaurants in England in 1957 that continues to be published today under different but related auspices; Henri Gault and Christian Millau created the influential Gault-Millau guide to restaurants in France in 1969, the only serious modern-day challenger to the *Guide Michelin* in France.

³⁶ Alexandre-Balthazar-Laurent Grimod de la Reynière, *Almanach des Gourmands*, 4th ed. (Paris: Cellot, 1806), 141-43. (my translation)

New York Times in 1963, almost 160 years later.

As stated earlier, one of Grimod's most significant contributions to the field of restaurants in general, besides taking the first dominant position in the French field of gastronomy, was to make restaurants culturally relevant. According to Spang, Grimod's writing changed the tenor of the discourse about restaurants, taking it out of the social and economic realm with which the post-Revolutionary public opinion about eating establishments was generally preoccupied and making "restaurant going into an affair of 'taste' alone."³⁷ As Aron describes 19th-century France post Grimod, the "incessant talk of food draws it away from its natural role as a human necessity and a habit, to elevate it to the status of an epic poem."³⁸ Recognizing the role public opinion played, Aron continues:

The gourmet message begins to hum through the streets, in the press, in clubs and gaming rooms. It is from this grapevine that the restaurants blossom in their full glory; a compact is signed between the high-class establishments and the new society: the latter will subsidize the former, who in turn, will create a hitherto undreamed-of standard of excellence.³⁹

The gastronomic myth-making that took place in the realm of food during this period and the industry that blossomed as a result Aron attributes to the "articulate discourse, technical statements, commentaries, philosophies, testimonials" put to paper by the "eaters themselves, the chroniclers of food," that is, by the gastronomes and reviewers.⁴⁰

It is curious that gastronomy's other founding father, Brillat-Savarin,

³⁷ Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture*, 151.

³⁸ Jean Paul Aron, *The Art of Eating in France: Manners and Menus in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Nina Rootes (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 209.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 210.

did not set opinions about specific restaurants to paper—save for a few kind words about Beauvilliers and a handful of other already famous eating establishments, provided simply as evidence of their significance in the history of *restauration*. He was preoccupied with larger gastronomic questions than whether the vol-au-vents were better at Véry or the Grand Véfour. Interestingly, as MacDonogh notes in the introduction to his biography of Brillat-Savarin, “There is no evidence that during the seventy years which preceded the publication of his book, the author was abnormally interested in his stomach, or indeed in any major branch of the culinary arts.”⁴¹ None of this is to say, however, that *The Physiology of Taste* did not have a significant impact on the restaurant reviewing of its day (and ours). In addition to providing aphorisms and other rules by which to judge the quality and taste of food and the dining experience, as well as bringing a serious, pseudo-scientific attention to matters gastronomic via tests and templates for understanding the physical, philosophical, and moral implications of the pleasures of the table, Brillat-Savarin may also have been responsible for solidifying the importance of social commentary and its byproduct of distinction in the evaluation of restaurants. Not that Grimod’s reviews were free of famous faces, but in Brillat’s typically professorial style, he made the dining room into a social experiment.

In a brief chapter on the *restaurateur*, Brillat-Savarin describes the social make up of a typical Parisian restaurant with the remove and attention to detail of a cultural anthropologist, a participant/observer to the gastronomic goings-on that supports MacDonogh’s supposition of his

⁴¹ Giles MacDonogh, *Brillat-Savarin: The Judge and His Stomach* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992), 1.

outsider status. Looking out from his own table in the fray, Brillat-Savarin gazes on the solitary diners, “who order at the top of their voices, wait impatiently, eat in a rush, pay, and get out”; the visiting country families, “who seem to relish delightedly their novel surroundings”; the married couple, who “have taken seats at some neighboring theatre [where] one or the other of them will fall asleep”; the lovers, who “give themselves away by the eagerness of one, the coqueteries of the other, and the gourmandism of them both”; the regular patrons, who “know by name all the waiters, who tip them off secretly to what is best and freshest”; the “individuals whose faces are known to everyone and whose names are never even heard”; and the foreigners, who “stuff themselves on double portions of meat, order whatever is most costly, drink the headiest wines, and do not always leave without support.”⁴² Is this dinner in a restaurant in early 19th century Paris or lunch yesterday at the Four Seasons in New York? Ferguson has noted that in *La Physiologie du Goût* Brillat-Savarin “socializes food...by recounting in story after story our social relations with food.”⁴³ My intent is to underscore that by acknowledging the social make-up of a dining room in his discussion of the business of the restaurant, he helped solidify the importance of the goings-on in the dining room in the evaluation of a dining experience. And as we will see throughout this dissertation, those goings-on are not benign; they influence the distinctions diners make, affecting their overall perception of the experience, and even the taste of the food.

A comparison of the different ways restaurants were treated by

⁴² Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*, trans. M. F. K. Fisher (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986 [1946]), 312.

⁴³ Ferguson, *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine*, 96-97.

Grimod de la Reynière and Brillat-Savarin sheds some light on the relationship between restaurant reviews and gastronomic literature in general. Brillat spoke in mostly broad, objective terms regarding restaurants, laying down a framework for understanding what happens when man contemplates and consumes food in a social setting. “The pleasures of the table are known only to the human race, they depend on careful preparations for the serving of the meal, on the choice of place, and on the thoughtful assembling of guests.” The social aspects of dining rather than the public aspects of dining were his principal concern. Though at times philosophical, Grimod’s writing was more serviceable, more consumer oriented, offering specific, practical advice about what was good and where to get it. It was also more subjective, for even when Grimod writes in general terms, such as when he defines the requisite qualities of a gourmand—the “most strident of appetites,” “jovial humour,” “from forty to sixty years of age.”—and notes it is “essential...not to try to judge a man by his external appearance...,”⁴⁴ you cannot help but think he is describing himself and justifying his role. (Some critics of the critic at the time charged that Grimod was more concerned with what he wanted to eat and with whom he wanted to eat it than any larger gastronomic questions.) Brillat’s rhetorical devices, such as providing tests of his suppositions and transmitting information in the form of conversations with and anecdotes about other educated men, give his writing an air of objectivity that make his conclusions seem definitive, though obviously subjective opinions factor heavily in his treatise. Although Grimod’s reviews in the *Almanach* predate Brillat’s singular gastronomic work, one could say that the review—that is, the

⁴⁴ Quoted in MacDonogh, *A Palate in Revolution: Grimod de La Reynière and the Almanach des Gourmands*, 187-88.

experience of eating at a restaurant to evaluate it and then writing down an opinion—is where Brillat’s rules of gastronomy are put to the test. In this way, reviews are applied gastronomy. At the same time, in a Bourdieuvian sense, by consecrating the opinions formed by the application of gastronomic principles to dining experiences of the sort gastronomes purvey, reviews also reinforce and reshape gastronomy itself. Interestingly, *La Physiologie du Goût* has never been out of print, while the *Almanach des Gourmands* has never been reissued and Grimod, like even the best magazine writers of any era, has fallen into relative obscurity.⁴⁵

Restaurant Reviews and Their Relationship to Restaurant Discourse

In his history of French gastronomy, Jean-Robert Pitte proposes that the review is essential to understanding how gastronomy was appropriated first by the bourgeoisie, then by other classes, and finally by French society at large. “If three quarters of French adults know the name Paul Bocuse, while many can’t name a single academic,” Pitte posits, “it is because of the advent of the gastronomic review.”⁴⁶ The realm in which such appropriations are made is discourse.

There are many ways to understand restaurant reviews and their relationship to discourse. Pitte’s suggestion that reviews and the gastronomic codes they contain helped define French society in the 19th century recalls Benedict Anderson’s explanation of the formation of imagined (national) communities. Newspapers, essentially “print-capitalism,” proved one of the

⁴⁵ Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, 268.

⁴⁶ Jean-Robert Pitte, *Gastronomie Française: Histoire et géographie d'une passion* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), 183. (my translation)

most effective media for disseminating opinions, and thereby helped create a provincial (i.e., discrete), vernacular world (view) that reinforced communities with a common language of signs and symbols solidified in time.⁴⁷ As applied gastronomy, restaurant reviews are one cog in the synchronic concatenation of cultural symbols that defines a nation by binding an imagined community of people with shared tastes, similar dining habits, and widely held opinions about food. The process of sociogenesis by which such manners and their increasing refinement serve to define and distinguish groups of people—providing a model for other social change in the process—has been explained by Norbert Elias. Regarding France, Elias remarks:

Stylistic conventions, the forms of social intercourse, affect-molding, esteem for courtesy, the importance of good speech and conversation, articulateness of language and much else—all of this is first formed in France within courtly society, then slowly changes, in a continuous diffusion, from a social into a national character.⁴⁸

Incorporating food into this model is easy if you consider gastronomy the articulation of social conventions and class aspirations about food, and restaurant reviews and the collective tastes they propose one of the most effective means of their diffusion.

Using Elias's model, Mennell traces the historical process of what he calls the "civilization of appetite" to investigate the stark differences in the food cultures in England and France. Much in the same way Elias believes manners and the social pressure exerted on individuals to regulate their behavior led to and shaped the stratification of society, Mennell believes the

⁴⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 62–63.

⁴⁸ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 30.

social regulation of eating led to socially significant distinctions about refinement and taste. He suggests that the bourgeoisie's emulation of courtly food practices added to "the movement towards greater delicacy and self-restraint" and notes that "in so far as [delicacy] involves discrimination and selection, the rejection as well as the acceptance of certain foods or combinations of foods, [was] guided at least as much by social proprieties as by individual fancies."⁴⁹ One of the ways these social proprieties entered the realm of discourse was through the theorizing and rationalizing of the gastronomic writers, whose postulations and reviews fed the discourse of the chefs' publics and helped shape not just how we eat, but also who we are. The word choice and tone of an 1865 English translation of Brillat-Savarin hints at Elias's civilizing process:

Gastronomy considers taste in its enjoyments as in its drawbacks; it has discovered the various degrees of pleasure it produces; it has regulated their action, and has fixed limits which no man of self-respect ought to outstep.⁵⁰

This period of dynamic gastronomic activity in France in the early 19th century resulted in the global hegemony of French cuisine for the next 200 years. And as this dissertation will suggest, a similar spate of gastronomic activity in 20th century America may be setting us on our own path toward a national taste and cuisine.

⁴⁹ Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, 33-34.

⁵⁰ Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Handbook of Dining; or, Corpulency and Leanness Scientifically Considered*, trans. L. F. Simpson (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1865), 62.

Methodology and Sources

Many challenges face the investigator who wishes to pinpoint the direct impact of restaurant reviewers' opinions on the dining choices and food preferences of others. Although I will incorporate some of the psychological and sociological experiments that try to do just that, the goal of this dissertation is not to demonstrate a direct, one-to-one relationship of cause and effect. Instead, I am concerned with the general discourse about restaurants, the way reviews play into that discourse, and how the opinions expressed in those reviews inform and shape our collective tastes in the field of gastronomy over time. Granted, such broad and abstract relationships are not necessarily easier to illustrate, but by investigating the way reviews are produced, the relationship of some reviews and reviewers to others, and how key decision-makers incorporate reviews into their evaluations, important patterns of influence emerge.

To help ascertain what the discursive relationship is between reviews and taste I conducted in-depth interviews with key people representing different segments of the media, the restaurant industry, and the field of gastronomy in general. My interview subjects included current *New York Times* restaurant critic, Frank Bruni, former *Times* restaurant critic, Mimi Sheraton, and *GQ*, Bloomberg News, and *Bon Appétit* restaurant critic, Alan Richman. To investigate the relationship between restaurant criticism and other consecrating forces, namely the James Beard Foundation, where I work, I also interviewed Izabela Wojcik, the director of house programming at the James Beard Foundation, who is responsible for inviting the 300 or so chefs who cook at the James Beard House each year. As Julia Child once remarked, for a chef, an invitation to cook at the Beard House is like a musician

receiving an invitation to play Carnegie Hall. Other, less extensive interviews and personal communications were conducted with chefs, food journalists, editors, and the director of an international cooking school located in Florence, Italy, that receives students from around the world.

I supplemented my own interviews with a vast body of published interviews of restaurant critics and several library shelves worth of their memoirs. Fortunately, just about every major critic in the United States, from Craig Claiborne to Frank Bruni (who is working on one right now), has published a book about his or her experience performing what has become one of the most coveted jobs in the world. In addition to these published materials, online forums and chats with restaurant critics are plentiful and they helped flesh out some of my primary material. During the last seven years I have moderated and/or participated in seven panel conversations about restaurant reviewing that have also informed my research.

To supplement these interviews, I delved deeply into restaurant reviews themselves, reading the majority of the reviews that have appeared in the *New York Times* since Craig Claiborne was first hired as the paper's food editor back in 1957. I pored over historic and contemporary guidebooks to find common themes and divergent opinions. I also spent many hours reading restaurant reviews and comments online. To trace trends and themes across media, I compared reviews of the same restaurant in different media outlets, such as newspapers, local and national magazines, guidebooks, and online user-generated-content Web sites. A cache of 500-plus pages of raw survey results from the 2002 Zagat Survey (for the 2003 guide) provided additional data for this analysis.

Finally, my research draws on my own experience in the food and

reviewing worlds. Over the course of six years in the 1990s, I was part of a team that supervised the development of the rating criteria, the restaurant inspections program, and the editorial content for the Mobil Travel Guides, a national program of restaurant and hotel ratings produced by Mobil Oil (now ExxonMobil) that was at one time a trusted name in the American hospitality rating business. Employment-contract bonuses for hotel general managers used to be tied to Mobil ratings. I am also a regular contributor of restaurant reviews to the *Art of Eating*, and I occasionally write about restaurants, food, and travel for *GQ* and *Food & Wine* magazines.

My work at the James Beard Foundation during the last 15 years has brought me into daily contact with a cross-section of the food and media worlds. Chefs, publicists, journalists, editors, food marketing boards, food producers (both large and small), winemakers, kitchenware manufacturers, and myriad other stakeholders in the food and beverage industry interact with the James Beard Foundation on a regular basis. As the organization's vice president, I participate in programming, fundraising, publishing, and strategic decision making to determine how we fulfill our mission "to celebrate, preserve, and nurture America's culinary heritage and diversity." Our programs include more than 220 guest-chef dinners held annually at the James Beard House in Greenwich Village. Chefs from all over the country and all over the world are invited to "perform" in Beard's kitchen for an audience of foundation members, press, and the general public. The foundation also holds guest-chef events at other venues around the country. The James Beard Foundation Awards held each May are considered one of the most prestigious recognition programs in the food industry. Adjudicated by peers, awards are given in many different categories, including, restaurants, chefs, winemakers,

service, cookbook authors, restaurant designers, graphic designers, broadcast media, and food journalists. The foundation's educational programming includes conferences, classes, and workshops for laypeople and professionals. Since 2001, the foundation has awarded over \$2 million worth of scholarships and tuition waivers to culinary students and chefs. Our core membership of 3,800 is divided roughly into one third professionals in the food and beverage industry and two thirds food enthusiasts.⁵¹ My interaction with these various constituencies have also informed the work presented herein. Throughout this dissertation, references to specific e-mails, conversations, and other information that was obtained during the course of my job that have been saved, recorded, or otherwise witnessed are indicated with the notation "personal communication."

Organization

Following this introductory chapter, the dissertation is organized into three principal areas: taste, the field of cultural production, and reviews, the last spanning two chapters. Chapter II: Toward a Theory of Taste, provides an overview of taste literature. Understanding the complexity of taste and the many ways we come to develop our personal and collective tastes is fundamental to the project at hand. In this chapter, taste is explored from the perspective of different biomedical and sociocultural disciplines to highlight where in the process of taste formation our aesthetic judgments are formed,

⁵¹ According to our most recent demographic survey, conducted in January 2009, more than 73% of our members earn over \$100,000 (28% over \$250,000). More than 85% graduated from college and 46% hold post-graduate or professional degrees. Approximately 31% fall between the ages of 36 and 50; 38% between the ages of 51 and 65.

how and by what forces they can be influenced, and why they seem at once so ingrained but are in fact extremely susceptible to manipulation.

Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production provides the basis for Chapter III: Restaurant Reviews, Fields of Cultural Production, and the Social Realm of Cultural Criticism. As position takers in both the field of gastronomy and the field of journalism, restaurant reviewers have a unique relationship to other actors in the food world and to other cultural critics. Dismissing the prerequisite of a national cuisine, I use Ferguson's model of the establishment of the field of gastronomy in 19th century France to propose a model for the establishment of the field of gastronomy in 20th century America. I suggest the cultural product of such a field may be taste, and I discuss a theory of mass opinion formation that helps explain how personal tastes become collective tastes in the public sphere.

In Chapter IV: Who's Eating New York?—Craig Claiborne, the *New York Times*, and the Evolution of the Field of Gastronomy in America, I explore the role restaurant reviews played in the development of the field of gastronomy during the latter half of the 20th century. Straddling the fields of both gastronomy and journalism, Craig Claiborne—who became food editor and restaurant reviewer of the *New York Times* in 1957—established an anonymous, journalistic style of reviewing that, bolstered by the cultural influence of the paper, gave him a dominant position in the field, which is enjoyed by the *Times* reviewer to this day. Claiborne and his successors and other reviewers around town provided an increasingly affluent, status-seeking readership the information and aesthetic judgments they needed to integrate food and restaurants into their urban lifestyles. In the process they sparked an interest and enthusiasm for food that continues to shape tastes.

In Chapter V: The People Versus the Experts—The Challenges of Zagat, Michelin, and Online Reviews, I explore the age-old problem of what to do when people with opinions want to be heard. Having developed an understanding of and enthusiasm for food thanks to Claiborne and his colleagues' work, New York's diners were ready to review restaurants for themselves. Zagat Survey rose to prominence by polling people about what they liked in restaurants, in other words, by creating a plebiscite on taste. Michelin took the opposite approach, bringing its own team of experts to dine in the Big Apple. Their effect on the field of gastronomy has been small. Perhaps in defiance of Zagat, for which opinions must be averaged to produce ratings, or in reaction to Michelin, whose secretive tribunals do not jibe with American egalitarianism, diners are posting restaurant reviews on the Internet in impressive numbers. Each of these new modes of reviewing could have challenged the dominant position of the *Times*. But my research shows that even after accounting for the structural changes to the field and changes in the way reviews are disseminated and used, the *Times* still shapes the conversation about restaurants and aesthetic judgments about food.

Finally, in Chapter VI: Conclusion—The Enduring Influence of the *New York Times*, the Shape of the Field of Gastronomy, and A Taste for American Cuisine, I discuss several theories of why the *Times* review remains dominant, including the simplest one, that it is used by other influencers in the field. I draw a sketch of the field of gastronomy in America to suggest how different position-takings play out. I also show how the successful transmission of aesthetic judgments about food move us toward a consensus of taste and I propose how, through the discourse generated in the field of gastronomy, one day these tastes may cohere into a national cuisine.

CHAPTER II

TOWARD A THEORY OF TASTE

There are many ways to approach the complex notion of taste. Different disciplines of the humanities and social sciences—namely, philosophy, sociology, and to a lesser extent, anthropology—have come at taste from various perspectives unique to their areas of interest. Physiology, psychology, and neurology have explored taste as a biomedical phenomenon. To understand the mechanisms through which individuals make judgments about the taste of food and the way in which these judgments are susceptible to the influence of restaurant reviews through the medium of restaurant discourse, it helps to have a basic understanding of each of these discipline-specific perspectives on taste.

Trying to identify conceptions of taste is complicated by the convolution of these different disciplinary approaches, which often inform each other. For instance, philosophers justify their conclusions about sensory perception using the physiological evidence of their time; sociologists track the social implications of taste using contemporary psychological and behavioral models. Seminal works on taste, such as Brillat-Savarin's curiously titled *Physiology of Taste*, written in 1825, blur discipline boundaries altogether.¹

¹ Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*. Giles MacDonogh notes in his biography of Brillat-Savarin that the word *physiologie* in French at the time meant a philosophical, not a

Unraveling the various theories that are intertwined in any analysis of taste, no matter the discipline, requires a close and careful reading.

The pervasive metaphoric use of the word *taste* to describe diverse aesthetic judgments further complicates the search for workable theories of taste. The phrases “gustatory taste” or “true taste,” as distinct from but tied to “aesthetic taste,” are sometimes used to distinguish the taste of food from the taste for other aesthetic objects. But as Korsmeyer notes, the metaphoric capacity of the word itself is the source of much of its power, as “metaphors constitute parts of the webs of meaning from which conceptual frameworks emerge.”² Allan Weiss enumerates the “lexical and epistemological equivocations” of the word taste:

According to context, *taste* means: the sense by which we distinguish flavors; the flavors themselves; an appetite for such preferred flavors; the discriminative activity according to which an individual likes or dislikes certain sensations; the sublimation of such value judgments as they pertain to art, and ultimately to all experience; and, by extension and ellipsis, taste implies good taste and style, established by means of an intuitive faculty of judgment.³

Throughout the history of musings on taste, much is made about the root and application of the word, its cultural resonances and linguistic concatenations, in English and across other languages. In her enthusiastic and comprehensive literary history of the topic, for example, Gigante is enthralled

physical-scientific treatise. See *Brillat-Savarin: The Judge and His Stomach* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992). In his introduction to the 1982 Flammarion edition, Jean-François Revel suggests that were Brillat's book written in modern times it would be titled *Phénoménologie du Goût* or *Gastronomie Structurale*. See Brillat-Savarin, *Physiologie du Goût* (Paris: Champs/Flammarion), 7.

² Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 39.

³ Allen S. Weiss, "Paradigms of Taste," in *Taste, Nostalgia*, ed. Allen S. Weiss (New York: Lusitania, 1997), 7.

by how her author subjects—Milton, Wordsworth, Lamb, Byron, Keats, and others—manipulate both the words and the metaphors of taste in their historical context.⁴ From small details, such as Milton’s playful use of the Latin *sapere*, which can mean both “to know” and “to taste,” both of which obviously resonate with Eve’s eating of the Apple, to large concepts, such as the use of the Man of Taste trope as a means of creating self-identity in consumerist 18th century Enlightenment literature, Gigante illuminates how the very complexity of the word taste gives it immense appeal and power.

An overview of the different disciplinary approaches to taste will help us understand how the concept operates in the realm of restaurant reviews and restaurant discourse. In order to be able to compare the various perspectives on taste, I will break my discussion down into the categories of Philosophy, Biomedical Sciences, Psychology, Anthropology, and Sociology.

A Taste for Philosophy

Aesthetics is the principal area of philosophy that wrestles with the concept of taste. Since Ancient Greece, philosophers have attempted to relate sensory perception to aesthetic judgment in order to better understand ideas of beauty and taste and the moral implications that follow from such judgments.⁵ Plato and Aristotle affirmed a hierarchy of the senses that separated the intellectual or “high” senses of seeing and hearing from the physical, or “low” senses of smelling, tasting, and touching. This distinction, as Korsmeyer explains, was predicated in part on the distance between the

⁴ See Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 16-20.

⁵ The term *aesthetics* would not be coined until the 18th century by German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten (1714-1762). See Dickie, *Aesthetics*, 9.

object and the body sensing it.⁶ The greater the distance, the greater the opportunity to engage the mind (by disengaging the body), and therefore, philosophically speaking, the greater the potential for intellectual and moral contemplation. The bodily nature of smell, touch, and taste, the very idea that in order to sense them you must come into physical contact with their object, and the immediate, unmediated, primitive reaction in the brain produced by these proximal senses made them individual and subjective, and relegated them to a lower level that would exclude them from serious philosophical contemplation.

This privileging of sight and hearing over touch, smell, and taste has persisted for centuries in philosophical circles, as Korsmeyer shows, despite an emerging scientific understanding of sensory perception that might bring into question these philosophical underpinnings.⁷ A. E. Loveland's 1897 investigation into the organs of taste at the cellular level posed an early challenge to any significant distinction in the physiology and functioning of taste cell vis-à-vis other sensory cells.⁸ Almost 100 years later, Julie Ann Miller reported on the similarities between the structure and functioning of taste cells and cells in the eye.⁹ And yet the philosophical hierarchy of the senses persists. Using David Prall's work as an example, Korsmeyer shows how isolating taste from olfaction and nutrition can be used, unconvincingly in her estimation, to demonstrate how taste can be freed from some of the limiting

⁶ Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, 38-45.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26-29.

⁸ A. E. Loveland, "A Study of the Organs of Taste," *Transactions of the American Microscopical Society* 19 (1897).

⁹ Julie Ann Miller, "A Matter of Taste," *BioScience* 40, no. 2 (1990).

qualities that philosophers used to dismiss it.¹⁰ Still, from Francis Hutcheson and Kant in the 18th century to Hegel at the turn of the 19th century, to Hans Jonas in the 20th century, philosophers have continued to adhere to the ranking of the senses established by the ancients.

An emphasis on distance from the object sensed and judged also arises in other philosophical contexts, though the meaning is not always physical distance. The neoplatonic, 17th century philosopher the Earl of Shaftesbury invoked the importance of distance from the object, metaphorically at least, by introducing the concept of disinterestedness, a sort of emotional distance, which he considered a prerequisite for moral judgments of beauty. According to Dickie, Shaftesbury's idea of disinterestedness became the foundation of aesthetic theory.¹¹ Hutcheson, among others, picks up disinterestedness as an important prerequisite for beauty, which Korsmeyer explains becomes the basis for his framework for judgments about aesthetic value.¹² The meaning of disinterestedness itself becomes a topic of philosophical debate, with suggested meanings ranging from the concrete, such as a lack of profit or personal gain, to the abstract, such as a lack of immediate pleasure or satiation on the part of the person doing the sensing. Nevertheless, disinterestedness is generally accepted as an important criterion in the assessment of "objectively" beautiful things.¹³ The concept of disinterestedness also serves to reinforce the hierarchy of the senses because

¹⁰ Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, 104-05.

¹¹ George Dickie, *Aesthetics: An Introduction*, ed. Nicholas Capaldi, *Traditions in Philosophy* (Pegasus, 1971).

¹² Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, 49.

¹³ Elizabeth Telfer prefers the term "noninstrumental" to describe aesthetic reactions, which she explains thus, "I appreciate the thing's look or sound for its own sake, not for any benefit it brings to me or others." See *Food for Thought: Philosophy and Food* (London: Routledge, 1996), 42.

the sensation of satiety of desire that comes from the proximal senses of taste and touch cannot be, by definition, appropriately and adequately disinterested. As I will discuss in Chapter IV, I believe the concept of disinterestedness provides the philosophical foundation on which is based the largely American notion that an anonymous restaurant critic is in a better position to judge what's on the plate before him or her than a critic who is known to the chef and restaurant where he or she is eating.

The 18th century is sometimes called the Century of Taste because aesthetic taste was used as a catchall phrase for the Enlightenment topics of beauty, cultural refinement, and distinction that became important in the increasingly rational and consumerist world.¹⁴ The persistent use of gustatory metaphors and analogies makes keeping track of which taste is which in the literature difficult at times. It also makes it somewhat surprising to realize, as Korsmeyer points out and Gigante underscores that, despite myriad references to and illustrations of eating, almost no one is talking about food. Instead, understanding beauty both as an object of perception and as a moral imperative was at the heart of the 18th century philosophers' aesthetic project.

Of the 18th-century treatises on taste, perhaps Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, sometimes referred to as his "theory of taste," was the most influential. (It is certainly the most dense.) Kant treats judgment as one of the three principal mental faculties, situating it between the faculty of understanding and the faculty of reason. In Kant's view of the world,

¹⁴ See George Dickie, *The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

judgment actually mediates between understanding and reason.¹⁵ Judgment accounts for feeling, expressed as pleasure or pain, as it relates to beauty. Kantian beauty is *disinterested*, in that it is based on a purposive quality of the form of an object represented and reflected upon, and not situated in the individual reflecting. Kantian beauty is also *universal* because it is based on a quality of the object and its representation, which implies that the pleasure derived from the harmony between the object's purposiveness and its representation could be true for everyone.¹⁶ In short, beauty is an intuition.¹⁷ What is universally beautiful in Kant's world is distinct from what is agreeable, which is, by definition, individual and subjective. Kant calls the faculty of judgment invoked by this type of pleasure *taste*.¹⁸

In Kant's concept of taste, art can be judged to be beautiful, but food can only be agreeable. As Kevin Sweeney articulates Kant's theory, the immediate, subjective, hedonic "taste of sense" that is invoked when we eat is distinct and different from the delayed, cognitive "taste of reflection" invoked when we consume other cultural products, namely of the visual and aural

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), 13.

¹⁶ Note that in *The Century of Taste*, Dickie dismisses Kant's complex teleology of taste because of the privileged role Kant gives to nature's purposiveness, which Dickie deems unsubstantiated (85–122). Allison dismisses Dickie's dismissal of Kant as naïve and uninformed. See Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste: A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, ed. Robert E. Pippin, Modern European Philosophy (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ In fact, as I read Kant and other Enlightenment taste philosophers, I can't help but feel that they are using beauty as a surrogate for emotion, and that their theories of taste, which are attempts to explain beauty and often the sublime, are really attempts to find a place for characteristically irrational and unpredictable emotion in their otherwise rational conception of the universe prior to the advent of psychology. A framework for understanding taste as an emotion is proposed by one English 18th century contemporary, Archibald Alison. See the introduction to his *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*.

¹⁸ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 26–27.

sort.¹⁹ Kant writes:

For though a man enumerate to me all the ingredients of a dish and remark that each is separately pleasant to me, and further extol with justice the wholesomeness of this particular food, yet am I deaf to all these reasons; I try the dish with *my* tongue and *my* palate, and thereafter (and not according to universal principles) do I pass my judgment.²⁰ (italics in original)

If a taster of food were susceptible to reason and with it able to change his or her opinion about what crossed the tongue or palate, a change that in Kant's view would require enough distance and disinterestedness to allow for reflective contemplation, then food might be able to rise to the realm of the beautiful. Instead, Kant's *Critique of Judgement* resonates with the earlier philosophical dismissal of gustatory taste as a subject unworthy of serious philosophical contemplation due to its proximal nature.

The disinterestedness of aesthetic judgments that are at the foundation of taste are what bring taste into the realm of morality for Kant, though as Szilágyi-Gál explains, the path is not always direct.²¹ Recall that Kant's object of taste is actually an intuition that results from the reflection on an object and its purposiveness. Interest in an intuition is impossible, as Dickie points out.²² The morality of aesthetic judgment in Kant's view is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it is important to note that the freedom inherent in a judgment made without direction toward one interest or another opens up the possibility that the faculty of judgment operates in

¹⁹ Kevin W. Sweeney, "Can Soup Be Beautiful? The Rise of Gastronomy and the Aesthetics of Food," in *Food & Philosophy: Eat, Think, and Be Merry*, ed. Fritz Allhoff and Dave Monroe (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 120–23.

²⁰ Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 126–27.

²¹ Mihály Szilágyi-Gál, "The Disinterested Autonomy of Judging: The Conception of Freedom Kant, Schiller, and Arendt Share" (Debreceni Egyetem, 2007), 2–4.

²² Dickie, *The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century*, 106–08.

the realm of free will. The notion that taste is a judgment based on intuition, further frees it from the bounds of reason and cognition. Because Kantian purposiveness is natural and teleological, one can surmise it is imbued into objects and systems by a creator/deity. Therefore, the intuition that is taste, which derives from the beauty that is the form of the object's purposiveness in the first place, is a sort of negotiation between God and our nonrational, noncognitive understanding of our place in the world. Kantian taste is a reaction, not a deduction, and therefore it cannot be reduced to any prescribed list of attributes or qualities.

Perhaps the 18th century philosopher whose theory of taste has the most to contribute to an understanding of the mechanisms of modern restaurant criticism, or any professional, journalistic criticism for that matter, is David Hume. Hume was a Scottish philosopher, whose theory of taste expressed in his concise essay, *On the Standard of Taste*,²³ places the onus of judgment on informed, educated experts, that is, on critics themselves.²⁴ As Dickie describes it, Hume's taste is "the joint verdicts of good critics."²⁵ (It helps my purposes here that Hume consistently uses examples of gustatory taste to explain his theory of aesthetic taste.) The standard of taste that Hume is looking for is not any objective quality inherent in an object or a faculty in the person observing it that can be used to judge one object against another. Instead, it is the consensus of a group of experts or critics of "strong

²³ David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays*, ed. John W. Lenz (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1965 [1757]).

²⁴ Kant's *Critique of Judgement* is considered by many to be a reaction to Hume's essay.

²⁵ Dickie, *The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century*, 135.

sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice.”²⁶ Hume admits that such “men of delicate taste” are rare, but suggests “they are easily to be distinguished in society by the soundness of their understanding, and the superiority of their faculties above the rest of mankind.”²⁷ In short, taste, according to Hume, is discursive.

One of the many factors that make’s Hume’s standard of taste unique, ahead of its time, and helpful in thinking about restaurant reviews today is its inherent relativity. Although Hume begins his essay by suggesting that all objects of true beauty have a certain timelessness—“the same work of Homer that pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and at London.”²⁸—Hume later accounts for variation in standards of taste due to what he calls “different humors of particular men” and “particular manners and opinions of our age and country.”²⁹ Relativity is further injected into the judgment of taste when Hume explains how an effective critic must understand that “every work of art, in order to produce its due effect on the mind, must be surveyed in a certain point of view, and cannot be fully relished by persons whose situation, real or imaginary, is not conformable to that which is required by the performance.”³⁰ In this way, any assessment of taste for Hume is contingent on the moment, the society, the object, and the person doing the judging—a prototypical postmodern position, indeed.

Although I am not in a position to declare Hume’s theory of taste “far

²⁶ Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," 17.

²⁷ Ibid., 19.

²⁸ Ibid., 9.

²⁹ Ibid., 19.

³⁰ Ibid., 15.

superior” to those proposed by Hutcheson, Gerard, Alison, and Kant, as Dickie does almost gleefully in the conclusion to his book on the philosophy of taste in the 18th century,³¹ I do find Hume’s theory prescient and still wholly applicable in light of what we’ve learned in terms of physiology, psychology, agency, and other modern pursuits in the two centuries that have followed the so-called Century of Taste. I also believe that Hume’s philosophy of taste provides a philosophical foundation (at least a foreshadowing) of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s complex theory of aesthetic judgment, aka distinction, based on class as expressed by habitus and the machinations of the field of cultural production as it pertains to food. I will explore Bourdieu more fully later in this chapter and throughout this dissertation.

A Taste for Biomedical Sciences

Taste has also been studied from different scientific perspectives—such as physiology, biology, chemistry, and psychology, to name a few—and each contributes to our understanding of how we perceive the flavors of food and incorporate those perceptions into our eating behaviors. Although there have been huge advances in the research of taste and related senses at the biochemical and neurological level, there remain large gaps in our understanding.³²

According to French chemist Hervé This, we have his fellow French chemist, Michel-Eugene Chevreul (1786–1889), to thank for first recognizing

³¹ Dickie, *The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century*, 142.

³² Linda M. Bartoshuk and Gary K. Beauchamp, "Chemical Senses," *Annual Review of Psychology* 45 (1994).

in 1824 that when we refer to the taste of a food we are actually talking about a complex sensory experience that includes olfactory, gustatory, and tactile sensations.³³ Brillat-Savarin was either aware of Chevreul's work or came independently to the same conclusion when he published his *Physiology of Taste* a year later, in which he wrote, "I am not only convinced that there is no full act of tasting without the participation of the sense of smell, but I am also tempted to believe that smell and taste form a single sense."³⁴ (Brillat-Savarin alludes to the tactile sensations associated with taste when he discusses the role of the teeth, tongue, and cheeks.) Further evidence for the interaction of these senses has been produced during flavor experiments at the University of Nottingham that demonstrate that smell and taste are not only linked in the mouth but also in the brain.³⁵ Psychologist Paul Rozin calls this sensory combination "mouthsense."³⁶ Dissecting the mechanisms of each of the sensations that comprise mouthsense and the role each plays in establishing taste preferences has been the project of much of the physiological and neurological exploration of taste.

Based on research done by German scientists in the early 20th century, we in the west have commonly understood gustatory sensation simply as the

³³ Hervé This, *Kitchen Mysteries: Revealing the Science of Cooking*, ed. Albert Sonnenfeld, trans. Jody Gladding, Arts & Traditions of the Table: Perspectives on Culinary History (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 11-12.

³⁴ Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*, 39.

³⁵ Anthony Blake, "The Language of Flavour: Learning and Memory," in *Food and the Memory: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2000*, ed. Harlan Walker (Devon, UK: Prospect Books, 2001), 44-46.

³⁶ Quoted from a personal communication in Valerie B. Duffy and Linda M. Bartoshuk, "Sensory Factors in Feeding," in *Why We Eat What We Eat: The Psychology of Eating*, ed. Elizabeth D. Capaldi (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1996), 145.

perception of four basic tastes: sweet, sour, bitter, and salty. Historically, papillae containing tastebuds were thought to be located on the tongue in specific regions that corresponded to areas of sensitivity to these basic tastes: sweet in the front, bitter in the back, salty and sour on the sides. Recent research has shown, however, that this tongue-map explanation is incomplete, and to a large extent, incorrect. For example, to the four basic tastes a fifth has been added, umami, which Japanese researchers explain as a general “tastiness” that comes from the perception of glutamic acid, the salt of the amino acid glutamate, and, This contends, alanine.³⁷ As This points out, even with the addition of umami, other tastes, such as the taste of licorice produced by glycyrrhizic acid, remain unaccounted for.³⁸ By 1987, Uziel et al. had concluded that taste was a “multidimensional continuum” along which certain but not all tastes could be grouped into fundamental categories.³⁹ What’s more, Bartoshuk has shown that the familiar tongue map of taste described above, which was created by the psychology historian Edwin Boring of Harvard in 1942, was based on a misinterpretation of data presented in the doctoral thesis of German physiologist D. P. Hanig in 1901. Bartoshuk’s experiments have shown that all tastes are perceived on all areas of the tongue.⁴⁰ In addition, taste buds are also located on other parts of the mouth besides the tongue, including along the margin of the hard and soft palate, on

³⁷ This, *Kitchen Mysteries: Revealing the Science of Cooking*, 15. It should be noted that some taste experts, such as Linda M. Bartoshuk, have been reluctant to treat umami as one of the basic tastes.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁹ A. Uziel, J. Smadja, and A. Faurion, "Physiologie du goût," *Oto-Rhino-Laryngologie* 2 (1987).

⁴⁰ Linda M. Bartoshuk, "The Biological Basis of Food Perception and Acceptance," *SO - Food Quality & Preference* 4, no. 1-2 (1993): 22-23.

the uvula, and in the throat. ⁴¹

The papillae housing the taste buds take three forms, named fungiform, foliate, and circumvallate after their shapes. The taste buds they contain are comprised of a combination of taste receptor cells—up to 100 in each bud, according to Miller—that function in a variety of ways not yet fully understood, and basal cells, which seem to also communicate taste information to the nerves and may play a role in taste cell rejuvenation.⁴² Taste cells are replaced at a rapid rate, roughly once every 10 days according to Miller, a fact that has implications in the function of memory in taste that will be discussed later. Each taste perception has its own mechanism within the taste cells. For instance, the salt taste of sodium chloride (table salt) is thought to be produced by a change in electrical charge within a cell channel that occurs when a charged sodium ion enters, thereby triggering a neurotransmitter. Sour tastes are perceived and transmitted via a similar, though distinct mechanism, likely triggered by the presence of positive hydrogen ions. Sweet and bitter tastes are thought to be registered by different proteinaceous receptors to which sweet or bitter molecules attach, triggering a neurotransmitter.⁴³ Other tastes will likely reveal additional receptors and alternate mechanisms.

As noted above, the interaction of taste and olfaction is important and complex. Brillat-Savarin suggested they might be one sense. Others differentiate the basic tastes perceived by the papillae and the complex tastes that result from the combination of taste and smell by using the word *flavor*

⁴¹ Duffy and Bartoshuk, "Sensory Factors in Feeding," 147.

⁴² Miller, "A Matter of Taste," 78.

⁴³ Bartoshuk and Beauchamp, "Chemical Senses," 421–22.

to refer to the latter. Duffy and Bartoshuk explain that smell factors into taste via two types of olfaction: orthonasal (through the nose) and retronasal (through the back of the mouth up into the nasal passages), and they show that each contributes in a slightly different way to taste/ flavor. Duffy and Bartoshuk also propose that the localization of taste provided by the sensation of touch has something to do with the difference in the tastes perceived via these two modes of olfaction.⁴⁴ Their work builds on Rozin's postulation that food odors can affect food preferences differently if they are perceived orthonasally versus retronasally.⁴⁵

The tactile sensations that contribute to taste in terms of mouthsense are manifold. Bartoshuk's research shows that the taste sensation is not localized to the place of contact, and in fact, she has demonstrated how an illusion of taste can be transmitted across the tongue using touch.⁴⁶ The pain that results from the burning sensation produced by certain compounds in piquant foods, such as the capsaicin that carries the heat of chile peppers or the isothiocyanates that make mustard and wasabi spicy, is an example of the tactile sensation of food. Finally, temperature is an important tactile sensation that not only triggers a sensory response but also affects the vaporization of aromas that has an impact on retronasal olfaction.

Information from the taste cells is transmitted to the brain via three cranial nerves. Each services a different portion of the tongue, carrying taste, thermal, touch, and pain information from the papillae to the brain.⁴⁷ The

⁴⁴ Duffy and Bartoshuk, "Sensory Factors in Feeding," 147-50.

⁴⁵ Paul Rozin, "Taste-Smell Confusions and the Duality of the Olfactory Sense," *Perception and Psychophysics* 31, no. 4 (1982).

⁴⁶ Bartoshuk, "The Biological Basis of Food Perception and Acceptance," 25.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*: 22.

specific neurotransmission process has not been fully mapped at the molecular level, but the process begins with the chemical taste events described above. Brillat-Savarin believed and Bartoshuk's research has proven that people missing all or part of their tongue continue to taste food with relatively good sensitivity and accuracy.

Genetic research provides some interesting information about the structure and function of the taste buds. Not everyone is wired for taste in the same way. Some tastes, such as the bitter taste of 6-n-propylthiouracil (PROP) cannot be perceived at all by some people, while others find it completely unpalatable. (Such genetic differentiation forms the basis for the hypothesis mentioned above that there are different receptors for bitter tastes, for those who cannot taste PROP can still taste other bitter compounds.) Genetic coding determines the morphology and number of papillae on the tongue, which can lead to supertasters (with a high concentration of papillae), who have a hypersensitivity to tastes at both ends of the spectrum.⁴⁸ Genetics also play into what is believed to be an innate preference for sweet over other tastes and an innate dislike of bitter. As of yet, there is no evidence that we are born with any innate preference for one smell over another, which suggests that all smell preferences, and by extrapolation all flavor preferences (remembering taste + smell = flavor) are learned.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Duffy and Bartoshuk, "Sensory Factors in Feeding," 154-60.

⁴⁹ Bartoshuk and Beauchamp, "Chemical Senses," 424-33.

A Taste for Psychology

Psychological explorations of and experiments about eating behaviors and food preferences have focused on various behavioral mechanisms and their triggers. The once generally accepted model of homeostasis—we get hungry, we eat foods we like, we return to a normal, satiated state until we are hungry again—has, since Pavlov’s time, given way to the notion that learning and experience interact with biological predispositions to produce eating behavior. As Elizabeth Capaldi explains the current generally accepted behavioral model:

Social experience is important, but so are individual experiences. Rats and people learn to avoid foods that make them sick and to approach foods that give them pleasure and make them feel well. The ingestion of particular foods is also a learned behavior, therefore. Throughout life, experience continues to change food preferences: Every eating experience is a learning experience.⁵⁰

Paul Rozin’s experiments on disgust, contagion, and sociocultural influences on food preferences illuminate important psychological components of taste. In their seminal paper on disgust, Rozin and Fallon characterize disgust as a food-related emotion, which they define as “revulsion at the prospect of (oral) incorporation of an offensive object.”⁵¹ They suggest a taxonomy of food rejection that has four basic categories: 1) *Distaste*, which is based primarily on sensory factors; 2) *Danger*, which is based on anticipated harmful consequences; 3) *Inappropriate*, which concerns items not culturally considered to be food; and 4) *Disgust*, which is largely due to ideational

⁵⁰ Elizabeth D. Capaldi, *Why We Eat What We Eat: The Psychology of Eating* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1996), 6.

⁵¹ Paul Rozin and April E. Fallon, "A Perspective on Disgust," *Psychological Review* 94 (1987): 23.

factors, as are inappropriate foods, that have an offensive quality.⁵² Rozin and Fallen distinguish the physical sensory perception of the taste of food from the learned, ideational factors that influence food rejection. Interestingly, they note that inappropriate or disgusting foods may or may not have an off-putting taste. “Even if ground dried cockroach tasted just like sugar,” they write, “if one knew it was cockroach, this particular sweet powder would taste bad.”⁵³ While noting that most psychological and physiological research has been concerned with *how much* is eaten rather than *what* is eaten, Rozin, asserts that “sociocultural factors are even more important in food selection than in intake control.”⁵⁴ Such a finding implies that aesthetic judgments which resonate in popular discourse may be a powerful determinant of food selection and preference.

Other psychologists have delved into the opposite end of the food-preference spectrum, that is, the pleasure of food, by examining how we develop certain food preferences and by teasing out distinctions such as liking the taste of a food versus the desire to eat it. Capaldi has shown how food preferences can be conditioned via different mechanisms, such as the “medicine effect,” a positive or negative postingestive response to something eaten, or “flavor-flavor learning,” the association of a flavor liked (e.g., sugar) with a flavor disliked (e.g., coffee) to develop a liking for the disliked flavor on

⁵² Ibid.: 24.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Paul Rozin, "Sociocultural Influences on Human Food Selection," in *Why We Eat What We Eat: The Psychology of Eating*, ed. Elizabeth D. Capaldi (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1996), 234.

its own.⁵⁵ In trying to explain sensory-specific satiation—the phenomenon whereby we stop eating something we like because we no longer have a taste for it—Hetherington and Rolls explain various mechanisms by which our taste for foods is developed and manipulated, such as habituation, opioid mediation, sensory stimulation (e.g., increased variety stimulates appetite), and certain cognitive processes. They conclude, “Pleasure is central to eating. The pleasure of eating and the pleasantness of foods are established through innate and learned mechanisms.”⁵⁶

Taste and food-preference psychology find their most practical (and one imagines lucrative) application in the realm of food marketing and consumer behavior. Journals such as *Food Quality and Preference* and *Appetite* specialize in the evaluation of taste perception, food acceptance, sensory satisfaction, and a host of other topics that together can help explain how we come to evaluate and prefer certain foods over others, especially in the marketplace. These journals are concerned both with the factors that affect food preference as well as the methods used to evaluate those preferences.⁵⁷

One area of study in this field that pertains directly to the effect of restaurant reviewing on taste is the role that consumer expectation and

⁵⁵ Elizabeth D. Capaldi, "Conditioned Food Preferences," in *Why We Eat What We Eat: The Psychology of Eating*, ed. Elizabeth D. Capaldi (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1996), 54–56.

⁵⁶ Marion M. Hetherington and Barbara J. Rolls, "Sensory-Specific Satiety: Theoretical Frameworks and Central Characteristics," in *Why We Eat What We Eat: The Psychology of Eating*, ed. Elizabeth D. Capaldi (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1996), 286.

⁵⁷ The application of taste preference psychology to food marketing is so pervasive that a new best-selling diet by one of the leading researchers in the field purports to be able to affect weight loss by explaining the most common, experimentally proven manipulations used by the food industry to encourage greater consumption and providing strategies to avoid being manipulated by them into eating more than you should. See Brian Wansink, *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think* (New York: Bantam Books, 2006).

environment has on food likes and dislikes. Experiments repeatedly confirm that manipulating the words on a label (or menu), changing the color or visual presentation of a familiar food, or altering the context and/or environment in which a food is consumed, can impact the degree to which a food is liked or disliked. Recently, King et al. have shown that the setting and context in which foods are evaluated—e.g., in a restaurant versus a laboratory, or served individually or as part of a meal—affect the level of acceptance of foods.⁵⁸ Yeomans et al. have reconfirmed that expectations generated by labeling and visual cues used to present a novel food, in their case, smoked salmon ice cream, can greatly affect the acceptance of that food. Not only did referring to the smoked salmon ice cream as “frozen savoury mousse” change people’s attitude about it, it actually changed the perception of saltiness and other flavor characteristics of the food. The authors of the study concluded, “Expectations play a major role in generating hedonic responses to food stimuli, such that the same food was rated as acceptable when the flavour was expected but close to disgusting when the expected and actual flavour were very different.”⁵⁹ Other studies pinpoint the affect of cognitive factors, such as country or region of origin, which has been proven to have both symbolic and emotional resonance, or the technology of production, which leads to certain sensory expectations, on flavor perception, sensory evaluation, and

⁵⁸ Silvia C. King et al., “The Effects of Contextual Variables on Food Acceptability: A confirmatory Study,” *Food Quality and Preference* 18, no. 1 (2007).

⁵⁹ Martin R. Yeomans et al., “The Role of Expectancy in Sensory and Hedonic Evaluation: The Case of Smoked Salmon Ice-Cream,” *Food Quality and Preference* 19, no. 6 (2008): 572.

acceptance.⁶⁰ Jaeger shows how nonsensory factors, such as convenience, price, production technology, personal health, and others, affect the decision of what to eat.⁶¹ Brian Wansink, the director of Cornell University's Food and Brand Lab, sums up the phenomenon thus, "We often taste what we think we will taste...our expectations about the taste of a food can 'trick our taste buds,' making us think a food tastes much better or worse than it actually does."⁶² The implications of the malleability of taste preferences when subjected to any information that affects diners' expectations, such as anything they read in restaurant reviews, are obvious.

A Taste for Science *and* Philosophy

Situated somewhere between a philosophical treatise, a compendium of scientific research, and a book of manners, Brillat-Savarin's *Physiology of Taste* (1825) bridges metaphoric and gustatory taste.⁶³ Brillat-Savarin dismisses the hierarchy of the senses, asserting that all senses play equally into our evolutionary drive to sustain ourselves and procreate.⁶⁴ To this end, he adds a sixth sense, physical desire,⁶⁵ and hints that there might be others. Brillat-Savarin believes all of the senses can be trained and improved. In a rhetorical

⁶⁰ See T. Iaccarino et al., "Influence of Information on Origin and Technology on the Consumer Response: The Case of *Soppressata* Salami," *Food Quality and Preference* 17, no. 1-2 (2006). and, Sharron Kuznesof, Angela Tregear, and Andrew Moxey, "Regional Foods: a Consumer Perspective," *British Food Journal* 99, no. 6 (1997).

⁶¹ Sara R. Jaeger, "Non-Sensory Factors in Sensory Science Research," *Food Quality and Preference* 17 (2005).

⁶² Wansink, *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think*, 118.

⁶³ Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 28-29, 32-33.

⁶⁵ *Génésiq* in French. See Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *Physiologie du goût*, Champs ed. (Paris: Flammarion, 1982 [1825]), 39.

reversal of the taste philosophers of the century that preceded him, he uses visual and aural metaphors to explain how gustatory taste works and how it can be developed and tuned.

In Brillat-Savarin's esteem, taste (and its cohort smell) is of supreme importance because it is "the basis for several operations which result in a man's growth and development, in his self-preservation, and in the general repairs to his body of the losses caused by elimination and evaporation."⁶⁶ Sweeney shows how Brillat-Savarin's explanation of gustatory taste aligns with Kant's formulation about aesthetic taste. Brillat-Savarin distinguishes between simple tastes activated by direct contact with the tongue, such as sweet and sour, which he says can only be judged agreeable or disagreeable, from complex flavors, a combination of taste, smell, and memory, that in their sequential unfolding, allow for reflection and contemplation of a higher order.⁶⁷ Building on this idea, I will later show how restaurant discourse functions to further remove taste from the immediacy of its sensory stimulation and personal satisfaction.

Brillat-Savarin privileges taste to assert a new field of intellectual and cultural pursuit called *gastronomy*, which he defines as "the intelligent knowledge of whatever concerns man's nourishment."⁶⁸ Gastronomy, as Brillat-Savarin constructs it, develops from the influence of taste on our instinct to eat. "Sensations, by force of repetition and consideration," he wrote, "have perfected the organ of taste and enlarged the sphere of its

⁶⁶ Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*, 34.

⁶⁷ Sweeney, "Can Soup Be Beautiful? The Rise of Gastronomy and the Aesthetics of Food," 124-27.

⁶⁸ Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*, 51.

power...The need to eat...has become a powerful passion which has a marked influence on everything connected with society.”⁶⁹ Current formulations of taste in the social sciences—in anthropology and sociology, in particular—underscore Brillat-Savarin’s point.

A Taste for Anthropology

What psychologists treat as experimental variables, such as the cognitive, symbolic, and emotional factors that affect eating behavior and food preference, anthropologists label culture. In anthropology, taste and its opposition, distaste, inasmuch as they translate into food preferences and eating behaviors, are viewed primarily as products and characteristics of culture. It is an important marker that helps groups distinguish themselves from one another, while also serving as a language for transmitting cultural norms. Whether treated semiotically, as a collection of linguistic-like signs that can be read for clues to cultural beliefs embedded in practices, or ontologically, as a filter through which to uncover, understand, and interpret cultural practices, taste provides insight into the machinations of the social forces that influence individual food preferences and behaviors. Anthropology has a long tradition of dealing with food, in part, as Sutton explains, because of “the very associations of food with ‘the primitive,’ as well as anthropologists’ longstanding commitment to documenting the quotidian.”⁷⁰ Seminal anthropological works on food help us understand how taste is culturally constructed. Against the backdrop of the philosophy, biomedical

⁶⁹ Ibid., 45–46.

⁷⁰ David E. Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*, eds. Paul Gilroy, Michael Herzfeld, and Danny Miller, *Materializing Culture* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2001), 4–5.

science, and psychology of taste, the anthropology of taste provides a cultural framework for understanding how restaurant reviews contribute to restaurant discourse, which in turn contributes to our formulations of taste.

The anthropology of taste is inseparable from the anthropology of food, although in most anthropological literature on food, the topic of taste is never broached. Still, taste, that is, collective taste, lies close to the surface. For example, when Lévi-Strauss notes in his explanation of the culinary triangle that “in any cuisine, nothing is simply cooked, but must be cooked in one fashion or another,”⁷¹ he is acknowledging that the manipulation of food leads to certain cultural preferences, or collective tastes. Similarly, other important anthropological works about food—by Mary Douglas, Jean Soler, and Marvin Harris, for example—can be viewed to some extent as explorations of the cultural component of taste because they deal with food preferences and prejudices, eating behaviors, cooking habits, gustatory taboos, and other cultural culinary practices that lead to important cultural distinctions. As Harris notes, “Food laws in Leviticus were mostly codifications of preexisting traditional food preferences and avoidances.”⁷²

More recently, food has been studied in an anthropological context as an object of material culture. The interplay of the anthropology of the senses and the anthropology of memory provide new tools and techniques for understanding the cultural components of food as a material object and taste as its sensory perception. As Iddison explains, “Our experience of taste and

⁷¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Culinary Triangle,” in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 1997 [1968]), 29.

⁷² Marvin Harris, “The Abominable Pig,” in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (London: Routledge, 1997), 74.

smell...rely substantially on memory, as there is no method to record or reproduce standards for these senses...The development of a culinary tradition must have depended initially on the memory function."⁷³ Memory plays a role in the practice of food criticism, as we shall see in subsequent chapters. To our understanding of the relationship between food and memory, Seremetakis adds that taste, like the other senses, is a sensation that happens in a moment. What we are discussing when we talk about any taste that we are experiencing is in fact the memory of a taste sensation, not a taste sensation itself. Seremetakis calls memory a "meta-sense" that:

Transports, bridges and crosses all the other senses....Memory is the horizon of sensory experiences, storing and restoring the experience of each sensory dimension in another, as well as dispersing and finding sensory records outside the body in a surround of entangling objects and places."⁷⁴

Weiss goes further, proposing that "the vagueries of personal 'taste' [are] buried in the dense dialectic between forgetting and anamnesis that forms and informs our senses, sensitivity, sensibility."⁷⁵ This "meta" quality points to discourse as one venue where senses such as taste can be negotiated.

Taste's reliance on memory makes it fluid, organic, and susceptible to manipulation. "After enjoying even the most substantial of banquets, the most corporeal of feasts, after relishing flavours and aromas," write social historians Gerald and Valerie Mars, "there is nothing left! Nothing, that is,

⁷³ Philip Iddison, "Memory as a Culinary Skill and Necessity," in *Food and the Memory: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2000*, ed. Harlan Walker (Devon, UK: Prospect Books, 2001), 116.

⁷⁴ C. Nadia Seremetakis, *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 9.

⁷⁵ Weiss, "Tractatus Logico-Gastronomicus," 85.

except our defective and vulnerable memories.”⁷⁶ If we recall that our taste cells are regenerated every ten days—meaning that the interface between the object tasted and our recollection of taste is almost never the same—memory further serves to provide a consistency of taste, smoothing out the variances while taking note of changes over time. Taste memory bridges the gap between expectations and sensory stimulation, as Yeomans et al. submit.⁷⁷ Operating on an innate or subconscious level, memory helps keep us open to new flavors even while it fails to allow us to remember or identify things we’ve tasted in the past with any degree of accuracy, as Köster et al. have demonstrated.⁷⁸ Seremetakis uses her memory of the taste of a delicious peach that is no longer available in the Greek marketplace to demonstrate how taste feeds a discourse of loss that produces nostalgia. “In matters of taste, memory always interacts with history,” echoes Allen Weiss. “The selectiveness of memory creates both identities and differences, so that culinary idiosyncrasy is in the vanguard of invention, and any adequate answer to the quest of taste must entail a discourse of inclusion, not exclusion; of openness, experimentation and risk, not reticence, denial and reaction.”⁷⁹

In a Proustian sense, taste also serves as a mnemonic device, allowing us to recollect situations, recall feelings, remember places, and reconnect with the past. Alluding to Proust, a scene in Disney’s blockbuster animated feature *Ratatouille* underscores this mnemonic function of taste when fictional,

⁷⁶ Gerald Mars and Valerie Mars, “Food History and the Death of Memory,” in *Food and the Memory: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2000*, ed. Harlan Walker (Devon, UK: Prospect Books, 2001), 157.

⁷⁷ Yeomans et al., “The Role of Expectancy in Sensory and Hedonic Evaluation: The Case of Smoked Salmon Ice-Cream,” 566.

⁷⁸ M. A. Köster, J. Prescott, and E. P. Köster, “Incidental Learning and Memory for Three Basic Tastes in Food,” *Chemical Senses* 29, no. 5 (2004).

⁷⁹ Weiss, “Paradigms of Taste,” 8–9.

frowning restaurant critic Anton Ego bites into the rat-chef's ratatouille and is transported back to his blissful childhood and transformed.⁸⁰ Such mnemonic tastes are often invoked by restaurant critics searching for traditional or authentic flavors in otherwise ersatz settings, such as a French or Italian restaurant in New York City, which are by definition contrived theme environments, despite how traditional or authentic they may seem. "Ritual feasting or mundane food exchanges can create lasting memory impressions, particularly when cultivated through narratives of past exchanges,"⁸¹ Sutton concludes in his anthropological study of food and memory on the Greek island of Kalymnos. This process of recollection involves complex cultural mechanisms, such as identity formation and metaphoric synesthesia. Sutton suggests that collective taste helps reinforce imagined communities, in Benedict Anderson's sense,⁸² by providing a shared sensory experience through the mundane ritual of eating. This ritual and the memories of tastes evoked by it link people who have migrated to their families, their towns, their island, and their nation.⁸³ Taste, or rather taste memory, helps hold communities together, though it does so in a nonsystematic way. As Sutton explains, "Memories of taste and smell by their very nature will tend to the idiosyncratic, the randomly associative, as opposed to symbols that may be more collectively cognized and debated."⁸⁴

Of course, as effective taste is at bringing people together, distaste can

⁸⁰ Brad Bird and Jan Pinkava, "Ratatouille," (Disney), produced by John Lasseter, et al., 2007.

⁸¹ Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*, 160.

⁸² See Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

⁸³ Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*, 83–86.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

be just as effective, maybe more so, at keeping them apart. Taste prejudices can lead to other prejudices. Hasia Diner's work on the foodways of Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants arriving in New York during the mass migrations of the late 18th and early 19th century documents how food habits and preferences were used internally and externally to segregate different ethnic groups.⁸⁵ Although we like to think that an openness to ethnic food reflects an openness to ethnic cultures, Lisa Heldke argues with great conviction to the contrary.⁸⁶ Schwabe reminds us that "food dislikes are not prejudices if they are based upon a sufficient range of experiences and willingness to recognize that taste may change or palates be educated."⁸⁷ Nor do all food prejudices turn into ethnic prejudices. But as Bourdieu, Weiss, Simoons, Rozin, and others reiterate, the power of taste lies as much in its negation as anywhere else.

Many other aspects of tastes, food preferences, and rituals of distinction serve to separate and/or bind communities in an anthropological sense. Some of these aspects are illuminated and operationalized by sociologists looking to understand how food choices are formed and play out in the cultural sphere and what sociocultural ramifications those choices have on society at large.

⁸⁵ Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁸⁶ Lisa M. Heldke, *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁸⁷ Calvin W. Schwabe, *Unmentionable Cuisine* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1979), 8.

A Taste for Sociology

In contrast to anthropology's early adoption of food as an important cultural phenomenon, until recently "few sociologists have analyzed food in terms of systems of production or consumption, cultural products or cultural words, or social context," according to Ferguson and Zukin, who wonder why, given its cultural richness, food has not "stirred the sociologist imagination."⁸⁸ Still, because of the pervasiveness of food in our daily lives and the reverberations that decisions about what we eat have throughout various aspects of society, the sociology of food has much to contribute to our understanding of taste. Eating touches potent areas of production, consumption, and distribution that are ripe with issues of class, gender, domesticity, and consumer behavior, among others. The tools, processes, and theories developed in the realm of sociology can help us understand the relationship of reviews to taste.

British sociologist Stephen Mennell has shown how the increasing mannerization of civilized society coupled with the growing importance of chefs and restaurants in the public sphere over the last few centuries has contributed to distinct national attitudes and behaviors regarding food and dining.⁸⁹ Using England and France as his cases, Mennell traces various complex social, political, and cultural forces from the Middle Ages to modern

⁸⁸ Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson and Sharon Zukin, "What's Cooking?," *Theory and Society* 24, no. 2 (1995): 194. Ferguson and Zukin were not alone. I am struck by how most sociological studies of food written in the 1990s begin with a call out to the field to take a closer look at food and eating behaviors. In addition to Ferguson and Zukin, see introductions to Warde, *Consumption, Food & Taste* and Beardsworth and Keil, *Sociology on the Menu*. Given the explosion of sociological research centered on food since then, the field must have heeded their advice.

⁸⁹ Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*.

times that helped define French and British food habits both independently and in contradistinction to each other. Mennell sets out with the premise that “tastes in food, like tastes in music, literature or the visual arts, are socially shaped, and the major forces which have shaped them are religions, classes and nations.”⁹⁰ Indebted to Elias and Habermas, he proceeds to tease out the power dynamics of food culture to conclude that “underneath the many swirling cross-currents, the main trend has been towards diminishing contrasts and increasing varieties in food habits and culinary taste.”⁹¹

Underlying French sociologist Claude Fischler’s exhilarating study of changes in western foodways is the paradox of the omnivore. As Fischler characterizes this paradox, we highly adaptive, omnivorous humans have the evolutionary benefit of being able to get the nutrients we need from an infinite number of sources. But with so many options comes the anxiety of having to choose, a lack of specificity (or its inverse, a vast freedom) that produces a sort of neurotic neophobia, a distrust of new things:

On the one hand, because he depends on variety, the omnivore tends toward diversification, innovation, exploration, and change, which are vital. On the other hand, he is simultaneously constrained by prudence, mistrust, and gustatory conservatism. Every new, unknown food is a potential danger.⁹²

This paradox, Fischler believes, is at the root of many of our modern food apprehensions.

Food is a “pillar of our identity,” Fischler writes, and in our world of ersatz industrial food, without any natural, identifiable antecedent, he believes we are increasingly susceptible to food fads, overweight, and any

⁹⁰ Ibid., 17.

⁹¹ Ibid., 322.

⁹² Claude Fischler, *L'Homnivore: Le goût, la cuisine et le corps*, Nouvelle édition corrigée ed. (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1993), 63. (my translation)

number of gastronomic ills.⁹³ Interestingly, Fischler suggests that the anxiety provoked by the omnivore's paradox in our modern context also makes us susceptible to manipulation of our food preferences and tastes. He uses the recent popularity of the *baguette de campagne* or “country baguette” and *baguette au levain* or “sourdough baguette” in French bakeries to show how the marketplace creates fantasies of consumption that resonate with mythical histories—the baguette having been a city bread, developed in Paris in the 20th century to meet the needs of bakers and citizens for a quick, quotidian bread.⁹⁴ Both “country baguette” and “sourdough baguette” are oxymorons, but they have been successful in the marketplace because they play on French nostalgia for tastes, and therefore identities, lost in this industrial age. The imaginary *baguette à l'ancienne*, with its role in identity formation, echoes the lost taste of Seremetakis's peach, which unites people in a collective longing. What could be a stronger food symbol of France and the French than the baguette? And yet the current French taste for baguettes is built on a nostalgic falsehood.

Fischler has many other intriguing examples of changes in eating behaviors and tastes that he believes show a breakdown of cultural mores. He once laughed at the signs he saw while traveling in America that warned against eating in any number of places in which no French person would ever think of doing so (such as clothing stores and libraries), only to realize later that because of the breakdown of social eating conventions, other developed countries will likely soon be required to post similar proscriptions. Fischler sums up these and other anxiety-provoking “devolutions” in the omnivore's

⁹³ Ibid., 219.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 208.

eating habits brought on by modernity with the observation (and clever pun) that we've moved from a gastronomic society, that is, one with a grammar and syntax of eating that Mennell might argue has helped define our nationalities, to a *gastroanomic* society, that is, one without rules about food, where anything goes, where the meaning of food and its role in identity formation is lost, preferences are unformed, and everyone needs to be warned not to eat in the library.⁹⁵

British sociologist Alan Warde uses editorial and advertising food content in women's magazines, data from a recurring national Family Expenditure Survey, and data from a household survey conducted in the north of England in 1990 to put some hard numbers behind observations made by colleagues such as Mennell and Fischler, and thereby draw some concrete conclusions about changes in taste.⁹⁶ Warde finds that from the 1960s to the 1990s the variety of foods in the marketplace increased dramatically, but he does not find any quantifiable changes in taste. Although his results are specific to Britain, Warde's methodology provides some useful tools for understanding taste and consumption in general.

In reaction to what Warde sees as shortcomings in the evidence for Mennell's claim of diminishing contrasts (he grants Mennell increased variety), he divides extant sociological theses about trends in food consumption patterns into four general categories: 1) *arbitrary individual diversity*, which is in essence Fischler's argument that a breakdown of rules of eating provokes the omnivore's paradox, producing an anxiety that leaves people insecure and susceptible to manipulation; 2) *post-Fordist food*, which

⁹⁵ Ibid., 212–16.

⁹⁶ Alan Warde, *Consumption, Food & Taste* (London: Sage, 1997).

suggests that an excessive commodification of foodstuffs in the marketplace has led to greater differentiation and volatility in consumption that pressures consumers toward greater individualization through the formation of neo-tribal or niche groups defined by consumption patterns; 3) *mass consumption in a mass society*, which posits a continued homogenization (or McDonaldization) of food consumption despite (or because of) the availability of an increased variety of foodstuffs; and 4) *the persistence of social differentiation*, which suggests eating habits and tastes are predetermined by class in a way consistent with Bourdieu.⁹⁷ In his nuanced evaluation, Warde finds evidence to support elements of all four general theses.

In his analysis of the headnotes of recipes in women's magazine, Warde teases out eight "social appeals, imperatives, or principles of recommendation" that are invoked in the text to encourage readers to prepare the dish at hand. Warde then arranges these motivational narrative tropes into four natural oppositions which he calls "antinomies of taste," namely, novelty and tradition, health and indulgence, economy and extravagance, and care and convenience.⁹⁸ "The four antinomies are longstanding structural oppositions, claims and counter-claims about cultural values which can be mobilized to express appreciation of food and to make dietary decisions," Warde writes. "These are very deep-rooted contradictions, probably irresolvable, and applicable not only to food, but to other spheres of consumption, too."⁹⁹ These antinomies of taste suggest a guilt-fueled tension (perhaps the source of Fischlerian anxiety) between good and bad that editors

⁹⁷ Ibid., 29-41.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 46-48.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 55.

and writers manipulate to motivate their readers. They are indeed also fundamental to restaurant reviewing, operating both during the evaluation of individual dining experiences and during the process of writing up of those evaluations for publication, as we shall see in the Chapter V. In fact, a study of restaurant reviews over the same period might further illuminate Warde's findings.

From the 1960s to the 1990s Warde finds sharp increases in recipe recommendations based on health and convenience, marked increases in those based on tradition and indulgence, and decreases in those based on novelty and care. Recommendations based on economy stayed about the same.¹⁰⁰ Among the many insights in his discussion of these findings, Warde suggests that the main mechanism to describe perceived food changes in the 20th century is commodification.¹⁰¹ "Commodity culture itself creates an illusion of rapid change because of its preoccupation with new products,"¹⁰² he notes, concluding that "more varied products do not necessarily entail that any, or every, individual has now developed a more diverse set of preferences,"¹⁰³ that "there is no necessary link between an increase in variety and a decline in social differentiation,"¹⁰⁴ and that "there is little evidence of class contrasts diminishing."¹⁰⁵ His finding that over 30 years there has been no significant diminishment of class contrasts in consumption patterns and eating behaviors in Britain despite the increased availability and diversity of foodstuffs provides an excellent segue into one of the most important and

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 158.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 171.

¹⁰² Ibid., 165.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 167.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 171.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 170.

sometimes controversial sociological theorists of taste, Pierre Bourdieu, for whom class is the predominant determinant of taste and, conversely, taste, an important expression of class.

In *Distinction*, his most cited work in the literature of taste, Bourdieu uses data he collected from a survey of daily habits and cultural preferences in France and other relevant consumption statistics to create a blueprint for taste based on class. In Bourdieu's world, taste is a synecdoche for the entire system of production and consumption of cultural capital, the circular mechanism through which ordinary things are transformed into oppositional symbols (distinctions), which produce culturally resonant and relevant lifestyles, which in turn produce new oppositional symbols. "[Taste] raises the differences inscribed in the physical order of bodies to the symbolic order of significant distinctions," he writes. "It is a virtue made of necessity which continuously transforms necessity into virtue by inducing 'choices' which correspond to the condition of which it is the product."¹⁰⁶ In Bourdieu's world, tastes—which he believes are always negations, i.e., an expression of distastes—like all aesthetic stances, "are opportunities to experience or assert one's positioning social space, as a rank to be upheld or a distance to be kept."¹⁰⁷

For Bourdieu, the space in which the aesthetic judgments are made that generate the symbols that produce a lifestyle is delimited by the *habitus*, a subconscious "structuring structure" of dispositions informed by the cultural components of class—such as upbringing, education, occupation, social milieu, and other components of cultural capital—that serves as both "the

¹⁰⁶ Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 175.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification of these practices.”¹⁰⁸ Bourdieu relates habitus, practice, taste, and lifestyle thus:

It is in the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e., the space of lifestyles, is constituted.¹⁰⁹

In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu elaborates on the habitus, describing it as “the product of history,”¹¹⁰ “the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations”¹¹¹ that serves as the:

...immanent law, *lex insita*, laid down in each agent by his earliest upbringing, which is the precondition not only for the co-ordination of practices but also for practices of co-ordination, since the corrections and adjustments the agents themselves consciously carry out presuppose their mastery of a common code and since undertakings of collective mobilization cannot succeed without a minimum of concordance between the habitus of the mobilizing agents...and the dispositions of those whose aspirations and world-view they express.¹¹²

In short, habitus explains how, in the social space, where you come from affects where you are going, and more to the project at hand, what you like. Two important and often overlooked points are that the habitus is regenerative and constantly changing. Every aesthetic judgment reshapes and reinforces the habitus.

Armed with his nuanced concepts of habitus, practice, and lifestyle, Bourdieu moves into the field of cultural production (and cultural

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 170.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 82.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 71.

¹¹² Ibid., 81.

consumption), where tastes are in effect produced and actualized. Bourdieu reminds us that we can only develop tastes for things that exist. “Tastes actually realized depend on the state of the system of goods offered.”¹¹³ Practically speaking, this correspondence between production and consumption leads to his important observation that “every change in the system of goods induces a change in tastes.”¹¹⁴ In Bourdieu’s conception of taste—one I find most compelling—there is an homology between the field in which cultural products are produced and the field in which cultural products are consumed. These two fields are mediated by taste, which is shaped by the habitus of the actors in the field. Bourdieu sums up this important, complex relationship:

A cultural product—an avant-garde picture, a political manifesto, a newspaper—is a constituted taste, a taste which has been raised from the vague semi-existence of half-formulated and unformulated experience, implicit or even unconscious desire, to the full reality of the finished product, by a process of objectification which, in present circumstances, is almost always the work of professionals.¹¹⁵

Of course, Bourdieu has his critics. In addition to elucidating myriad machinations of the mechanisms of taste and the production of symbolic capital, he draws seemingly problematic conclusions, such as, “The taste of the professionals or senior executives defines the popular taste, by negation, as the taste for the heavy, the fat and the coarse, by tending toward the light, the refined and the delicate”¹¹⁶; and “The working-class meal is characterized by plenty...and above all by freedom. ‘Elastic’ and ‘abundant’ dishes are brought to the table—soups or sauces, pasta or potatoes (almost always

¹¹³ Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 231.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 185.

included among the vegetables)—and served with a ladle or spoon, to avoid too much measuring and counting, in contrasting to everything that has to be cut and divided, such as roasts.”¹¹⁷ It is these types of poor-people-eat-heavy-food conclusions that some (mostly American) critics of Bourdieu see as spurious and reductive—despite how accurate these causal relationships might have been in 1960s France—and that critics cite as the reason Bourdieu’s usefulness is limited.

Because of the specificity of Bourdieu’s data to France, as well as France’s unique class structure and the relative value it places on products of high culture, some critics believe Bourdieu’s work has limited application in American society. But the shortcomings Bourdieu’s American detractors find in his theory are due mostly to the challenges of finding and measuring the data to prove his points, not necessarily to the theory itself.¹¹⁸ As I read various applications of Bourdieu used to generate and interpret data, even his own, I am not so much disabused of the veracity of his theory as of the utility and applicability of the data themselves. Placing Bourdieu in contradistinction to Warner,¹¹⁹ whose tidy, regimented theory of social class in America is measurable, if superficial and incomplete, Douglas Holt provides a comprehensive and compelling critique of the misinterpretation and/or misapplication of Bourdieu’s theories in (American) cultural sociological study. Holt recognizes that the way Bourdieu theorizes tastes “to operate as class boundaries through the micropolitics of everyday social

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 194.

¹¹⁸ For example, see Bonnie H. Erickson, "Culture, Class, and Connections," *The American Journal of Sociology* 102, no. 1 (1996)., who argues that Bourdieu undervalues social networks and mischaracterizes lifestyle and life cycle.

¹¹⁹ Lloyd Warner, Marchia Meeker, and Kenneth Eells, *Social Class in America: The Evaluation of Status* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960 [1949]).

interaction” makes his work difficult for sociologists to operationalize.¹²⁰ Obviously Bourdieu’s is not the unified theory of the social universe. But Holt’s point-by-point analysis demonstrates how easy it is to misread and misapply Bourdieu, and how much of the criticism actually underscores his major points. What is important to remember from Holt’s painstaking refutation of challenges to Bourdieu’s theory is that Bourdieu sees habitus as a “structuring structure” that circumscribes the field of possible options or probabilities of aesthetic judgment based on inputs of cultural capital, not solely as the judgment or the judgment-making mechanism, but something that encompasses both. Much the way probabilities in quantum mechanics are used to suggest a certain area in which an electron might be found if not the exact location of the electron itself, the habitus does not represent the aesthetic judgments themselves, but the space in which such judgments can be made. Also similar to quantum mechanics, each judgment made (or each electron present) changes the field of probabilities. What makes this theory so difficult to operationalize is that just about every action brings about a change in the shape of the space, so an attempt to pinpoint the space seems futile. It is an ever-changing space of possibilities. I do not believe this makes the theory any less powerful.

Moreover, most food theorists usually stop at Bourdieu’s discussion of habitus without taking into account his other important work on the field of cultural production, which is, in my opinion, even more important in the formation of taste, at least as it is shaped and manipulated in the discourse generated by restaurant reviews. Applied to the field of gastronomy,

¹²⁰ Douglas B. Holt, "Distinction in America? Recovering Bourdieu's Theory of Tastes from Its Critics," *Poetics* 25, no. 2-3 (1997).

Bourdieu's work in this area helps get to the root of Weiss's well-founded logoculinary skepticism that "One must always wonder, when reading a restaurant reviews or a recipe, precisely what motivated the writer to order and write about any given dish."¹²¹ The impact of Bourdieu's theory of cultural production on the world of reviewing will be discussed in the next chapter.

Of course, Bourdieu is not the first or the last theorist to set taste on a foundation of class; class is inherent in all matters of taste, however you conceive it. The 18th century philosophers of taste were certainly cognizant of the class component of aesthetic judgment. Who are Hume's "men of delicate taste" but a group of educated, experienced people with enough access and entitlement to allow them to become so? Any study of high/low or mass/popular culture is a study of taste and class, whether it's the taste cultures and taste publics that form the conceptual tools for Gans's critique of mass culture¹²² or the process of sacralization of culture and creation of hierarchies of taste that Levine shows transformed the status of Shakespeare's plays, Italian opera, classical music, and other cultural amusements in 19th and 20th century America.¹²³ Goody, who equates the "flowering of culture" to the "cultivation of taste" traces hierarchies of cuisine and differentiation in cooking (techniques, ingredients, flavorings—tastes) through Europe, Asia, and the Middle East to conclude, "Cooking is closely related to production on

¹²¹ Weiss, "Tractatus Logico-Gastronomicus," 99.

¹²² Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

¹²³ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

the one hand and to class on the other.”¹²⁴ Neither is Bourdieu the first to suggest that the performative element of class-marked consumption impacts aesthetic judgments at every level of society. Consider Veblen’s early observation that “no class of society, not even the most abjectly poor, foregoes all customary conspicuous consumption.”¹²⁵ But, as Holt argues and I concur, what makes Bourdieu’s concept of taste uniquely compelling is the expanded relationship between taste and class that results from making the practice of consumption, not just the object consumed, an integral part of the process that gives taste the regenerative power to build and perpetuate the class structure that produces it.

A Taste for Restaurant Reviews

This survey of the literature of taste across various disciplines is not meant to be exhaustive. Other disciplines, such as history, are beginning to look at taste as a way to round out their analysis of human interaction by incorporating important experiential and sensory information in the analysis of historical data.¹²⁶ Rather, my intent is to show how the complex notion of taste is dealt with in different fields, and to demonstrate how in order to paint an accurate and complete picture of gustatory taste, you have to consider not only different perspectives, but also different epistemological frameworks. Is taste the positive hydrogen ion that touches your tongue and

¹²⁴ Jack Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology*, Themes in the social sciences (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

¹²⁵ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 85.

¹²⁶ See Gerard J. Fitzgerald and Gabriella M. Petrick, "In Good Taste: Rethinking American History with Our Palates," *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (2008).

triggers a neurological response in the brain? Is it an emotional reaction to an object of sublime beauty or deliciousness? Or is it the social milieu in which aesthetic judgments are made? As I have shown, taste is and encompasses all of these things and more. The history of the philosophy of taste, especially the hierarchy of the senses, continues to resonate in our time. For proof, all you have to do is compare the amount of money donated and the respect given to the cultural institutions that support art forms that privilege the senses at the top of the hierarchy—museums and opera companies, for example—to that given to cultural institutions dedicated to the senses on the lower end of the hierarchy. The value placed on the anonymity of reviewers, whether real or imagined, finds its historical antecedent in the debate about the need for distance from and disinterestedness in the object perceived in order to engage the mental faculty required to make an accurate and acceptable aesthetic judgment. The biological and psychological research about gustatory taste underscores the susceptibility of our taste buds and olfactory receptors and the cognitive responses they produce to physiological, chemical, contextual, and environmental influences. And the theorizing about taste that has taken place in the fields of anthropology and sociology demonstrates the cultural potency and symbolic richness of aesthetic judgments about food, as well as the tenuousness and tentativeness of those judgments.

In the next chapter we will delve more deeply into Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production as it pertains to food, that is, the field of gastronomy, and as it pertains to media, that is, the field of journalism, in order to see how restaurant reviewers operationalize taste and thereby reinforce distinctions in the social realm of cultural criticism.

CHAPTER III

RESTAURANT REVIEWS, FIELDS OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION, AND THE SOCIAL REALM OF CULTURAL CRITICISM

No matter how taste is conceived, it is operationalized in the social realm. Individuals have tastes. Groups have tastes. In a society that commodifies culture and puts a premium on the acquisition of status, the interaction of individuals and groups is often shaped by the negotiation of these personal and collective tastes. DiMaggio's research on artistic classification systems demonstrates how taste is used as "a form of ritual identification," a social tool "that helps to establish networks of trusting relations and facilitate group mobilization and the attainment of such social rewards as desirable spouses and prestigious jobs."¹ Allen and Lincoln's work on the retrospective consecration of *auteur* films carries DiMaggio's work further, showing how the values discourse encoded in cultural reviews shapes cultural schema that inform a collective memory that tends towards a consensus of opinion on aesthetic judgments.² In short, individual tastes become collective tastes through the discourse generated in the field of cultural production.

¹ Paul DiMaggio, "Classification in Art," *American Sociological Review* 52, no. 4 (1987): 443.

² Michael Patrick Allen and Anne E. Lincoln, "Critical Discourse and the Cultural Consecration of American Films," *Social Forces* 82, no. 3 (2004): 887.

The Field of Cultural Production

Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production provides the most comprehensive and compelling theoretical framework for understanding the relationship of cultural reviews and the production of taste. Bourdieu approaches the field of cultural production from different perspectives throughout his vast body of work, painstakingly building up the concept's complexity across entire books, such as in *The Rules of Art*, or firing off quick, but in his words, "very inadequate," definitions in shorter essays and lectures. While the concept permeates all of his writing, it is not always easy to define. In general, he is referring to the socio-economic space in which cultural goods, such as books, art, drama, music, fashion, and food, are produced and consumed. According to Bourdieu, the field of cultural production comprises "the space of positions and the space of the position-takings in which they are expressed."³ It can be understood as "the system of objective relations between...agents or institutions [critics, agents, dealers, publishers, gallery owners, juries of artistic prizes, collectors, audiences, readers, etc.] and as the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated."⁴ Elsewhere Bourdieu describes a field as:

A field of forces within which the agents occupy positions that statistically determine the positions they take with respect to the field, these position-takings being aimed either at conserving or transforming the structure of relations of forces

³ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," in *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993 [1983]), 30.

⁴ ———, "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods," in *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993 [1977]), 78.

that is constitutive of the field.⁵

Fields intersect and overlap. The field of cultural production is situated within the field of power, which is itself situated within the field of class relations.⁶

Bourdieu conceives of fields in two dimensions, total capital (economic plus symbolic plus cultural capital), in other words, an expression of the degree of domination of a field, plotted on the vertical axis against the proportionate relationship of cultural and/or symbolic capital to economic capital, in other words, an expression of the degree of autonomy of the field, plotted on the horizontal axis. He notes:

The structure of the field, i.e., of the space of positions, is nothing other than the structure of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which governs success in the field and the winning of the external or specific profits (such as literary prestige) which are at stake in the field.⁷

Bourdieu further elaborates two important principles of hierarchization within fields: *heteronomous* hierarchization, which is ranking based on success achieved outside the field, as evidenced by such indices as a high volume of sales, appointments to important cultural institutions, or celebrity in venues outside the field; and *autonomous* hierarchization, which is ranking based on success within the field, such as appreciation by one's peers, art for art's sake or a chef's chef.⁸ Bourdieu refers to the way fields interact, their correspondences or homologies, in three dimensions or layers. He adds an

⁵ ———, "The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field," in *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, ed. Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2005 [1995]), 30.

⁶ Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," 37-38.

⁷ ———, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, 30.

⁸ ———, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," 37-38.

important point about the effect of each position taken in a field:

Every new position, in asserting itself as such, determines a displacement of the whole structure and that, by the logic of action and reaction, it leads to all sorts of changes in the position-takings of the occupants of the other positions.⁹

Agents in a field are indoctrinated into a *doxa*, that is, an inherent, tacit, “system of presuppositions”¹⁰ or “schemes of thought and perception”¹¹ that help shape understanding within the field. Their willingness to participate in the field and the satisfaction they achieve from playing the game proposed by the field Bourdieu calls the *illusio*.¹²

To summarize, an agent enters a field by taking a position that corresponds to his or her economic, social, and cultural capital within the field. The location of this position is qualified by the dispositions afforded by his or her habitus. This position taking changes the shape of the field, altering the other positions, and prompting those already in the field to reconsider their positions and take new ones. Once inside, the agent adopts the *doxa* of the field, which helps negotiate movement in and through the field. Other fields exert forces on the field that pull both the agents in the field and the field itself in one direction or another. The agent’s willingness to participate and the pleasure derived from participation is the *illusio*.

Given the current fetish for charcuterie in American restaurants, it might help to think of a synchronic cross-section of a field as a slice of a *pâté en terrine*, an assemblage of chunks of meat and fat of various shapes and sizes

⁹ Ibid., 58.

¹⁰ ———, “The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field,” 37.

¹¹ ———, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 167.

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel, Meridian, crossing aesthetics (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 333.

interspersed with pieces of vegetables and dried fruit, whole peppercorns, pistachios, specs of truffle, and other ingredients, all held together by a finely ground forcemeat. The agents are the ingredients held in suspension at various levels in relation to one another, some higher (suggesting more autonomy and social or cultural capital), some lower, some more to the right (suggesting more heteronomy and economic capital), some more to the left. Evidence of the trajectory that has put some people where they are can be seen, like a carrot stick or nut that's been sliced through, but others have entered the field in the moment. Nothing precedes them. Still others have insinuated themselves from other slices of terrine (other fields), sitting above or below this slice. Like a *pâté en terrine*, each slice of a field is related to the previous one but is different.

The Role of Critics in the Field of Cultural Production

Bourdieu's theory has some interesting implications for the role of the cultural critic who operates within the fields of criticism and journalism, as well as the field of the cultural product about which he or she writes. Regardless of the perceived consecrating power of any one critic, Bourdieu says it is the field that "creates the creator."¹³ Substituting food for theater in his explanation of the relationship between critics, theater, and newspapers sheds some light on the critics' mediating role between fields:

The space of judgements about theater [or food] is homologous with the space of the newspapers for which they are produced and which disseminate them and also with the space of the theatres and plays [or restaurants and chefs] about which they

¹³ Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods," 76-78.

are formulated.¹⁴

Of course the relationship is not as simple as one in which the class of the reviewer and the demographics of the media outlet determine the class of the readership, and this is because of the simultaneous operation of multiple fields and the arrival of other position-takers, whose forces pull and push in different directions. But Bourdieu does suggest that:

Critics serve their readerships so well only because the homology between their position in the intellectual field and their readership's position within the dominant-class field is the basis of an objective connivance...which means that they most sincerely, and therefore most effectively, defend the ideological interests of their clientele when defending their own interests as intellectuals against their specific adversaries, the occupants of opposing positions in the field of production."¹⁵

Bourdieu explains that the field also encourages critics to prioritize the new—even when the new is old—because the constant struggle for positions and position-takings imposes an element of time and history to the field. “To bring a new producer, a new product and a new system of tastes on to the market at a given moment is to push the whole set of producers, products, and systems of tastes into the past.”¹⁶

Though some people dispute this class-to-class relationship or homology between critics and their audiences, the results of several studies of reviews suggest it cannot be dismissed so easily. For example, Bourdieu's theory is supported by Shrum's finding that the visibility and publicity function of theater reviews at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, that is, the way reviews keep the name of the plays in the public consciousness, proved more

¹⁴ Ibid., 89.

¹⁵ Ibid., 94-95.

¹⁶ Ibid., 108.

important than any positive or negative evaluation of the plays themselves.¹⁷ With thousands of plays, thousands of reviews, and thousands of attendees, the nature of the festival makes it difficult for any audience member to find a homologous review. Bourdieu's characterization of reviews also speaks directly to Shrum's finding that reviews helped maintain cultural hierarchies; the more highbrow the show, the more of an impact the reviews had.¹⁸ In Shrum's view, "Criticism in the modern world is inextricably linked to the status of genres."¹⁹ The status of genres is a product of the field. An example of this phenomenon is found in the "culture gulch" at the *New York Times*, where, as Diamond notes, it is generally acknowledged that "the more expensive the entertainment or cultural fare, the more important the *Times*' opinion."²⁰

The interdependence Bourdieu proposes between critics and other agents in the field is also supported by Jolson and Bushman's finding that both restaurant owners and critics significantly overestimated the impact their reviews had on diners who had already visited a restaurant once.²¹ One way to look at eating in a restaurant is that it is akin to taking a position in the field of restaurants, and personal experience and opinion trumps the critic's experience because of the closer homology the diner has with the

¹⁷ Wesley Shrum, "Critics and Publics: Cultural Mediation in Highbrow and Popular Performing Arts," *The American Journal of Sociology* 97, no. 2 (1991): 367.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ ———, *Fringe and Fortune: The Role of Critics in High and Popular Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 207.

²⁰ Edwin Diamond, *Behind the Times: Inside the New New York Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 331.

²¹ Marvin A. Jolson and F. Anthony Bushman, "Third-Party Consumer Information Systems: The Case of the Food Critic," *Journal of Retailing* 54, no. 4 (1978).

other position-takers in the field.²² Interestingly, in their study of university employees and their use of restaurant reviews, Barrows et al. found that “recommendation of a friend is the most valued factor in determining whether to go to a restaurant for the first time.”²³ There are many ways to interpret this finding, one of which is that there is no reviewer with the correct homology to address the sociocultural positions of this student population.

Another possible interpretation is suggested by West and Broniarczyk’s research into how multiple opinions are integrated into consumer choices and the role aspirations and risk play in purchasing decisions.²⁴ West and Broniarczyk concur with Jolson and Bushman’s interviewees that when it comes to experiential purchases, such as restaurant meals, “other’s opinions are likely to be especially important...because they offer indirect experience on sensory aspects not conveyed by tangible attributes.”²⁵ Although it would seem to make sense that a consensus of these opinions would have the most positive influence, West and Broniarczyk show that depending on the consumer’s aspiration level, and whether it is above or below the average critical assessment, critical disagreement can actually have a stronger impact on purchasing decisions. If one critic loves a restaurant and another pans it,

²² The ability for more people to have access to restaurants and thereby participate in the field of gastronomy is one of the structural elements Ferguson uses to show the emergence of a field of gastronomy in France, as discussed in the next section.

²³ Clayton W. Barrows, Frank P. Lattuca, and Robert H. Bosselman, "Influence of Restaurant Reviews Upon Consumers," *FIU Hospitality Review* 7, no. 2 (1989): 90.

²⁴ Patricia M. West and Susan M. Broniarczyk, "Integrating Multiple Opinions: The Role of Aspiration Level on Consumer Response to Critic Consensus," *The Journal of Consumer Research* 25, no. 1 (1998).

²⁵ *Ibid.*: 38.

consumers aspire to have a great meal seem willing to risk a bad dining experience. Coupled with the proven importance of friends' restaurant recommendations in making the decision to try a new restaurant,²⁶ this finding suggests that the influence of the critic has less to do with his or her expertise, writing style, or taste, and more to do with the field of cultural production in which he or she operates and the field of cultural consumption in which the consumers make their decisions.

It is important to note that Bourdieu's theory of cultural production is a theory of elite domination of culture. In any field, those with the most capital can exert the strongest powers of consecration, attain the highest positions, and reap the greatest rewards. Such top-down theories of culture have fallen into disfavor in some circles in light of a presumed postmodern leveling of cultural hierarchies, such as those described by Appadurai,²⁷ and trends toward cultural omnivorousness, such as those described by Levine and Peterson.²⁸ But studies, such as Shrum's, suggest "that the distinction between high and popular culture persists in spite of postmodern predictions that it should vanish."²⁹ And recent studies are beginning to show that the

²⁶ See Barrows, Lattuca, and Bosselman, "Influence of Restaurant Reviews Upon Consumers," Jolson and Bushman, "Third-Party Consumer Information Systems: The Case of the Food Critic," and West and Broniarczyk, "Integrating Multiple Opinions: The Role of Aspiration Level on Consumer Response to Critic Consensus."

²⁷ See Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, 50-54.

²⁸ See Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, "Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore," *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 5 (1996), and Richard A. Peterson and Albert Simkus, "How Musical Tastes Mark Occupational Status Groups," in *Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality*, ed. Michèle Lamont and Marcel Fournier (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

²⁹ Shrum, *Fringe and Fortune: The Role of Critics in High and Popular Art*, 6.

omnivorous, highbrow-lowbrow nature of the cultural object does not necessarily change the power dynamic of the field of cultural production. Specific to food and gastronomy, Johnston and Baumann's analysis of the articles that appeared in the major upscale food magazines—*Bon Appétit*, *Food & Wine*, *Gourmet*, and *Savueur*—showed that the trend toward culinary omnivorousness did not represent a democratization of culture. Rather it suggested a shift in the characteristics of the objects legitimized by the dominant, consecrating institutions—the magazines they studied—from highbrow foods to lowbrow foods and everything in between, and indicated that omnivorousness itself has become a mark of distinction. Johnston and Baumann find:

Gourmet food writing suggests that the omnivorous age does not usher in a relativistic cultural paradise where “anything goes” and all foods are made legitimate. Instead, boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate culture are redrawn in new, complex ways that balance the need for distinction with the competing ideology of democratic equality and cultural populism.³⁰

In a cross-genre study of tastes for various cultural products, namely food, furniture, fashion movies, music, and hobbies, Holt found similarly that despite tastes for culture in America becoming more diverse across the highbrow-lowbrow continuum, a democratization of culture has not necessarily occurred. Instead, Holt attributes this cultural diversity to a complex confluence of elite tastes, such as cosmopolitanism, exoticism, self-actualizing leisure, and connoisseurship, which remain dominant.³¹ As I will

³⁰ Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann, "Democracy versus Distinction: A Study of Omnivorousness in Gourmet Food Writing," *American Journal of Sociology* 113, no. 1 (2007): 197.

³¹ Douglas B. Holt, "Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?," *The Journal of Consumer Research* 25, no. 1 (1998): 19.

demonstrate in the next chapters, my research into restaurant reviews in New York City further supports the idea that regardless of whether they are evaluating takeout slices of pizza or the fanciest French restaurants, the tastemakers in the area of food remain those with the most capital.

The Field of Gastronomy in France and the United States

Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson applies Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production to the realm of food to demonstrate the emergence of the field of gastronomy in 19th-century France.³² "Although the culinary arts in the West can be traced to the Greeks and especially the Romans," she writes, "gastronomy as a modern social phenomenon was instituted in early 19th-century France. It was then...that the culinary arts moved into public space and acquired a public consciousness that justifies identification as a 'gastronomic field.'"³³ To signal this transformation, she enumerates five structural elements that indicated the French gastronomic field was born:³⁴ 1) an increasing number of people were enthusiastic about and could participate in gastronomic matters, 2) restaurants and other specific sites dedicated to gastronomic production and consumption flourished, 3) critical debate that both articulated standards and presumed authority legitimized certain gastronomic expression, 4) subfields that fostered and informed debate blossomed, and 5) networks of agents and institutions forged links to other fields that added to the social prestige of gastronomy.

³² See Ferguson, "A Cultural Field in the Making: Gastronomy in 19th-Century France.", and also, *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine*.

³³ Ferguson, "A Cultural Field in the Making: Gastronomy in 19th-Century France," 599.

³⁴ Ibid.: 601-02.

For many of the reasons already outlined in Chapter I, Ferguson argues for the importance of writing in the field of gastronomy because of the perishability of the cultural product. She summarizes:

The words and texts of an expansive culinary discourse, not the dishes and meals of a circumscribed and confined culinary practice, fixed the culinary product and gave it an existence beyond the sphere of immediate culinary production. Accordingly, the gastronomic field is structured by the distinction between the material product—the foodstuff, the dish, or the meal—and the critical, intellectual, or aesthetic by-products that discuss, review and debate the original product.³⁵

As evidence of these “by-products” that served to raise gastronomic consciousness, she submits five genres of food-related writing, each typified by a particular author: 1) food-related journalism, as practiced by Grimod de La Reynière; 2) cultural commentary, as provided by Brillat-Savarin; 3) cookbooks and culinary treatises, such as those by the chef Marie-Antoine Carême; 4) political philosophies, such as those espoused by Charles Fourier; and 5) realist novels, such as those written by Honoré de Balzac.

Ferguson emphasizes the “nationalization” of cuisine in this food writing and the discourse it engendered as a key indicator of the existence of a gastronomic field. She proposes that a rise in French culinary nationalism during the 19th century acted as a modernizing and constitutive force in the formation of the field of gastronomy.³⁶ The injection of gastronomy into the national discourse, she explains, allowed for an infinite number of consumers beyond those who actually digested any French food, readers, for example, who, by the act of consuming gastronomic discourse, become position-takers

³⁵ Ibid.: 610. I would point out that in Bourdieu’s conception of the field of cultural production, this is not unique to the field of gastronomy. All fields comprise the producers and commentators who serve to consecrate the work.

³⁶ Ibid.: 610-25.

in the field of gastronomy. “Culinary discourse constructed a paradigm for the cultivation of a self-consciously national identity,” she concludes.³⁷

If, as Bourdieu suggests, discourse is one of the important tools of mediation of any field of cultural production, then it would seem the specific nature of that discourse is irrelevant. Whether that discourse is nationalist or not is beside the point. Unquestionably, 19th-century French gastronomic critics and commentators fed the discourse about food and thereby served to consecrate certain cultural (culinary) products (and not others) by revving up of the process Bourdieu calls “the production of belief.”³⁸ Given the period, nationalism may have served as a useful device for consecration or legitimization. As such, it may have helped direct the discourse within the field toward a particularly resonant system of valuation, thereby making the consecration process seem more meaningful. In this way, nationalism likely gave some position-takers a sense of gravitas that commanded a certain authority, and thereby advanced their positions (both autonomously and heteronomously). But nationalism is hardly a requirement for a field or for discourse. And a national cuisine, which could come out of the discourse

³⁷ Ibid.: 624. Curiously, as part of her case for culinary nationalism, Ferguson writes, “There was no brooking dissent with Grimod de la Reynière or Carême or any number of their epigones” (621–622). Meanwhile, Spang quotes several contemporary critics of Grimod’s, the harshest among them Joseph François Nicholas Dusaluchoy, one of the editors of the *Journal des arts, des sciences, et de la littérature*, who called for an “‘open war’ against Grimod and all his kind” Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture*, 160. In *The Oxford Companion to Food*, editor Alan Davidson writes, “Carême’s own perception of his place in the history of France and that of cuisine was exaggerated. Alan Davidson, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Food* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 138.

³⁸ Bourdieu, “The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods.”

generated in the field of gastronomy, but might not, would be a byproduct not the goal.

Ferguson's overemphasis of the role of nationalism in the discourse that constituted France's gastronomic field leads her to the spurious conclusion that there is no gastronomic field in the United States. America, in her opinion, "does not offer the culinary unity or authority requisite for a gastronomic field," and thus she declares, "there is no cultural product on which to base a cultural field because there is no American cuisine,"³⁹ The cultural product of gastronomy is not a national cuisine, but rather the sociocultural sphere that coheres around the topic of food or cuisine itself. A field of gastronomy emerges from the negotiations of attitudes about the role of food in a society. These are expressed by how various groups in that society value certain tastes and cuisines over others, where and how they eat, what priority they give to food, how they socialize around the table, whether tastes are open or closed to foreign influences, and myriad other debates. The positions and position-takings represented by these sorts of questions, the struggles for the power of consecration and distinction, the various forms of capital amassed by the agents, the intersection and homologies with other fields—these are the tasty bits that make up the slice of *pâté en terrine*, the components of the field, whether or not the recipe for that *pâté* comes out of a book of French or American cuisine.

Just as the field of art determines what is art—to the extent that we are talking about art autonomously, not heteronomously—the field of gastronomy determines what is cuisine, not the other way around. The

³⁹ Ferguson, "A Cultural Field in the Making: Gastronomy in 19th-Century France," 633, ———, *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine*, 106.

consecration of genres is one of the tools a cultural field uses to negotiate positions.⁴⁰ Granted, the unwieldy, pluralistic nature of American cuisine is difficult to grasp or define,⁴¹ but the truth is Americans are eating something, and more importantly, they read and think about what they are eating and use food to mark socially significant distinctions in a certain way informed by the machinations of the field of gastronomy and other fields related to the consumption and production of food. As Johnston and Baumann assert, gastronomy is “a fluid, discursive field where the legitimacy of food production and consumption methods are negotiated.”⁴² Just as the trend toward omnivorousness in cultural consumption has been shown to require a more complex understanding of consumption-based status and a closer look at the way that cultural fields operate to produce it,⁴³ so too does America’s multivariant way of eating require a closer look at the way the gastronomic field operates without a neatly codified, distinct cultural product to pin it on.

Taste versus Cuisine as a Cultural Product

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the ephemerality and malleability of taste makes it difficult to use as a tool for cultural investigation. It is a relative concept, amorphous and exclusionary, embedded with issues of class and status. And yet the role of taste in the emergence of a gastronomic field cannot be ignored. In fact, I believe that taste could be

⁴⁰ See DiMaggio, "Classification in Art."

⁴¹ See Mitchell Davis and Anne McBride, "The State of American Cuisine," (New York: The James Beard Foundation, 2008).

⁴² Johnston and Baumann, "Democracy versus Distinction: A Study of Omnivorousness in Gourmet Food Writing," 171.

⁴³ See Peterson and Kern, "Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore."

considered one of the cultural products of the field of gastronomy.⁴⁴ As Bourdieu notes [and I add]:

A cultural product—avant-garde picture, a political manifesto, a newspaper [a meal]—is a constituted taste, a taste which has been raised from the vague semi-existence of half-formulated or unformulated experience, implicit or even unconscious desire, to the full reality of the finished product, by a process of objectification.⁴⁵

Conceiving taste as a cultural product of the field of gastronomy allows for the possibility of there being a “taste for a taste.” As peculiar as it sounds, this is precisely the result of most gastronomic debate.

It must be noted that Bourdieu dismisses the notion of taste as a cultural product, stating outright that there is “no need to resort to the hypothesis of a sovereign taste compelling the adjustment of production to needs, or the opposite hypothesis, in which taste is itself a product of production.”⁴⁶ He explains that the correlation between the goods produced and people’s taste for them is nothing more than part of the process of objectification that results from the meeting between two systems of differences, that is, the homology of the field of consumption and the field of production. From the perspective of the field of food *production*, then, taste may only be considered a mechanism or by-product of distinction, not a product in and of itself. But from the perspective of the field of *gastronomy*, if anything a subfield of the fields of consumption and journalism, what is

⁴⁴ Mennell implies that cultivated taste may be the product of gastronomy by defining *gastronome* as “a person who not only cultivates his own ‘refined taste for the pleasures of the table’ but also, by *writing* about it, helps to cultivate other people’s too.” Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, 267.

⁴⁵ Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 231.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

produced is the codification, albeit it ever-changing, of what foods people are supposed to want to consume. Bourdieu might argue that this code is nothing more than a way to help certain dominant classes navigate their way to the “next thing” in order to keep themselves distinct from everyone else, but it nevertheless takes the form of a cultural product—embedded in books, essays, magazine articles, and even cooking-school curriculae—that then takes on a life of its own.

Western taste in general and French taste in particular did not develop out of *l'air*. As noted earlier, Norbert Elias has shown how an increased awareness of the “self” through the Middle Ages necessitated a different framework within which to negotiate relationships with others.⁴⁷ The result was a code of manners. First simply a means to regulate bodily functions in social situations, manners became the basis on which distinctions of class and social status were made, the marks of civilization. Elias goes so far as to suggest that the role of manners in regulating aggression and their affect on the power dynamic between individuals and authority, as well as the way they served as a means of social differentiation, gave manners a key role in the formation of states.⁴⁸

As we’ve already seen, Mennell builds on Elias’s work, applying the notion of the civilizing process to the culture of food in France and England in an attempt to explain why the countries’ food cultures developed so differently. For Mennell, taste is a subset of manners. Mennell demonstrates how, beginning in the Middle Ages, the rise of courtly society in France and

⁴⁷ Elias, *The Civilizing Process*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 443–56.

the increased refinement and recording of recipes contributed to the development of particular tastes. He writes:

Even if the trend towards individuality in taste and culinary creation only became very obvious in the 18th and 19th centuries, traces of it can be found much earlier, and it is not unreasonable to see it as rooted in a more general transformation of art and consciousness which began during the Renaissance.⁴⁹

This break of French food from the influence of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is T. Sarah Peterson's concern.⁵⁰ Although the ancient texts provided Renaissance men models for cooking and gardening, they were largely subsumed by the medieval conceit that food, medicine, and spirituality were inseparable—the basis of the humoral model. “The invention and rapid spread of the new French cooking were part of a larger cultural shift that marked the break between the Renaissance and the modern world,” Peterson writes. “France’s enduring authority in food dates from this historical moment, and that authority rests on the expulsion from the dining hall of the magus with his spices and saffron.”⁵¹ Both Mennell and Peterson agree that La Varenne’s *Le Cuisinier François*, published in 1651, is the first “modern” cookbook, with the structure of a decidedly *French* cuisine (stocks, sauces, and classic dishes), not to mention the structure of *French* cookbooks, already in evidence.⁵²

The idea of a restaurant itself, Spang explains, originated from the intersection of food and medicine, and it fed a moral debate. “The

⁴⁹ Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, 68.

⁵⁰ T. Sarah Peterson, *Acquired Taste: The French Origins of Modern Cooking* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁵² By modern they mean post-Medieval.

encyclopédistes and sympathetic medical doctors saw the history of diet as a tale, not of art's perfection," she writes, "but of society's decay."⁵³ The first restaurants, sanitarium-like places that served simple, restorative broths or *restaurants*, date to 1766. It did not take long for *restaurant*-makers to start tinkering with their recipes, as increased competition necessitated product differentiation. This gastronomic "progress," Spang notes, was viewed with skepticism. "Culinary embellishment, by tempting the satiated to eat yet more, destroyed the unity of desire and need that once had existed. Once people craved more than they physically needed, they could no longer trust (as animals did) that what tasted good was also good for them."⁵⁴ The (im)morality of refined taste had social consequences, as well:

By perverting man's original and natural tastes, *restaurants* and other shows of culinary refinement broke the great chain of being and destroyed any sense of responsibility of fellow men...the nouvelle cuisine was not a triumph of culinary science, but an affront to the French peasantry and a sad commentary on national morality. As advocates of the nouvelle cuisine had removed discussion of cookery from the kitchen in order to describe the new cookery as evidence of society's delicacy and perfection, so its critics brought it into the salon to hold it up as proof of the same society's decline and corruption.⁵⁵

Spang points out that these debates about the morality of taste were going on in other sociocultural realms as well, but food resonated with more people than did questions about translating Homer from Latin, for example, and therefore as a topic of conversation, food brought these issues quite literally to the table.

⁵³ Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture*, 50.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 51–52.

Jean-Louis Flandrin further complicates questions about the origins of French cuisine, and by extension, French taste, by enumerating several social and culinary influences affecting food and eating in France during the early modern period.⁵⁶ From the Reformation Act and the decreased dietary role of the church to the discovery of the New World, from the advent of the fork in Byzantium and its wide acceptance in Italy, to shifts in the structure of work and social life that led to changes in dining schedules, the French “way of eating” that reached its pinnacle during the courtly 18th century was the product of the negotiation of forces coming at the table from every direction.

By chronicling just a few of the many historical antecedents of modern French cuisine, it is evident that neither the field of gastronomy nor a national French culinary discourse suddenly emerged in the 19th century.⁵⁷ Citing estimates made by Girard, Peterson notes that between 1700 and 1789 there were some 273,600 cookbooks already circulating in France,⁵⁸ including subsequent additions of *Le Cuisinier François*, which is an indication of the existence of some field-like structure organizing around information about food. Still, Ferguson’s historic evidence shows that major gastronomic changes occurred during the 19th century. What was the nature of those changes?

The gastronomic works of Grimod de la Reynière and Brillat-Savarin (and even the treatises by Carême), represented significant new position-

⁵⁶ Jean-Louis Flandrin, "The Early Modern Period," in *Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Jean-Louis Flandrin, Massimo Montanari, and Albert Sonnenfeld (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999 [1996]).

⁵⁷ Though the coinage of the term *gastronomie* dates only to 1801, there is nothing to say that a field that encompassed similar agents and cultural products could not have existed before that. After all, Ferguson applied the term to the period retroactively in the 1990s.

⁵⁸ Peterson, *Acquired Taste: The French Origins of Modern Cooking*, 206.

takings within the fields of food and gastronomy. Neither chefs nor cookbook authors, Grimod de la Reynière and Brillat-Savarin fashioned for themselves the role of arbiters of taste. And because of the large amount of capital (political, economic, and symbolic) with which each of these noblemen entered the gastronomic field, not to mention the space of unoccupied positions left after the fall of the Ancien Régime, they were able to situate themselves above the lowly foodservice professionals who were vying for those positions. As noted earlier, every change in position affects every other position in the field as well as the position-takings possible. Grimod de la Reynière and Brillat-Savarin reshaped the field of gastronomy, realigning the participants in the field—chefs, restaurateurs, cookbook authors, diners, and others—behind their joint projects of bourgeois refinement and nationalism. They did so with a compelling articulation of French tastes.

Flandrin's citation of the preface to *Les Dons de Comus*, an influential cookbook dating from 1739, illustrates how the refinement of taste for food was already aligned with the nationalistic and moral values linked to other forms of art. The authors of the preface, two Jesuits named Guillaume-Hyacinth Bougeant and Pierre Brumoy, relate taste to the fine arts and emphasize its role in national culture: "Cooking, like any other art invented for need or for pleasure, was perfected along with the national genius of each nation and became more delicate as the nations became more polite...Among the civilized nations, progress in cooking followed progress in all the other arts."⁵⁹ Flandrin speculates that the "invention of the concept of good taste"

⁵⁹ Jean-Louis Flandrin, "From Dietetics to Gastronomy: The Liberation of the Gourmet," in *Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Jean-

in cooking as in literature and other arts was itself an aspect of French classicism.

Why invent the concept of good taste? Whether a by-product of the homology of the fields of consumption and production, or the natural evolution of the refinement of the social self through manners, the concept of good taste functions primarily to distinguish those who have it from those who do not. There is nothing inherently better about one flavor over another until each of those flavors are generally accepted to represent the preferences of a particular social group or class. And then, as those preferences change, whether because of changes in the distribution of the various capital of the people who claim them or changes in the positions and position-takings within their respective fields, tastes change, too. Gastronomy became the field in which these tastes were negotiated, codified, written down, and quite literally served up to the public at large.

In addition to various types of capital, what Grimod de la Reynière, Brillat-Savarin, and other members of their field had going for them was timing. During the 19th century, when more restaurants and more money meant people were eating in public more often, and when the idea of a nation with a unifying culture and social mores predicated on manners was taking hold, they were the first to devise and write down a code that mapped the prevailing social distinctions onto eating. This code, which concretized a national taste, was swallowed up and digested by an impressive number of French citizens, and perhaps more importantly, by many more people abroad, who, convinced by the machinations of the fields of cultural production and

Louis Flandrin, Massimo Montanari, and Albert Sonnenfeld (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999 [1996]), 430.

the cultural products they consecrated, adopted French cuisine as the dominant culinary idiom for more than two centuries. Some 150 years later, timing also played role in the establishment of the field of gastronomy in America.

American Gastronomy and Its Home in New York City

Contrary to Ferguson's conclusion, my research shows that a field of gastronomy exists in America, and that during the second half of the 20th century, it underwent a transformation similar to the one she describes in 19th-century France.⁶⁰ After World War II, new-found national prosperity expanded the American middle class and increased the access they had to various cultural products, among them food. Travel to Europe informed the American palate, and expatriate chefs and restaurateurs, namely from France, catered to these newly developing tastes.⁶¹ As Levenstein characterizes it, "[The new French restaurants] appealed less to those who wanted to rub shoulders with show business celebrities or to show off the immensity of their fortunes than to people whose status derived in part, at least, from the sophistication of their consumption habits."⁶²

Admittedly, the taste for good (that is, French) food and the status that went along with it developed first among American elites, mostly in New

⁶⁰ I make this claim aware of questions about the value and limitations of Bourdieu applied across cultures and across historical periods. See Craig Calhoun, "Habitue, Field, and Capital: The Question of Historical Specificity," in *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Edward LiPuma, and Moishe Postone (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁶¹ See Betty Fussell, *My Kitchen Wars: A Memoir* (New York: North Point Press, 1999), and Mimi Sheraton, *Eating My Words: An Appetite for Life* (New York: William Morrow, 2004).

⁶² Harvey A. Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 140.

York, and mostly at tables in Le Pavillon, an influential French restaurant opened in 1941 by Henri Soulé.⁶³ Levenstein notes, however, that during the 1960s, “forces that would broaden its base and bring it down a notch were already at work.”⁶⁴ These forces produced the very same structural changes in America that Ferguson uses to indicate the emergence of the field of gastronomy in 19th-century France, namely: 1) an increased number of restaurants and increased disposable income that allowed people to take advantage of them; 2) an explosion in food-related media, including newspaper and magazine articles, cookbooks, television shows, and other sites that facilitated gastronomic discourse; 3) the articulation of standards of production and consumption, that is, the codification of the tastes of the dominant class, that were disseminated through these various media, especially restaurant reviews; 4) the appearance of subfields to foster debate; and 5) the formation of links to other fields that elevated the social prestige of gastronomy.

Like the field of gastronomy in 19th-century France, the field of gastronomy in 20th-century America did not emerge suddenly, rather it drastically changed shape. Several influential position-takers rose to the top (providing models for future entrants into the field), and bolstered by their new symbolic capital, they tugged the field in a particular direction, toward

⁶³ Soulé had been part of the team that operated the restaurant in the French pavilion at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. Motivated by the success of that endeavor, he returned to New York to open his own restaurant, hiring as chef Pierre Franey, who had been a member of the kitchen brigade at the French pavilion restaurant. Among the upperclasses, Le Pavillon was considered the best restaurant in New York, and by extension the country, well into the 1960s.

⁶⁴ Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America*, 141.

the seemingly contradictory poles of an appreciation of authentic cuisines and an openmindedness about culinary experimentation and creativity. As we shall see in the next chapter, most important among these early position-takers was arguably Craig Claiborne of the *New York Times*, who transposed American mechanisms of social distinction onto the realm of food, establishing systems of valuation and other modes of belief production that helped shape discourse about taste. Claiborne changed the parameters of his profession and thereby the parameters of his field. His success begat other reviewers in the city and across the country who lit the spark that produced the current frenzy about food and restaurant discourse still burning in the vibrant field of gastronomy in America today.

In this process, the role of New York City cannot be underestimated. As Paris's position was integral to the field of gastronomy in France in the 19th century, New York's was integral to the field of gastronomy in America in the 20th century. The convergence of people, money, media, and other attributes of life in a prosperous urban capital allows for fields of cultural production to flourish. Despite setbacks, such as the city's financial crisis in the 1970s and the events of 9/11, the unprecedented economic prosperity ushered in by the growth of Wall Street and the growing size (until recently) and influence of the city's media has kept New York at the forefront of cultural consecration and consumption. Even while other cities have developed their own cultural institutions and their own fine restaurants, the dearth of local media and the disproportionate influence of New York's media on the national stage have meant that these satellites cannot challenge

the power of consecration New York's audience affords.⁶⁵ Comparing resources dedicated to cultural coverage at the *New York Times* with the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post* in the 1990s, Diamond showed that none came close to investing as much as the New York paper.⁶⁶ The James Beard Foundation's director of house programming, Izabela Wojcik, agreed that the disproportionate influence of food coverage in the *New York Times* and other New York based food media makes it difficult to formulate an opinion about restaurants that have not appeared on the pages of these national media.⁶⁷ She cited the overwhelming response received by the restaurants included in Frank Bruni's list of the ten most interesting places to eat outside New York as evidence of this trend.⁶⁸ Page and Dornenburg's finding that most top chefs, no matter where they were located, were hoping to be noticed by the *New York Times*, underscores this point.⁶⁹ Of the 92 restaurants represented by Bullfrog & Baum, one of the largest publicity firms in New York City that specializes in restaurants, 33 (36%) are located in the city and 59 (64%) are located out of the city.⁷⁰ According to the firm's founder and president, Jennifer Baum, their out-of-town clients are hoping to

⁶⁵ As I write this in 2008–2009, a financial crisis of historic proportions has taken hold which some analysts suggest may shift the cultural dominance of New York, and the United States for that matter, in cultural matters in the future. Large media companies and cultural institutions have been hit particularly hard.

⁶⁶ Diamond, *Behind the Times: Inside the New New York Times*, 330.

⁶⁷ Izabela Wojcik, interviewed by Mitchell Davis, New York, 14 December 2008.

⁶⁸ Frank Bruni, "Coast to Coast, Restaurants that Count," *New York Times*, 27 February 2008.

⁶⁹ Andrew Dornenburg and Karen Page, *Dining Out: Secrets from America's Leading Critics, Chefs, and Restaurateurs* (New York: Wiley, 1998), 131.

⁷⁰ "Restaurant Clients," Bullfrog & Baum, <http://www.bullfrogandbaum.com/CLIENTS/Hospitality/Restaurants/tabid/74/Default.aspx>.

attract the attention of and curry favor from the *New York Times* and the other national media based here.⁷¹

Restaurant Reviews and the Field of Journalism

Although restaurant reviews were born of gastronomic literature, today they are more closely associated with journalism. In fact, the seriousness Claiborne is said to have brought to restaurant reviewing could be characterized simply as the application of journalistic practices and ethics to the task. Once limited to newspapers and food magazines, restaurant reviews now appear on television, on radio, in general lifestyle magazines, on food blogs, in online magazines, and recently on screens in taxi cabs.⁷² Even President Obama has dabbled in restaurant reviewing.⁷³ Despite the increasing prevalence of reviews in nonfood mass media, my research shows that the reviews in traditional media still carry the most weight.⁷⁴ No guide in America has the impact of Michelin in France, not even Michelin, which debuted a New York City restaurant guide in 2005 and now also publishes guides to restaurants in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas. Like the director of a Broadway show or the author of a new novel, chefs and restaurateurs wring their hands more feverishly in anticipation of the *New*

⁷¹ Personal communication.

⁷² As of 2008, Zagat ratings have been available by touching a tab on the Taxi T.V. screens in yellow cabs.

⁷³ Shortly before President Obama's inauguration, a restaurant review he had conducted in August 2001 for WTTW-Channell 11's show "Check, Please!" resurfaced. He gave a positive review to Dixie Kitchen and Bait Shop in Hyde Park, Illinois. See Caryn Rousseau, "Obama's 'Check, Please!' Appearance: Talks Johnny Cakes, Peach Cobbler, Small Business," *The Huffington Post* (2009), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/01/06/obamas-check-please-appea_n_155503.html.

⁷⁴ For a discussion of the persistent importance of these media see Chapter VI.

York Times review than in anticipation of any other published opinion. The importance of journalistic reviews in the restaurant field suggests exploring reviews as part of the larger field of journalism may also shed insight into the mechanism through which they influence taste.

Restaurant reviews are part of a subset of cultural criticism that has a longstanding tradition in journalism. Books, film, plays, art, dance, architecture, and other cultural products have been reviewed in newspapers and other mainstream media since they began in America, where, as Anderson noted, printers saw newspapers as an important source of income early on.⁷⁵ As Dickstein explained it:

The development of cultural journalism is interwoven with the growth of the press itself and the development of a large, anonymous reading public—new to culture, unsure of its own taste, and eager for guidance through a tangled maze of cultural artifacts.⁷⁶

Telling people what they should do or see or read or eat has presumably always helped sell publications, as Grimod de la Reynière no doubt realized with his bestselling *Almanach des gourmands*.

Dickstein, a literary critic who uncharacteristically includes a chapter on journalism in his overview of changes in the field of literary criticism, links the increase in prevalence and rise in importance of cultural reviews to the advent of the cultural marketplace. “Critical journalism becomes important when art leaves the court and the salon and enters the marketplace,”⁷⁷ he writes, echoing Mennell’s discussion about the effects of chefs’ publics and

⁷⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 61.

⁷⁶ Morris Dickstein, *Double Agent: The Critic & Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 55-56.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

gastronomic literature on competition between restaurants and Bourdieu's explanation of the homology between the fields of production and consumption. Dickstein proposes that the market-driven nature of reviews, not to mention a shift in our arts culture from a dependence on patronage to a dependence on publicity ties the history of reviews to the history of advertising. "Reviewers," he concludes, "are key links in a commercial chain which connects the modern producers of culture with its potential consumers."⁷⁸ To illustrate his point, it is interesting to note that until the *New York Times* began publishing regular reviews in the 1960s, the budgets for most newspaper restaurant reviews came out of advertising, which is still the case at many regional papers.⁷⁹ Even when reviews are paid for by the critic or the institution, Shrum's research about the effect of theater criticism on ticket sales suggests reviews cannot escape this advertising/publicity function. "Reading or seeing reviews in a number of places highlights the importance of a show and maintains its salience for taste publics in ways that may be more effective, but serve much the same function, as advertising," he finds.⁸⁰

Although the restaurant critic straddles the fields of gastronomy and journalism, most have been newspapermen rather than food people. From Raymond Sokolov, who came from the politics beat to succeed Claiborne in 1972 to the current *New York Times* critic Frank Bruni, who was a political campaign reporter and Rome bureau chief before taking the critic's job in 2004, the *Times* has traditionally preferred journalists, with or without

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Mitchell Davis, "Power Meal: Craig Claiborne's Last Supper for the New York Times," *Gastronomica* 4, no. 3 (2004): 68.

⁸⁰ Shrum, "Critics and Publics: Cultural Mediation in Highbrow and Popular Performing Arts," 368.

experience in food. In a 1985 survey of 22 active restaurant critics all but one had a background in journalism, but less than half had any foodservice experience.⁸¹ This was only slightly higher than the results from an earlier study, conducted in 1977, in which more than two thirds of the 80 restaurant reviewers who completed the survey did not consider themselves food experts, and, in fact, “many review restaurants as a sideline to regular news reporting duties.”⁸² Of course, the lack of any expertise required to be a restaurant critic speaks in part to the lowly status reviewing food has held in the newspaper’s hierarchy of culture beats. Although Marchetti notes a trend toward specialization in news coverage in general,⁸³ Booth observes, “The frequently expressed opinion around newspaper city rooms is that you bring into the job of critic a man who is first of all a highly professional journalist,”⁸⁴ and change has been slow to come to the culture gulch.

Edwin Diamond described how tensions in the culture department played out at the *New York Times* during the 1980s and early 1990s when the paper was trying to attract new, younger readers and expand its coverage nationally. Management’s increasing reliance on market research and the new-reader orientation such research engendered resulted in pressure to shift the emphasis on the culture pages from highbrow to more popular forms.⁸⁵

Preempting the shift, then restaurant critic Bryan Miller told Diamond he

⁸¹ John J. Schroeder, "Restaurant Critics Respond: We're Doing Our Job," *Cornell Hotel & Restaurant Administration Quarterly* 25, no. 57-63 (1985): 57.

⁸² Jolson and Bushman, "Third-Party Consumer Information Systems: The Case of the Food Critic," 74.

⁸³ Dominique Marchetti, "Subfields of Specialized Journalism," in *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, ed. Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2005).

⁸⁴ John E. Booth, *The Critic, Power, and the Performing Arts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 67.

⁸⁵ Diamond, *Behind the Times: Inside the New New York Times*, 307-38.

reviewed with a “consumer beat” mentality. This consumer orientation, which Miller inherited from his predecessor Mimi Sheraton, may help explain why, as coverage of classical music concerts and other highbrow culture shrank, restaurant reviews remained important, even though, as Diamond writes, “Miller’s twice-weekly restaurant reviews cost the *Times* approximately as much as the paper spent to maintain a correspondent and bureau in Africa.”⁸⁶ I will discuss in the next chapter how Claiborne’s early emphasis on food rather than the exclusivity of restaurants may have also helped keep the paper’s restaurant reviews relevant during this dynamic time at the paper.

The shift in editorial direction at the *Times* reflected a reorientation of consumer opinion in this country that had already been underway. As Schulman explains it, due in part to the identity politics that grew out of the 1960s, the value placed on individuality, and by extension, on individual opinions also grew.⁸⁷ Schulman characterizes the shift in societal attitudes reflected in pop culture in the 1970s as “an upturned middle finger at conventional sources of authority.”⁸⁸ Faced with a growing sense of entitlement fostered by Ralph Nader’s consumer advocacy movement,⁸⁹ cultural commentators or at least the institutions that supported them could not help but react. Sheraton’s and Miller’s consumer-beat posture was quite different from Claiborne’s educative connoisseur. In restaurant reviewing, the

⁸⁶ Ibid, 308

⁸⁷ Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002).

⁸⁸ Ibid., 146.

⁸⁹ In his history of the alternative food movement, Warren Belasco illustrates one way in which reactionary consumer politics manifested themselves in the realm of food. See Warren J. Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry 1966–1988* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989).

growing primacy of diner opinions has contributed to the popularity of seemingly more democratic reviews, such as those published in *Zagat Survey*, and later on, as the technology developed, those published by individuals on blogs and user-generated review Web sites. Reflecting other social changes, the food (and culture) snob gave way to the food (and culture) omnivore.

Although it is natural to believe that journalism occupies a unique social space, especially in democratic societies, Bourdieu emphasizes that, save for a particularly high degree of heteronomy, the field of journalism is a field like any other. As in other fields, “the structured space of discourses reproduces, in its own terms, the structured space of the newspapers and of the readerships for whom they are produced.”⁹⁰ Benson and Neveu locate the field of journalism vis-à-vis other fields:

The journalistic field is seen as part of the field of power; that is, it tends to engage with first and foremost those agents who possess high volumes of capital. Within this field of power, however it lies within the “dominated” field of cultural production—a field within this larger field. At its “left” cultural pole, journalism is part of the field of “restricted” cultural production (produced for other producers—small literary journals, avant-garde art and music, etc.) while at its “right” economic pole, it belongs the field of large-scale cultural production (produced for general audiences—mass entertainment, etc.).⁹¹

As Bourdieu argued in various forums and from various perspectives, “The journalistic field tends to reinforce the ‘commercial’ elements at the core of all fields to the detriment of the ‘pure.’”⁹² This emphasis results in the

⁹⁰ Bourdieu, “The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods,” 88-89.

⁹¹ Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu, “Introduction: Field Theory as a Work in Progress,” in *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, ed. Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2005), 5.

⁹² Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (New York: The New Press, 1998), 70.

field of journalism being “permanently subject to trial by market, whether directly, through advertisers, or indirectly, through audience ratings.”⁹³ Furthermore, the competition within and the perishability of the medium pressures journalists to favor the new, which produces a sort of “permanent amnesia” as everyone tries to out-scoop everyone else. This competition not only pressures outlets to compete for stories, experts, and other newsmaking and newsworthy things, but also to generate new stories to prevent other outlets from breaking them first. The paradoxical result of this constant surveillance of outlets and other media is that their content tends toward uniformity and conservatism.⁹⁴

In discussing the high degree of heteronomy of the journalistic field, Bourdieu emphasizes that “to understand what happens in journalism, it is not sufficient to know who finances the publications, who the advertisers are, who pays for the advertising, where the subsidies come from, and so on...”⁹⁵ Recall that heteronomy means that agents in other fields have an impact on what happens in the field of journalism—politicians, social historians, any experts from any field deferred to, even chefs. This heteronomy does not exclude autonomy in the field, of course. To understand how autonomy in the journalistic field works, media critics such as Patrick Champagne and Dominique Marchetti suggest the need to further segment the field. Recognizing the dual pull from market forces and political forces, Champagne notes that the degree of autonomy changes from genre to genre (television to newspaper, for example), outlet to outlet (*The New York Times* to the *New*

⁹³ Ibid., 71.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 72.

⁹⁵ Bourdieu, "The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field," 33.

York Daily News), and even within outlets (sports to food). “Thus we see that it is hardly possible to speak of journalists in general, despite a number of common traits that characterize the profession.”⁹⁶ Investigating the trend toward specialist reporters with specialized beats, Marchetti further emphasizes the need to dissect the myriad sociocultural aspects of each subfield to understand the field of journalism as a whole:

The articulation of the journalistic field around the two poles “generalist/specialist” reflects, on the one hand, the characteristics of the publics to whom media outlets are addressed, and on the other hand, those of the outlets and the journalists themselves.⁹⁷

Marchetti notes an interesting consequence of the journalistic field’s heteronomy that has implications for the field of cultural criticism. He acknowledges that “the interpenetration of journalism and various other sectors of cultural production (publishing, music, film) is especially deep,”⁹⁸ in part for reasons we have already discussed, namely the influence journalists can exert on the markets for these cultural products (food among them). But Marchetti sees another sphere of influence as “increasingly a few major economic groups control both the production of news and the cultural realms that journalists cover.”⁹⁹ He uses sports to illustrate his point because networks own the original broadcasts of the sporting events as well as the news coverage about them. In food, one thinks of magazines, such as *Food & Wine*, which introduced a line of food products, *Gourmet*, which created the *Gourmet* Institute for culinary education weekends, and all of the magazines

⁹⁶ Patrick Champagne, “The ‘Double Dependency’: The Journalistic Field Between Politics and Markets,” in *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, ed. Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2005), 57.

⁹⁷ Marchetti, “Subfields of Specialized Journalism,” 65.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

who publish new cookbooks, some on an annual basis. Each of these products falls into the category of content the magazines cover. What's more media outlets increasingly view prominent chefs not only as content but as marketing tools. The *New York Times* "Taste of T" event on November 6, 2008, featured 14 top-flight chefs, all of whom have been reviewed or featured in the food pages of the newspaper. This coopting of chefs for promotional purposes rather than editorial content, says restaurant critic Alan Richman, has led most magazines to drop serious restaurant reviews altogether because editors and publishers have realized the benefits of using chefs and restaurants as promotional tools outweigh the risks of offending them with a negative review.¹⁰⁰

To find other examples of these journalistic forces operating in the subfield of food journalism, one need not look hard. Consider the New York weeklies, such as *New York* and *Time Out*, whose editors wrestle for exclusive access to news about restaurant openings. Such scoops have become even more valuable nowadays as food blogs, such as seriouseats.com and eater.com are in constant contact with publicists and have their own citizen-reporters walking the streets to take pictures of construction sites for their "Plywood Reports." There are food-trend reporters, such as Florence Fabricant at the *New York Times*, around whom restaurant publicists tread lightly for fear a leak to another journalist will prevent her from writing about their clients. America's Test Kitchen, publishers of *Cook's Country* and *Cook's Illustrated* magazines, employ an extreme consumer-oriented, market-research approach to their editorial content. All recipe titles and ingredients are market tested

¹⁰⁰ Alan Richman, interviewed by Mitchell Davis, Mamaroneck, NY, December 18 2007.

and retested before any recipes appear in print. In cases when the editors disagree, the market research wins.¹⁰¹ Perhaps one of the strongest indications of how the commercial forces acting on media and reader orientation converge is the sameness of the covers and uniformity of content of the three dominant monthly food magazines, *Bon Appétit*, *Food & Wine*, and *Gourmet*, listed in order of circulation, each of which has produced a special themed “restaurant” issue and issues dedicated to the food of Paris and the food of Italy within in the last year. Similar to the process Bourdieu described in *On Television*, the need to maximize circulation and demographics to maximize advertising dollars pushes the content of these magazines toward uniformity.

Restaurant Reviews, Collective Tastes, and a Theory of Mass Opinion

Thinking of restaurant reviews as a subfield of journalism suggests they may be viewed as a tool in the construction of collective tastes. In light of Mennell’s operationalization of Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, it therefore proves helpful to think of these collective tastes shaped through journalism as a form of mass opinion. Habermas built his concept of the bourgeois public sphere on the notion of Kantian cosmopolitanism (*Weltläufigkeit*), wherein the world “was constituted in the communication of rational beings.”¹⁰² He distinguished between the transcendental world, and this rational world by describing the latter as “the world of a critically

¹⁰¹ Personal communication with Margaret Grodinsky, editor-in-chief, *Cook’s Country*, 28 August 2008. This constant reader polling suggests one way collective tastes can be conceived as a form of mass opinion, as discussed in the next section.

¹⁰² Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 106.

debating reading public...the world of the men of letters but also that of the *salons* in which 'mixed companies' engaged in critical discussions."¹⁰³ Critics of Habermas, such as Schudson,¹⁰⁴ who questions whether an ideal public sphere ever existed in the United States, and Fraser, who views Habermas's conception of the public sphere as incomplete in light of its exclusion of marginalized groups and the reality of the existence of multiple subaltern public spheres,¹⁰⁵ nevertheless concur that his is a powerful model for understanding how public opinion affects social and political realities through discourse.

Although Habermas believed the socio-structural transformation of the public sphere precipitated in part by the commercial mass media led to the end of the "rational-critical exchange" that was crucial for the sort of public debate that constituted the ideal, democratic world, the way he described the transformation has interesting implications for understanding the formation of collective tastes. In our modern, ersatz public sphere, according to Habermas, there is no real debate of informed and engaged people. Instead, "the critical discussion of a reading public" has given way to "exchanges about tastes and preferences' between consumers," such that "even the talk about what is consumed, 'the examination of tastes,' becomes a part of consumption itself."¹⁰⁶ Fraser notes that "public spheres are not only

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Schudson, "Was There Ever a Public Sphere? If So, When? Reflections on the American Case," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

¹⁰⁵ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

¹⁰⁶ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, 171.

arenas for the formation of discursive opinions; in addition, they are arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities.”¹⁰⁷ The role of aesthetic judgments in creating identities was discussed in the previous chapter. Accepting Habermas’s belief that public opinion no longer represents rational opinions arrived at by people engaged in critical debate, but instead is a reflection of the dominant opinions and tastes imposed on the group that are “picked up, ready-made, flexibly reproduced, barely internalized, and not evoking much commitment,”¹⁰⁸ gives reviews an even greater power to shape tastes, and therefore identities, en masse. Granted Habermas is disdainful of the notion that personal taste stands in for rational debate, but if it does, then it must have a certain power. Where is this noncritical public receiving the information about what food they like in order to simply return it undigested, so to speak, to anyone who asks? Where are they receiving the information about the tastes they passively accept to be good? In his study of food in pop culture, Fabio Parasecoli proposes a transnational, hegemonic model for the dissemination of meaning encoded in cultural signifiers that is triggered by consumption.¹⁰⁹ As we shall see in subsequent chapters, in America information about food and taste comes largely from restaurants reviews published in traditional media.

The practical application of mass-opinion theory deals with measuring the complex process of the transmission of ideologies through the media to the masses that Habermas theorizes. This process finds its application in the

¹⁰⁷ Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," 125.

¹⁰⁸ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, 246.

¹⁰⁹ Fabio Parasecoli, *Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2008), 4–11.

world of food through the Zagat Survey, which polls the restaurant dining public, in effect measuring collective tastes. As Zaller characterizes the process of mass-opinion formation, “Every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition: information to form a mental picture of the given issue, and predisposition to motivate some conclusion about it.”¹¹⁰

Thinking of collective tastes, it is interesting to note that Zaller’s conceptualization of political predispositions, the underpinnings of personal values, is similar to Bourdieu’s habitus:

“Predispositions are at least in part a distillation of a person’s lifetime experiences, including childhood socialization and direct involvement with the raw ingredients of policy issues, such as earning a living, paying taxes, racial discrimination, and so forth. Predispositions also partly depend on social and economic location and, probably at least as strongly, on inherited or acquired personality factors and tastes.”¹¹¹

Although the ideologies and opinions Zaller is referring to are political in nature, inasmuch as gastronomy represents culinary ideology, and the most important reviews are communicated through mass-media channels, this body of mass-opinion literature provides some interesting insight into the discursive processes that lead to the dispersion of taste.

Zaller’s model of political campaigns presumes elite domination of public opinion. Like Bourdieu, by elites, Zaller is not necessarily referring to the upper classes, but rather to opinion makers with relatively higher cultural capital. As Zaller explains it, messages formed by elites are diffused through the media. The public receives these messages, which resonate or not depending on individual predispositions. If they resonate and are internalized,

¹¹⁰ John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 7.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

the messages become considerations, Zaller's word for the personal rationalizations individuals use when taking one side or another. Attitude change, at least as it can be measured, results from a change in the make up of the messages people are exposed to. It is a slow, nonlinear process. Changes in the messages cause attitude change "not by producing a sudden conversion experience but by producing gradual changes in the balance of considerations that are present in people's minds."¹¹² Because Zaller is concerned with political campaigns and the measurement of mass opinion, he is primarily interested in the opinions that are articulated when a survey question is asked. Such opinions are not necessarily firmly or deeply held, but they are near the surface at the time of questioning. Asking the question triggers an instantaneous synchronic evaluation of a person's considerations, conjuring things heard, memories formed, and opinions expressed, and including any information conveyed in the question or the survey, to put forth an answer.

Although taste is not political ideology, it is ideological. As one of Brillat-Savarin's early English translators worded it, "Gastronomy is the maturer knowledge—the rationale of every thing which concerns man as regards his food."¹¹³ I would argue that the characteristics of taste judgments discussed in the previous chapter—such as the instantaneity of the taste sensation and the mechanisms through which taste triggers memories, invokes habitus, and is shaped by the information conveyed in the moment as well as the environment in which the tasting occurs—are akin to the characteristics of mass opinions described by Zaller, making his model of

¹¹² Ibid., 266.

¹¹³ Brillat-Savarin, *The Handbook of Dining; or, Corpulency and Leanness Scientifically Considered*, 61.

public opinion applicable to the realm of taste.

To carry this analogy of collective tastes as mass opinions about food further, reviewers are therefore elites, whose messages about taste are conveyed in their reviews. Through the process Habermas bemoaned, these tastes are received passively and regurgitated. Zaller defines elite domination as “a situation in which elites induce citizens to hold opinions that they would not hold if aware of the best available information and analysis.”¹¹⁴ At first this definition does not ring true in the realm of taste because it presumes that there is some objective definition of taste which, if properly informed, we might all agree on. Of course, several of the philosophers of aesthetic judgment referenced in the previous chapter did in fact hold that taste could be objectified in some way. Recall that Kantian beauty was universal and disinterested. Regardless, the prescriptive nature of gastronomic writing presumes a body of knowledge that could be mastered given enough time and attention, much the way a political issue can be better understood by careful attention to facts. Although it is hard to say whether tastemaking elites writing reviews have more or less overt motivation to manipulate public opinion about food than political campaigners have to manipulate public opinion about political issues, that does not mean their work is any less manipulative. And regardless of the level of consciousness of the personal parameters that circumscribe the probabilities of taste judgments (call them predispositions or habitus), there are socially constructed ideologies of taste that move some people to prefer certain things over others.

Interestingly, in the realm of politics, because the press is traditionally

¹¹⁴ Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, 313.

considered an objective conduit between the elites (e.g., experts or newsmakers) and the masses, they are forced to make decisions about the legitimacy of sources, decisions that can shape the news in one way or the other. Zaller uses one journalist's observation to make an important point, "We don't deal in facts, we deal in attributed opinions."¹¹⁵ In Zaller's model of elite domination of mass opinion, however, unattributed opinions are just as or maybe even more important than attributed ones. He notes that "the sources responsible for a given story may not be quoted in it, consulted for it, or even personally familiar to the reporter."¹¹⁶ Zaller concludes, "Legitimacy is determined by what mainstream experts take seriously."¹¹⁷ In the situation of the reviewer at a newspaper, the reviewer is both the expert and the reporter. His or her source of legitimacy comes from having gotten the job in the first place. But the reviewer is no less reliant on opinions of other experts than the political reporter. For years Claiborne and later Miller relied on Pierre Franey, the celebrated chef of Le Pavillon, for his culinary expertise. Food experts are often asked to accompany critics to dinner to shed light on unfamiliar cuisines and new trends. In these relationships the fields of journalism and gastronomy literally meet at the table. The only differences between these culinary informants and news informants are that the input from these elites is rarely attributed in the restaurant review and the distance between the sources and the public is shorter.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 315.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 318.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 319.

¹¹⁸ In fact, the increase in the prevalence of first-person reporting and the rise in popularity of blogs, not to mention a growing preference for reporting everyman opinions, has shortened the distance between elites, the press, and the public even more.

Situating Restaurant Reviews in the Field of Cultural Production

So what can we learn from restaurant reviews and restaurant reviewing in the context of the field of cultural production, whether we consider them a subset of the field of journalism, a product of the field of gastronomy, or a tool for the formation of mass opinions that lead to collective tastes? Restaurant reviews are obviously more than prescriptions of gastronomic behavior or, for that matter, meditations on some notion of quality. To the contrary, as Shrum notes in his study of the mediating function of critics in the promulgation of cultural hierarchies, "Critics are not objective referees of the best and worst, standing outside the art world and judging its output, but participants in a stream of discourse that defines the cultural hierarchy."¹¹⁹ Although Blank asserts that the credibility of reviews is inherent in the procedures by which they are produced,¹²⁰ Allen and Lincoln explain an interesting corollary to their findings about the retrospective consecration of films, that the producers of intellectual and critical discourse, the scholars and critics, derive their authority not necessarily from the perceived validity of their opinions, but from "their ability to frame their aesthetic judgments within the context of specific cultural schemas."¹²¹ This finding echoes Bourdieu's explanation of the critics role in mediating the homology between the fields of cultural production and consumption.

It makes sense that a more didactic style of reviewing is prominent at times when major trends are afoot and tastes or eating habits are in flux.

¹¹⁹ Shrum, *Fringe and Fortune: The Role of Critics in High and Popular Art*, 10.

¹²⁰ Grant Blank, *Critics, Ratings, and Society: The Sociology of Reviews* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 25-42.

¹²¹ Allen and Lincoln, "Critical Discourse and the Cultural Consecration of American Films," 891.

Grimod's first reviews were written as the first restaurants were popping up all over Paris and Parisians needed help navigating the new world of capitalist culinary consumption and the peculiar consequence of eating and socializing around food in public that came with it. Similarly, Claiborne's reviews assumed a didactic—some might say pretentious—tone when they debuted in the *Times* in the 1960s, a moment when restaurants were flourishing in New York City and more New Yorkers with more access to them began to use restaurants as arenas of social interplay and exchange. It is possible an expert tone alleviates the Fischlerian anxiety that is particularly strong at times when eating habits and food preferences are changing.

According to Ferguson's taxonomy of reviewers, the Judge, who is usually associated with a major media outlet, uses his or her passion, personality, and unique perspective to garner influence and build readership, especially in times of flux.¹²² From their perch atop the field, the *Times* reviewers since Claiborne have all been quintessential judges. As we will see, their enduring success in that position has kept the Judge the dominant form of reviewing in the United States. But there are other forms of reviewing as well. The Tribunal, for which a panel of experts arrives at some form of consensus about taste, finds its most successful incarnation in the Michelin Guide in France. The Plebiscite, which produces aesthetic judgments about restaurants and food by polling the opinions of the dining public, is typified by the Zagat Survey. These other forms of reviewing are popular and effective at various times and in various places, depending on how they resonate with the field of gastronomy and with society at large.

¹²² Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, "Michelin in America," *Gastronomica* 8, no 1 (2008): 50.

CHAPTER IV
WHO'S EATING NEW YORK?:
CRAIG CLAIBORNE, THE *NEW YORK TIMES*,
AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE FIELD OF GASTRONOMY
IN AMERICA

With its concentration of museums, opera companies, dance troupes, art galleries, fashion houses, restaurants, and other cultural organizations, not to mention media outlets and money, during the latter half of the 20th century New York City asserted itself as the cultural capital of the United States. Even though important cultural institutions for art, music, dance, architecture, and even food, have flourished across the country, the convergence of the markets and the media that deal in these cultural products in New York maintains the city's prime position. As a result, New York's critics wield unique power in the consecration of cultural products.¹ The byproduct of this consecration is an important and compelling standard of taste that transcends the city's five boroughs.

In the area of food, New York's power to consecrate is especially robust. As I have argued elsewhere, New York dominates the cultural culinary sphere, particularly as it pertains to restaurants.² The large number of restaurants in the city,³ the concentration of food publishing and media

¹ Booth, *The Critic, Power, and the Performing Arts*, 192.

² See Davis, "Eating Out, Eating American: New York Restaurant Dining and Identity."

³ According to the 2002 Economic Census conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, there are 14,590 food and drinking establishments in the five

outlets,⁴ and the citywide obsession with restaurants as a tool for the formation of social identity places New York in a unique position vis-à-vis other important American food cities, such as San Francisco or New Orleans. What's more, the symbolic nature of eating out has come to inform a certain type of New York existence. Eating out in New York is a tool people use to transgress class and ethnic boundaries.⁵ Eating out is also an act of civic pride. New Yorkers readily recount to their disbelieving relatives and friends stories of people who keep clothing in their kitchen cabinets or who have had their kitchens removed entirely because they eat out three meals a day, seven days a week.⁶ Such culinary mythologizing about food and restaurants helps synthesize a modern New York identity.

Although restaurants have been a venue for social climbing in New York since at least the time the Swiss Delmonico brothers opened their first *restaurant français* in 1831,⁷ integrating restaurant and chef culture into a sophisticated, urban identity is not limited to the traditional upperclasses.

boroughs. "2002 Economic Census," U.S. Census Bureau, http://www.census.gov/econ/census02/data/ny/51000_72.HTM. Other government sources, such as the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, which conducts restaurant inspections, suggest the number exceeds 20,000. "Restaurant Inspection Information," New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/rii/index.shtml>.

⁴ *Gourmet*, *Food & Wine*, *Saveur*, *Bon Appétit*, Food Network, Zagat, eater.com, seriouseats.com, starchefs.com, and all but one major cookbook publisher, are all based in New York City.

⁵ See Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*, and Krishnendu Ray, *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

⁶ The most famous example of this phenomenon was Reese Schonfeld, the founding CEO of the Television Food Network (later just Food Network), whose apartment had no kitchen. See Nanci Hellmich, "Food Channel Tempts Viewers with Show Tidbits," *USA Today*, 30 August 1993.

⁷ Ellen F. Steinberg and Jack H. Prost, "A Menu and a Mystery: The Case of the 1834 Delmonico Bill of Fare," *Gastronomica* 8, no. 2 (2008): 40.

Fabio Parasecoli describes a more recent process by which obsessive interest in chefs and restaurants has become a marker of urban coolness. Young, urban trendsetters have aligned themselves with a profusion of young, urban chefs hooked into an international culinary network, who are pushing the culinary envelope toward the avant-garde. “Fully rooted in the capitalistic system of consumption,” he writes, “these new well-off hipsters were after mostly pure fun and the opportunity to socialize with their peers in a stimulating environment. The consequence was that food became just one factor in their overall perception of attractiveness and desirability.”⁸

In the afterword added to the 25th-anniversary reprint of their history of restaurants in New York, Michael and Ariane Batterberry situate the evolution of New York’s contemporary dining scene since the 1970s into a larger social context.⁹ They note an increase in the number of restaurants, due, in part, to favorable rents brought about by the city’s economic downturn, and the increase in size of the graduating classes of the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, whose students were inspired by the creativity espoused by the Nouvelle Cuisine chefs in France. They suggest that Reagan’s supply-side economics and the Wall Street boom they ushered in encouraged the status-conscious consumption of luxury lifestyle goods for which restaurants provided an ideal public arena. Restaurateurs made restaurants more accessible and more enticing by making them more

⁸ Fabio Parasecoli, "The Chefs, the Entrepreneurs, and Their Patrons," in *Gastropolis: Food & New York City*, ed. Annie Hauck-Lawson and Jonathan Deutsch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 129.

⁹ Michael Batterberry and Ariane Ruskin Batterberry, *On the Town in New York: The Landmark History of Eating, Drinking, and Entertainments from the American Revolution to the Food Revolution*, 25th anniversary special ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999).

casual and by emphasizing what the hospitality industry at the time called “*eatertainment*,” the idea that dining was not just something you did on your way to other cultural activities, but was a cultural activity in and of itself. Finally, the Batterberrys submit that changes in kitchen technology, in cookbook and other food publishing, and in patterns of leisure invited more people to participate in the conversation about food, restaurants, and chefs.

In short, what the Batterberrys are describing is the evolution and explosion of the field of gastronomy. Changes in American society in general and in New York City life in particular created the perfect environment for the field of gastronomy to flourish. Recall from the previous chapter that the five structural elements Ferguson considers necessary for such a field to exist are: 1) an increase in the number of restaurants and the people with means to eat in them, 2) the establishment of specific sites dedicated to gastronomic production and consumption, 3) the articulation and dissemination of gastronomic standards, 4) the appearance of subfields to foster and inform debate, and 5) the formation of links to other fields of cultural production. Each of these elements emerged in New York in the latter half of the 20th century. As in the case of 19th-century France, America’s field of gastronomy did not appear out of nowhere. It was shaped primarily by New York City’s chefs, food writers, and especially its critics.

My research shows that restaurant reviews, because of their unique discursive power to educate about food and to consecrate tastes, especially in a dynamic restaurant environment such as the one in New York City during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, played a pivotal role in the evolution of the field of gastronomy. With neither a codified American cuisine—or a desire to create one—nor our own Brillat-Savarin to neatly articulate and disseminate

the rules against which distinctions based on food could be made, our workaday, restaurant reviewers had a outsized impact on the discourse in the field of gastronomy. Perhaps none was more important than Craig Claiborne at the *New York Times*, whose journalistic ethics, professionalism, emphasis on food, and his position at the newspaper with the most clout in cultural matters, made him a defining force in American gastronomy.

Recall the elite-domination model proposed in the previous chapter that suggests restaurant reviewing informs and shapes taste through discourse in a process similar to the formation of mass opinion. In New York, the literal and figurative center of the gastronomic field in America, reviewers, as the dominant position-takers, shaped that discourse, consecrating and thereby valuing the symbolic and cultural capital associated with certain food preferences that became our expressed tastes. As Pierre Franey, once the chef of the top restaurant in New York and later a collaborator of Claiborne's, recalled in his memoir, "[Claiborne] could, literally, make a restaurant overnight, so reliable and important did people deem his reviews."¹⁰ These tastes were then reinforced by and reintegrated into the field to inform the discourse that fed the process that linked certain tastes to certain cultural and symbolic capital.

As Ferguson explains, the Judge is naturally the dominant mode of restaurant reviewing when affluent but unknowledgeable diners are eager to eat out.¹¹ This role as educator of the upperclasses, and perhaps more importantly, of those aspiring to move in that direction, gives the Judge a

¹⁰ Pierre Franey, Richard Flaste, and Bryan Miller, *A Chef's Tale: A Memoir of Food, France and America* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 115.

¹¹ Ferguson, "Michelin in America," 50.

particularly powerful platform from which to shape taste. As New York's economic and cultural influence grew in the 1950s and 1960s, Claiborne was there as a judge to tell everyone what was good and where to eat. So effective was he as a reviewer that his reviews became the model for American reviewers in general and his tastes contributed to a gourmet movement whose reverberations are still being felt today.

Craig Claiborne and Restaurant Reviews at the *Times*¹²

Craig Claiborne's arrival in 1957 as the first male food editor at the *New York Times*, the first male food editor at any major newspaper for that matter, led to an important shift in the cultural importance of food and restaurants and initiated a process that would end up professionalizing restaurant reviewing at the *Times* and across the United States. He would also drastically change the shape and direction of the field of gastronomy in America. Claiborne's influence and his enduring success has been attributed in part to his being a man in a newspaper position traditionally held by women.¹³ As he recalled in his memoir, his gender was the biggest hurdle he faced getting the job at the *Times*.¹⁴ Although an exploration of the impact of gender on the field of food writing is beyond the scope of this dissertation, one could say that Claiborne's gender gave him a position-taking advantage over female food editors at other newspapers and magazines in the nascent field of gastronomy.

¹² Portions of this section were first published in Davis, "Power Meal: Craig Claiborne's Last Supper for the New York Times."

¹³ Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 57.

¹⁴ Craig Claiborne, *A Feast Made for Laughter: A Memoir with Recipes*, First Owl Book Edition ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983), 126.

In addition, Claiborne's training at Lausanne's famed Ecole Hôtelière de la Société Suisse des Hôteliers gave him bona fides that no food writer had previously brought to the table. Claiborne attended the prestigious hotel school in Switzerland on an allocation from the G.I. Bill after completion of naval service during World War II and a later recall. Having been born into a downwardly mobile family in Mississippi, the navy allowed him to travel the world. "Shortly after my birth, my father lost all of his land holdings plus a fortune in other business interests. He was, in short, destitute," he recounted in his memoir.¹⁵ In response, his mother opened a boarding house that was a success in terms of bookings and guest satisfaction but was forever saddled with debt. Nevertheless, African American servants helped his mother prepare food for guests, and Claiborne grew up with an appreciation, if not much knowledge of southern cooking.¹⁶ On the way to his first naval assignment in Chicago, as a yeoman, third class, he recalled, "I had drunk lots of beer in college...but I had never sampled a glass of wine and the most sophisticated, exotic food that I had sampled was jellied consommé madrilène...for lunch at the Chicago World's Fair...on reflection I know that it was inevitably out of a can."¹⁷ Claiborne surmised that his interest in food and the hospitality industry that eventually led him to Lausanne may have originated during a posting to Casablanca, where the French food he and his shipmates enjoyed opened his mind and his palate to the pleasures of

¹⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹⁶ Witt highlights the class-based "gastronomic miscegenation" prevalent in Claiborne's recipes and in his memoir. See Witt, *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity*, 58.

¹⁷ Claiborne, *A Feast Made for Laughter: A Memoir with Recipes*, 61.

cuisine.¹⁸ Even so, Claiborne admitted in his memoir:

When I became food editor of the *New York Times*, on September 9, 1957, I had small acquaintance with the first-rate restaurants of New York, let alone those of Europe and elsewhere. The simple and obvious fact was that I had never possessed enough money to dine in the style to which I might have liked to become accustomed.¹⁹

Despite or perhaps because of his background, Claiborne approached his job at the *Times* with a journalistic seriousness and professionalism that had not been applied to the food pages before. He set out early to assert himself as the dominant voice in New York's dining scene. In 1959, he penned a front-page article entitled "Elegance of Cuisine Is on Wane in U.S." that proved a watershed for New York restaurants.²⁰ Setting out to answer a question posed by James Beard about why it was that America seemed "more interested in preserving the whooping crane and the buffalo than in perpetuating classic cookery and improving standards of table service," Claiborne explained the gastronomically deleterious effects of an aging chef population, convenience foods, forgotten taste memories, poor training, disgruntled unions, and other social and business factors that he believed caused both chefs in the kitchen and guests in the dining room to forgo the effort required for the appreciation of elegant cuisine and dining. Claiborne held up Pierre Franey, chef of Le Pavillon at the time,²¹ and Frances Roth, administrative director of the Culinary Institute of America, as two people holding out against the changing tide. It was a strong position statement,

¹⁸ Ibid., 65.

¹⁹ Ibid., 137.

²⁰ Craig Claiborne, "Elegance of Cuisine Is on Wane in U.S.," *New York Times*, 13 April 1959.

²¹ Franey later became a close friend and collaborator of Claiborne's and of one of his successors at the *Times*, Bryan Miller.

audacious for someone with limited restaurant dining experience, and effective in putting restaurateurs and chefs on their toes. It also presumably started Claiborne on the road to educating New York's diners so they could reclaim some of the elegance that had been lost.

Whether in response to Claiborne's culinary call to arms or simply by coincidence, at that moment the city's restaurant scene began to change. Recovering from the devastating impact of Prohibition and the challenges presented by the Great Depression and World War II,²² New York City restaurateurs began conceiving larger, more ambitious projects with world-class aspirations just as Claiborne was lamenting the loss of elegance in restaurant dining. The Four Seasons, the most expensive restaurant ever built, opened its doors in July 1959 (they remain open today)²³; La Caravelle opened in November 1960 (it closed in May 2004); and Lutèce opened in March 1961 (closed in February 2004). Claiborne reviewed them all favorably. Each would be considered among the most important American restaurants of the century.

Claiborne was particularly excited by the Four Seasons. "There has never been a restaurant better keyed to the tempo of Manhattan than the Four Seasons," he declared in the lede to a review that praised the service ("There is probably no dining establishment in New York where training for

²² See Batterberry and Batterberry, *On the Town in New York: The Landmark History of Eating, Drinking, and Entertainments from the American Revolution to the Food Revolution*, 234-42, 71-75, Harvey A. Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 183-87.

²³ The Four Seasons cost \$4.5 million to build in 1959. Using the Consumers Price Index, that is equivalent to \$32 million in 2007 dollars. Other indices estimate the real value in today's dollars to be between \$26 million and \$123 million.

table service is more thorough”), the décor (“a conversation piece sufficient in itself to sustain a lively causerie throughout a leisurely lunch”), and the food “There is certainly no question that Albert Stockli, the executive chef...has a talent to equal his imagination.”)²⁴ Claiborne was not without criticism, however, especially about the food, noting the “vulgar” oversized portions that were “all too common in American dining places” and sloppy knife skills. He also commented on the kitchen’s “tendency to serve overly sweet sauces” and asked rhetorically, “Why does such a restaurant so dedicated to seasonal themes permit iceberg lettuce on the premises?”

Food Moves to the Center of the Plate

In his early reviews of important restaurants such as the Four Seasons, Claiborne was already establishing a benchmark for what would come to define “gourmet” tastes in America. Around these tastes with the force of his opinions, a field of gastronomy would coalesce. His educated and authoritative tone and idiosyncratic attention to details about food bolstered his authority and fostered connoisseurship. Claiborne’s variety of connoisseurship was different from other popular critics at the time. Lucius Beebe, a bon vivant who often reviewed restaurants in the society columns he wrote during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s for diverse publications, including the *New York Herald Tribune* and *Gourmet*, was more concerned with what he referred to as “café society” than with the quality of the coffee.²⁵ Duncan Hines, perhaps the country’s most famous critic during the 1940s and 1950s,

²⁴ Craig Claiborne, review of The Four Seasons, *New York Times*, 2 October 1959.

²⁵ David Plotnikoff, "One-Man Show: In His Day, Lucius Beebe was America's Preeminent Gourmand," *Savueur*, January 2009.

was in awe of the number and variety of restaurants in New York, which he claimed to have visited more than 150 times.²⁶ But his ratings were preoccupied with cleanliness, not the quality of cuisine or the dining environment. In a section devoted to the importance of sanitation in the introduction to the 1947 edition of his *Adventures in Good Eating* guide, Hines warns, “People eating out should give sufficient thought to the kitchen of a public eating place rather than be guided solely by chromium fronts and attractive interior decorations.”²⁷

In Claiborne’s early reviews, good food was usually what mattered most. Whether because he was unable to draw on much personal dining experience or simply because he liked to cook and eat, Claiborne emphasized food and cooking techniques in his reviews. He infused his reviews with the tone of a culinary mentor at a time when people’s interest in food was piqued and they desired to learn more. With an increasingly international selection of restaurants to choose from, Claiborne also managed to give his readers guidance about what to look for in various cuisines and how to eat. An early review of the Chinese restaurant Wo Ping from June 28, 1963, foreshadows the cultural omnivorosity discussed in the previous chapter that is a hallmark of foodies today: “Some dishes are exceptional, including the fried fresh crab and fried fresh snails. These are fingers-in-the-gravy food, however and are not, perhaps, for the fastidious.” Clearly, he was speaking to a restaurant-going crowd who might not have appreciated authentic Chinese food enough yet to get messy when they ate it. On the other end of the dining

²⁶ Duncan Hines, *Duncan Hines' Food Odyssey* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1955), 32–33.

²⁷ ———, *Adventures in Good Eating*, 14th ed. (Bowling Green, KY: Adventures in Good Eating, 1947), xii.

spectrum, in a review in the fall of 1964, Claiborne raved about Le Mistral, the “most recent addition to the town’s roster of luxury restaurants...a place of estimable charm with a kitchen of considerable merit.”²⁸ Even so, he pointed out a fault with one of the entrées, striped bass Polignac, which was served with a sauce of white wine and mushrooms that was “perhaps, a trifle too thickened with flour.” The presumption was that Claiborne knew in precise detail how a striped bass Polignac and its sauce ought to be prepared and so should you. In a 1992 state-of-the-industry article about restaurant reviewing, Marilyn Alva summed up Claiborne’s contribution: “Claiborne’s educational approach to reviewing in the late 1960s and 1970s—explanatory dissections of dishes—helped expand Americans’ culinary horizons beyond meatloaf and mashed potatoes.”²⁹

Not everyone agreed with the assessment that Claiborne’s culinary knowledge was sound. *Timesman* and later food critic John L. Hess and his wife Karen Hess took issue in their catty commentary on American food called *The Taste of America*, in which they considered Claiborne and his colleagues James Beard and Julia Child the source of a “gourmet plague” that “debased the American Palate.”³⁰ The Hesses dismissed Claiborne’s presumed knowledge of Escoffier,³¹ his cooking skills, his understanding of

²⁸ Craig Claiborne, review of Le Mistral, *New York Times*, 12 November 1965, 43.

²⁹ Marilyn Alva, "Have Restaurant Reviewers Gone Soft?," *Restaurant Business*, 10 June 1992.

³⁰ John L. Hess and Karen Hess, *The Taste of America*, 1st Illinois paperback ed. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000 [1972]), 152–72. John Hess was restaurant critic at the *Times* for nine months after Claiborne.

³¹ Given Claiborne’s comment about the over-thickened sauce in his review of Le Mistral, it is funny to note that the Hesses take Claiborne to task for two *sauce velouté* recipes he published that call for what they consider to be enough

complementary components of flavor, and even his journalism, noting that, “There are not many Claiborne features in which one cannot find one or more unfortunate errors.”³² Even Claiborne’s friend and fellow southerner James Villas, who was food and wine editor of the tony *Town & Country* for 27 years, sometimes took issue with Claiborne’s expertise. Although Villas credited Claiborne with almost single-handedly changing American tastes, describing him as, “one of the most brilliant, exacting, and dedicated journalists I’ve ever known,” he nevertheless had to admit, “This legend who taught America so much about cooking was himself not a very accomplished cook.”³³ What’s more, Villas added, “Craig’s interpretation of certain dishes was not always as valid as implied in some of the recipes he published.”³⁴

But the accuracy of Claiborne’s information was beside the point of his influence in this regard. With the weight of the *New York Times* behind him and the authority derived from the serious journalism he practiced, Claiborne privileged food and pontificated about restaurants in his reviews, codifying and communicating a gastronomic perspective that formed the basis for a culinary coming of age. Changing the basis of consecration of a great restaurant from the social to the culinary also changed the basis for the cultural distinction that could be attained through dining. By definition, not everyone has access to the most exclusive restaurants, whether because of limited money or low social standing. But everyone knows or can learn something about food. Before Claiborne, the most exclusive restaurants were

flour to make “library paste,” “a catastrophe,” and to set a new “gourmet record.” See page 153.

³² Hess and Hess, *The Taste of America*, 160.

³³ James Villas, *Between Bites: Memoirs of a Hungry Hedonist; A Life in Food* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 144.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

invariably considered the best, at least in the eyes of the upwardly mobile, middle-class, status-conscious readers of the *Times*. After Claiborne, the best restaurants, even the most exclusive ones, needed to serve good food, too.³⁵ By synthesizing all he learned from the cooks he wrote about and the restaurants he dined in and by transmitting that information in the form of the culinary judgments he made in his *Times* reviews, Claiborne invited the general public into the conversation about restaurants and food. He created a taste public, to use Gans's term,³⁶ empowering diners to have their own opinions (which, of course, were his opinions). In the process, he articulated and disseminated the sort of gastronomic standards integral to any field of gastronomy.

Fifty years later, Claiborne's early criticisms of the food at the Four Seasons still resonate—oversized portions, sloppy knife skills, saccharine sauces, and iceberg lettuce are the bane of sophisticated foodies, the supposed downfall of misguided chefs, and fodder for uneducated eaters. Witness the opening elimination challenge in the November 12, 2008, premiere of season five of Bravo's *Top Chef* reality television series,³⁷ for which contestants peeled and chopped 15 apples while the head judge and celebrated chef Tom Colicchio discussed the importance and increasing rarity of good knife skills among chefs. Consider beloved television personality and cookbook author Jacques Pépin's admission in his 2003 memoir that he has

³⁵ Interestingly, Patric Kuh found a similar shift in emphasis from restaurants to food in gastronomic discourse in France in the 1930s, which he attributed to the influential, market-driven cooking of Fernand Point at Le Pyramide in Vienne. See Patric Kuh, *The Last Days of Haute Cuisine* (New York: Viking, 2001), 40.

³⁶ Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*.

³⁷ "Melting Pot," *Top Chef: New York* (Bravo), produced by Magical Elves, 2008.

forever loved iceberg lettuce³⁸ and the he's-one-of-us reaction it generated throughout the blogosphere.³⁹ So atypical and unexpected was Pépin's iceberg enchantment that it warranted a mention in the *New York Times* review of his book.⁴⁰ Before Claiborne, certainly some high-minded gourmets must have been put off by out-of-season lettuce and sweet sauces. But as the persistence of these critical culinary frames implies, throughout his career Claiborne gave his large and growing audience important tools of distinction that shaped the public discourse on taste.

Weekly Reviews Debut

Until 1963, Claiborne's focus remained on the other articles on the food pages, profiling talented home cooks, reporting on food trends, creating and testing recipes, and only occasionally reviewing restaurants when important new ones opened. But when the paper started publishing weekly restaurant reviews, his focus and the position of the restaurant critic in the field of gastronomy changed. The first weekly reviews appeared on Friday, May 24, 1963, under the heading "Directory to Dining." From that day on, just about every Friday (until a reorganization in 1997 moved the reviews to Wednesday) one could find advice in the national paper of record on where to dine in and around New York City. Over time, as general interest in

³⁸ Jacques Pépin, *The Apprentice: My Life in the Kitchen* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2003), 141.

³⁹ Refer, for instance, to this comment by "Kristin" on the "Cook Like Your Grandmother" blog: "I love iceberg lettuce. And ever since I saw Jacques Pépin extolling its virtues on his PBS cooking show, I've decided that I shouldn't be ashamed of my preference for iceberg anymore." (<http://blog.cooklikeyourgrandmother.com/2008/07/how-to-make-wedge-salad.html>)

⁴⁰ Stacy Schiff, review of *The Apprentice: My Life in the Kitchen* by Jacques Pépin, *New York Times*, 4 May 2003, Book Review.

restaurants and the consecrating power of the *Times* critic grew, the name, size, tone, placement, and overall format of the reviews changed.

The early “Directory” consisted of three or four one-hundred-word capsule reviews of restaurants in New York City and the outlying suburbs. They were simple reviews that nevertheless included definitive opinions. In a 50-word review of Jimmy’s Greek American Restaurant that appeared in the first “Directory,” Claiborne deemed it, “Far and away the best Greek restaurant in the city.”⁴¹ A few weeks later he wrote about Canton Village, “The food is quite palatable, but the menu is chiefly run-of-the-mill, a catalogue more or less of New York’s favorite Chinese food.”⁴² Claiborne’s early review of ‘21’ afforded a critical opinion of a beloved institution, “From the standpoint of décor...there is no finer place to dine in New York....The menu is fascinating, but the kitchen does not offer great cuisine.”⁴³ Claiborne rated restaurants on a scale of one to three stars, explained in a legend that was reprinted each week: “One star denotes restaurants of more than routing interest; two stars denote those of superior quality; and three stars pertain to restaurants regarded as among the finest in the city.” Without comment he added a fourth star on October 9, 1963.

By reviewing a handful of eating establishments each week, Claiborne opened the *Times*’s food pages to a much broader swath of the city’s restaurants than those pages would have otherwise contained. It was in part his emphasis on food that allowed him to do this. Previously, the paper’s reviews focused on new, important, and exclusive restaurants, such as the

⁴¹ “Directory to Dining,” *New York Times*, 24 May 1963, 34.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 14 June, 32.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 5 July, 26.

Four Seasons and Lutèce. There certainly were not enough of these sort of restaurants openings each week to fill the new directory. Now, the imprimatur of the *Times* on Greek American diners and Chinatown dives opened up the possibility of eating in a *Times*-touted restaurant to a much wider dining population. Recall that such access to and participation in dining is one of Ferguson's prerequisites for a field of gastronomy.

Changes in the status of the restaurant reviews and by extension the restaurants and reviewers themselves can be traced through the evolution of the name of the department in which they were published and its placement in the paper, as well as in the style of the titles and the length of the reviews, which grew substantially over time. The nature of these changes suggests they coincided with a growth in the impact of the reviews. As already mentioned, the weekly restaurant reviews began under the title "Directory to Dining," with only minor alterations to that name made from week to week as needed to fill column space (e.g., "A Directory to Dining is Offered"). In the fall of 1966 Claiborne's byline was added, and with it came a personalization of the opinions that gave a heightened sense of authority to the reviews. The addition of the byline also opened the door to first-person accounts.

In 1967, Claiborne began to play with the title of the directory. Suddenly the titles are more descriptive: "Directory to Dining Includes a Korean Restaurant (22 September 1967); "A Variety of Restaurants in the Dining Directory" (3 November 1967). In 1969 "A Guide to Dining Out in City" appears, and the word "Directory" is gone. By 1970 the whole directory concept is abandoned. The columns are given more sensational titles, such as "If Only the Maitre D' Didn't Whistle" (2 January 1970), and "Perhaps the Best Persian Food in the City" (19 March 1971). Unlike their passive

predecessors, these titles were active and dynamic. They added an element of newsworthiness to the restaurant critiques. A new placement on the top of a page called “Food Day” within the “Food Fashions Family Furnishings” department further evidenced the growing importance of food and restaurants.⁴⁴

The new dynamism in the titles of the reviews reflected the new dynamism in the New York restaurant scene. In Claiborne’s end-of-the-decade wrap up he observed, “The most astonishing part of the nineteen-sixties on the New York restaurant scene was the awesome debut of restaurants of numerous nationalities.” He noted the opening of “nearly half a hundred” Japanese restaurants, a public that was “enthusiastically aware of new dishes in the vast [Chinese] repertory,” and the “phenomenal debut of what have become world-known French restaurants.”⁴⁵ During this evolution, the restaurant reviews grew in length and the number of restaurants featured each week shrunk. By the end of the 1960s, the food department had settled into a comfortable stride of two 500- to 700-word restaurant reviews per week, with larger roundups appearing occasionally. With fewer restaurants to write about and a burgeoning restaurant scene, new restaurants became a focus of the weekly reviews.

These changes also reflected a new dynamism in the field of gastronomy. While Claiborne had been the lone, powerful voice in the city’s

⁴⁴ During the 1970s, when the paper broke into the successful “daily magazines” or lifestyle sections to attract new readers and advertisers, restaurant reviews would be grouped in the Friday “Weekend” section with other cultural pursuits. A reorganization in 1996 reunited the reviews with other food reporting on Wednesdays. See Diamond, *Behind the Times: Inside the New New York Times*, 84–106.

⁴⁵ Craig Claiborne, “A Decade of Haute Cuisine in America,” *New York Times*, 1 January 1970, 27.

restaurant scene for the better part of a decade, by the end of the 1960s other media outlets saw the growing importance and appeal of the city's restaurant and dining culture. What Claiborne did not mention in his end-of-the-decade round up was the debut of a new source of cultural critique, *New York* magazine, where Gael Greene, a young, charismatic restaurant critic with a zippy writing style and zany pop-culture references, offered an alternative take on where to eat and how to incorporate restaurants into one's ever-more-sophisticated lifestyle. According to Diamond, the *Times* was very much aware of the success of *New York* in culture coverage and the challenges that posed for the newspaper.⁴⁶ *New York* had been founded by journalists from the former *Herald Tribune* and they bred talent the paper was happy to hire away. (Mimi Sheraton had worked at the magazine before coming to the *Times*.) The paper's executive editor, Abe Rosenthal confessed to a reporter, *New York* "used to drive me out of my mind."⁴⁷ According to Diamond, Rosenthal lifted the ideas for the paper's new lifestyle sections from the successful departments in *New York*. The more overt assertion of power in the headlines of the reviews at the *Times* and the new emphasis on new restaurants at the start of the 1970s indicated the field of gastronomy was revving up.

At the same time, important changes in our society's relationship to authority and the hierarchization of culture were also taking shape. According to Diamond's account of life at the *Times* during this period mentioned previously, these changes manifested themselves in tensions in the paper's culture gulch between defenders of highbrow culture and proponents of

⁴⁶ Diamond, *Behind the Times: Inside the New New York Times*, 150.

⁴⁷ Quoted in *Ibid.*

lowbrow culture. In a sense, by opening his weekly Directory to Dining to restaurants of every stripe, even those located in the suburbs, Claiborne had preempted such tensions in the food department. His emphasis on a wide variety of foods and his approach of imparting the information needed to foster culinary connoisseurship was just what the paper was looking for in its cultural reporting and criticism. Claiborne was empowering people to form their own opinions—granted they were his opinions—about food, which as an attraction for an increasingly status-conscious readerships.

As is often the case, along with this type of aesthetic education came a sense of entitlement typical of the connoisseur. With increasing amounts of disposable income and a newfound knowledge of how to dine, a certain snobbishness entered Claiborne's reviews and the restaurant dining rooms around town. This, too, supported Claiborne's position at the paper, for the *Times's* management increasingly saw their target audience as status-seeking sophisticates located across the country.⁴⁸ Hess, who considered Claiborne "the quintessential snob,"⁴⁹ bristled at the gastronomic pretensions of his culinary colleague and his acolytes. When he tried to set the record straight during his nine-month tenure as restaurant critic after Claiborne's departure in 1972, Hess was implored by the powers above to make his reviews "more serviceable," by which they meant more chic.⁵⁰

Even so, Claiborne had not been the hippest cat on the food beat. Food and restaurants, which had always been a status-making tool of the upper echelons, became an important focus of the growing counter culture.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 91–92.

⁴⁹ John L. Hess, *My Times: A Memoir of Dissent* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 147.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 154.

As Belasco explained:

In 1969–70, dietary change was one of the more substantial household reforms. Compared to other cultural adaptations, the emerging countercuisine seemed less cooptable because it demanded greater personal commitment...Examining and altering one's tastes was somewhat akin to psychoanalysis: a confrontation with subconsciously ingrained values, tastes, and behaviors. Coming out of the confrontation, new converts might experience a sense of liberation and rightness, a therapeutic "high" akin to the psychedelic experience.⁵¹

Although the sheer girth of the *Times* and its force on the culture front made it virtually impossible to knock it out of the top position, shaping the discourse about restaurants in interesting new ways that were culturally relevant but still homologous with the paper's readership posed a challenge for the restaurant critics who succeeded Claiborne. For reasons that many have chronicled, the paper is far from nimble.⁵² Diamond describes how attempts during the 1970s to move the culture pages in a more popular direction achieved mixed results. On the restaurant pages, rather than embracing any form of popular or counter culture, what would prove compelling was an increased emphasis on the diner in an effete form of consumer advocacy. Value, authenticity, and the accurate preparation of food became the common, consumer-oriented tropes.

Value Becomes a Point of Distinction

I have written elsewhere about the change in the role of the American restaurant critic from educator and mentor, in the mold of Claiborne, to

⁵¹ Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry 1966–1988*, 28.

⁵² See Diamond, *Behind the Times: Inside the New New York Times*, and Hess, *My Times: A Memoir of Dissent*.

consumer advocate, in the mold of Mimi Sheraton.⁵³ This change speaks to the evolution of a uniquely American form of reviewing that reflected our increasing knowledge, our changing tastes, and the evolving field of gastronomy. It was in large part a reaction to the change in value placed on individual opinions in general, as explained earlier. It also helped the *Times* reviewer claim important positions in the fields of both journalism and gastronomy. To sum up the transition, a growing dining public unfamiliar with the cuisines that were being presented during the restaurant boom of the 1960s needed both information and advice to be able to understand and evaluate the food that was being served to them. Claiborne taught people about food as much as he critiqued it, and he thereby welcomed everyone to the gourmet table. As this education took root and people began to travel more, cook more, and eat out more, they developed their own expertise. Concomitant with this change and a new wave of consumer ideology espoused by popular figures, such as Ralph Nader, in the late 1960s, the tone of reviews began to change from that of a culinary mentor to that of a consumer advocate. While Hess made the point in his memoir that adopting the guise of the consumer advocate was not a directive from the top brass at the paper, quite the reverse,⁵⁴ the reality is that the pervasiveness of the consumer ideology of the era meant that a change in the dynamic between consumers and producers and the critics who mediated between them was unavoidable. This was especially true of the younger, rebellious, hungry generation coming of age culturally at the time.

⁵³ Davis, "Power Meal: Craig Claiborne's Last Supper for the *New York Times*," 66–67.

⁵⁴ Hess, *My Times: A Memoir of Dissent*, 154.

One indication of the increasing importance the consumer played in the dining equation was the inclusion of value in the newspaper's star-rating criteria in 1969. The standard rubric that accompanied the reviews for years explained the stars thus: "The restaurants are rated on the basis of four stars to none. Four stars pertain to restaurants as among the finest in the area."⁵⁵ On January 3, 1969, an important change in the wording occurred: "The restaurants are rated on the bases of four stars to none. The criterion is the food and service in relation to cost." (24).⁵⁶ Enter value into the dining evaluation. Value is a relative concept that has meaning only in an environment of educated consumers. Without a basis of similar experiences for comparison, the concept of value is not much help. Having never eaten in a fine French restaurant, how can a diner judge if a French dining experience is worth its price among other dining options out there?

The inclusion of value in the restaurant rating criteria also implies a change in the dining public. If everyone eating in restaurants is of a certain class with unlimited means—or at least lives in a milieu where people pretend money is no object—value is irrelevant. But if more people are eating in unfamiliar restaurants from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, value becomes a key factor in making dining decisions. Claiborne's reviews attracted people interested in food, not just people interested in restaurants. Presumably, value was implied in his reviews prior to the change in the wording of the legend of the stars. But its implicit nature was due to the fact that he was the expert with the education and experience to ascertain it, and most of the people he

⁵⁵ "Directory to Dining," *New York Times*, 8 January 1965.

⁵⁶ On December 2, 1969 the wording was tweaked slightly to read, "The restaurants are rated four stars to none, based on the relationship of food and service to cost" (p. 24).

was writing for did not pay much attention to value, anyway. Except at the extremes—too many millions paid for a piece of art or a book so bad it is not worth the paper it is printed on—value is rare in most culture criticism. How does the price of entrance to a museum or the ticket to a concert impact one's enjoyment or a critic's assessment? In my opinion, the overt inclusion of value in the star rating of restaurants in the *Times* marks a significant shift in the position of the consumer vis-à-vis the reviewer and in the field of gastronomy vis-à-vis other fields of cultural production.

The critics who succeeded Claiborne carried on in his role with varying degrees of success, due, a Bourdieuvian would suspect, to the varying degree of homology between their perspective and their readers' and the societal changes taking root. (For a chronological list of reviewers at the *Times*, see Table 1.) Claiborne's immediate successor was Raymond Sokolov, a Harvard graduate who had won a Fulbright to Oxford and completed doctoral work in Classics before entering the field of journalism. Sokolov, who had always been interested in food, was a culture reporter at *Newsweek* until he replaced Claiborne as food editor and restaurant critic at the *Times*. (He actually began reviewing restaurants for the paper in 1971, before Claiborne relinquished his food-editor post.) During his 2 1/2 year stint, Sokolov's reviews showed an even hand and a solid understanding of food—they were similar in tone to Claiborne's. A short-lived innovation he brought to the reviews was to include a rating for décor, four triangles to none, in addition to the rating for food, four stars to none. Rating décor added another element of value to the reviews that reinforced the importance of food in the total evaluation. Relating food to décor allows a critic to laud a restaurant that serves great food in a crummy setting and vice versa. One of Sokolov's earliest

weekly round-ups demonstrated this device by juxtaposing Peking Restaurant, high on the Upper West Side (three stars for food, two triangles for décor) with The Four Seasons (three stars for food, four triangles for décor)⁵⁷ The Four Seasons was and remains the most expensive restaurant ever built, and according to the critic at the *Times* it had the same quality food as a Chinese restaurant on West 94th Street. A dozen years after Claiborne's first Four Seasons review, Sokolov deemed the Four Seasons dining room "the most perfect modern restaurant setting yet built in this century," but acknowledged "the food does not quite match the setting." The Peking Restaurant, on the other hand, was serving what was in his estimation "the best Chinese restaurant food in New York."

John Hess, who had been at the *Times* since 1954, followed Sokolov in the critics' post. (In his memoir Hess said he never knew why his predecessor left.⁵⁸) His food knowledge came from his wife, an accomplished cook, and his time spent eating in Paris while he lived there as a foreign correspondent for the paper. During his short tenure as critic, Hess's anachronistic attitude provided an interesting counterpoint to Claiborne's and Sokolov's willing-to-like-anything approach. With their heavily moralistic, patronizing, and pompous tone, his reviews seem like a throwback to an earlier time, pre Claiborne perhaps, when restaurant review readers were considered ignorant know-nothings if they were considered at all. His first "review"—it was more like a position statement—clearly lays out his point of view, "Fancy for the

⁵⁷ Raymond A. Sokolov, review of Peking Restaurant and The Four Seasons, *New York Times*, 30 July 1971, Food Fashions Family Furnishings section.

⁵⁸ Hess, *My Times: A Memoir of Dissent*, 149.

Table 1

A Chronology of New York Times Restaurant Critics

Dates	Critic	Special Characteristics
1957–1963	Craig Claiborne	Only occasionally reviewed important restaurant openings while serving as food editor. Other staff writers occasionally wrote reviews, including Nan Ickeringill.
1963–1972	Craig Claiborne	Continued as food editor but wrote weekly restaurant reviews starting on May 24, 1963. Developed the distinct, authoritative, educational tone of a consumer mentor and established the model of multiple, anonymous visits.
1971–1974	Raymond Sokolov	Was a reporter for <i>Newsweek</i> in France and the U.S. before becoming restaurant critic at the <i>Times</i> . He succeeded Claiborne as food editor in 1972.
1973–1974	John L. Hess	Was a reporter for the <i>Times</i> in Paris before becoming restaurant critic. Only reviewed for nine months.
1974–1976	John Canaday	Former art critic for the paper. Yielded to Mimi Sheraton after noticing her enthusiasm for food.
1976–1982	Mimi Sheraton	The first full-time critic at the paper. Her style and tone reflected the shift to critic as consumer advocate rather than mentor.
1983	Marian Burros	A staff food writer for the <i>Times</i> , Burros still occasionally subs for the paper's restaurant critics.
1984–1993	Bryan Miller	A Francophile with a workaday writing style, Miller reviewed restaurants longer than anyone. He was taken to task by Italian restaurateurs for not appreciating fine Italian food.
1993–1999	Ruth Reichl	Evocative, first-person narrative distinguished Reichl's reviews that were meant to entertain. Wine writer Frank J. Priol and Marian Burros subbed as critics after Reichl but before Grimes began.
1999–2003	William Grimes	Criticized for not seeming to enjoy food despite his protestations, Grimes nevertheless sustained an intellectual discourse and favored the modern, conceptual style of cooking trendy today.
2004	Amanda Hesser	Although a rotating roster of reviewers, including Eric Asimov and Marian Burros, covered the review for an extended period of time, it was Hesser who is remembered best for the ethical breach of reviewing the restaurant of a chef whose book she endorsed.
2004–	Frank Bruni	Former Rome bureau chief, Bruni added pop cultural references to reviews. He says he writes for an international audience, not a local one.

Note: This table represents critics responsible for the paper's main weekly reviews. In addition, the *Times* began its \$25 and Under reviews on February 7, 1992. They were written by Eric Asimov until 2004 and then by a rotating team, including Peter Meehan, Dana Bowen, Sam Sifton, and Julia Moskin, until the column was retired in 2008.

sake of being fancy is bad taste in any art.”⁵⁹ Hess notes:

This reflection was inspired by the very first New York meal we have eaten in the line of our new duty as food critic...the invitation was gracious, the company agreeable and the food not really bad, but since we intend to accentuate the negative in order to draw a moral, we'll not mention names.⁶⁰

Hess's concept of value was quite different from his predecessor's. His appreciation of food was not derived from a bourgeois sense of entitlement bolstered by a little “gourmet” education. Not everyone was invited to sit at his table, especially not *poseurs*. Hess's last review, only nine months later, was consistent with his first. Writing about Boulderberg Manor in Rockland County, NY, to which he was coaxed by some readers who felt their restaurants had been unfairly overlooked, Hess concluded:

What we had was the work of a faithful student of American gourmet cookery, doing his awful best...This house should burn those gourmet books and find a good, old-fashioned American cook and baker...[to] put good, homecooked food on the table. I bet the burghers, once they overcame their surprise, would like it as much as the glop they now push down with their booze.⁶¹

Several months after relinquishing his job as reviewer, “sick of the gourmet plague that had marked our first meal for pay, our last, and most of those in between,”⁶² Hess famously gave the entire Chinatown neighborhood four stars in a feature article, declaring the best American food to be Chinese.⁶³ Rather than an egalitarian gesture, it was a slap in the face of American chefs and the diners who thought they could cook. It was also a slap in the face of

⁵⁹ John L. Hess, "A Food Story With a Moral: Fancy Doesn't Always Mean Good," *New York Times*, 31 May 1973.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ ———, review of Boulderberg Manor, *New York Times*, 11 January 1974.

⁶² Hess and Hess, *The Taste of America*, 215.

⁶³ John L. Hess, "The Best American Food is Chinese: If Michelin Rated Our Restaurants—Oh, là, là, là," *New York Times*, 18 August 1974.

Claiborne, who had played a large role in educating those status-hungry diners and spotlighting those wannabe chefs in the first place. (Recall that Hess and his wife Karen wrote the aforementioned acerbic *Taste of America* in which they considered Claiborne one of the sources of a “gourmet plague” that had spread throughout America.)

Looking at the background and habitus of these three reviewers—Claiborne, Sokolov, and Hess—one might think Sokolov, an Ivy Leaguer, would be the odd man out. Hess, with his lower-middleclass background, University of Utah education, and left-leaning politics, ought to have been more aligned with Claiborne. And yet Sokolov’s reviews were more similar to Claiborne’s than Hess’s were. Hess’s disdain for Claiborne and for the culinary pretensions he believed Claiborne promulgated suggests another scenario was playing out. Claiborne may have arrived in New York without any money, but the downward mobility of his family’s social-status suggests a once-elevated position. In his memoir he recounted how the boarding house table was always laden with the family silver.⁶⁴ It is possible that Claiborne fashioned food as a way to climb back up, a perspective that might explain his educative connoisseurial approach to reviewing and also why it resonated with the social aspirations of the *Times*’s readership. Whatever the reason, it offended Hess’s sensibilities.

As an aside, I find it interesting that all three men cared so much for Chinese food, which seems then and now to represent for *Times* critics an intrepidity and appreciation of ethnic authenticity that they must believe

⁶⁴ Claiborne, *A Feast Made for Laughter: A Memoir with Recipes*, 21.

increases their credibility and improves their standing in the field.⁶⁵ That Sokolov found his Chinese food haven outside the exotic alleyways of Chinatown is curious, and may be an indication that the affect of one's habitus on personal tastes and comfort zones cannot be totally overcome through food. Regardless, with Hess gone (of his own volition) and the changing cultural environment in New York City and the rest of the country, not to mention the ever-increasing general interest in food, the time was ripe for a critic with a consumer-minded approach to review restaurants.

A Culinary Consumer Advocate Arrives

After Hess, John Canaday, the paper's art critic, filled in part-time as food critic for two years or so. The unlikelihood of taking a food critic and paying him or her to write about art, even today, speaks to the heteronymy of the field of gastronomy and its relatively low position vis-à-vis other fields of cultural production, even within the field of journalism, where, as we've seen, journalistic experience has traditionally trumped specificity and expertise. That the field of gastronomy was and remains lower in this way than the field of art and other cultural products, also hints at the persistence of the hierarchy of the senses discussed in Chapter II. Although it appears from the enthusiasm expressed in his reviews that Canaday was having fun in the job of restaurant critic, the arrival of Mimi Sheraton at the paper, a strong personality who evidently took food very seriously, moved Canaday to relinquish his post. As Sheraton explained the transition:

⁶⁵ For an interesting take on the exploitative nature of this type of ethnic culinary appropriation, see Heldke, *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer*.

They told me when I got to the *Times* that when Canaday was no longer doing it, I would be the food critic and that's exactly what happened. Actually, John took a vacation, four weeks in April [1976], and I did the reviews. He came back and he said he was going to give it up because I obviously was giving it more than he was giving and I really cared about it, and he had many other things to do. We asked him to stay until August so I could build up some places and that's what happened.⁶⁶

Sheraton had grown up in a middle-class Jewish New York family, eating in celebrated restaurants for birthdays and special occasions during the 1930s and 1940s. She graduated from New York University and embarked on a career in journalism, writing about decorating (she received a diploma in interior design from the School of Interior Design), travel, and food for a variety publications. Upon being hired at the *Times*, management provided Sheraton very little direction besides articulating the convention Claiborne—who was back as food editor—had instituted: a minimum of three restaurant visits before publishing a review. “They certainly didn’t want me to not do any negative criticisms,” Sheraton told me during our interview, acknowledging her reputation as a harsh critic. “I think they didn’t want me to be any meaner than I had to be.”⁶⁷

When Sheraton’s first regular weekly restaurant reviews appeared in the “Weekend” section of the *Times* on August 13, 1976, the reviewer had assumed a different posture. Rather than being dismissive of her readers as Hess was, Sheraton was out to advocate on their behalf. A strong, personal socialist bent informed her reviews. Despite her mother’s protestations, Sheraton believed finding and directing people to good food was a noble cause and spending money on it was justified as long as the quality was good

⁶⁶ Mimi Sheraton, interviewed by Mitchell Davis, New York, 17 April 2002.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

and the details right.⁶⁸ Sheraton established her distinctive reviewing style from the beginning, that of a tough grader with the “average” consumer’s experience at the forefront of her mind. (Always a connoisseur at heart, Claiborne never claimed to be an “average” anything.) She also played the role of detective, searching for restaurants and chefs doing things the way they ought to be done and hoping to steer consumers clear of those who were not. She became famous for the lengths to which she would go to disguise herself when she dined out in order to be able to base her judgments on the experience of an average diner: false names, wigs, costumes. Having taken classes at Le Cordon Bleu and traveled and eaten extensively around the world, food was at least as important to her as to Claiborne, and she kept it the focus of the *Times*’s reviews. She said food accounted for as much as 80 percent of her final evaluation about a restaurant. Sheraton’s background in interior design also made her well-suited for the exciting 1970s and 1980s, which saw the rise of a new, creative, more casual style of restaurant that emphasized design. Unfortunatley, Sokolov’s triangle ratings for décor were gone by then.

Sheraton’s first review was a roundup of al fresco dining spots around the city. She set it up with her characteristically severe, staccato tone: “The following represent the best choices among the garden restaurants visited. At three others—Limericks...Giordano’s...and Emilio’s...both gardens and food were so tacky they are beneath serious criticism.” Her conclusions about Barbetta are indicative of her self-perceived role:

⁶⁸ Sheraton’s mother believed her job as critic at the *Times* amounted to nothing more than “a maven of dreck.” Sheraton, *Eating My Words: An Appetite for Life*, 11–12.

While an order of risotto Piemontese was richly fragrant with the earthy, smoky scent of dried porcini mushrooms, the tortellini con panna was ruined by a stiffly cold pasta, a bland filling and a topping that seemed to be a floury cream sauce rather than the gossamer blend of parmesan, butter and sweet cream it *should* be...If prices here were half what they are, one might be more generous in rating the value. But at \$20 or so per person for a full dinner, one has a *right* to expect much more.⁶⁹ (my italics)

Sheraton's reviews were longer and more detailed than her predecessors'. As an advocate for her readers, value was even more important to her than to Claiborne, as this Barbetta review shows. Her reviews contained strong, unequivocal judgments about right and wrong. Consider the following two negative reviews that appeared on January 14, 1977, along with one for an Italian restaurant she liked very much:

To understand the ratings of the following two new restaurants, it is important to keep in mind that a no-star rating may mean fair or poor. Fair is the case with the summerhouse. One feels almost misanthropic in giving this an adverse review, but good intentions cannot mask inept cooking, and one gets the feeling that the cook knows almost everything about food except how to make it taste good.⁷⁰

She was less forgiving of La Quenelle, "for if one considers the management at the Summerhouse merely inept, one gets the sense that at La Quenelle they must know the food they are serving is miserable."⁷¹

Interestingly, by the time of Sheraton's first review, the rubric about the stars had shifted yet again. In the box that accompanied Sheraton's Barbetta review, the legend read: "The restaurants reviewed here each Friday are rated four stars to none, based on the author's reaction to cuisine,

⁶⁹ Mimi Sheraton, review of Barbetta, *New York Times*, 13 August 1976, Weekend section.

⁷⁰ ———, review of Da Silvano, Summerhouse, and La Quenelle, *New York Times*, 14 January 1977, Weekend section.

⁷¹ Ibid.

atmosphere and price in relation to comparable establishments.” Not only was value an issue in the rating of a particular dining experience, but it was now assessed in comparison to other restaurants. Though subtle, I think this shift in emphasis reflects a readership that had begun to eat out more often and in a wider variety of restaurants.

Sheraton’s long tenure made her an important and trusted source of information for a general readership who increasingly cared about food and restaurants. As she said, “People had to read the *New York Times* review. There weren’t so many reviewers then. There was only Gael Greene at *New York* magazine and Seymour Britchky, who had a very hot newsletter for people who cared about restaurants.”⁷² Alan Richman, the multiple James Beard Foundation Award-winning restaurant critic for *GQ*, *Bon Appétit*, and Bloomberg, confirmed her self-assessment, adding that Sheraton’s gift as a critic also contributed to her influence:

Boy, she was such a good critic. When she was doing it, the reviews were on Friday. And there was nothing else in the Friday paper. And people would buy the Friday paper, and you know the old saying, it was a tube-ripper—you know in the suburbs people used to get their papers delivered in tubes—I mean people couldn’t wait to read what Mimi had to say. Friday’s column was an event in New York. That’s how good she was. And how much she was respected.⁷³

Significantly, these were also good times for the newspaper, the success of its reorganization and reorientation having paid off in terms of increased readership and stock market value.⁷⁴

Under Sheraton’s watch, restaurant dining in New York City and the rest of the country was heading in a new direction. She recalled:

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Richman interview, 18 December 2007.

⁷⁴ Diamond, *Behind the Times: Inside the New New York Times*, 146–47.

Standards were changing. More people were cooking on t.v., more people were traveling, books were being written. All over the country, not only here. And going to restaurants became a very popular thing to do....I was at a time when this was happening, but I think I also pushed its happening.⁷⁵

She introduced *Times* readers to a new style of cooking and a different kind of restaurant that was taking hold in New York, a culinary movement that came to be known as New American Cuisine:

It was really at that time that restaurants began to change a lot, Fancy ones came in. But they had that new kind of very casual, expensive elegance. There was the influence of the Californian cuisine...trying to get produce all ecologically and organically grown. There was free association of ethnic food influences, Japanese, Italian, and American into something different.⁷⁶

Sheraton attributed this movement to new interests of American chefs and new tastes of American diners initiated by the advent of the Nouvelle Cuisine in France, which she believes had a strong impact on both sides of the Atlantic and on both sides of the swinging door:

I'll tell you what I really think brought it about, what really gave everyone the confidence to do it was the French Nouvelle Cuisine. The fact that French chefs were saying okay, we don't have to do it the old way, in a sense, everything can go. We can use Asian this, we can do that, we can put fruit with the crab meat, the way we have been laughing at the Austrians for years for putting fruit in the crab meat. I think that gave American chefs the confidence to do the same. I was not a big advocate of the Nouvelle Cuisine. I think it was done to such an extent, like an ideologue, that cost the French their reputation for food for a long time, but I do think the signal was there that there is not only one classic way to do it.⁷⁷

The globally traveled, ecologically minded, newly sophisticated *Times* diners had a culinary movement of their own. With a conservative but open attitude

⁷⁵ Sheraton interview, 17 April 2002.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

in line with the paper itself, Sheraton gave readers the information and advice they needed to participate in this dynamic restaurant environment.

In 1984, Sheraton was succeeded by Bryan Miller, a native of New York with a degree from Columbia University who had experience in journalism *and* had cooked in restaurants. Unlike Sheraton and Claiborne, whose food knowledge came from classes, restaurant meals, and home cooking, Miller actually spent time behind the swinging door. He had even seriously considered becoming a chef. According to Diamond, this working knowledge of field he was going to evaluate made him attractive to the *Times* editors as “a symbol of the paper’s new interests.”⁷⁸ Miller maintained the critic’s consumer focus entrenched by Sheraton, albeit with a more delicate touch. He considered his job part of the “consumer beat” and saw his principle responsibility “tipping off readers where they should spend their precious dining dollars.”⁷⁹ Perhaps because of his affinity for the professional kitchen, unlike any of his predecessors, Miller occasionally openly befriended working chefs.⁸⁰

Whether because of his personal tastes or his longtime friendship and collaboration with Pierre Franey, or most likely a combination of both, Miller’s reviews reflected a predilection for French food and French restaurants with which other restaurateurs and chefs, especially Italian ones, took issue.⁸¹ He once famously told Italian restaurateur Tony May that he did

⁷⁸ Diamond, *Behind the Times: Inside the New New York Times*, 308.

⁷⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 307.

⁸⁰ Dornenburg and Page, *Dining Out: Secrets from America's Leading Critics, Chefs, and Restaurateurs*, 133.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

not believe an Italian restaurant could achieve four stars.⁸² After Ruth Reichl, his successor, gave three stars to a Japanese noodle restaurant, he fired off a angry letter to the *Times*, a copy of which was obtained by salon.com, that retrospectively made his position clear: “How do you think she comes off giving SoHo noodle shops 2 and 3 stars?”⁸³ Miller wrote. “SHE HAS DESTROYED THE SYSTEM that Craig, Mimi and I upheld.” In response, Reichl told salon.com, “Bryan was the one who redefined the star system to mean that only fancy French restaurants could get a lot of stars.”⁸⁴

These types of exchanges, especially at moments of transition, highlight position-taking battles in the field of gastronomy and reflect changes in the larger sociocultural sphere. Miller reviewed for the *Times* for almost nine years, and while his consumer orientation and taste for French food might have been well-suited to the beginning of his tenure, by the end he had lost touch with the social and gastronomic world changing around him and his position was out of synch with the rest of the field. In the set up to his salon.com interview with Reichl, Garner credits Reichl with having “democratized” restaurant reviewing, a timely approach for her to take given the trend toward cultural omnivorousness occurring at the time, but an historically inaccurate attribution if you consider the wide range of restaurants Claiborne, Sheraton, Sokolov, and even Hess, reviewed favorably. (During the interview, Reichl called Garner on this oversight.) To my knowledge, no restaurant critic at the *Times* has ever been fired—a sign of the conservative, slow-moving bureaucracy and the faith the paper puts in its

⁸² Personal communication with Tony May.

⁸³ Quoted in Ruth Reichl, interviewed by Dwight Garner, <http://www.salon.com/nov96/interview961118.html>, 18 November 1996.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

reporters and critics as much as a sign of any critic's success at mediating between social currents and journalistic imperatives, the homologies Bourdieu declared key. In fact, all of the critics I interviewed said the paper kept them insulated from public reaction to their work, save for the occasional law suit, which the paper has never lost.

A Focus on Entertainment in Reviews

By the time Ruth Reichl took over the reviewer's job from Miller in 1993, the reviewer's posture as educator was pretty much gone for good. As Reichl told Dornenburg and Page, "It's certainly wonderful when you can educate readers. But I don't think they come to a newspaper to be educated and if you do it too much, it becomes tedious. Ultimately, I think my goal is to entertain people. If they're not entertained, they won't read you."⁸⁵ This shift from the review as a service to consumers that tells them where to eat, what to order, how to digest new food trends, and even how to be a snob, to the review as cultural form of entertainment represents another important change in the perspective of the reviewer and the field of gastronomy. The current *New York Times* critic, Frank Bruni, reiterated Reichl's sentiment to me during our interview, saying that his reviews are not about the menu and the food, though both are certainly present, rather, they are about the cultural phenomenon of restaurants. He writes from the standpoint that he is commenting on New York City's restaurants for a diverse, increasingly national and international audience, the majority of whom will never go to any of the restaurants in his reviews. As Bruni explained his position:

⁸⁵ Quoted in Dornenburg and Page, *Dining Out: Secrets from America's Leading Critics, Chefs, and Restaurateurs*.

I think that when you are working for a newspaper with an Internet circulation that is probably up to like 7,000,000 or something, and with the vast majority of those readers living far outside your geography, and with a restaurant having fewer seats than a movie theater, and requiring a much greater commitment of time and money to visit, you have to realize that most of the people reading you or whom you could attract to read to you are never, ever, ever going to set foot in this establishment, and don't need an ordering guide because they are not going to use it.⁸⁶

Shifting the emphasis of reviews away from educational descriptions of the food served in restaurants to observations about that food and those restaurants in a broader cultural context recalls the distinction made in Chapter I between Grimod de la Reynière's writing about restaurants, which emphasized serviceability, and Brillat-Savarin's writing, which emphasized larger, culturally relevant issues. In short, one could say, the restaurant reviews in the *Times* have become less culinary and more gastronomic. As if to underscore this point, during our interview, Bruni clarified that he is the *restaurant* critic of the *New York Times*, not the *food* critic.

Of course, the reader was always a focus at the *Times*, as at any media company, and the restaurant reviews must have always entertained. The drama emphasized by some of Claiborne's and Canaday's headlines speaks to the appeal of a sensational negative review, which can never be very far from any reviewer's mind. A reviewer wants to be read and that requires a compelling narrative and a distinctive writing style. But Reichl took the storytelling further. To add to the narrative quality of her reviews, she often included composite dialogue "overheard" at nearby tables, the veracity of which restaurateurs frequently questioned. The "Author's Note" to her first memoir, *Tender at the Bone*, in which she states, "I learned early that the most

⁸⁶ Bruni interview, 5 December 2007.

important thing in life is a good story,”⁸⁷ was proof to some of her detractors that the journalistic integrity of her reviews was less important than crafting an entertaining story.

Any shift in the self-perceived role of the reviewer—whether from reviewer as mentor or connoisseur to reviewer as advocate or entertainer—creates a shift in focus that has an impact on everything from the selection of restaurants to the evaluation of the dining experience to the words chosen to convey that experience to the reader. Bruni used the fact that he is writing for a geographically diverse national audience as his rationale for not using any sort of scientific approach to choosing which restaurants to review:

What these reviews should be, by definition, in my opinion, because they are written in the general interest publication of record that is the *New York Times*, is they should be an attempt to give the widest number of readers across the nation, these days, more even than in the city, what they are most likely to want to read in aggregate over 52 weeks of a year.⁸⁸

Readers are still a focus, but they are no longer the dining consumers they once were.

Contrary to the opinion of most chefs, restaurateurs, publicists, and other stakeholders in the restaurant industry, I believe the reviewer as entertainer, or rather, as gastro-cultural critic actually lifts restaurant reviews from their limiting workaday role of providing serviceable information for dining decisions and brings them deeper into the sphere of more profound cultural discourse. For the details about restaurants, diners can and have turned to other sources, as we will see in the next chapter. For the larger sociocultural significance of chefs and restaurants and dining, they can, and

⁸⁷ Ruth Reichl, *Tender at the Bone* (New York: Random House, 1999), x.

⁸⁸ Frank Bruni, interviewed by Mitchell Davis, New York, 5 December 2007.

still do turn to the *Times*. The reality is that because of the consecrating power of the institution of the *New York Times* itself, which Diamond suggests resides outside the effectiveness of any one critic, any loss of power in the field as a result is negligible. The importance, the consecrating power of the *Times* review remains high among chefs even as the media world is being reshaped by the Internet. While it may sting a chef not to have his or her favorite dish mentioned in a review as important as those that appear in the *Times*, value is added to the field by making reviews more widely read.

Journalistic Ethics, Social Class, Philosophical Disinterestedness, and the Question of Anonymity

Claiborne is credited with having created a model of reviewing suited to the ethical standards of the *Times*, requiring a minimum of three anonymous visits prior to publication and zero tolerance of free food or gifts, that became the standard or at least the goal for reviewers across the United States. These parameters form the basis of the “Food Critics’ Guidelines” published by the Association of Food Journalists, and they have been adopted as part of the association’s code of ethics.⁸⁹ Insisting on anonymity and paying for all food were important factors in the ascent of the *Times* critic in the field of gastronomy because it distinguished the paper’s reviews from others out there. Anonymity pulled critics higher up in the field of journalism and helped them reconcile issues of class, which play out differently in the two fields critics straddle, journalism and gastronomy. In addition, anonymity adds the possibility of philosophical disinterestedness to the reviewer’s aesthetic

⁸⁹ "Food Critics' Guidelines," Association of Food Journalists, <http://www.afjonline.com/afj.aspx?pgID=887>.

project, as we shall see.

In light of the widespread acceptance of this anonymous approach to restaurant reviewing in America, it might be illuminating to begin a discussion of anonymity by comparing another model of reviewing. Generally speaking, in Europe, reviewers place less value on anonymity compared to their American counterparts. Former *Chicago Tribune* food editor William Rice summed up the differences thus:

In Europe, the best-known journalists are known to the ownership. they write more about gastronomy, about the grandeur and glory of food. Here in the U.S. a critic sneaks around and checks whether the food is properly prepared and whether the bathrooms are clean.⁹⁰

Far from being anonymous, European reviewers are often friendly with chefs and restaurateurs. Even if they are not, they are not adverse to announcing their arrival and asking to see what the chef can do. This attitude may date back to the first reviews written by Grimod de la Reynière for his *Almanach des Gourmands*. Recall that during the weekly afternoon meetings of his Jury Dégustateur, Paris's best chefs, pâtissiers, chocolatiers, charcutiers, and other purveyors presented their finest fare for adjudication in person. Hardly anonymous, Grimod and his Jury established their power through their relationships with these restaurateurs and chefs and the fear they instilled in them. Even Michelin, the European gold standard when it comes to restaurant ratings, has not historically always maintained the anonymity of its inspectors, though these days the company insists they do. In 1992 I cooked for three months in a restaurant in Turin, Italy, and the local Michelin inspector was a good friend of the chef's who would often hang out with the

⁹⁰ Quoted in Alva, "Have Restaurant Reviewers Gone Soft?," 100.

cooks in the kitchen. We did not have a Michelin star at the time, but the rumor was we would be getting one.⁹¹ What's more, this same Michelin man was responsible for sourcing Italian ingredients, such as white truffles and olive oil, for some of the top-rated Michelin chefs in Europe, such as Frédy Girardet (in Lausanne, Switzerland), Joël Robuchon (Paris), and Alain Ducasse (Monaco).

When I asked Sheraton if she saw any validity to the European approach of seeing what a chef can do, she replied adamantly, "Bullshit! It's not what a chef *can* do, it's what he *will* do."⁹² Of the forty or so American reviewers interviewed by Dornenburg and Page, only three said they did not think anonymity was that important. Tellingly, all three had been reviewing restaurants in their respective cities for many years, which means they probably could not have been anonymous even if they believed they should be.⁹³ Only one American critic, Steven Shaw, is on record as saying he believes the pretense of anonymity is counterproductive to the critics' mission of setting a standard for fine dining. "It sends a signal to the public that restaurants are out to deceive us," he wrote, "and that in order to expose them restaurant reviewers must act as undercover investigative consumer advocates."⁹⁴ On the contrary, Shaw believes that closer ties between the critic and the industry would lead to better informed reviews:

⁹¹ Shortly after the end of my *stage*, a Michelin star was indeed awarded to Luigi Caputo's Ristorante Balbo, which it held for 12 years—the only Michelin starred restaurant in Torino.

⁹² Sheraton interview. 17 April 2002.

⁹³ Dornenburg and Page, *Dining Out: Secrets from America's Leading Critics, Chefs, and Restaurateurs*, 35–45.

⁹⁴ Steven A. Shaw, *Turning the Tables: Restaurants from the Inside Out* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 108.

Any critic who tells you he can get as much information out of a chef on the phone as he can by spending time in his kitchen is delusional...and if the restaurateur knows the writer personally and trusts that he's a responsible and competent writer and won't misreport what the restaurateur says, he will be even more open.⁹⁵

Of course whether American critics are ever truly anonymous is another question altogether. So convincing did Reichl believe her costumes to be that she developed alternative persona to go with them. She went so far as to write her memoir of reviewing at the *Times* from the perspective of the different fictional characters she portrayed during her years as critic⁹⁶ (further evidence of the importance of story-telling in her approach to the job). And yet several restaurateurs and chefs confided in me they always knew she was the one in the wig in the corner. Bruni dismissed the idea that any critic could successfully hide behind a costume, noting, "It would take a kind of costuming, make up, energy and budget that no critic is going to undertake to maintain anonymity in certain kinds of restaurants."⁹⁷ Maile Carpenter won a James Beard Foundation Journalism Award for an exposé about Michael Bauer, the longstanding restaurant critic and food editor at the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Bauer has served as president of the Association of Food Journalists and is also a member of the James Beard Foundation's restaurant awards committee (different from the committee that administers the journalism awards). Carpenter provided an impressively substantiated demonstration of how restaurants and chefs believe Bauer is neither anonymous nor fair in his assessments, even while he insists that he is and

⁹⁵ Ibid., 109.

⁹⁶ See Ruth Reichl, *Garlic and Sapphires: The Secret Life of a Critic in Disguise* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005).

⁹⁷ Bruni interview, 5 December 2007.

while the industry maintains “a good charade.”⁹⁸ She described a greeting she and Bauer received from a maitre d’ at one restaurant Bauer was reviewing, “He knew who Bauer was. Bauer knew he knew. But the gracious host smiled and pretended Bauer was a regular guy.” (Ironically, the same year that Carpenter won the James Beard Award for her piece, Bauer won a James Beard Award for his reviewing.) Bruni told me he believed he was recognized 50 percent of the time and that he believes this is true of every critic on the job after about six months, especially the critic at the *Times*:

I think anonymity while you are sitting at a table is unpredictable and often impossible...It’s totally a function of the restaurant. The restaurants that are better capitalized or that have more ego, it’s abundantly clear that from the moment they open their doors, one of their principle concerns is knowing when critics come, and knowing when, and I don’t mean this arrogantly, knowing when the *Times* critic is in house...in those restaurants it is central, central, central to their very business plan.⁹⁹

Critics can sometimes use anonymity to their advantage. While still new to the job, Reichl managed to sneak into Le Cirque once or twice before she was recognized. Her review of the two Le Cirques—one for the known and one for the unknown—was an immediate sensation that asserted her position as the dominant restaurant voice in town.¹⁰⁰ The review spoke to the consumer-advocate role of the critic from Sheraton’s day—so many anonymous diners at Le Cirque had felt similarly snubbed—but also emphasized the lengths to which she would go to write an entertaining piece. As Diamond notes, these sorts of extreme performances of duty, which

⁹⁸ Maile Carpenter, “Eating in Michael Bauer’s town,” *San Francisco*, August 2001, 73.

⁹⁹ Bruni interview, 5 December 2007.

¹⁰⁰ Ruth Reichl, review of Le Cirque, *New York Times*, 29 October 1993, Weekend section.

“proffered the face of incorruptible authority,” were viewed favorably by *Times* editors, especially in the softer cultural realms.¹⁰¹ They also reinforced the idea that a reviewer must be anonymous in order to accurately assess a dining experience. Even though he is so often recognized, Bruni holds that the American guise of anonymity is beneficial to the critic. Likening anonymity to a “moat,” he thinks it keeps the reviewer separated from the industry and diminishes the possibility of any transgressions restaurateurs and chefs might attempt:

I think that its extremely important to do what you can to make sure they don't know you are coming before you step foot in the door, and that's accomplishable. I mean you can screw up on that at times, but it's usually, it's almost always accomplishable. And I think that is important not just as a practical matter, but I think that going through the paces of being anonymous kind of guarantees that you are standing at a certain remove from the industry. It's like the things you do in the service of this idealized and sometimes intermittently attainable anonymity, also happen to be a kind of barrier that signals to restaurateurs and chefs and publicists that there's a moat between you and them. And I think the moat is really important.

This moat of anonymity does more than just perpetuate the notion that restaurants are out to get us, as Shaw suggested. It also reinforces certain complicated class distinctions inherent in dining out.¹⁰² After being recognized, Reichl quoted Le Cirque owner Sirio Maccioni in her review as having said to her, “The King of Spain is waiting in the bar, but your table is ready.” In Maccioni’s memoir—which makes it clear that ten years later he still feels wounded by Reichl’s review—he pointed out that the King of Spain,

¹⁰¹ Diamond, *Behind the Times: Inside the New New York Times*, 310.

¹⁰² For an interesting exploration of class in the restaurant dining room see Gwen Hyman, “The Taste of Fame: Chefs, Diners, Celebrity, Class,” *Gastronomica* 8, no. 3 (2008).

a close friend, *was* in the room.¹⁰³ Still, insisting on anonymity suggests that there's an experience awaiting a privileged few, and an experience the rest of us can expect. Reichl knew she was slaying a class-swollen giant with her review of Le Cirque. As she recounted to Maccioni's coauthor, Peter Elliot, "I knew that I was speaking to power in that one. I did not sleep for three nights before it came out...the publisher of *The New York Times*—Punch Sulzberger—liked that restaurant a lot...My editors were nervous...That one was read at the very top of the paper."¹⁰⁴ That critics, restaurateurs, and chefs are aware of the reverberations of their actions in this way, that they maintain the "charade" of anonymity, to use Carpenter's term, recalls Bourdieu's concept of the *illusio*, a prerequisite for a field of cultural production invoked by the position-takers who must recognize that they are playing a game and take pleasure in it. In this regard, Maccioni's attempt at personal reconciliation with Reichl was dead on. "Let's call it what it is," he told his co-author Peter Elliot, "a game."¹⁰⁵

In fact, the game Reichl played as reviewer for the *Times* for six years was fraught with her own ideological and class contradictions. In an unusual article she submitted to the *New York Times Magazine* midway through her tenure, Reichl confessed to disapproving of her job writing about "\$100 meals while half the world is hungry."¹⁰⁶ With a middle-class Jewish upbringing in New York City and a degree from University of Michigan, Reichl's politics were shaped in Berkeley during the 1970s, where she worked as a cook

¹⁰³ Sirio Maccioni and Peter J. Elliot, *Sirio: The Story of My Life and Le Cirque* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 281.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Ruth Reichl, "Why I Disapprove of What I Do," *New York Times Magazine*, 10 March 1996.

because she found restaurant work “deeply satisfying.” Like Sheraton’s mother before her, Reichl’s mother also disapproved of her job of “telling rich people where to eat.” But Reichl rationalized her charge by reflecting on the changes in restaurants in America, which she believed, save for holdouts like Le Cirque, were no longer only “where rich people to go remind themselves that they are different from you and me.”¹⁰⁷ Thanks to Claiborne, Sheraton, and a flourishing field of gastronomy, not to mention the changes in society that emphasized consumption and status, “Going out to eat used to be like going to the opera; today, it is more like going to the movies.”¹⁰⁸ The result of this transformation, Reichl concluded, is that “everyone has become a critic,” and as we will see when we look at Zagat Survey and online reviews in the next chapter, she was in some ways right.

Of course, if you look at the record closely, Reichl was not the only *Times* restaurant reviewer wrestling with class. Claiborne’s social aspirations that resonated with his readers were the same ones that offended Hess. Unlike Reichl, Hess could not rationalize away his class conflicts, which were the product of his habitus, not an ideological trend. Reichl left the *Times* to run *Gourmet*, a magazine that since its founding in 1942 has been dedicated to high-life pursuits. Just 21 days before he died in January 2005, Hess posted a rebuke on his blog about Bruni’s swooning four-star review of Masa, where the prix-fix menu was \$500.¹⁰⁹ Sheraton’s zeal for simulating a typical diner’s experience and her emphasis on value and authenticity helped shift her socialist proclivities. In the realm of class, anonymity performs another

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ John L. Hess, “Let Them Eat Sushi,” *John L. Hess: Dissents* (2004), <http://www.johnlhess.blogspot.com/>.

service for the reviewer. The cloak of objectivity and the distance it provides protects the reviewer from being seduced into the world of dining elites. At a newspaper in particular, this allows the critic to more effectively straddle the field of journalism, which is skeptical of the upperclasses, and the field of gastronomy, which embraces them.

Philosophically, the presumed anonymity of critics charged with making aesthetic judgments about food has a function, also. Anonymity injects an element of disinterestedness, which we saw in Chapter II was so important to the philosophers who ranked the senses based on the degree to which aesthetic beauty could be contemplated reflexively, objectively, and intellectually. Although the restaurant critic's actual taste sensation is still immediate and proximal, the anonymity of the reviewer inserts a metaphoric distance between the object tasted, the taster, and in the case of restaurant reviews, the chef—Bruni's moat. Not accepting free food or gifts helps, too. To use Hume's phrase, the anonymous critic is presumed "freed from all prejudice"¹¹⁰ that would make his or her experience unique, allowing the formation of opinions that everyone with the proper education would share. This objectivity is a hallmark of the field of journalism. Claiborne's insistence on anonymity derived from the standpoint of journalistic ethics, but by so insisting he also inserted an element of Kantian universality and objectivity to the evaluations he was making that permitted food and restaurants to be taken more seriously as cultural objects of aesthetic contemplation. The perspective of the consumer advocate, which implies that the experience the critic is having should and can be replicated for other diners, further increases

¹¹⁰ Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," 17.

the potential for objectivity and universality of the restaurant experience. The locus of this contemplation is the discourse generated in the field of gastronomy that is initiated by the review.

What Are They Eating In Britain?

British restaurant critics have taken the role of reviewer as entertainer to an extreme, and in so doing, they almost scream for recognition rather than feign anonymity. They are notorious for the vicious, personal tenor of their criticism. As Jay Rayner, restaurant critic for the *Observer*, wrote in *Saveur*, “British restaurant criticism is a far more brutal business than the American variety.”¹¹¹ Warren St. John described how the savage reviewers in London approach their prey, “They don't go incognito, but rather appear under their own names, often with a pack of friends, sometimes expecting star treatment.”¹¹² Rayner reported on a law suit brought against critic Matthew Norman of the *Sunday Telegraph* for a review of Shepherds in which he deemed the place “among the very worst restaurants in Christendom” and likened the chef's crab and brandy soup to a weapon of mass destruction, suggesting that if it were “found today in a canister buried in the Iraqi desert, it would save Tony Blair's skin.”¹¹³ Having won the 2003 British Press Award for Food and Drink Writer of the Year, Norman was no fledgling, flippant journalist. Instead, his flamboyant style came out of a long line of vituperative cultural criticism in Britain, itself a product of an oversaturated journalistic

¹¹¹ Jay Rayner, "Diatribes for Dinner: Restaurant reviewing in Britain is no Longer Exactly a Gentleman's Game," *Saveur*, March 2005, 28.

¹¹² William St. John, "London Food Critics Have Knives Out for the Chefs," *New York Times*, 9 November 2003.

¹¹³ See Adam Lusher, "Restaurant Tells Our Reviewer: 'This Is War'," *Sunday Telegraph*, 25 January 2004.

field in which position takers have to scream to be heard among the cacophony of opinions on British newsstands. According to Rayner, the first weekly reviews in England, written by Quentin Crew in *Queen* magazine, debuted in the mid-1960s, at about the same time Claiborne's weekly reviews first appeared in the *New York Times*. Unlike Claiborne's serviceable Directory to Dining, however, the first British reviews were written as pithy entertainments—the distinctive British field of journalism, no doubt, shaping them from the onset.

In what could be viewed as a test of the British reviewing style on our shores, *Vanity Fair* invited A. A. Gill, one of Britain's most notorious restaurant critics, to review Jean-Georges Vongerichten's new, modern Chinese restaurant 66 for the magazine's August 2003 issue.¹¹⁴ Gill saved one of his most evocative metaphors for Vongerichten's shrimp-and-foie-gras dumplings with grapefruit dipping sauce, which he described as “fishy liver-filled condoms...properly vile, with a savor that lingered like a lovelorn drunk and tasted as if your mouth had been used as the swab bin in an animal hospital.”¹¹⁵ From the standpoint of the position of the magazine in the subfield of lifestyle journalism, the review was a tremendous success, reverberating in newspapers, other magazines, and books for several years. Americans had never read anything quite like it. But from the standpoint of the American field of gastronomy, the test was a failure. Steven Shaw deemed Gill's criticism of Vongerichten “beneath contempt.”¹¹⁶ Unused to such harsh, hyperbolic reviews, Vongerichten and his business partner Phil Suarez were

¹¹⁴ A. A. Gill, review of 66, *Vanity Fair*, August 2003.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Shaw, *Turning the Tables: Restaurants from the Inside Out*, 113.

devastated, attributing such an un-American-style attack to a mistaken slight of the *Vanity Fair's* publisher, Graydon Carter. Carter denied any relationship between his treatment at Vongerichten's restaurants and the review.¹¹⁷ Rather than siding with the British critic, even people who disliked the restaurant felt sorry for Vongerichten. Still, the incident underscored the stark differences between the British and American fields of journalism and gastronomy, and perhaps signaled some important changes afoot. Guest critics from overseas writing sensationalized reviews in upscale lifestyle magazines about chefs with global restaurant empires—this was not restaurant reviewing to help people decide where to eat dinner. This was aesthetic sport. And the implications for the heteronymous fields of journalism and gastronomy in America about what was to come were clear. Anyone could be a critic and no one had to play nice.¹¹⁸

Other Important Critics in the New York Market

While the *New York Times* restaurant critic has historically been dominant, as the field of gastronomy and interest in restaurants grew, reviews began appearing in other outlets. For a 2004 article in the online magazine *Slammed*, restaurant critic Philip Innes counted no fewer than 29 reviewers in the vicinity of the city, concluding that only a handful were first rate in part because “most publications’ food budgets are inadequate” and “the hiring of

¹¹⁷ Ironically, Carter is now also a restaurateur, part owner of The Wavery Inn & Garden, by all accounts a restaurant with mediocre food but a celebrity-filled reservations book. The restaurant famously has an unlisted phone number. More on this restaurant later in this chapter.

¹¹⁸ The arrival of another savage British restaurant critic, Toby Young, as a judge on Season Five of Bravo's *Top Chef* signals that a British invasion of sorts may be underway.

restaurant critics tends to be more incestuous than open and well-publicized.”¹¹⁹ In 2006, *Time Out New York* congregated a panel of publicists and practitioners to rank all of the city’s most important cultural critics across genres.¹²⁰ To lend credibility and a sense of seriousness to the magazine’s otherwise flip, urban perspective, their deliberations were overseen by Samir Husni, chairman of the department of journalism at University of Mississippi. Using a hedonic scale that took into account knowledge, style, taste, and accessibility, the *Times*’s then “\$25 and Under” critic Peter Meehan beat out all the other local restaurant critics. (Bruni came in fifth, behind Meehan, Steve Cuozzo of the *New York Post*, Adam Platt of *New York*, and Irene Sax of the *Daily News*.) About Meehan’s reviews the jury concluded:

Writing is smart, witty and very sensible. His approach is logical, fair, and almost always places the consumer first, which makes a certain amount of sense, seeing as the restaurants he profiles are more value driven than those profiled by Frank Bruni.¹²¹

The panel’s rationale emphasized the serviceability and consumer advocacy of Meehan’s reviews. But perhaps more important, Meehan, a young, hip, East Village resident with a voracious appetite for food and an appreciation of culinary craftsmanship, was homologous with *Time Out*’s aspirational, young, urban New York audience.

Although it would take more time and space than this dissertation will allow to delve into the histories and homologies of other New York City restaurant critics and their media outlets as deeply as I have delved into those of the *New York Times*, a brief overview of some of the most important

¹¹⁹ Philip Innes, "Who's the Fairest of Them All," *Slammed* (2004), <http://www.slammedmagazine.com/critics/fairest.php>.

¹²⁰ See "Judgment Day," *Time Out New York*, 7–13 December 2006.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

reviewers will inform the later discussion of how restaurant reviews have shaped our collective tastes through the field of gastronomy. Each has used his or her authority and personality to muster a voice that can be heard in the din created by the *New York Times* review. Although the noise has not quite reached the climax it has in British restaurant criticism, one wonders if as the number of opinions published about restaurants grows, the tenor of our restaurant reviews won't veer in that direction.

Gael Greene and *New York Magazine*

Though she did not make *Time Out's* list of top reviewers in 2006, as mentioned earlier, during her 30-year tenure, *New York* magazine critic Gael Greene was for many years the only serious counterpoint to the powerhouses at the *New York Times*. Of Greene, Alan Richman said, "She was huge...she is the only person who has gone *mano a mano* with the *Times* and succeeded."¹²² Sheraton agreed. Andrew Carmellini, former executive chef of Café Boulud and A Voce, confirmed that *New York* magazine had a positive and immediate effect on restaurant business, second perhaps only to the *Times*, due in part, one imagines, to the momentum generated by Greene and her racy reviews.¹²³ If nothing else, during her career Greene contributed a minimum of 1,500 reviews to the discourse about restaurants in New York. Her limited food experience and her gift for resonating with the cultural fashions of the day tugged the field of gastronomy away from the center of the plate and back into the center of the dining room.

Greene began reviewing for *New York* just after the magazine's

¹²² Richman interview, 18 December 2007.

¹²³ Personal communication.

inception in 1968 and she maintained her title as the Insatiable Critic until November 2008. A native of Detroit who grew up eating frozen food served by a maid, Greene attended the University of Michigan but dropped out to spend a year in Paris, where her palate was alit by food. (She returned from Europe when the year was up to finish school.) Greene had been working as a freelance journalist in New York when, in 1968, the phone rang and *New York* founding editor Clay Felker asked her to be the new magazine's restaurant critic. She agreed, insisting to Felker, "We have to do it like Craig Claiborne does it at the *Times*...Anonymously. I'll have to eat a minimum of three times before judging a restaurant—with friends—like he does."¹²⁴ Unlike Claiborne's reviews, however, Greene's were infused with sexual energy and characterized by a freedom of expression (and of grammar) in tune with the magazine's New Journalism and with the times in which she was writing. Although *New York* did not include ratings with their restaurant reviews until January 2006—when current critic Adam Platt retroactively starred 101 restaurants on a scale of 1 to 5—in 1975 Greene rated Manhattan's top French restaurants with her own system, using mouths to signify "culinary excellence" and hearts to signify "total pleasure." (André Soltner's Lutèce received her highest rating of five mouths and four hearts.) Greene's affair with top French chef Gilbert le Coze prior to and after he arrived in New York from Paris with his sister Maguy to open Le Bernardin—a seafood restaurant that ushered in the trend toward undercooking fish (more on that later)—was the stuff of soap operas. Greene lavished praise on Le Bernardin despite her lack of anonymity there, feeling justified in her positive pronouncements because of the buzz about the place

¹²⁴ Gael Greene, *Insatiable: Tales from a Life of Delicious Excess*, 1st ed. (New York: Warner Books, 2006), 2.

created by other critics in other publications, such as then *New York Times* critic Bryan Miller, who gave the restaurant four stars out of the gate.¹²⁵ Greene could forgo anonymity because her position in the field came from her flamboyant style rather than for her journalistic integrity. Though she loved to eat, her reviews were not about food, they were about appetite and hunger.

Today, *New York's* reviews are less overtly social or sexual and more purposefully about the dining details of the restaurants under consideration. They are conducted by Platt and his colleagues, Robin Raisfeld and Rob Patronite, who review as a couple for the "Underground Gourmet" column. (For a comparison of circulation and demographic data about publications that address New York restaurants, see Table 2.) Perhaps still propelled by the force of Greene's personality, and certainly bolstered by the bump in business they generate, the magazine's reviews are taken seriously by restaurateurs and the local dining crowd. But their reach outside the city is limited. And to chefs and publicists, their legitimizing capacity is only invoked in the positive to counter a negative review in the *Times*. To his credit, Platt, who has been reviewing for the magazine since 2000, came in third in the *Time Out* ranking.

In what represents a significant shift in the field of gastronomy, Bruni's reviews have taken a step back in perspective to address his more

¹²⁵ See Bryan Miller, review of Le Bernardin, *New York Times*, 28 March 1986, Weekend section. The restaurant, now under the direction of Maguy Le Coze and chef/owner Eric Ripert, has maintained this top rating ever since.

Table 2

Select Demographic and Circulation Information for Print Publications Addressing Food and/or Restaurants in the New York City Market

Publication	Total Average Paid Circulation	Median Age	Median Income (\$)	Some College and/or Undergraduate Degree (%)
<i>Bon Appétit</i> ^a	1,371,495	50	81,981	n/a
<i>Vanity Fair</i> ^a	1,144,000	39.5	69,265	34.7
<i>The New Yorker</i> ^a	1,043,931	47.8	117,194 ^f	92.5
<i>New York Times</i> (weekday) ^b	1,000,665	45.1	57,711	83.3
<i>Gourmet</i> ^a	983,836	49.4	79,942	n/a
<i>GQ</i> ^a	915,173	34.3	70,732	70
<i>Daily News</i> (weekday) ^c	681,415	45.1	68,145	12
<i>New York</i> ^d	543,000	52	168,470	78
<i>Time Out New York</i> ^e	146,449	32	93,000	97

Notes: All figures were compiled from the most up-to-date, audited, electronic media kit for each publication. Demographics for online audiences are not included.

^a Media kits for these Condé Nast publications were updated October 2008 and are based on demographic surveys conducted by MRI in 2008 and circulation data audited by ABC in June 2008. ^b Figures for the *New York Times* were audited by ABC in September 2008. They exclude the Sunday paper. ^c Demographic information was produced by Scarborough Research in December 2007; circulation figures were audited by ABC in September 2007. ^d *New York* magazine demographics were produced by MMR in 2008; circulation figures were audited by ABC in June 2008. ^e *Time Out* demographics data were compiled by MRI in February 2008; circulation figures were audited by ABC in December 2007. ^f This income figure represents the average of two demographics surveys conducted in 2008, one by MMR and one by MRI.

national audience. He uses clever turns of phrase, pop-culture references, and other narrative devices to make his culinary criticism entertaining and broad.

New York magazine's reviews, on the other hand, have become more service

oriented. Whereas Greene's reviews were at one time a must-read for their sheer zaniness and the suspense-filled thrill about what outrageous thing she might do or write next, the current *New York* reviews are now more detail oriented, reporting straightforwardly on the critics' dining experiences and chronicling the city's restaurant scene.

A comparison of reviews of the Waverly Inn & Garden illustrates this reversal. Waverly Inn is partially owned by *Vanity Fair* publisher Graydon Carter, who has turned the restaurant into a celebrity-stuffed canteen. Still, Adam Platt's review is typical of his straightforward style. He comments on the difficulty of getting a reservation, he describes the clubbiness of the scene, and then he turns to the food: "For a semi-private club, it's not bad. For a public restaurant, it could be better, although if you're Graydon Carter and a place like this opened a few doors down from your own townhouse, you wouldn't be too upset."¹²⁶ Contrast this with Bruni's fictional, fawning e-mail to Carter from Frannie von Furstinshow, a campy spoof of a celebuteante writing to tell him how she thought everything was "Brilliant. Just Brilliant."¹²⁷ The posture assumed by the reviewers and the position of these publications has clearly switched. The set up to a recent Raisfeld and Patronite review demonstrates how the couple use their knowledge of the local scene to garner support for their opinions from a local, restaurant-going crowd:

New York City is home to nearly as many restaurant clichés as restaurants. There's the etched-mirror-lined brasserie, the sponge-painted trattoria, and the splashy space-age Thai, not to mention the classic steakhouse and the big-box Asian. These cookie-cutter concepts might have crowds, good food even, but

¹²⁶ Adam Platt, review of The Waverly Inn & Garden, *New York*, 18 March 2007.

¹²⁷ Frank Bruni, review of The Waverly Inn & Garden, *New York Times*, 24 January 2007, Dining In/Dining Out section.

they seldom have that crucial, ineffable quality: personality. Vinegar Hill House, a newly opened mom-and-pop shop in Brooklyn, positively exudes it.¹²⁸

New York's reviews may still move New Yorkers to the city's restaurants, but they no longer afford the same level of must-read, sociocultural critique of Greene's reviews in her prime.

Gourmet and Other Magazines

Magazines with a more national focus have had a fascination with New York restaurants for as long as the city has fancied itself a dining destination. From the standpoint of the subfield of lifestyle journalism, New York has always provided a model of the sophisticated urban lifestyle. From the 1940s until 2006 *Gourmet* magazine ran a "Spécialités de la Maison" column that featured reviews of New York City restaurants. James Beard was among *Gourmet's* early reviewers, encouraging readers in a 1949 roundup to think about staying in the city on a summer evening and heading downtown to the quiet streets of lower Manhattan for a soothing summertime meal.¹²⁹ As enthusiasm for food grew into a frenzy in the 1970s and 1980s, the power of *Gourmet's* reviews grew, too. Jay Jacobs was the critic most closely associated with the magazine during America's formative foodie years. His tenure lasted from 1972 to 1986, and according to most chefs and restaurateurs I've spoken with, a *Gourmet* review during that time would bring people into the restaurant for as long as a year or two after it was published. As Jacobs reflected on his own impact, "The magazine's imprimatur would yield

¹²⁸ Robin Raisfeld and Rob Patronite, review of Vinegar Hill House, *New York*, 7 December 2008.

¹²⁹ James Beard, "Spécialités de la Maison," *Gourmet*, July 1949.

sustained patronage by a well-heeled, cosmopolitan readership prepared to indulge itself unstintingly.”¹³⁰

Traditionally, the editors of *Gourmet* only published positive reviews, rationalizing away negative opinions by noting that the limited space they could afford reviews of any kind in a national monthly magazine did not allow for them to tell readers where *not* to go. One of Blank’s informants described the benefit of this policy in terms of the quick credibility it provided, “If it was reviewed in *Gourmet* I know it’s good.”¹³¹ The reality was slightly more complicated. The magazine did occasionally publish negative reviews over the years, but they were the exception. What’s more, a profitable dining directory at the back of the magazine, for which restaurants paid to be listed, meant that negative reviews threatened advertising sales. By only publishing positive reviews, *Gourmet* also had freer access to chefs and restaurants for editorial content and promotion. Without the fear of a damaging review, the industry was always happy to participate.

This editorial policy changed when Reichl arrived from the *Times* to assume the position of editor-in-chief. Reichl let negative reviews into the pages of *Gourmet* with more regularity. One extremely negative review, written in the British style, of a young British chef named Paul Liebrandt who was dazzling diners at a restaurant called Atlas on Central Park South, sparked an all out war between Jonathan Gold, the critic for *Gourmet*, and William Grimes, the critic at the *Times*. (A description of the position-taking battle that ensued is included in the final chapter.) *Gourmet*’s reviewing policy

¹³⁰ Jay Jacobs, *A Glutton for Punishment: Confessions of a Mercenary Eater* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990), 20.

¹³¹ Quoted in Blank, *Critics, Ratings, and Society: The Sociology of Reviews*, 138.

changed drastically again under Reichl's watch. In 2006 she declared the magazine would cease publishing regular monthly restaurant reviews altogether.

Other magazine food writers and critics, such as James Villas at *Town & Country*, Alan Richman at *GQ*, and Jeffrey Steingarten at *Vogue*, have at times each enjoyed privileged positions in the fields of journalism and gastronomy, as indicated by large audiences and industry recognition. Due to the national scope and general readership of the lifestyle publications for which they write about food, their subjects are not necessarily limited to restaurants or to any particular locale. But the popularity of their publications and the personality of their writing makes their voices stand out in the field all the same. Writing about food and restaurants is an effective way to establish and maintain positions within the subfield of lifestyle journalism, especially now that restaurants and chefs have become such hot topics. With bestselling books, television spots, and other celebrity-building achievements to their credit, these magazine writers have also benefited from structural shifts in the field of gastronomy. Steingarten and Richman have both won James Beard Foundation Journalism Awards, Richman winning a total of 11, more than any other journalists. Richman was also the first food writer to ever win a National Magazine Award for feature writing. Steingarten is a frequent judge on *Iron Chef*. When these lifestyle magazine writers turn their attention to restaurants, they often focus on New York City. Of the three, Richman is perhaps most closely associated with restaurant criticism, his reviews and restaurant reporting having appeared regularly in *GQ* since 1991, and more recently in *Bon Appétit* and various Bloomberg outlets, as well.

One of the reasons for Richman's prominence is his fearlessness about holding provocative, controversial opinions. His confidence is due, in part, to his training as a journalist, his belief in the importance of telling a newsworthy story with his reviews, and his effectiveness at straddling the field of gastronomy and the subfield of lifestyle journalism—as evidenced by his many awards in both. Not quite in the league of hyperbole of the British critics, Richman is known more as a curmudgeon than a sensationalist, his criticism can nevertheless be biting. Looking for the reason that food in Boston restaurants is always served in giant, unappealingly presented portions, he traced the trend back to celebrity chef Todd English's first restaurant, Olives, in Charlestown, Massachusetts.¹³² In a piece that took him around the world to sample most of the restaurants in Jean-Georges Vongerichten's growing international empire, Richman lamented the poor state of Vongerichten's cooking, which he once considered among the best in the country and now doesn't consider worth its salt.¹³³ Countering the positive culinary buzz about Las Vegas, Richman ate in almost all of the city's new restaurants and deemed it a terrible food town, albeit one with a few great restaurants.¹³⁴ And most notoriously, one year after hurricane Katrina, Richman wrote a negative review of the reopened restaurants that began, "I've never had much luck eating in New Orleans," and went on to characterize the city as "a festival of narcissism, indolence and corruption."¹³⁵ Local New Orleans critics and angry diners from across the country are still throwing insults Richman's way, dismissing his culinary knowledge, expertise, and nature every opportunity

¹³² Alan Richman, "Boston Glob," *GQ*, September 1997.

¹³³ ———, "Stick a Fork in Jean-Georges," *GQ*, December 2004.

¹³⁴ ———, "Meals of Fortune," *GQ*, September 2006.

¹³⁵ ———, "Yes, We're Open," *GQ*, November 2006.

they get.¹³⁶ As you can tell from the themes of these articles, Richman's calling card is satire. His effectiveness comes from his strong reporting skills, his sense of humor, and his writing talent.

Richman is not just critical of restaurants, he is critical of critics. In an interview with Margaret Grodinsky that was published in *Beard House*, the former magazine of James Beard Foundation,¹³⁷ he differentiated restaurant critics at magazines from their colleagues at newspapers. According to Richman, newspaper critics "just critique every bit of food, then describe the wallpaper."¹³⁸ What newspaper critics lack in creativity, however, Richman believes they make up for in ethical standards. "At least newspaper critics are pros."¹³⁹ Magazine critics, on the other hand, especially those who are writing for publications that cannot or choose not to pay for expenses, are being deceptive, in Richman's opinion:

The ethics of magazine reviewing are out of control. So much of what goes into magazines, top magazines, is arranged by p.r. people calling magazines and arranging meals for critics...we have to talk about the end result of doing business this way: it's pure deception. It's not illegal, because there is no law against taking a free meal, but it is really misleading to readers.¹⁴⁰

Given that the journalism and ethics are sound, Richman believes the best criticism tells a story that both entertains and informs. This is hard to do when writing about food and restaurants, he says, harder in fact than any

¹³⁶ *Times-Picayune* restaurant critic Brett Anderson, once a close colleague of Richman's, was perhaps the most personally offended by what he considered Richman's "amateurism on display." See Brett Anderson, "Renowned Restaurant Writer Rips New Orleans but Only Embarrasses Himself," *Times-Picayune*, 2 November 2006.

¹³⁷ Margaret Grodinsky, "Critical Judgment: Chewing the Fat with Alan Richman," *Beard House*, Winter 1999.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

other kind of writing he has done because of the limiting nature of the material. “There is no narrative line other than what you create.”¹⁴¹ (Bruni, who is also a seasoned journalist, expressed this sentiment to me as well.)

Richman’s analysis of the differences in restaurant reviews in newspapers and lifestyle magazines gets to the heart of some structural differences in the field of journalism and may shed light on why the critics at newspapers since Claiborne have been more dominant in the field. Without an adherence to the journalistic ethics that produce the “incorruptible authority” we expect from newspapers, magazine writers at some level cannot be fully trusted. (Perhaps this is another reason *Time Out* brought in the chairman of a university journalism department to monitor its survey of critics.) Even if readers are unaware, the perception of unethical practices undermines the magazine critic’s consecrating authority among restaurateurs and chefs. Undoubtedly, these magazines proffer serious journalism in other departments, especially in the “well,” to use the magazine term for feature articles that appear in the center of the “book.” But the rules for the cultural reporting on the edges of the well are more lax. At *Esquire* magazine, which has always blended serious journalism with astute cultural criticism, John Mariani, who holds a Ph.D. in English Literature from Columbia University, has been the magazine’s longstanding food critic. Being included on his annual roster of the “Best Restaurants in America” is a feather in the toque of a chef. And yet Mariani is renowned in the industry for the demands he

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 62.

makes on the restaurants he writes about and for never paying a bill.¹⁴²

In recent years, other magazines have added restaurant reviews to their editorial mix, another indication of how general interest in food has spread, how the appeal of restaurants has grown, and how the celebrity of chefs attracts an ever-diverse group of position-takers to the field of gastronomy. Although the *New Yorker* has periodically included articles about food in its editorial calendar, over the last ten years or so stories about chefs, restaurants, and food trends have appeared more frequently. A much-anticipated annual food-themed issue debuted in 2003. Since 2000 the magazine has included a short restaurant review almost every week. The 250- to 500-word reviews appear in the front of the book in a section called “Goings on About Town” under the column heading “Tables for Two.”¹⁴³ The reviews are more atmospheric than serviceable, though they contain enough detail and opinion for a curious diner to have an expectation of what the restaurant and meal will be like when he or she arrives. A recent, negative review of Vongerichten’s new soba restaurant, Matsugen, which replaced the ill-fated 66 that A. A. Gill eviscerated in *Vanity Fair* (see above), is typical of the magazine’s evocative, writerly style:

¹⁴² For a first-hand account of Mariani’s tour through Cleveland’s restaurants, see Michael Ruhlman, *The Soul of a Chef: The Journey Toward Perfection* (New York: Viking, 2000), 190–201.

¹⁴³ The column “Tables for Two” actually debuted in the *New Yorker* on September 12, 1925. It was written by Lois Long under the pseudonym Lipstick, and it featured two- to three-page articles about New York hotspots, including restaurants, night clubs, and the like. Long stopped writing in 1938, but the column continued until 1963. A separate restaurant column written by Sheila Hibben and Katherine Blow ran from 1935 until 1942. “Tables for Two” was revived as an occasional restaurant review in 1995 and it became a weekly feature in the spring of 2000. See Jon Michaud and Erin Overbey, “Ask the Librarians VI,” *Emdashes: The New Yorker Between the Lines* (2007), <http://emdashes.com/2007/10/ask-the-librarians-vi.php>.

Gone are the red calligraphied pennants hanging from the ceiling, although a fish tank (and a single moray eel) remains, along with—in what is perhaps a final nod to the Chairman—a long, often lonely communal bar. The room is chic, austere, and ultimately a bore; the staff is attentive, knowledgeable, and almost uncomfortably obeisant...Some of Matsugen's dishes...may be enriched by an understanding of their form. But, like haikus, some soba houses are better than others, and it doesn't take a scholar to figure out that this one is missing some beats.¹⁴⁴

Several chefs, including Andrew Carmellini, have remarked that favorable *New Yorker* reviews generate a surprising amount of business considering that they are so short and that they are published in a non-food magazine. One suspects this response is due both to the homology of the magazines' critical perspective to its audience and also due to the strong journalistic ethics upheld by the editors, which gives it a privileged, consecrating position in the field of journalism, if not yet much clout in the field of gastronomy.

Reviewers at Other Newspapers

The *New York Times* has dominated the cultural space of restaurant reviews for so many years that not many other newspaper reviewers have been able to make their voices heard. Blaming the unpredictable and ephemeral nature of restaurant meals and the diminishing influence of critics, in 2005 *New York Post* restaurant critic Steve Cuzzo announced that the paper would cease publishing reviews so that he could report on restaurants in a more meaningful way: "Restaurant reviews are over. History. Outta here."¹⁴⁵ The short-lived reincarnation of the *New York Sun* included a weekly restaurant review, but like the paper itself, the influence of its reviewer was not

¹⁴⁴ Lauren Collins, review of Matsugen, *The New Yorker*, 3 November 2008.

¹⁴⁵ Steve Cuzzo, "You Got Served!," *New York Post*, 28 September 2005, 41.

significant.¹⁴⁶ In recent years, only a handful of other newspaper reviewers have been able to carve out a niche for their restaurant opinions. And most often, when another newspaper's reviewer causes a reaction in the field, it is because of a disagreement with what the *New York Times* critic has had to say about a prominent place, which further reinforces the dominance of the *Times*' critic's voice. It is worth noting that the *New York Times* critic remains the only full-time staff position among the other city's newspaper critics.

Having reviewed restaurants for three years for *New York* magazine's "Underground Gourmet" column, Jane Freiman became the restaurant critic for New York *Newsday* in 1989. During her six-year tenure as the paper's critic, she was able to hold her own and occasionally make news by offering a contrary opinion to the city's dominant newspaper voice. Although her food background was limited, her opinions were taken seriously because of the serious journalistic approach she applied to her job. Freiman's negative, 2 1/2-star review of Lutèce in 1991 dealt a devastating blow to chef/owner André Soltner, which Irene Daria chronicled in her book about the restaurant. Freiman told Daria she went to the restaurant seven or eight times because "she was bending over backwards to be fair."¹⁴⁷ Narry a negative thing had been written about Lutèce in its almost three decades atop New York's dining scene. When Freiman rereviewed Lutèce in 1995 after Soltner sold it to Ark Restaurants, who installed Eberhard Müller as chef, she was not afraid to remind readers and the field:

¹⁴⁶ When the *Sun* debuted in 2002, I was engaged as a restaurant reviewer. My tenure lasted only a couple of weeks because I could not maintain anonymity.

¹⁴⁷ Irene Daria, *Lutèce: A Day in the Life of America's Greatest Restaurant* (New York: Random House, 1993), xvii.

Despite longstanding efforts by many media to preserve the myth of Soltner's Lutèce as a four-star establishment, it had been widely known since New York *Newsday*'s 2 1/2-star review in November, 1991, that it had become a living food museum.¹⁴⁸

After *Newsday* ceased publication of its New York City edition in July of 1995, Freiman became the managing editor and Sunday features editor of the Long Island edition, and the newspaper stopped reviewing the city's restaurants altogether.

Over at the *New York Daily News*, the two most recent restaurant critics engaged by the paper have contributed their own distinct voices and opinions to the general restaurant discourse on a very local level. Pascale Le Draoulec reviewed restaurants for the *Daily News* from 2001 to 2007. She came to the paper after writing about food in San Francisco. Her serious, food-focused, service-oriented approach won her a James Beard Foundation Journalism Award for newspaper restaurant criticism after just 14 months on the job. But even so, her balanced reviews failed to make much of a splash. Two chefs I spoke with jokingly wondered if they had even ever been reviewed by the *Daily News* (which they had been). Le Draoulec's successor made instant news, if only because it was the first time any paper had hired a food blogger for an old-school media position. Danyelle Freeman's blog restaurantgirl.com chronicles her infatuation with restaurants and chefs. When she came to the paper, she was neither anonymous nor removed from the restaurant world, in fact she had become famous because of her relationship to it. To use Bruni's metaphor, there was no moat to separate her from the chefs she was going to review. In fact, the photo from her blog was

¹⁴⁸ Jane Freiman, *Newsday*, 28 April 1995, Dining Out.

posted along with most reports of her hiring.¹⁴⁹ Whether the paper was trying to make its reviews more current by hiring a new-media person I have been unable to confirm, but the online chatter suggests that's how the move was perceived.

Some quick Internet searching gives an indication of the relative resonance these critics have in the online blogosphere (see Table 3). Keying in "Frank Bruni" on chowhound.com produced a total of 367 topics, posts, and stories tagged with his name. Even after her relatively long tenure, "Pascal Le Draoulec" brought up only 5. "Restaurant girl" and "Danyelle Freeman" generated a total of 19 tags, most of which read like this one, "Restaurant Girl howler of the week." The results were similar on eater.com: 348 for "Frank

Table 3

The Relative Resonance of New York City Newspaper Critics in the Blogosphere

Critic (Newspaper)	Tenure in Years	# of Tags on Chowhound	# of Tags on Eater	# of Results on Google ^b
Frank Bruni (<i>New York Times</i>)	4	367	348	107,000
Pascale le Draoulec (<i>NY Daily News</i>)	7	5	1	771
Danyelle Freeman aka Restaurant Girl (<i>NY Daily News</i>) ^a	1	19	143	3,410

Notes: Searches were conducted between 15 and 20 December 2008.

^a Data for Danyelle Freeman represent the combined total of "Restaurant Girl" and "Danyelle Freeman" search terms. ^b Google name searches were limited by the names of the reviewers' publications to try to reduce over-counting.

¹⁴⁹ See "Daily News Installs Restaurant Girl as New Restaurant Critic," *eater.com* (2007), http://eater.com/archives/2007/08/exclusive_daily.php.

Bruni,” 1 for “Pascale le Draoulec,” 168 for “Restaurant Girl” and “Danyelle Freeman” combined. These results make it clear that Bruni is cited online more than le Draoulec and Freeman ($\chi^2=1079$, $p < .0001$). Although they may all take their jobs seriously, no newspaper reviewer in New York generates as much conversation on or off the web as the one at the *New York Times*.

Of Critical Importance in the American Field of Gastronomy

In this chapter I have presented an overview of the evolution of the field of gastronomy in America during the latter half of the 20th century from the standpoint of the restaurant critics who had the largest impact, primarily Craig Claiborne and his successors at the *New York Times*. Simultaneously navigating the fields of gastronomy and journalism, these critics helped codify and disseminate information and aesthetic judgments about food. As the field of gastronomy began to flourish, other reviewers writing for other publications appeared on the scene. These new position-takers, whose reviews reflected changing interests and changing values, reshaped and shifted the field. Due to certain homologies of these critics to their publics, these changes occasionally resulted in certain styles of reviewing resonating more deeply than others with the restaurant-dining public. Craig Claiborne’s readers, hungry for gourmet food and status, welcomed the education in culinary connoisseurship they received in his reviews. Mimi Sheraton’s fans appreciated her undercover advocacy on their behalf. Gael Greene’s pop-culture-keyed criticism informed the social and economic aspirations of the hip, young readership of *New York* magazine.

Although the *Times* review remained the most important from the

standpoint of consecration within the field, the spread of restaurant reviews to other media and the concomitant increase in interest about aesthetic judgments related to food in the public sphere made people in far-flung industries pay more attention to what was happening back there in the kitchen. This newfound interest allowed for the whole restaurant business and especially the profession of chef to be taken more seriously. As a result, throughout the decades under consideration, restaurants and chefs in New York and around the country enjoyed unprecedented popularity. Whether opening multi-million-dollar restaurants, experimenting with new cuisines, or serving up painstakingly authentic recreations of dishes from around the world, the enthusiasm of the city's restaurateurs and chefs fostered excitement that led to what some people called a New American Cuisine. None of these developments could have happened without a flourishing field of gastronomy.

New American Cuisine is not the sort of national cuisine Ferguson is looking to pin her field of gastronomy on. There are no easy-to-follow rules, no clear-cut culinary distinctions, no standard of appreciation that transcends all classes of society. It is an anything-goes style of cooking that simultaneously values the most authentic versions of Peking Duck and the most outrageous technological triumphs of molecular gastronomy. The curious larder of the one of the most celebrated chefs of the moment, David Chang of the Momofuku restaurants, contains cornflakes, peanut butter, and MSG. But this lack of codification does not mean that the field of gastronomy does not exist. To the contrary, it is bubbling away.

Recall that taste, as Hume defined it, is the product of the rational debate of educated critics. Far from perpetuating a lack of standards of taste,

the variety of opinions about food and restaurants among our critics, diners, and other interested parties fuels a rich restaurant discourse that has helped solidify the field of gastronomy, where such standards are negotiated and become real. In the next chapter, we'll consider challenges to the dominance of the *Times* and the structural changes to the field of gastronomy they have brought about. We will explore how the popular Zagat Survey, which polls diners for their opinions about restaurants closed the gap between consumer and critic. We will see how the arrival of Michelin on American shores brought the promise of a panel of experts deciding once and for all which of our restaurants and chefs were the best. And we will explore how the increased popularity of user-generated review Web sites means that diners no longer need to wait for the surveyors at Zagat to ask what they think about the restaurants they have eaten in. These challenges help illustrate how aesthetic judgments made by the reviewers discussed in this chapter, are transmitted to diners and incorporated into their own preferences for restaurants and foods—in short, how they form the basis for our collective tastes.

CHAPTER V

THE PEOPLE VERSUS THE EXPERTS: THE CHALLENGES POSED BY ZAGAT, MICHELIN, AND ONLINE REVIEWS

As we have seen in the previous chapter, during the early stages of development of the field of gastronomy in America, the restaurant critics with the strongest voices and the most appealing personalities, those who resonated best with their readership and with their times, shaped the discourse about restaurants and food in America. By educating, informing, and advising diners where to eat and what was good, these critics had a lasting impact on the field of gastronomy because they established standards against which social distinctions of sophistication and refinement could be made. They continue to shape the discourse about food and restaurants today because of the prominence of their publications, the force of their opinions, their skill as writers, and because the cultural and symbolic capital with which they take new positions and find new homologies in the field supports their dominance. But they are no longer the only tastemakers.

One of the consequences of providing people—especially Americans—with the knowledge and tools they need to make their own aesthetic judgments about taste is that eventually they will seek an outlet for their opinions. It is one thing for a dining public to vote with its dollars and simply avoid the restaurants they do not like. But in a vibrant field of gastronomy, where consumers feel empowered, everyone is an expert, and the discourse

about restaurants is flush, eventually some diners are going to want to be heard. As former *Times* critic Ruth Reichl concluded in her mid-tenure apologia, "Everyone has become a critic. I couldn't be happier. The more people pay attention to what and how they eat, the more attuned they become to their own senses and the world around them."¹ Diners have always formed opinions about restaurants and shared them with friends, so technically everyone has always been a critic. Studies even show that these friendly opinions have a powerful influence on dining decisions.² But when more and more people are able to project their opinions about restaurants into the public sphere, the implications for the power dynamic in the field of gastronomy and other fields of cultural production are vast.

In this chapter I look at three strong, potential challenges to the dominance of the *New York Times* restaurant critic and the structure of the field of gastronomy. Two of them vie for power by amassing public opinion about restaurants. The first serious outlet for consumer opinions about restaurants appeared in 1979 in the form of the Zagat Survey, a purportedly scientific poll of consumer preferences about restaurants that became extremely popular in New York City in the 1990s. The founders, Tim and Nina Zagat, both lawyers, who met while studying at Yale, threatened to destabilize the dominance of the restaurant critics in traditional media by promoting the idea that the real voice of the people was finally going to be heard. Advances in Internet technology and increased access to the Web have

¹ Reichl, "Why I Disapprove of What I Do."

² See Barrows, Lattuca, and Bosselman, "Influence of Restaurant Reviews Upon Consumers," Jolson and Bushman, "Third-Party Consumer Information Systems: The Case of the Food Critic," and West and Broniarczyk, "Integrating Multiple Opinions: The Role of Aspiration Level on Consumer Response to Critic Consensus."

created another challenge by giving diners an even more direct route than Zagat to make their opinions heard. As the number of people visiting food blogs and user-generated review Web sites increases exponentially by the day, the Internet threatens to destabilize the power structure of the field. Another challenge arrived more recently from France in the form of an inspection panel of experts from Michelin, who for more than 100 years have been consecrating restaurants in Europe.

In Ferguson's taxonomy of restaurant reviewers,³ Zagat is a plebiscite and Michelin is a tribunal. According to Ferguson, one of the major distinctions of the plebiscite is that "ratings depend on the luck of the draw and the disposition of the consumers."⁴ This characterization, however, presumes that these polls operate outside the field of gastronomy—a position that follows from Ferguson's argument elsewhere that such a field does not exist in America.⁵ Where do these predispositions about restaurants and food come from if they are not shaped by the discourse about restaurants and food generated by the field? My research shows that the luck of the draw may more likely be the aesthetic judgments expressed by the dominant voices in the field which inform the dispositions of the individuals polled.⁶

Curiously, as my research in this chapter will demonstrate, when restaurant reviews and ratings are compared across different media, no matter what system is used to derive them, the same restaurants keep rising to the

³ Ferguson, "Michelin in America."

⁴ Ibid.: 52.

⁵ ———, *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine*.

⁶ I disagree with Ferguson's taxonomy on another point. She groups online reviews and blogs with judges, such as Claiborne and Sheraton. Because most online reviews these days are found on review websites that tabulate and average reviewers ratings, I consider them more in line with plebiscites, such as Zagat.

top. This result suggests that the opinions of the critics with the most power to consecrate in the field continue to direct the discourse, and that this discourse sets expectations that lead to the formation of opinions that establish norms reflected in the preferences and aesthetic judgments of the critics and the public at large. Recall Wansink's, Yeoman's, and other's research into the important role expectations have in the formation of tastes discussed in Chapter II and Zaller's model of elite domination of mass opinion discussed in Chapter III. Taken together with my research, these theories help us understand the inner workings of the field of gastronomy and the way it shapes taste.

Zagat and the Public Opinion of Taste

Introduced in 1979, the Zagat Survey⁷ was expected to pose a serious challenge to the dominance of traditional journalistic reviews in New York City. The survey originated when Tim and Nina Zagat, two New York lawyers who met and married while in school at Yale, polled 200 colleagues in their firm about where they liked to eat. From this small office poll, the survey has grown into an international publishing empire covering 100 countries, according to the company's Web site, and producing guides to hotels, golf courses, shopping, music, theater, and nightlife, in addition to the core guides to restaurants. Still a privately held company, the Zagat enterprise, which was put up for sale unsuccessfully for several months in

⁷ A graphic redesign of the cover in 2008 effectively changed the name of the book from *Zagat Survey 2007 New York City Restaurants* to *Zagat New York City Restaurants 2008*. Throughout this dissertation I will refer interchangeably to Zagat or Zagat Survey, which I have chosen not to italicize unless I am discussing a particular edition of the book and using the complete name.

2008, is estimated to generate between \$60 to \$70 million in revenue annually.⁸ The survey's biggest market is by far New York City, where estimates are that some 650,000 copies of the printed book are sold every year.⁹ In July 2008, zagat.com, which launched as a paid subscription service in 1999, reported 384,000 unique visitors.¹⁰

The innovation of Zagat was to conduct a plebiscite on taste. By surveying diners about their opinions and compiling those opinions into ratings, adding snippets of the survey respondents' comments to give an editorial sense of the overall dining experience, the maroon-colored books offered a concise collection of what "real" diners, not experts pretending to be real diners, thought were the best restaurants in town. In some ways, polling diners was a natural evolution in the review/diner dynamic initiated by the *New York Times*. Claiborne taught diners about food. Sheraton advocated on their behalf. At a certain point, presumably, they no longer needed the mediation of the reviewer. To Reichl's point, everyone had become a reviewer.¹¹ As Nina Zagat told a reporter in 2007, "We really believed in the idea. We were confident that regular people were savvy enough to decide what they liked and didn't like all by themselves."¹² You might also say that through their plebiscite Zagat opened the field of gastronomy to diners themselves.

⁸ Luisa Beltran, "Zagat Calls Off Auction," *The Deal*, 9 June 2008.

⁹ Randall Stross, "How Many Reviewers Should be in the Kitchen," *New York Times*, 7 September 2008.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Reichl, "Why I Disapprove of What I Do." In this evolution the online blog/review, which we will discuss later in this chapter, is the natural next stage.

¹² Tommy Fernandez, "Letting Everybody be a Critic," *Crain's New York Business*, 1 October 2007.

The Zagats have always been notoriously secretive about their data collection and the calculations that produce the ratings and capsule reviews that appear in their books and on their Web site. Since 2002 the surveys have been conducted online. Voters rate food, service and décor each on a scale from 1 to 3, and those ratings are extrapolated to produce a final rating in the book for each category out of 30. The 2009 edition of the New York City guide contains 2,073 ratings “based on the collective opinions of avid consumers—38,128 all told.”¹³ According to their math, this translates to 6.6 million annual meals. The highest scores for food, décor, and service in the 2009 guide are 28, 29, and 28, respectively.

Over the years the Zagat system and ratings have been criticized for many reasons. Much has been made about the company’s unwillingness to verify whether anyone who rates a restaurant on their questionnaire has actually been to that restaurant—within the last year, as they request, or ever, for that matter. Obviously the number of people submitting reviews, which the company’s Web site claims to be upwards of 350,000 for all of the surveys combined, would make such verification daunting. Some critics have signaled the misleading degree of accuracy resulting from the extrapolation of ratings made on a three-point scale to a 30-point a scale as a reason to disregard Zagat’s numbers. Others point out editing gaffs that assign comments that do not pertain to restaurants in question, or, more often, comments that are so generic they could pertain to any restaurant. Through it all, the Zagats have maintained that the sheer number of survey respondents renders any mistakes statistically insignificant.

¹³ Curt Gathje and Carol Diuguid, eds., *Zagat New York City Restaurants 2009* (New York: Zagat Survey, 2008), 5.

Presupposing questions of the accuracy and reliability of the data and the edited information is the fundamental conceit about the guide—that a survey of diners produces more reliable ratings than expert opinion. To explain why certain restaurants remain highly rated in Zagat after the quality of the experience they offer has deteriorated, *Times* critic William Grimes posited what he called the “Zagat Effect”:

...the self-levitating phenomenon...in which a restaurant, once it has achieved a top rating, continues to do so year after year, regardless of the quality of the food. Diners flock to it, Zagat guide in hand (either literally or metaphorically) and, convinced that they are eating at a top-flight establishment, cannot bring themselves to believe otherwise.¹⁴

Agreeing with Grimes’s point, Steven Shaw, a lawyer when he is not writing about restaurants, went further, adding, “What renders a popular survey truly suspect is that one has no sense of the reasoning process (if any) behind Zagat’s numerals and strung-together quips.”¹⁵ Shaw suggests that averaging opinions leads to average results, creating a popularity contest rather than a contest based on merit. “One does not, after all, gain the accolades of the Zagat constituency by presenting challenging, complex, or advanced cuisine.”¹⁶ Mimi Sheraton has also argued this point.¹⁷ And I have written elsewhere, that if you follow the Zagat process through to its natural conclusion, the restaurant that best satisfies the most number of diners is McDonald’s.¹⁸

I was able to analyze some of the raw data that were used to generate

¹⁴ William Grimes, review of Aureole, *New York Times*, 20 October 1999, Dining In, Dining Out section.

¹⁵ Steven A. Shaw, “The Zagat Effect,” *Commentary*, November 2000, 49.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Mimi Sheraton, “Rating Zagat,” *Food & Wine* 2001.

¹⁸ Davis, “Power Meal: Craig Claiborne's Last Supper for the *New York Times*,” 68.

the ratings and reviews that appeared in the 2003 Zagat Survey of New York city restaurants.¹⁹ The 500-plus pages of comments submitted online that I perused provided some interesting insight into the Zagat process. There are the obvious mistakes, such as one reviewer's comment on Strip House, a steakhouse in Greenwich Village, that was described as "the best for Village coffee." Although the writer's guidelines that accompanied the data clearly state, "No matter what the comments might say, *the review must correspond with the numbers*" (emphasis in original),²⁰ there were several restaurants for which the tenor of the comments did not seem to jibe with the numerical rating. For example, Siam Inn scored a 19 for food, but 19 of the 36 comments submitted (a total of only 57 people voted) were along the lines of "Great Thai food!!" "Grossly Underrated," and "Best Thai I have Found in NYC." The review of Siam Inn that was printed in the final book read, "This 'satisfying Theater District Thai' [is] 'less well-known' than competitors but is still a 'fast,' 'cheap,' and 'convenient' choice."²¹

Perhaps most interesting were the relatively small number of people who actually voted on any particular restaurant. The introduction to the 2003 guide—the first guide produced after voting went entirely online—says that the results represent the opinions of 25,922 people who participated.²² And yet the majority of the restaurants in my sampling comprised between 60 and 120 responses. The lowest tally for a restaurant in my sample that appeared in the book was 28 for the restaurant Wild Ginger. The rhetoric implies that

¹⁹ These data were saved for me by a colleague who edited portions of the 2003 guide.

²⁰ "Zagat Editorial Overview," (New York: Zagat Survey, LLC, 2001).

²¹ Curt Gathje and Carol Diuguid, eds., *Zagat Survey 2003 New York City Restaurants* (New York: Zagat Survey, 2002), 183-84.

²² *Ibid.*, 6.

everyone votes on every restaurant, when in fact very few people vote on any restaurant. Considering that only a fraction of those people who vote on a restaurant actually write in comments, even one misplaced or mistaken comment results in a high margin of error. What's more, when viewed against the number of seats in the restaurants and the listing of "Most Popular" restaurants that appears at the front of the guide,²³ the voting numbers occasionally do not make any sense at all. As you can see in Table 4, the most popular "restaurant" in my sample, in terms of the number of people who voted on it, was Starbucks, which 867 survey respondents weighed in on.²⁴ Given the lines out the doors of most Starbucks locations, this makes perfect sense. But the numbers for 71 Clinton Fresh Food are puzzling. Can it be possible that with only 30 seats, 400 diners completed the survey on their own? That represents a ratio of votes to seats that is more than double Vong's, the restaurant with the next highest ratio in this sample. In fact the popularity listings in the front of the guide are not generated from the number of people who actually vote or frequent a restaurant, but are derived instead from the answers to a survey question that asks each reviewer to name his or her five favorite restaurants. Still, comparing this list to the actual number of voters and seats available provides a good test of plausibility.

²³ Ibid., 9.

²⁴ Presumably Starbucks was still an interesting enough phenomenon in 2003 to merit a rating in a restaurant guidebook at all. Or perhaps their coffee shops were not yet pervasive enough that you could see one from wherever in the city you might be standing. Starbucks has not appeared in the Zagat Survey since the 2007 guide.

Table 4

Ratio of Votes to Seats for a Selection of Restaurants in the 2003 Zagat Survey

Restaurant Name	Number of Respondents Who Voted on It	Number of Seats	Ratio of Votes to Seats	Included in the list of "Most Popular" restaurants?
Starbucks	867 ^a	n/a	n/a	No
Smith & Wollensky	725	390	1.9	No
Vong	681	120	5.7	Yes, ranked #35
Sparks Steak House	599	684	0.9	Yes, ranked #39
Shun Lee West	436	190	2.3	No
Spice	431	165 ^b	2.6	No
71 Clinton Fresh Food	394	30	13.1	No
Snack	61	10	6.1	No

Note: This table was compiled from data submitted to Zagat Survey, LLC, in 2002 for the 2003 *New York City Restaurants Guide*. It represents a convenience sample from the restaurants in the letters S, U, V, and W.

^a Represents the total votes for multiple locations throughout the city. ^b Represents the total of seats at three locations with 45, 50, and 70 seats each.

Although I would need access to the entire data set to come to more definitive conclusions about the veracity of Zagat's final ratings, this small sampling nevertheless suggests that the questions that have always been raised about the accuracy of the Zagat numbers are justified. Admittedly, except for the restaurants with the highest and the lowest ratings, the specific numbers are not that important when making most restaurant dining decisions. What exactly is the difference to be expected at a restaurant that received an 18

rating for food and one that received a 19.²⁵ Still, the Zagats stand behind their numbers and their arithmetic, believing that the ratings they publish are representative and significant. They have even begun to apply their rating “technology” to other fields, such as medicine.²⁶ In the end, as Shaw reminds us, it is the notion that the average opinion is desirable when choosing a restaurant that undermines the Zagat guides, not their math.

The Zagat system treats restaurant preferences and tastes as mass opinions. Recall from the previous chapter that Zaller qualifies what mass opinion surveys measure, noting that they are influenced by personal predispositions and by the ideological messages imposed by dominant elites. To see if something similar to these processes was evident in the realm of restaurants and taste, I compared Frank Bruni’s main reviews in the *New York Times* over the course of a year with the restaurants that appeared in the Zagat guides that bracketed that year,²⁷ noting if Bruni gave the restaurant a positive, negative, or neutral review. (Neutral reviews presented a relatively even number of positive and negative points about the restaurants.) These data are tabulated in Appendix B.

Although the number of restaurants in question is too small to demonstrate statistical significance, a couple of interesting relationships are evident. Three new restaurants that Bruni reviewed favorably in the course of the year did not find their way into the 2009 Zagat: La Sirène, Terroir, and

²⁵ A scene from *This Is Spinal Tap* comes to mind—the food is one better.

²⁶ Jeremy Smerd, “Wellpoint Joins with Zagat for Doctor Ratings,” *Workforce Management*, 5 November 2007.

²⁷ I chose a 12-month period that reflected the publishing cycle of the guides, namely, September 2007 to September 2008, rather than the calendar year to ensure that newer restaurants would have had a chance to appear in the books.

Gottino. Both Terroir and Gottino are part of a trend of small wine bars with limited menus but top quality food. Because another well-liked wine bar that's part of this trend and has been around longer, El Quinto Pino, is also missing from the guide, it would seem gourmet wine bars have not yet entered the radar of the editors or eaters in Zagat's world. That leaves La Sirène, a small French bistro in SoHo opened in May 2007 that online reviewers love, the only restaurant reviewed favorably by Bruni that was omitted by Zagat.²⁸ A favorable Bruni review *did* add another restaurant to the Zagat list, however. In 2008 Bruni gave a very positive review to a somewhat obscure midtown Chinese restaurant called Szechuan Gourmet that had been open since 2004.²⁹ Although this restaurant did not appear in the 2008 Zagat, it does appear in 2009, without any rating presumably because by the time Bruni brought it to Zagat's attention, their survey process was too far along to have people vote on it.

Curious whether the nature of Bruni's review might have any effect on the ratings in Zagat, I compared the combined scores of restaurants that appeared in both the 2008 and 2009 guides, to Bruni's review, taking into account whether Bruni's review was positive, negative, or neutral. Only ten restaurants could be compared in this way, that is, only ten restaurants that already existed in the 2008 guide were reviewed by Bruni over the course of the next year. Of them, three restaurants that received a positive review from Bruni saw their Zagat ratings rise from 2008 to 2009, and one restaurant that received a negative review from Bruni saw its total score in Zagat decrease.

²⁸ Frank Bruni, review of La Sirène, *New York Times*, 19 March 2008, Dining In, Dining Out section.

²⁹ ———, review of Szechuan Gourmet, *New York Times*, 23 July 2008, Dining In, Dining Out section.

The remaining six restaurants had either an inverse relationship or no change relative to Bruni's review. Of course there are multiple explanations for any relationship between Bruni's reviews and the ratings in Zagat. As Bruni said during his interview, he may choose to rereview a restaurant if he thinks something about it is different.³⁰ Presumably Zagat diners would also notice a change. Taking into account the Zagat Effect explained above, however, it would follow that a high-scoring, popular restaurant would be slower to react to negative change than another restaurant because people who go there with high expectations have a vested interest in liking it.

Amidst these very limited data, two restaurants stand out as worthy of further consideration because of changes in their Zagat ratings. One is the Southwestern-inspired restaurant Mesa Grill. Mesa Grill was Bobby Flay's first restaurant. Flay is an extremely popular television personality and chef, with three series currently running on the Food Network. Mesa Grill remains his flagship. Although the restaurant has been considered subpar by people in the food world for years, it is always packed, in large part due to Flay's celebrity. In a recent review that demoted the restaurant from two to one star, Bruni wrote, "On balance Mesa Grill presents only flickers of the excitement it did in 1991, when it opened, or in 2000, when William Grimes gave it two stars in the *Times*. It's an overly familiar, somewhat tired production."³¹ Mesa Grill's combined rating fell three points in the Zagat guide that appeared after Bruni's review, the restaurant losing one point from each of the food, décor, and service categories. Whether there is a direct

³⁰ Bruni interview, 5 December 2007.

³¹ Frank Bruni, review of Mesa Grill, *New York Times*, 23 January 2008, Dining In, Dining Out section.

relationship between Bruni's review and the Zagat demotion obviously cannot be said from these data, but everything else has been equal at Mesa Grill for many years, so a change this year seems more than coincidental.

The second case that is interesting to look at is the restaurant Perbacco. Perbacco is a small, 40-seat Italian trattoria in Manhattan's East Village. The restaurant had been open for five years before a new chef arrived from Italy in the spring of 2008. Bruni wrote an enthusiastic two-star review after the new chef arrived, concluding, the restaurant had "graduated to a whole new level, worthy of its name, which means 'wow.'"³² That review had an immediate impact on business, and within a month the owner was already looking for more space.³³ From 2008 to 2009 Perbacco's combined Zagat rating rose four points, one for food, two for décor (which did not change; Bruni called it "humble"), and one for service. Considering that Andrew Carmellini has said people came into his previous restaurant, A Voce, years after opening, not realizing the ownership, the décor, and the food had changed,³⁴ it would seem unlikely a new chef could take sole credit for such an immediate peak in the Zagat ratings. Besides, the décor rating rose more than the food rating. Again, a direct cause and effect cannot be based on these data, but it seems likely to me that the positive movement in Perbacco's score was fed by the excitement created by the *Times* review.

Indeed, a plebiscite on taste could destabilize the field of gastronomy and knock the traditional restaurant critics, such as those at the *Times*, out of

³² ———, review of Perbacco, *New York Times*, 20 August 2008, Dining In, Dining Out section.

³³ Amanda, "First Word: Perbacco Tries to Move into Carne Vale Space," *eater.com* (2008), http://eater.com/archives/2008/11/first_word_perbacco_attempting_to_move_into_carnevale_space.php.

³⁴ Personal communication.

their dominant positions if a statistically significant number of diners were surveyed about each restaurant and if the list of preferred restaurants that resulted differed drastically from those preferred by the critics. Such a survey would be impossible to conduct. Moreover, it would be unnecessary because the machinations of the field of gastronomy prevent the possibility that the critics' homologies are so out of line with their publications' and their readers'. To a significant extent, what restaurant diners know about food they have learned from the dominant position-takers in the field. Polling consumers about taste may resonate with a certain American egalitarian predisposition of the sort De Tocqueville identified in his 19th century survey of American democracy. Moreover, inasmuch as it allows us to measure a mass opinion or consensus of taste, such polling may provide a compelling model for understanding collective tastes as a byproduct of discourse. When the Zagat surveys were completed in hard form, they were distributed in law firms, financial companies, and doctor's practices, that is, to affluent, educated, professional restaurant goers, who no doubt overlap with the *Times* and other traditional restaurant review readership demographics (see Table 2). Since they have been conducted online, the survey pool must have opened up somewhat, but the diners with opinions about a large number of restaurants of the type Zagat is looking for are going to be homologous with the consumers in the field of gastronomy nonetheless. Polling a group of diners about restaurants may seem like a good idea, but it will not necessarily lead anyone to wonderful new places to eat.

The Michelin Tribunal Arrives in America

An alternative to the Zagat plebiscite, both in physical form and in ideology, hit the book shelves four years ago when the first Michelin Guide to restaurants arrived in America. Ferguson describes the sort of tribunal that Michelin represents as "collective decrees, rendered anonymously by a corps of dedicated inspectors."³⁵ Although other restaurant tribunals had at one time held some sway in America, such as the Mobil Travel Guides and the AAA TourBook series, due to poor management, inconsistent ratings, antiquated criteria, and changes in the field of gastronomy, perhaps, over the last 20 years or so these rating programs lost favor among the dining public and lost respect in the eyes of professionals in the industry.³⁶ In New York City, these American tribunals were never paid much attention to anyway.³⁷ The arrival of Michelin was welcomed by many in the food world as a symbol of our restaurants having arrived on the global dining scene—the stamp of French approval still carrying weight in matters gastronomic despite our own flourishing field of gastronomy. But the actual ratings and reviews Michelin published in their first American guides left much of the dining public

³⁵ Ferguson, "Michelin in America," 51.

³⁶ In 1996 I was part of a team brought in to revamp the Mobil Travel Guide restaurant rating criteria to reflect changes in dining habits and to make the guides more relevant. For five years I supervised a team of restaurant inspectors, who, as part of the new criteria, ate in all of the four- and five-star restaurants and many of the three-stars, as well. The purchase of Mobil by Exxon in 1999 changed the company's commitment to and budget for the guides. ExxonMobil was not very interested in the guides but they did not want to lose the brand extension and recognition they afforded, either. Unwilling to provide the funding necessary to eat in all of the restaurants, in 2000 they sold the guides to a publisher, who returned to producing the ratings using check lists administered by inspectors who did not eat in the restaurants.

³⁷ An industry focus group of restaurateurs and chefs in New York conducted in 1996 when our team took over management of the Mobil Travel Guide rating program confirmed this.

questioning whether they understood American restaurants at all.

Michelin launched their foray into the American market with a 2006 guide to New York City's restaurants and hotels that went on sale in the fall of 2005. Guides to San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas followed in 2006, 2007, and 2008, respectively. With more than 300,000 copies sold annually in France, the 109-year-old Michelin guide is touted as the bestselling book in that country.³⁸ Even so, the current director Jean-Luc Naret, who has been responsible for a massive Michelin expansion into the U.S. and Asia (Tokyo now has more Michelin three-star restaurants than Paris), decided to alter the structure and format of the guide for the American market. The first change was to issue only city guides in the U.S., as opposed to one national book, which is how the guide has always appeared in France. (A separate guide to Paris restaurants and hotels has been published every three to five years since 1995.) The American guides also include extended editorial reviews, which have never appeared in the French edition. To make the guide more visually appealing, Michelin added illustrations, recipes, photos of the restaurants, and information about the cities' neighborhoods. As Naret told Ferguson, coming to the U.S. with the same style of book that has been sold historically in France would have been "total suicide."

As for the inspections, Naret maintains that the secretive criteria of the guides are applied uniformly around the world. The inspectors who produced the ratings for the first guide to New York were European;³⁹ subsequent inspections have been conducted by locals.⁴⁰ Naret says three

³⁸ Paul Hyman, "The Michelin Guide Renewed," *Slow* Oct./Dec. (2000): 120.

³⁹ Jean-Luc Naret, interviewed by Matt DeLucia, September 2005.

⁴⁰ ———, interviewed by Paolo, 20 October 2008.

stars in New York or Los Angeles or Tokyo or Hong Kong are the same as three stars in Paris. Others are not so sure. Writing for *Slate*, Mike Steinberger suggested that Michelin was more lenient in New York than in France both with their rules and their evaluations so as to be welcomed as friend, not foe.⁴¹ Before arriving in the U.S., Michelin had suffered some serious blows to its credibility. In 2004 there was the suicide of Michelin three-star chef Bernard L'Oiseau, which was initially attributed to the rumor that his restaurant would lose a star in an upcoming Michelin guide (it did not).⁴² In 2004, Pascal Rémy, a former Michelin inspector for 16 years, wrote a tell-all book that divulged some of the secrets of the Michelin inspection process, including the revelation that roughly one third of the starred restaurants are not inspected from year to year.⁴³ In 2005, Michelin was forced to recall their Benelux guide (to Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxemburg) due to an embarrassing error: the guide included a favorable review of the Belgian restaurant Ostend Queen, which did not open until after the guide went to press.⁴⁴ Finally, in recent years, several high profile chefs have handed back their stars, including Alain Senderens, who held the guide's top three-star rating at Lucas Carton in Paris for 28 years until he returned them in 2005,⁴⁵ and more recently, Olivier Roellinger of Maisons de Bricourt in Cancale, who gave up his three stars in 2008 after only having

⁴¹ Mike Steinberger, "Star Wars: Did Michelin Lower the Bar for New York?," *Slate* (2005), <http://www.slate.com/id/2129306/>.

⁴² Rudolph Chelminski, *The Perfectionist: Life and Death in Haute Cuisine* (New York: Gotham Books, 2005).

⁴³ See Pascal Rémy, *L'inspecteur se met à table* (Paris: Equateur, 2004).

⁴⁴ See David Rennie, "Michelin in Soup for Building Site Review," *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 January 2005.

⁴⁵ See Jean-Claude Ribaut, "Le cuisinier Alain Senderens renonce à ses trois étoiles au Guide Michelin," *Le Monde*, 22 May 2005.

received his third star two years prior.⁴⁶ The economic and personal pressure of maintaining the standards and meeting the expectations of a Michelin three-star dining experience bore too heavily on the shoulders of these chef-owners. In this environment, to arrive in New York and suggest to its citizens that their beloved restaurants were not all that special might have been suicide for Michelin, indeed.

Alas, the Michelin guides received a chilly reception in the U.S., anyway. Although New Yorkers were proud to have three three-star restaurants in their midst—Jean Georges, Le Bernardin, and Per Se; a fourth, Masa, was added in the 2009 guide—Michelin was criticized for their unrepresentative selection of restaurants overall, blatant mistakes, bland writing, and what might be best described as their Frenchness. Ferguson details some of the underlying reasons for these criticisms, such as our inherent distrust of things French, our dismissive attitude toward secretive tribunals, especially when it comes to personal matters like taste, and an inherent conservatism that results from the cumbersome process of inspections that is employed to produce the ratings. The 2009 New York guide includes only 565 restaurants compared to Zagat's 2,073. Even so, the book contains 29 of the 54 restaurants (54%) Bruni reviewed in the year prior to its publication (see Appendix B).

None of this is to say the Michelin has not had some impact on our shores. Even with four stars from the *New York Times* and a top score of 28 for food in Zagat, since receiving its three-star rating from Michelin business at

⁴⁶ See "Olivier Roellinger s'Arrête," *Le Monde*, 11 November 2008.

Le Bernardin has increased at least 15 percent.⁴⁷ Chef/owner Eric Ripert said he would not have thought an increase in business possible. Even so, the company's U.S. director of consumer marketing, Jackie Weiss, said sales of the U.S. guides to Americans have not met the company's expectations.⁴⁸ Without having penetrated as deeply into the American dining public's psyche as Zagat, the Michelin stars are still an important validation for some of the chefs who receive them. Several, including David Chang of the Momofuku restaurants, have been surprised by the positive reception they have had as they were welcomed into the Michelin "club."⁴⁹ Understandably, European chefs receive the most personal satisfaction from their Michelin ratings. Ripert said he cried when he got the phone call from Michelin. Leaving France he felt he had given up on any chance of receiving the recognition his mentors had so proudly displayed. Izabela Wojcik, who invites chefs to cook at the James Beard Foundation, was unsure if Michelin has had much of an impact on non European chefs cooking in America because of the sort of conservatism Ferguson mentioned:

I think Michelin adds to the American press that a chef and a restaurant already holds, an additional feather in their caps, but I feel like they are not pointing out restaurants that nobody knows about. They are not discovering anything that isn't already being thought about. They are not looking for new things.⁵⁰

Michelin has not penetrated the New York diners' psyche nearly as deeply as Zagat in part because it has not been around as long as Zagat, and

⁴⁷ Ferguson reported the increase to be 20 percent, but my figure comes from a personal communication with Eric Ripert in 2007.

⁴⁸ From a personal communication in 2008 during which we discussed the implementation of a new program to generate interest among Americans for the guides. Weiss has since left the company.

⁴⁹ Personal communication.

⁵⁰ Wojcik interview, 14 December 2008.

perhaps also because a plebiscite jibes better with the American mentality than a tribunal, as Ferguson proposes. Neither has Michelin challenged the structure of the field of gastronomy as some expected it might. My research suggests that Michelin's shortcomings in this regard have little to do with the lack of a national American cuisine. In the 116 years that Michelin has been rating restaurants in France, what has passed as French cuisine has changed dramatically. As but one example, the Nouvelle Cuisine of the 1970s turned French cuisine on its *tête*. Two studies of the nature of the signature dishes published in the French Michelin guide along with the restaurant ratings have shown how in the midst of the creativity and culinary turmoil wrought by Nouvelle Cuisine, both the guide and the French field of gastronomy marshaled on.⁵¹ Rao et al. concluded that even powerful, conservative "critics" like Michelin, who prefer categories to stay put, do not have the power to keep boundaries in place,⁵² which suggests the field makes culinary categories, not the other way around.

What explains then why the four restaurants to garner Michelin's top three-star rating had already received the *New York Times's* top four-star rating? Three of them are French, which might say something about why the Michelin inspectors liked them so much. But the fourth one is Japanese. Here again is evidence of the power of the field of gastronomy to shape aesthetic judgments about food. By using local inspectors, whom Naret said have an

⁵¹ See Claude Fischler, "The Michelin Galaxy: Nouvelle Cuisine, Three-Star Restaurants, and the Culinary Revolution," *The Journal of Gastronomy* 6, no. 2 (1990), and Hayagreeva Rao, Philippe Monin, and Rodolphe Durand, "Border Crossing: Bricolage and the Erosion of Categorical Boundaries in French Gastronomy," *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 6 (2005).

⁵² Rao, Monin, and Durand, "Border Crossing: Bricolage and the Erosion of Categorical Boundaries in French Gastronomy," 989.

average of five years experience in the business before they are hired,⁵³ Michelin is using people to judge restaurants who have similar predispositions and have been exposed to the same discourse about aesthetic judgments about food as other participants in the field of gastronomy. When selecting the first European inspectors to be dispatched in New York, Naret could have picked those with the most conservative French gastronomic sensibilities to assert a new consensus of taste. Instead, he chose those with tastes most in line with the American field of gastronomy. As he described the rationale behind the selection and training process:

I selected them personally, based on my tour with them, so I could choose the ones with the most open eyes in order to be able to see the different kinds of restaurants and the different types of cuisine that you have in New York, because you have everything here. It's very important for our people to know that we're not a French company rating French restaurants; we're an international company writing about international restaurants and hotels.⁵⁴

Regardless of whether Michelin's ratings are similar to the *Times's* ratings, which are similar to Zagat's ratings, because Michelin did not want to offend American culinary sensibilities by serving up a completely new list of top restaurants, or because the Michelin inspectors did their work independently and arrived at the same conclusions, the field of cultural production about food, that is, the field of gastronomy, was at work. By codifying and communicating information about aesthetic judgments about food, it produces consensus about what is generally considered good, perhaps even what is allowed to be good. This conclusion may not be surprising among professionals working in the field, or even among a self-selecting group of

⁵³ Naret interview, September 2005.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

diners who complete a survey, but as the research presented in the next section shows, the similarity of opinion exists in these early stages of the egalitarian world of online restaurant reviewing, as well.

The Internet and the Potential of Online Reviewing to Reshape the Field of Gastronomy

The Internet is the quickest medium to react to new things and due in part to this timeliness and flexibility, it may become the most important influence on restaurant reviewing since the *New York Times* began publishing weekly reviews in 1963. Even more egalitarian than Zagat and certainly more up to date, food blogs, such as eater.com, seriouseats.com, and Grub Street (the food blog of *New York* magazine), and reader-comment-packed Web sites, such as yelp.com, citysearch.com, and menupages.com, provide information on an incredible number and array of restaurants and, more to the point of their success, allow just about anyone with access to a computer the ability to review them. On December 15, 2008, yelp.com listed 22,911 restaurants in New York's five boroughs, with 10,873 restaurants in Manhattan alone. They were scattered across 76 food categories, ranging from street carts to delis to Japanese sushi bars to fine French dining. Menupages.com's database for New York City includes 6,825 restaurants (complete with full, printable menus) divided into 94 searchable categories.⁵⁵ This is a staggering amount of information.

Unable to ascertain the total number of New York restaurants on the citysearch.com Web site by poking around myself, I sent an e-mail to the

⁵⁵ If you add up the actual number of restaurants in each category, you get 12,227, but that's because some restaurants are listed in more than one category.

Web site's new senior editor in charge of restaurants, Josh Ozersky, who was recently hired away from his job as the editorial director of Grub Street. Given the implausibly large numbers on the other Web sites, I found Ozersky's response telling, "I've been asking around and nobody is sure. Several thousand at the very least..."

It is also difficult to get a handle on how many people are using these Web sites. The *New York Times* reported that in July 2008, yelp.com had 4.76 million unique visitors, compared to zagat.com's 384,000.⁵⁶ Three months later the *Times* reported yelp.com had 15 million monthly visitors.⁵⁷ This discrepancy illustrates the consensus in the online world that the actual numbers of unique visitors to any Web site are difficult to tabulate and are often inaccurately cited, even by the most respected tracking services. But it is still possible to glean trends in usage from aggregate data. A simple Google Trends comparison of unique daily visitors to citysearch.com, zagat.com, menupages.com, and yelp.com over the last year (see Appendix C) reveals that traffic to citysearch.com is decreasing while traffic to zagat.com and menupages.com remains low but constant. Only traffic to yelp.com has increased substantially during this period, and the increase shows no signs of abating. Not surprisingly, people in the restaurant industry are beginning to pay attention to these online reviewers. Last year, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on the increased seriousness with which restaurants are handling food bloggers, yelpers, and other online critics, treating them to free meals,

⁵⁶ Stross, "How Many Reviewers Should be in the Kitchen." Keep in mind that Zagat's Web site requires a paid subscription. The minimum fee for access to ratings and reviews as of December 2008 was \$4.95 per month.

⁵⁷ Donald G. McNeil Jr., "Eat and Tell: How do Yelp.com Reviews Get their Message Across? Volume," *New York Times*, 5 November 2008.

organizing parties for them, and otherwise trying to engage them in the public-relations strategies that keep restaurants in good favor with other media and opinion makers.⁵⁸ Clearly something important in the realm of restaurant reviewing is happening online.

To ascertain trends in this online reviewing world, I spent hours poring over reviews and comments about restaurants posted on various food blogs and Web sites. What I found interesting about them is how many of the online conversations about restaurants that have been reviewed in other media seem to resonate with and sometimes directly refer to what the reviewers in the other media have said. To examine how the information one can glean from these sounding boards is different from other sources, I looked closely at online reviews posted for two restaurants in particular, Momofuku Ssäm Bar and Ago Ristorante, the former, universally beloved by the press, and the latter, universally panned. Momofuku Ssäm Bar is a small, East Village, Asian-inspired restaurant that turned chef/owner David Chang into one of the most famous chefs in the country practically overnight, in part, because of its universal critical acclaim.⁵⁹ Bruni liked Momofuku Ssäm Bar very much when he rated it two stars in his first review of the restaurant in 2007, writing that Chang “has proven himself one of this city's brightest culinary talents.”⁶⁰ His enthusiasm continued to grow to the point that he rereviewed it 19 months later, giving the loud, casual, downtown restaurant a

⁵⁸ Katy McLaughlin, "The Price of a Four-Star Rating," *Wall Street Journal*, 6 October 2007.

⁵⁹ An 8,000-plus word profile in *The New Yorker* chronicled Chang's speedy rise. See Larissa Macfarquhar, "Chef on the Edge," *The New Yorker* 2008.

⁶⁰ Frank Bruni, review of Momofuku Ssäm Bar, *New York Times*, 21 February 2007, Dining In, Dining Out section.

third star.⁶¹ The title of Platt's review in *New York* summed up his opinion of the place: "Ssäm Kind of Wonderful."⁶² Ago Ristorante, on the other hand, is an Italian trattoria with a high profile because of Robert DeNiro's involvement. Celebrity-hungry New Yorkers had high expectations because of the restaurant's successful outposts in Los Angeles and Miami, which are popular with the Hollywood set. When Ago finally opened in New York, the critics hated it. Bruni gave it a rare "poor" rating, the lowest the paper allows. *New York* has ignored it entirely.

Because yelp.com is the most popular review-oriented Web site these days, I began my online research there (see Table 5). Of the 209 reviews of Momofuku Ssäm Bar posted on yelp.com on December 12, 2008, 49 were negative. Of these negative reviews, there were two general recurring complaints about the food. One was typical of that expressed by Peter A., "Good food, but severely overrated." The others, echoed Linda L., "If you are looking for good Korean food, this isn't the place for you."⁶³ A third category of complaints focused on the uncomfortable seats. The remaining 169 reviews were overwhelmingly positive.⁶⁴ Fully one third of the reviews, both negative

⁶¹ ———, review of Momofuku Ssäm Bar, *New York Times*, 3 December 2008, Dining In, Dining Out section.

⁶² Adam Platt, review of Momofuku Ssäm Bar, *New York*, 2 April 2007.

⁶³ Although Chang is Korean and there are some recognizable Korean influences on the menu, such as kimchee, the fact that the restaurant has never billed itself as Korean says to me most of these reviews are a reaction to yelp.com having categorized the restaurant as Korean in its database.

⁶⁴ The amateur nature of online reviews can make them difficult to code. Without the benefit of professional editing, the opinions can seem scattered. Luckily most conclude with a recommendation to go to the restaurant or not. For my purposes, if a review ultimately recommended the restaurant or suggested the reviewer would return for any positive reason, the review was counted as positive. If the reviewer did not recommend the restaurant or said he or she would not return, it was counted as negative. To give the restaurants

and positive, referred in a direct or indirect way to other reviews, either by mentioning “the hype” about the restaurant, commenting that some part of the experience was “overrated,” or noting awards and other reviewers’ comments. Of the 10 yelp.com reviews posted for Ago Ristorante on the same day, four were positive and six were negative. Among the negatives, Tony O. wrote “This place is a shithole” with “no redeeming qualities.” Savant S. concurred, adding “The critic’s scorn is well deserved.” Among the fans, Amme H. wrote, “This is some of the best food I’ve ever had.” And Jessica D. adds “I’m so happy this restaurant is here in New York.”

Other user-generated content Web sites reflected a similar distribution (also compiled on Table 5). On menupages.com, 48 reviews for Momofuku Ssäm Bar were posted, 22 negative and 26 positive. Nine reviews of Ago Ristorante were posted there, three positive, six negative. The menupages.com comments expressed similar opinions, both positive and negative, as those that were expressed on yelp.com, although the menupages.com complaints about Momofuku Ssäm Bar had a higher proportion of “overrated” comments than those on yelp.com. On citysearch.com, Momofuku Ssäm Bar received a positive editorial review by Erin Behan, who said the food at night “sizzles,” and 35 reader reviews, 20 of which were quite negative, mostly complaining about how the restaurant did not live up to its hype and the attitude of the service. Citysearch.com had no editorial review of Ago and five reader posts, three very positive, two very

the benefit of the doubt, ambivalent reviews were counted as positive rather than neutral.

Table 5

A Comparison of Online Reviews for Momofuku Ssäm Bar and Ago Ristorante

Restaurant	Web Site	Positive Reviews ^b (%)	Negative Reviews ^b (%)	Refer to Others ^a (%)	Do not Refer (%)	Final Star Rating
Momofuku Ssäm Bar	yelp	160 (77)	49 (23)	69 (33)	140 (67)	4
	menupages	22 (49)	26 (51)	21 (44)	27 (56)	3 1/2
	citysearch	15 (43)	20 (57)	17 (49)	18 (51)	4 1/2
Ago Ristorante	yelp	4 (40)	6 (60)	4 (40)	6 (60)	3
	menupages	3 (33)	6 (67)	2 (22)	7 (78)	3 1/2
	citysearch	2 (40)	3 (60)	2 (40)	3 (60)	4 1/2

Note: The final tally of reviews was conducted on December 15, 2008.

^a A review was considered to refer to other reviews if it contained words or phrases such as “hype,” “overrated,” “famous,” “award winning,” “heard about,” “others love,” or similarly referential language. ^b If a review ultimately recommended the restaurant or suggested the reviewer would return for any positive reason, the review was counted as positive. If the reviewer did not recommend the restaurant or said he or she would not return, it was counted as negative. To give the restaurants the benefit of the doubt, ambivalent reviews were counted as positive rather than neutral. For additional information categorization, see footnote 61.

negative. Of the positive Ago reviews, one was signed by a name that also appeared in the comment section of *New York’s* restaurant guide, suggesting to me that they were generated by the restaurant.

The only reviewer’s name that appears in the Momofuku postings is Bruni’s. Among Ssäm Bar’s yelp.com reviewers there are those who agree with Bruni, such as Jessica S., who wrote, “Bruni was right, bread and butter was worth it,” and K.P. from New York, who took Bruni’s advice to order the extravagant, \$200 whole, roasted pork shoulder, the Bo Ssäm, which has a starring role in 18 of the yelp.com reviews: “I thought Bruni was

exaggerating...but it is so worth getting 12 of your closest friends.” Naturally, some yelp.com reviewers disagree with Bruni, too, such as Beth O. from New York, who said flat out, “I just want to say: Frank Bruni, you were way off.” The only other traditional media specifically referred to in the reviews were national magazines that had touted Chang, such as *The New Yorker* and *GQ*, but the incidence was much lower and none of their reviewers were mentioned by name. Bruni’s influence on these reviews can also be seen in what people order, which often closely follows the dishes he recommends. Although Mary B. does not refer to Bruni by name, everything she ordered was highlighted in the list of recommended dishes that accompanied his most recent review, which was published five days before she posted her own thoughts online: “Everything I tasted was amazing: the pork buns, the banh mi, the duck with the killer spaetzle, the pork shoulder steak. But I can't stop thinking about the brussels sprouts. I've never had anything like them.” Both of Bruni’s reviews gave a very favorable mention and dedicated several lines to the Bo Ssam, the extravagant, \$200 pork shoulder that feeds six to ten people or more.

The structure of the content of these online reviews brings Alan Warde’s “antinomies of taste” to mind.⁶⁵ Patterns in the arguments in the reviews, especially those that refer to other reviews, resonate with the “longstanding structural oppositions” based on cultural values that Warde identified in the recipe headnotes in British women’s magazines. These antinomies are namely, novelty and tradition, health and indulgence, economy and extravagance, and care and convenience. In the Momofuku Ssäm Bar

⁶⁵ Warde, *Consumption, Food & Taste*, 97.

example, the first antinomy, novelty and tradition, is reflected in the comments of the type “there is better Korean food available elsewhere” and “people can find similar pork buns like the ones Chang is famous for all over Chinatown.” The tension between economy and extravagance are typified in the reviews that mention value, some reviewers considering the restaurant a great deal and others finding it a total rip off. Health and indulgence are reflected in the reviews that mention the pervasiveness of pork on the menu and the artery-clogging qualities of the whole, roasted pork shoulder that’s the centerpiece of the Bo Ssäm, which is the focal point of almost 10% of Momofuku Ssäm Bar’s online reviews. Care and convenience appear in the comments about service speed and attentiveness, and even to some extent in the complaints about the comfort of the chairs. The prevalence in these online reviews of these antinomies of taste, which Warde shows are used as consumer-oriented narrative tropes in much food writing, suggest the formation of opinions about restaurants, at least when they are written, is shaped by models from other food media.

The Purpose of Online Reviews

Whether anyone will ever read 200-plus reviews of any restaurant before making a decision about whether or not to eat there is doubtful, but some possible uses of this information have implications for structural relationships in the field of gastronomy. With unlimited space, yelp.com reviewers tend to provide details of what they ordered and how they were treated so it seems fairly certain that they have eaten in the restaurants they are writing about. This differentiates these online reviews from Zagat, whose detractors have questioned this very issue. Read carefully, the details provided

can also paint a picture about what to expect from a dining experience beside the actual subjective opinion and the rating of the reviewer. Wojcik said she sometimes looked at online reviews to get a sense of a chef's style of cooking and his positioning in the public before she extended an invitation to cook at the James Beard House. This level of detail is another advantage over Zagat. The vast number of restaurants covered and all of the online tools provided (such as the possibility of mapping locations, linking to website, and others) further sets yelp.com apart. Zagat does have a website, but it is only available to paid subscribers and the information it contains is only slightly broader and deeper than what is in the printed guides. If the credibility and utility of the information on yelp.com is perceived to be higher than other established guides, especially those generated by user surveys, yelp.com may pose a serious challenge to their viability. The traffic data in Appendix C supports the suggestion that this challenge is underway. The inability of the Zagats to find a buyer for their publishing enterprise, even before the current economic downturn, may speak to the challenges posed to their position in the field of gastronomy.

My analysis of yelp.com data for these two restaurants also supports Shrum's finding in his study of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival that "the effect of reviews is more through visibility provided than through evaluations tendered."⁶⁶ The dizzying thumbs-up, thumbs down world of online reviewing can be difficult to grasp, even with the handy ratings averages and neat graphs of distributions the Web sites often provide. But the volume of reviews, the actual number of people motivated to comment on a restaurant, when the

⁶⁶ Shrum, "Critics and Publics: Cultural Mediation in Highbrow and Popular Performing Arts," 367.

length of time the restaurant has been open and its number of seats is taken into account, appears to tell you something about the overall desirability of the dining experience. Comparing Momofuku's 209 reviews (40 seats, 2 1/2 years old) to Ago's 10 (145 seats, 11 months old) is helpful. Such a comparison also indicates that the drive to review a restaurant online (as well as to try it in the first place) may be the product of the amount of discourse about the restaurant in the field of gastronomy.

Evidence suggests that yelp.com understands that, faced with so many opinions, it may help users to be able to know something more about the people posting reviews. The *Times* reported the company has created the Yelp Elite, a group of reviewers identified by a complex algorithm that takes into account the volume of their review output and the popularity of their reviews, among other factors.⁶⁷ These elite reviewers must post using their first name and last initial and they must have bios with photos on the site. Their elite status is indicated next to their picture, which appears with their reviews. This sort of monitoring helps guard against restaurants promoting themselves by posting effusive reviews, a phenomenon so common online and so obvious sometimes that eater.com runs a regular feature called "Adventures in Shilling," in which they nab restaurants they believe have blatantly posted positive reviews about themselves, especially if those restaurants have been reviewed negatively in the traditional press. While signaling that all reviewers are not equal by creating an elite squad seems contrary to the egalitarian nature that has made these Web sites popular in the first place, it is an admission that there is only so much information one hungry person can

⁶⁷ McNeil Jr., "Eat and Tell: How do Yelp.com Reviews Get their Message Across? Volume."

digest before dinner. It also poses a more concerted threat to the dominance of traditional reviewers in the field. By creating identities for themselves online and building followings for their reviews, these elite yelpers have the potential to influence ever-larger groups of people. Some elite reviewers have posted as many as 900 reviews.⁶⁸ As noted, restaurant publicists are already courting this group. Without the weight of established institutions behind them and an assurance of journalist ethics they may not be able to take the sort of positions occupied by traditional reviewers. But the potential is certainly there.

Online review websites may also allow for certain under-the-radar restaurants and chefs to achieve higher degrees of consecration in the field. As Wojcik told me, “There are so many restaurants I talk to who are just waiting, *waiting* for somebody to have an opinion about them, and hoping that it’s going to be good.”⁶⁹ With space for only 52 or so full-fledged reviews in a weekly newspaper food section or magazine, the vast majority of the city’s 20,000-plus restaurants do not stand a chance of entering the public discourse about restaurants, and that’s in New York where there are more media outlets for reviews than in any other city in the country.⁷⁰ Even if you include listings, round-ups and other possible mentions—most of which cover the same media-cozy restaurants, anyway—you do not get very deep into the city’s total dining landscape. With 2,000-plus restaurants, the New York Zagat guide still only captures data on a fraction of the restaurants you might

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Wojcik interview, 14 December 2008.

⁷⁰ In an attempt to get more restaurants into the Wednesday “Dining In, Dining Out” section, in 2008 *New York Times* food editor Pete Wells turned the weekly “\$25 and Under” review into “Dining Briefs,” which includes two or three capsule reviews each week.

stumble into. Online, every restaurant has a chance of being reviewed. And as being first to review a place counts toward one's elite status on Yelp, the motivation is to find as many unreviewed places as one can.

Restaurants can also use these online forums to respond to or counteract what has been written about them in the press. Historically, there were very few channels a restaurant could use to respond to a critic. Many restaurateurs and publicists contact critics after their restaurants have been reviewed to alert them of changes made in response to their criticisms. Bruni mentioned that early in his tenure he was puzzled by this follow-up because his limited space and the pressure on him to review new restaurants meant he would likely never be able to return.⁷¹ The advent of the *Times's* Diner's Journal blog means Bruni may now, in fact, be able to mention a significant change at a restaurant without having to use up column inches in the printed paper. And it also means that restaurants can respond by posting comments on the *Times's* blog themselves. In 2007, restaurateur Jeffrey Chodorow, took out a full-page, \$40,000 ad to print a letter in response to Bruni's unfavorable review of his Kobe Club steakhouse.⁷² Chodorow attacked Bruni, and his predecessor, Grimes, for not having any background in food—an attack, moreover, on the people who hired them. Not many restaurateurs can afford such an extravagant rebuttal. Voicing an opinion online does not qualify as shilling if posters identify themselves honestly. In fact, chefs have begun to monitor blogs, challenging criticisms they deem false or spurious by posting

⁷¹ Personal communication. Somehow he did manage to get back to Momofuku Ssäm Bar, however.

⁷² Frank Bruni, review of Kobe Club, *New York Times*, 7 February 2007, Dining In, Dining Out section. Chodorow's ad appeared two weeks later, on February 21, page F9.

their own responses and occasionally engaging their online critics in extended online conversations.⁷³

From the online reviewer's perspective, having a chance to state opinions and react to others allows diners the satisfaction of participating in the discourse about restaurants more fully than just by spending their money, though ultimately it is the potential effect on business that these online reviews have that has made the industry pay attention. This participation shifts the power dynamic between the media, the restaurant, and the diner, but it has not yet knocked out traditional critics from their dominant positions in the field. While chefs and restaurateurs still seek the consecration of the established reviewers, they also appreciate the feedback from their clientele. Despite having been anointed by the media as a chef who can do no wrong, David Chang and his crew at Momofuku read their online reviews regularly and address the complaints and criticisms they consider valid.⁷⁴ The fact that so many of the online reviews refer to other reviews directly or in the way they present their arguments, reinforces the power of consecration of the other media by allowing them to shape the discourse. In a sense, there is a classic Bourdieuvian exchange of power, consecration for the potential to generate business.

Posting reviews online also helps build communities of restaurant goers that have the potential to affect dining decisions in profound ways. As

⁷³ Personal communication with Andrew Carmellini. In fact one day passing through the James Beard House kitchen I overheard the brigade from Quince restaurant in San Francisco discussing an exchange on Carmellini's blog between the chef and the poster of a negative comment about an unsatisfying experience in his restaurant.

⁷⁴ Personal communication with Andrew Burman, who worked in the kitchen at Momofuku Ko for three months.

the reviewing studies by Jolson and Bushman and West and Broniarczyk have shown, opinions from friends may count for as much or more than opinions from traditional critics when making restaurant dining decisions. Their findings imply that as online communities grow, the number of “friends” potentially influencing any one diner’s decision could increase dramatically. Although online reviews still appear to be shaped by opinions presented in other media first, at least as the online reviewers react to the opinions expressed by critics in traditional media, it may only be a matter of time before this dynamic changes and more people begin listening to what their online friends have to say. Online reviewers skew younger because of the nature of the medium. According to Yelp, 81 percent of its reviewers are under 40.⁷⁵ Younger people, more comfortable with electronic media, put more trust in online information and relationships. Ultimately, engaging a younger audience in the passionate discourse about restaurants one finds online may help to sustain restaurant going as a part of urban New York City life in the future. It will certainly keep the field of gastronomy vibrant.

A Bifurcation of Reviews In Print and Online

In the previous chapter we saw how, since Reichl and Bruni, the reviewer’s posture at the *Times* has moved away from the educative connoisseur of Claiborne’s day and the consumer advocate of Sheraton’s, to a broader, more culturally resonant, more entertaining one. Bruni’s rationale for his part in this transition is that his readership is increasingly national and international—due to the paper’s focus and the popular *Times* Web site—and

⁷⁵ Quoted in McNeil Jr., “Eat and Tell: How do Yelp.com Reviews Get their Message Across? Volume.”

therefore, most of his readers are not going to be eating in the restaurants he is writing about. In this chapter we've seen how, since about the same time, popularity of user-generated restaurant rating systems, whether in the form of the Zagat guides or online, have grown. These shifts in emphasis and form have resulted in an interesting and important bifurcation of two important functions of the restaurant review that were traditionally united in each review.

The primary function of restaurant reviews is to provide information and details about restaurants—such as address, hours, menu, price, recommended dishes, and décor—to help people decide where to eat. The analysis in this chapter suggests this function may be moving online. The common refrain about Zagat among people in the food business who felt they knew better than to trust the ratings has always been that it was the best restaurant phone book. Web sites, such as citysearch.com, menupages.com, and yelp.com, which contain so much more information about so many more restaurants are much better phone books. There is no limit to their potential for breadth, depth, and timeliness of the information they contain. No printed publication, no organization that is not solely devoted to gathering restaurant data and publishing it immediately online, will ever be able to compete.

The second function reviews serve is to shape the discourse about restaurants. This is the essence of gastronomy. Since Grimod's first *Almanach*, reviews have provided insight into and context for the curious world of public dining. They have transmitted culturally coded aesthetic judgments about food and given them a cultural resonance and flair that made them stick. The *Times* reviews appear to be less concerned with the service function and more

concerned with the gastronomic function thatn they once were. Given the challenges facing the fields of gastronomy and journalism described in this chapter, this reorientation may help to keep the *Times* review in the dominant position it has held for so long.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: THE ENDURING INFLUENCE OF THE *NEW YORK TIMES*, THE SHAPE OF THE AMERICAN FIELD OF GASTRONOMY, AND A TASTE FOR AMERICAN CUISINE

Throughout this dissertation I have attempted to demonstrate how restaurant reviews influence taste by stimulating restaurant discourse which in turn influences food preferences via complex sociocultural mechanisms operating in the field of gastronomy. In Chapter I, I used the example of America's newfound taste for sushi to show how matters of aesthetic judgment in the realm of food can have far-reaching, even global ramifications, often in unexpected realms. Few people waiting on line for the Jewish appetizing counter at Barney Greengrass on Manhattan's Upper West Side realize that the price of their smoked sablefish has risen because of a newfound taste for Japanese food at fancy restaurants downtown. In this introductory chapter I also emphasized the importance of writing in the transformation of food from a biological necessity to a cultural product and the role restaurant reviews have played historically in that process.

In Chapter II, I presented theories of taste from various disciplines to show how tastes for food, whether personal or collective, sensory or psychological, are susceptible to myriad influences and are malleable, even though to most people they seem ingrained. Across the board, evidence shows that if you change the philosophical, sociocultural, or physical environment, you change the way we perceive and judge the food we eat.

In Chapter III, I presented Bourdieu's theory of cultural production as a model for understanding how cultural critics and discourse operate in the social sphere. Using this theory, I asserted that, as in France, a field of gastronomy exists in America, and I situated this field in relationship to the field of journalism and the subfield of cultural criticism. I used theories about mass opinion to suggest that within the framework of cultural production, like mass opinions, collective tastes are shaped from the top down, that is from those in the field of gastronomy with the most social and cultural capital.

In Chapter IV, I traced the evolution of the field of gastronomy in America, focusing on restaurant reviewers and their reviews. During the 1950s and 1960s, the field of gastronomy coalesced around Craig Claiborne and his reviews in the *New York Times*. Claiborne's journalistic principles and his focus on food established the restaurant review as an effective medium for the articulation and dissemination of aesthetic opinions about food that were necessary for a field of gastronomy to flourish. Reflecting social movements and changing values, as well as changes in the fields of gastronomy and journalism, New York's restaurant critics mediated between producers, with their growing culinary aspirations, and consumers, with their growing interests in food and restaurants.

In Chapter V, I considered recent challenges to the structure of the field of gastronomy with the potential to change its shape and/or destabilize the dominance of the critics at the *New York Times*. The Zagat Survey polled newly minted diner-reviewers about their favorite places to eat, and in so doing invited more people to participate directly in the production of aesthetic judgments about food. Even with this increased participation, my

research showed that the results of the annual survey tend toward the opinions expressed in other media. Michelin's panel of experts promised a new standard of excellence, but instead they, too, proffered a familiar ranking of restaurants. User-review Web sites offer direct access to the public sphere for anyone with a computer connected to the Internet and an opinion about where to eat. The flexibility and vastness of this new medium may one day pose a serious shift in the structure of the field of gastronomy, but for the time being, my research showed that online reviews also appear to be shaped by the opinions of traditional reviewers. What the popularity of these online reviews and the changes in orientation of the reviewers at the *Times* do suggest is that a bifurcation of reviewing functions is occurring, with serviceable information about restaurants migrating online and gastronomic discourse staying put in the traditional media.

The Enduring Influence of the *New York Times* on the Field of Gastronomy in America

My analysis of the ratings in Zagat, the reviews in Michelin, and the online postings about restaurants on various Web sites has shown that, although each outlet boasts a unique procedure, a particular package, and a substantial audience, the overall conversation about which are the best restaurants and decisions about where to dine are still primarily influenced by the traditional critics, especially those at the *New York Times*. This influence is felt by restaurants in New York City, certainly, but also increasingly by restaurants across the country, especially as the paper's national and online focus grows. While conducting research for their book on restaurant reviewing, Dornenburg and Page expected to hear from the chefs they

interviewed that their local city papers had the strongest impact on business. “However, without exception, it was the *New York Times* that top chefs from coast to coast cited.”¹ Having spoken to many of the chefs and owners whose restaurants made it onto Frank Bruni’s list of the ten most interesting places to eat in America outside New York City,² the James Beard Foundation’s Izabela Wojcik reported that the restaurants were overwhelmed by the response Bruni’s article generated.³

In New York, the paper’s power to consecrate is, as always, robust. New York based chef Andrew Carmellini said he believed that the *Times* review carried a legitimacy that other reviews did not.⁴ Irene Daria, who chronicled the daily life of André Soltner, the chef/owner of Lutèce, which for several decades had been considered the best French restaurant in the country, emphasized how much Bryan Miller’s *Times* review toward the end of Soltner’s career meant to the celebrated chef. Daria wrote:

André worried about that review. “What if the *Times* gives us three stars, two, or even one?” he thought. If that happened, he says, he would ask himself, “Should I continue or should I not continue? Being in this business for forty-three years, Lutèce for thirty-one years, I think this question would [arise] in my mind. And even maybe would be a reason to give up, to throw in the sponge.”⁵

Almost a decade later, Leslie Brenner chronicled the year-long effort at Restaurant Daniel to reclaim its fourth star from then critic William Grimes.⁶

¹ Dornenburg and Page, *Dining Out: Secrets from America's Leading Critics, Chefs, and Restaurateurs*, 131.

² Bruni, "Coast to Coast, Restaurants that Count."

³ Wojcik interview, 14 December 2008.

⁴ Personal communication.

⁵ Daria, *Lutèce: A Day in the Life of America's Greatest Restaurant*, xviii.

⁶ Leslie Brenner, *The Fourth Star: Dispatches from Inside Daniel Boulud's Celebrated New York Restaurant*, 1st ed. (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2002).

According to one estimate, some 20 cooks were sacrificed in the process.⁷ In a confessional essay about what happens when a critic is in his restaurant, Dan Barber, chef/owner of Blue Hill and Blue Hill at Stone Barns, called the *Times* critic “the only reviewer who really matters.”⁸ Speaking for chefs both in New York and across the rest of the country, Wojcik concurred, “That’s the one that really counts. In their mind’s that’s the approval chefs seek, the most meaningful career-wise.”⁹ Bruni has his own perspective on the importance of his job in the field:

I keep waiting to see the ostensibly diminished influence of the print medium and the ostensibly diminished influence of the *New York Times*. I keep waiting to see it reflected in the degree to which restaurants seem helped, hurt, or care about the star ratings and I don’t get the sense they care any less. If they ever went to greater lengths and got their pants in tighter wads than they do now, which is what I see, I just can’t imagine that’s possible.¹⁰

The dramatic arc of a recent HBO documentary about the move of Sirio Maccioni’s celebrated Le Cirque restaurant to a new location was built almost entirely on the anticipation of Bruni’s *Times* review.¹¹ While no chef in America to my knowledge has committed suicide as a result of a bad review—a phenomenon that is not undocumented in France¹²—the power of the *New*

⁷ Ibid., 306.

⁸ Dan Barber, “The Mouth That Matters,” *Gourmet*, October 2007, 82.

⁹ Wojcik interview, 14 December 2008.

¹⁰ Bruni interview, 5 December 2007.

¹¹ See Andrew Rossi, “Le Cirque: A Table in Heaven,” (HBO), produced by Andrew Rossi, Charles Marquardt, and Kate Novack, 2007 (aired 29 December 2008). Bruni gave the restaurant a devastating two stars. See Frank Bruni, review of Le Cirque, *New York Times*, 19 July 2006, Dining In, Dining Out section, 1

¹² Michelin three-star chef Bernard Loiseau committed suicide on February 24, 2003, allegedly because of a downgraded rating in France’s Gault Millau restaurant guide and the rumor that he was about to lose one of his three Michelin stars. France’s most respected chef, Paul Bocuse, famously blamed Gault Millau for his colleague’s death. Of course, the reality was more

York Times review to consecrate a chef's career remains great.

Despite chefs' feverish pursuit of acknowledgment from the *Times* and Bruni's belief to the contrary, some people in the restaurant business in New York City say they have noticed a decrease in the immediate effect on business a *Times* review generates. According to Steve Hall, founder and president of the New York based restaurant public relations firm, The Hall Company:

I think that people get their news from so many different sources these days that is it very possible to survive with a one star or no review from the *Times*. The satisfactory or poor review is still very hard to get over. While [the *Times*] still has an impact, and is still important for future press, it nowhere near has the same importance as in the past and it doesn't guarantee longevity anymore.

To reconcile these phenomena, the increased value placed on consecration in the *Times* (real or perceived) and the decreased effect on business a *Times* review has (real or perceived), it helps to think in terms of structural changes in both the fields gastronomy and journalism. On the most basic level, the loss of some historically important outlets for reviews has concentrated power in those that remain. As previously noted, *Gourmet* magazine, which Dornenburg and Page's subjects considered "a good restaurant filler,"¹³ stopped publishing regular monthly restaurant reviews in 2006 after a 64-year run. The *New York Post* decided reviews were "over" in 2005. The rationale provided by both of

complicated than that, but the relationship between the rating and his suicide ricocheted around the world. The story was carried in newspapers around the world, see Craig S. Smith, "Bitterness Follows French Chef's Death: Country Considers Its Food Critics," *New York Times* 2003, Jacques Buob, "La Disparition tragique du chef Bernard Loiseau," *Le Monde*, 26 February 2003., The tragedy was also documented in a book; see Chelminski, *The Perfectionist: Life and Death in Haute Cuisine*..

¹³ Dornenburg and Page, *Dining Out: Secrets from America's Leading Critics, Chefs, and Restaurateurs*, 132.

these outlets pinned their decisions on the popularity of new electronic media, such as the Web sites and blogs discussed above. According to one statistic from Technorati, an online web traffic monitoring service, in 2007 there were 21,000 food blogs.¹⁴ As *Gourmet* editor-in-chief and former *New York Times* restaurant critic Ruth Reichl explained to Steven Shaw during an online interview late in 2005 (just as she must have been making the decision to stop printing restaurant reviews in her magazine):

The main point, I think, is that in this time of blogs, of eGullets, etc., ordinary reviews just seem so old-fashioned. There are so many other ways to get information that is more up to date. What that means is that a publication has to recognize what exactly it can provide to its readers with this antique form. And I think it comes down to good writing, some fun, an opinion. Certainly not the Voice of God.¹⁵

Whether Reichl's rationale tells the full story at *Gourmet* is debatable. With a median age today of 49.4 in 2008 (see Table 2) and one that historically has tracked much higher, the *Gourmet* reader is not quite the right demographic for blogs and user-generated-content Web sites (recall that 81% of yelpers are under 40). During his interview, Alan Richman contradicted Reichl's explanation about why food magazine have stopped printing reviews. Echoing Marchetti's observations about the cooption of content by media organizations in the realm of sports,¹⁶ Richman explained:

You know my theory on why magazines aren't doing reviews anymore? They all want the chefs to do their stuff. They have to make nice to the chefs. They make goodie, goodie to them. There is so much to be gained by having the chef on the cover and doing his recipes and doing a column for them. I think it's quite clear that they just don't want to take a chance on ever hurting the feelings of a chef.¹⁷

¹⁴ Quoted in McLaughlin, "The Price of a Four-Star Rating."

¹⁵ Ruth Reichl, interviewed by Steven A. Shaw, 28 November 2005.

¹⁶ Marchetti, "Subfields of Specialized Journalism," 77.

¹⁷ Richman interview, 18 December 2007. Coincidentally, Richman began his

Diners are not the only people who rely on traditional reviews. To inform her decisions about who should be invited to cook at the James Beard House, Wojcik turns frequently to national and local press. With fewer reviews, she said, there are fewer sources of information for her to consult. According to Wojcik, the national media, “especially the *New York Times*,” is important both because of the opinions they express, but also because those opinions tell her “how the chef is positioned and how the public might be perceiving that restaurant,” she said.¹⁸

Critics rely on other critics, too. “I’m an old-school journalist from the era of competitive writing,” Richman said. “I’m competing against Bruni. The *Times* is on top. I want to be pithier, more clever, make better points. Nothing is more exciting to me than when Bruni and I come out with a review of the same restaurant on the same day.”¹⁹ This sort of competitive journalism suggests the *Times* not only plays a part in framing the conversation about restaurants among diners, which we saw earlier in the number of online reviews that refer to or are shaped by other reviews, both directly and indirectly, but also plays a part in framing the conversation about restaurants among other reviewers.

While diners may be turning to online reviews for their information about restaurants in large numbers, these secondary users, that is, influencers in the field, are not satisfied with what they find online. When asked if he reads blogs, Richman said no, unless someone tells him there is something

career as a sports writer.

¹⁸ Wojcik interview, 14 December 2008.

¹⁹ Richman interview, 18 December 2007.

interesting about a restaurant he knows.:

There is only negativity that comes out of reading blogs. For the most part, the people who write blogs are out not to write about the restaurant but to get attention. Blogging is about getting attention, being outrageous. It's not about passing on information. It's about getting your name out there. I have never found myself missing anything in life by not reading blogs.²⁰

Similarly unimpressed, Wojcik added that the fact that anyone can post anything online makes her skeptical of the opinions expressed in blogs.

I think the bloggers' attitude is sort of like, "I've eaten many things and I've talked to many people and you know I have just as much authority and I'm just as qualified to speak about my restaurant experience as anybody else," which puts me in an uncomfortable position of questioning, How do I know what their palates are like? If they can do it, then my mother can do it. And if my mother can do it, then, well, I need more confidence than that.²¹

Richman's comment about how food bloggers vie for attention online suggests their own subfield is emerging.

Neither Richman nor Wojcik felt that any of the bloggers would be able to nudge the *Times* out of the lead position in the field until a structure was built that allowed bloggers to remain anonymous and that afforded them the chance to be able to make a living at the job so they could perform it with the seriousness they felt it warranted. I have not been able to confirm the *Times*'s current dining budget—Bruni said he has never been given a figure, but that he felt certain he would be told if he was spending too much. I've heard estimates that place Bruni's annual expenses are in the range of \$300,000, though it seems improbable to me that anyone could spend \$822 a day in restaurants, even in Manhattan. Bryan Miller's credit card bills for

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Wojcik interview, 14 December 2008.

restaurants apparently totaled \$125,000 a year, which was more than 40 percent of his salary at the time²². During an interview conducted by Susan Stamberg on N.P.R., Reichl was once asked if it bothered her that her dining budget could pay for two foreign correspondents.²³ Until a new, very profitable business model for online media evolves, no Internet outlet is likely to invest this much in its restaurant reviews. Perhaps one of Claiborne's most important legacies in terms of assuring the prominence of the *Times* in the field of gastronomy was not just his insistence on his anonymous, ethical model of reviewing, but his ability to convince the *Times* organization through his success in the position that investing so much money in its reviews was important for the paper.

When I asked Richman if he thought anybody in the critic's position at the *Times*, anyone with that much money to spend on restaurants, would have the power to shape restaurant discourse simply because of the weight of the institution itself—as Diamond suggested is the case—he replied, “Anybody can do it but not anybody can succeed at it.” As evidence, he offered Amanda Hesser, a respected food writer at the paper who served as an interim critic before Bruni's arrival, but who had not fared well in the reviewer's seat.²⁴ Canaday and Hess would serve as other examples of *New York Times* reviewers who neither found the right homology for the field nor otherwise made much of a splash in the field of gastronomy while they

²² Diamond, *Behind the Times: Inside the New New York Times*, 308.

²³ Quoted in Reichl interview, 18 November 1996.

²⁴ Although the rumor in the food world and blogosphere was that Hesser was not offered the permanent reviewer position at the *Times* because of an ethical breach—she favorably reviewed a restaurant owned and operated by Jean-Georges Vongerichten, for whom she had previously provided a promotional book-jacket quote—during our interview Bruni made a point of mentioning that this rumor was false.

occupied the dominant position the *Times* reviewer's seat afforded.

Mapping the Field of Gastronomy in America

With references to positions and position-takings and other spatial relationships pervading this dissertation, it may prove helpful to see the agents I have mentioned plotted on a diagram of the field of gastronomy in America. Following Bourdieu's model of the French field of literature in the latter half of the 19th century,²⁵ Figure 1 presents a sketch of the field of gastronomy in America at the present time. The subfield of food journalism is superimposed on the field of gastronomy. On the diagram, the horizontal axis represents economic capital as expressed by the size of the audience. The vertical axis represents a combination of symbolic and cultural capital expressed as the power to consecrate within the field. As you move upward, agents have more respect, more influence, and more autonomy in the field; as you move across, agents have more financial success and more heteronomy.

To give a sense of just how heterogeneous the field is, I've plotted a variety of different types of agents, all of whom I've mentioned at some point in this dissertation. Celebrity chefs are interesting to consider in this context. They can be divided into two groups, those who have maintained their integrity in the field while they've garnered cross-over success, such as Mario Batali and Daniel Boulud, and those who have become so popular that they have lost the respect of others in the field, such as Emeril. Thinking about cuisines also brings some interesting characteristics to the fore. Certain cuisines, such as French and Japanese, are popular but respected. Just opening

²⁵ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, 49.

a French or Japanese restaurant gives an owner or chef a certain status in the field. Others, such as Chinese, are also popular, but they have never been able

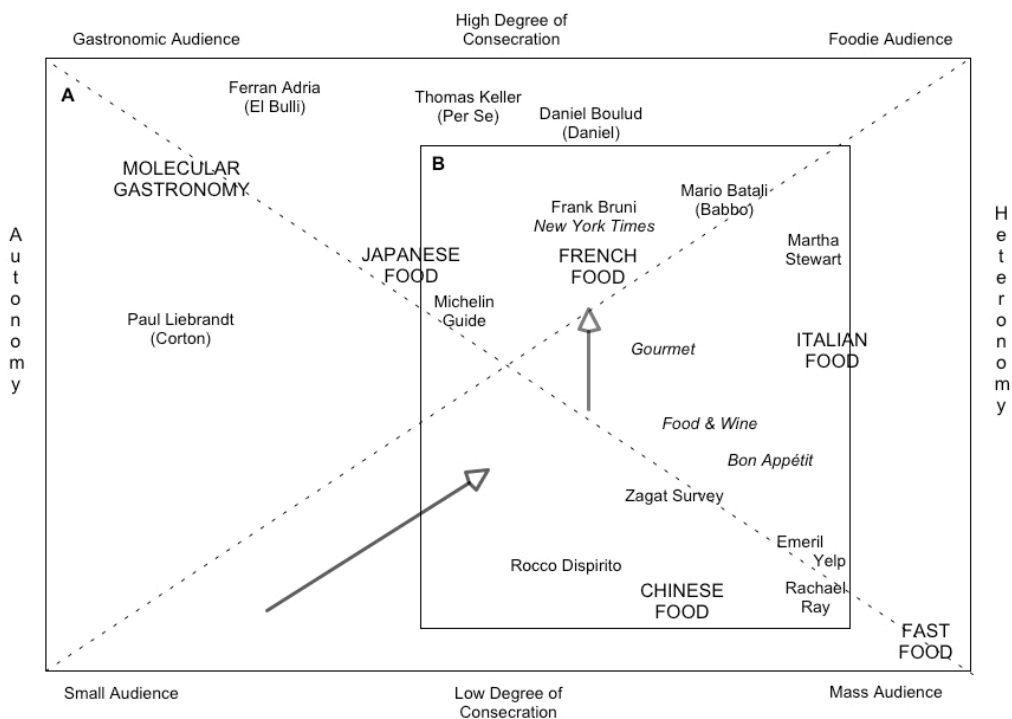


Figure 1 A sketch of the American field of gastronomy (A) and subfield of food journalism (B) at present. Positions higher on the vertical axis garner a higher degree of influence and respect in the field. Positions moving along the horizontal axis reflect increased economic reward. Because a media opportunity (i.e. a chef with a magazine column or television show) increases both economic and symbolic capital, the subfield of food journalism is skewed toward the right.

to achieve much respect in the field. Rarified cuisines, such as the intricate molecular gastronomy practiced by Spanish chef Ferran Adrià, considered by many in the field to be the greatest chef of our time, are influential, but not widely known. Of course, *Times* critic, Frank Bruni, has the highest level of consecration among the journalists and food media, but other media personalities have bigger audiences, and some, such as Martha Stewart, manage to maintain both large audiences and prestige.

A field is constantly in flux, as every new position taken changes all of

the position-takings, so this diagram is really just a fantastical snapshot. But it gives an idea of the relative powers of consecration of various agents and the potential impact of some of the challenges to the structure of the field that have been discussed. It also provides some insight into certain phenomena in the field, such as the rise of the celebrity chef, and it helps us imagine how these phenomena might play out. For example, looking at the diagram you could imagine that as chefs, who are either directly or indirectly the subject of most restaurant reviews, have increasingly become celebrities, reviewers have lost some of their powers of consecration over them. When Mario or Emeril or Jean-Georges open a new restaurant, they are expected to be good because of their fame, and their elevated position in the field. Few are waiting for the critics to weigh in. These chefs, who parlayed their early critical recognition into cultural capital, pique the interest of a broad audience, their fans.

Through surveys like Zagat and now open-access Internet review sites, this audience can review the chefs' restaurants themselves. But as the critics, who kick-started the process, attempt to regain some of their own cultural capital, they knock down these celebrity chefs, which reasserts their consecrating power in the field. Though this knocking down stings professionally, the chefs are palliated by their fame, which they use as a calling card into other fields, like Hollywood, where food and cooking are enjoying an unprecedented currency that underscore the field's heteronymy and keeps bringing the fans in to eat. Suddenly, in addition to chefs getting bit parts in movies,²⁶ receiving invitations to appear on evening talk shows,²⁷ and dancing

²⁶ Nobu Matsuhisa played Mr. Roboto in the 2002 film *Austin Powers in Goldmember*, directed by Jay Roach.

with the stars,²⁸ Gwyneth Paltrow is cohosting a food show on PBS,²⁹ Meryl Streep is playing Julia Child in a feature movie,³⁰ and an animated, food-obsessed rat from Disney who would give anything to be able to cook is a box-office sensation.³¹ Reviews written in this environment and this milieu may not necessarily add or detract from business—the force of fame is too difficult to counteract. Movie stars still trump cooks in matters of cultural production. But the new positions that reviewers take will be reflected in new aesthetic judgments, new gastronomic codes, new tastes, that will resonate with some of these new participants, that is, the fans, as well.

Food for Art's Sake or Vice Versa? A Battle of Consecration

The story of the New York critics' reception of a young, creative British chef illustrates how far the field of gastronomy in America evolved in a short period of time. The battle for consecration between Jonathon Gold of *Gourmet* and William Grimes of the *Times* over Paul Liebrandt's cooking at the short-lived Atlas restaurant on Central Park South (2000–2001), is more typical of the type of battle you would expect to find in the long-established, saturated fields of art or literature. It provides further evidence that even without a national cuisine, the field of gastronomy in America has matured.

When Reichl took over the editorship of *Gourmet* after having

²⁷ Emeril Lagasse appeared nine times on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* between 1997 and 2008.

²⁸ Rocco DiSpirito was one of the contestants on season seven of *Dancing with the Stars*, which aired in 2008.

²⁹ Charles Pinsky, "Spain...On the Road Again," (PBS), produced by Charles Pinsky, 2008.

³⁰ Nora Ephron, "Julie & Julia," (Columbia Tristar), produced by Dana Stevens and Scott Rudin, 2009.

³¹ Bird and Pinkava, "Ratatouille."

reviewed restaurants for the *Times*, she famously began allowing negative reviews, which had been rare in the magazine during the 58 years prior. The first reviews under Reichl's watch were written by Jonathan Gold, who was the magazine's New York critic from 1999 to 2004. A gifted writer, in 2007 Gold won the first and only Pulitzer Prize for criticism given to a restaurant critic for his later work at *LA Weekly*.³² (Gold was back as a contributing editor at *Gourmet* in October 2008.)

Only 25 years old when he arrived at Atlas in 2000, Liebrandt had trained in some of London's finest kitchens, where groundbreaking chefs, such as Marco Pierre White, were pushing cooking in a new, creative direction. Grimes's enthusiasm for Atlas overflowed in his three-star review.³³ He welcomed Liebrandt as a "representative of the newer British chefs who have energized London's dining scene." Characterizing their cooking as "working-class cheek," Grimes suggested this wave of inventive chefs have "a determination to create friction by rubbing opposites together, or giving high-class treatment to low-status foods." Citing flavor combinations like salsify, quince, and Belgian beer (which were incorporated into a soup) and green apple, wasabi, extra-virgin olive oil, and sea salt (elements of a palate-cleansing sorbet), Grimes gushed that Liebrandt's talent "makes you use taste buds that other chefs ignore." He declared this new incarnation of the restaurant, "one of the most exciting in the city."

Perhaps moved by Liebrandt's creativity, Grimes followed up the review a few weeks later with a "Critic's Notebook" position piece about "a

³² James Rainey, "Times Wins Pulitzer for Series on Ocean Pollution," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 April 2007.

³³ William Grimes, review of Atlas, *New York Times*, 29 November 2000, Dining In/Dining Out section.

specter haunting American cuisine” that “seduces chefs, restaurateurs, and especially culinary journalists.”³⁴ That specter was “comfort food.” In a wittily argued essay about the “sticky, therapy-derived, feel-good” term, Grimes dismissed the allusion of comfort foods to regressive childhood food preferences that “recall the tastes and textures of infancy.” He concluded:

Learning to eat is a kind of education. It rewards the adventurous. It pays double dividends to thrill seekers who dare to taste a sea urchin; who do not flinch in the face of an andouillette; who, instead of sniffing and picking and probing when something odd turns up on the plate, dive right in, sending off sparks with their forks. We have a name for such people. We call them adults. And when they go out to a restaurant, they are not looking for solace, they’re looking for a good meal.

Jonathan Gold clearly wrote his review of Atlas that appeared in *Gourmet* a couple of months later with Grimes’s opinions about Liebrandt and comfort food in mind.³⁵ He opened with a debate among his dinner guests about whether a broth that surrounded a disk of foie gras torchon tasted more like Robitussin, NyQuil, or a generic drugstore cough syrup one diner remembered the flavor of from her childhood. Taking a direct jab at Grimes, Gold borrowed Barbara Kafka’s phrase to describe Liebrandt’s cooking. “Atlas’s menu is all critic bait,” he declared, “from the tomato confit with crisp caramel that begins the meal to the aspic-topped yogurt at its end.” Gold described the waiters as “Liebrandt’s acolytes, scrupulously loyal to the food.” An herbal broth “called to mind industrial solvents more than it did something you might take pleasure in eating.” Noting that fine training and skill were evident in the preparation of some of the dishes, even if the flavors

³⁴ ———, “Critic’s Notebook: Into the Mouths of Babes,” *New York Times*, 10 January 2001.

³⁵ Jonathan Gold, review of Atlas, *Gourmet*, April 2001.

did not work, Gold commented:

One imagines an atelier full of chefs creating culinary Mona Lisas, and Liebrandt, front and center, gleefully scrawling mustaches on them. He may delight more in vandalizing food than in preparing it well, but somebody back in the kitchen clearly knows how to cook in restaurants.

Currying additional cultural currency from the world of art, Gold concluded by pushing the art metaphor further, suggesting, “Liebrandt is to Ducasse as Damien Hirst is to Brancusi, and dish after dish comes across as the culinary equivalent of a shark pickled in formaldehyde: high-gloss, low-rent Dada, relentless in its determination to shock.” As with A. A. Gill’s skewering of Vongerichten’s 66, people in the food world could not believe what they were reading, and that they were reading it in one of the most consecrated and consecrating media outlets in the field.

Still, everyone loves a food fight. The restaurant’s publicist took the daring step of issuing a press release on March 15, 2001, with both reviews attached. Unfortunately, Liebrandt and Atlas did not make it through the next year. The point of recounting this moment is not to illustrate whether Gold or Grimes was right or to make a case for who was the wittier writer. Rather it is to suggest that this level of debate in restaurant reviews is indicative of a new level of discourse in the field of gastronomy. This was a blatant battle between two critics, between two publications vying to occupy an elevated position in the field and to stay relevant in a changing landscape of restaurants and restaurant reviews. Grimes was telling the American people to grow up, gastronomically speaking. Gold was warning them not to be swindled. *Gourmet* was saying we will hold the old guard. The *Times* was asserting it was ready for the new. Atlas and Liebrandt were beside the point. Which critic, which publication would hold the dominant position about the

future of food was at stake.

This exchange also illustrates how the debate over a new style of cooking can bring into question not just the judgment of a specific reviewer, but the tastes of the dining public at large. It also shows how those tastes are imprinted by trends in society. Eras of economic prosperity and security always seem to push the culture envelope toward risky expressions of creativity that can seem frivolous to some. Like John Hess before him, Jonathan Gold was saying, "Enough is enough!" to such frivolity. The events of September 11, 2001, which came only a few months after Grimes's rally cry against comfort food, rendered his anti-comfort-food position untenable. As we came out of the economic and psychological depression and pervasive atmosphere of fear that ensued after 9/11 and into another moment of economic prosperity, proponents and practitioners of the avant-garde of molecular gastronomy, from which Liebrandt had been born, began attracting attention again. This time around, the trend was better received.³⁶

The James Beard Foundation's Izabela Wojcik brought up the Liebrandt incident during her interview. Just before we met in late 2008, Corton, Liebrandt's new restaurant, had received a positive, three-star review from Bruni.³⁷ This was significant in Wojcik's estimation because Bruni's mixed review of Liebrandt's previous post at the ambitious restaurant Gilt

³⁶ See Parasecoli, "The Chefs, the Entrepreneurs, and Their Patrons." Interestingly, in the current economic climate, the food media is once again preoccupied with comfort food. Simple, nostalgic food not only satisfies in uncertain times, it also provides the perfect counterpoint to the wildly creative trend of molecular gastronomy, whence Liebrandt had come, that has been the food world's focus until now.

³⁷ Frank Bruni, review of Corton, *New York Times*, 10 December 2008, Dining In, Dining Out section, 12.

two years prior³⁸ had apparently cost Liebrandt his job.³⁹ Wojcik noted that all of the reviews Liebrandt has received since Atlas, including the most recent, referred back in some way to the debate between Gold and Grimes:

I feel like Liebrandt has been pigeon holed and everything he is going to try to accomplish, the perception of what he is doing, is going to be a continuous reaction to that box that [the critics] put him in in the first place. So it's going to be either he continues to be a provocateur, or he's not really as bad as that any more. I mean it's always going to be a constant reference to the starting point that was put on him.⁴⁰

Bruni's review referred directly to Liebrandt's bad-boy cooking at his previous restaurants, including Atlas, which was long before Bruni's time as a New York City reviewer. He even alluded to the art metaphors in Gold's review, commenting, "At Corton [Liebrandt] calms down and wises up, accepting that an evening in a restaurant shouldn't be like a visit to a fringe art gallery: geared to the intellect, reliant on provocation."⁴¹ Wojcik's observation recalls the mediating, boundary-enforcing role of critics found in research by Rao et al. and others.⁴²

The question of who "won" this battle is an interesting, if unanswerable one. Liebrandt lost his job and the restaurant closed, but that does not make Gold necessarily the victor. *Gourmet* stopped publishing regular restaurant reviews altogether, so they have left the game. The *Times* carries on with their restaurant reviews, and as my research has shown, they continue to be the most important in field. Grimes is now reviewing books

³⁸ Frank Bruni, review of Gilt, *New York Times*, 8 February 2006, Dining In, Dining Out section, 10.

³⁹ Andrea Strong, "The Departed," *Time Out New York*, 19–25 April 2007.

⁴⁰ Wojcik interview, 14 December 2008.

⁴¹ Frank Bruni, review of Corton.

⁴² Rao, Monin, and Durand, "Border Crossing: Bricolage and the Erosion of Categorical Boundaries in French Gastronomy."

for the *Times*. Gold has a Pulitzer for criticism, a powerful consecrating device in the field of journalism, though it was not awarded for his work during this time. Perhaps more significantly, this style of wildly creative, cutting-edge cuisine has been celebrated the world over by diners and critics alike, who beg shamelessly for reservations at temples of molecular gastronomy, such as El Bulli in Spain and The Fat Duck in England, while chefs vie to work in their kitchens. Tellingly, even with Liebrandt's recent success, this style of cooking has never really caught on in New York. Instead, it is a trademark of Chicago dining.

A Field for American Gastronomy, A Taste for American Cuisine

In concluding this dissertation I have tried to provide some concrete examples of the field of gastronomy at work. The nature of any field of cultural production, which is, after all, a highly structured, constantly changing, metaphoric space, makes it difficult to pinpoint and dissect. But discourse about food and opinions about restaurants are everywhere these days. By casting my net wide and pulling in as many examples as I could find, I have tried to build a persuasive argument for the existence of a vibrant field of American gastronomy and the important role that restaurant reviews have played in its evolution, not to mention the role they play in the formation of taste.

Another difficulty with this project from the onset was how to demonstrate the relationship between discourse and taste. On the one hand, tastes are personal and elusive. On the other hand, they are public and they define us. Relying on Bourdieu for my template, I have looked at reviews of restaurants in New York City over time and across media to suggest one way

personal tastes become public, that is, through the discourse reviews generate in the field of gastronomy. In the same realm of discourse, public tastes become personal. The power to affect the translation of tastes in one way or the other reflects the relative positions of the tasters and the tasted, the consumers and the producers and the critics who mitigate between them in the field.

During our interview, Wojcik relayed an anecdote about a recent dinner that provides a concise example of how aesthetic judgments from reviews can be adopted by individuals, without them even realizing it.:

My sister-in law-lives in Westport, Connecticut. And we were going to meet them for dinner. All of their friends are affluent, well educated. The wives stay at home, but they were former leaders of some industry or something or other. The husbands are all in finance. They go out to eat a lot. They are very informed about food and wines and that becomes part of their status, as well.

I just recall reading a review about the place they were taking me so I would have an idea what to expect. And while we were there I remember talking to one of them about what he thought. And his opinion was that the restaurant was good, but that it needs a little work. It has potential. And that was exactly what the review said, that the restaurant has potential. The consensus of the group was that it had potential, but they were just all just regurgitating the same point that was made in the review.

Trust me, the restaurant had realized its potential. It was what it was going to be. It was just so peculiar to me. What does that mean? I don't know where else that restaurant could be going.⁴³

Another difficulty was defining whose tastes I was talking about. Affluent diners in Connecticut? Construction workers on their lunch break? The rarified world of \$500 sushi dinners and vintage bottles of wine that is the domain of some restaurant reviewers at least some of the time is not

⁴³ Wojcik interview, 14 December 2008.

where most people eat. But talk is cheap and gastronomic discourse trickles down from the position-takers eating caviar in fancy restaurants to the people eating hot dogs in the street. The celebrity of celebrated chefs who come from fine restaurants does not derive from their clientele. Through television shows and consultancy contracts and the correspondences between the fields of production and consumption, the tastes that are negotiated in the field of gastronomy find their way into unexpected places. The sun-dried tomato cream-cheese at a bagel shop, the Stouffer's Sicilian flatbread in the freezer aisle, these are expressions of tastes negotiated elsewhere that find their way into the mouths of unsuspecting people uninterested in ever reading a restaurant review or discussing where they are going to eat.

As a result of some of the processes described in this dissertation, more and more people are nourishing an interest in food. A recent report based on nationwide interviews of consumers and influencers and demographics data from the Simmons Market Research Bureau, says that 14% of Americans, 31 million people, are "foodies."⁴⁴ The report defines foodies as people for whom food "offers a framework through which they can build relationships, make new friends, explore the world, and even examine which behaviors are ethical" The report concludes that these foodies are voicing their opinions by shopping for new foods, and in the process they "are shaping the American palate." The more opinions being voiced, the more dynamic the field of cultural production, and the louder and more distinct any one opinion has to be in order to be heard.

Being heard is another way of saying that an opinion carries weight, that

⁴⁴ "Foodies in the U.S.: Five Cohorts: Foreign/Spicy, Restaurant, Cooks, Gourmet, and Organic," (Packaged Facts, 2009).

the position and/or the position taker who is voicing that opinion can affect a high degree of consecration in the field. The *New York Times* restaurant review remains the loudest voice because it has so much capital invested in its position and because influential people on both sides of the swinging door care what the *New York Times* reviewer has to say. These are related phenomena, as we have seen. The *Times's* critic may no longer be able to make or break a restaurant overnight—on a recent evening, almost every table at Ago, which Bruni panned, was occupied.⁴⁵ But it can cost a chef his or her job or spark a trend on menus that has an impact on tastes all the same. The loss of the capability of a restaurant critic to fill a restaurant is not necessarily a loss of power. New media provide more effective channels for sharing the information necessary to decide which restaurant to try. But by shaping the discourse about restaurants instead, you could say the *Times* has an effect on what you are going to like when you get there. Shaping the discourse about restaurants shapes tastes.

The personal tastes of an influential critic can have a direct effect on what restaurants serve due to a relationship that recalls Bourdieu's explanation of the correspondence between the field of production and the field of consumption. Perhaps inspired by her affair with Le Bernardin chef Gilbert Le Coze, Gael Greene developed a taste for what at the time would have been considered undercooked fish. In the early 1990s, when I took my own position in the field, every fine-dining chef in New York knew how

⁴⁵ In an interesting and unexpected turn of events given the arguments and evidence provided in this dissertation, Andrew Carmellini has taken over the kitchen at Ago Ristorante. See Oliver Schwaner-Albright, "For De Niro's Hotel, Another Try at Dining," *New York Times*, 4 February 2009, Dining In, Dining Out section, 9

Greene liked her fish. Today, after Greene, after Le Coze, after Nouvelle Cuisine seems so old fashioned, fish in fine restaurants is always served less cooked than it was 25 years ago. Obviously, a direct link cannot be established between Greene's tastes then and fish cookery now. There are too many variables to consider. But Greene, being a champion of Le Coze and his new way of serving fish, certainly helped move things in that direction. Today, every time a server takes an order in a restaurant and mentions that the chef cooks the salmon medium rare, we are witnessing restaurant discourse and the field of gastronomy in action. Although no historian would go there with me, I could go back to the moment when it was first suggested that fish "tasted better" if it was slightly "underdone"—the quotation marks are there to indicate aesthetic judgments—and suggest that's where the newfound American taste for sushi was born. Regardless, certainly eating one's fish this way today is used as a form of social distinction that separates the serious, sophisticated food-lovers from everyone else. The disdainful look from a waiter who is asked to bring a fillet back to the kitchen to have the chef cook it more is further evidence of the field of gastronomy at work.

There are other examples of the personal tastes of critics having an impact on the food that is served in restaurants. William Grimes's essay against the regressive tastes of comfort food solidified what cooks in town already knew, that he preferred conceptual, intellectually challenging cooking to simple, one-dimensional fare. The timing of the opening of WD-50, the first, most experimental restaurant in New York to offer the new style of cooking called molecular gastronomy, toward the end of Grime's tenure in 2003 was not simply a coincidence. Frank Bruni, whose tastes fall closer to comfort food than to molecular gastronomy, has also had an impact on what

chefs are willing to serve. Paul Liebrandt's latest backer, Drew Nieporent, knew he was taking a risk. A restaurateur and/or chef cannot help but take into account the preferences of a powerful critic with a national platform when planning a restaurant or devising a menu—the financial and professional risks are too great to ignore them.

Restaurateurs sometimes react to criticism in dramatic ways. In a 2007 *Time Out New York* article, blogger Andrea Strong identified six executive chefs in the previous year that she believed had been fired because of negative reviews, attributing their dismissal largely to Bruni's power and his reviews in the *Times*.⁴⁶ One restaurateur told Strong that firing a chef was not just a way to change the food the critic did not like, it was also an effective public-relations strategy. Producing a somewhat different effect from a full-page-advertisement rebuttal in the food section, firing a chef generates news about the restaurant that alerts the general dining public that drastic steps have been taken to correct the problems addressed in the review. Although Bruni realizes people like Strong and blogs like eater.com pin these staff changes on him and his reviews, he told me during his interview that he believes his criticisms are usually reflective of larger problems facing the restaurant and chef. He does not believe he is solely responsible. Either way, Bruni said these dismissals are “something you can't concern yourself with and be truthful and fulfill your obligation to the reader.”⁴⁷

Catering to one critic's taste is different from fashioning a consensus of taste through discourse in a way that can lead to a cuisine. James Beard was a pioneer in the world of food. At the time in 1954 when the *New York Times*

⁴⁶ Strong, "The Departed."

⁴⁷ Bruni interview, 5 December 2007.

anointed Beard the “dean of American cookery,”⁴⁸ the phrase “American cuisine” would have been an oxymoron. Claiborne’s hiring at the *New York Times* in 1957 jump-started a gourmet discourse that helped shape our tastes into food preferences that made the idea of an American cuisine possible because of the distinctions (and distastes) they encouraged. Today, we freely talk about American cuisine, though no one is quite sure what it is. Although a discussion of the foundations of a national cuisine are beyond the scope of this dissertation, my research on the role of reviews in shaping collective tastes does suggest a few ways the topic can be approached. Based on her exposure to foreign culinary students and her extensive experience eating in America, Gabriella Ganugi, founder of Apicius, the Culinary Institute of Florence, said she believes American cuisine reflects American ideology, at least as it is portrayed in the media.⁴⁹ She said people she encounters characterize American food as abundant, approachable, uncomplicated, fast, and sweet, in part because that’s how people abroad think about Americans. Ed Behr, publisher and editor of the highly regarded *Art of Eating* quarterly magazine, suggested a similar relationship between American ideology and cuisine. He characterized American food as having a sense of freedom and possibility, a lack of respect for or understanding of tradition, and a paradoxical enthusiasm for what is old-fashioned and familiar and what is new.⁵⁰ While these descriptions of American cuisine may not easily generate a list of specific dishes tied to geography and regional foodways, such as those that constitute French and Italian cuisines, they nevertheless suggest a

⁴⁸ The paper gave Beard that title—which stuck—in a review of *Jim Beard’s Complete Book of Barbecue & Rotisserie Cooking* that appeared on August 25, 1954.

⁴⁹ Personal communication.

⁵⁰ Personal communication.

uniquely American approach to food—James Beard preferred “attitude”⁵¹—that distinguishes us and that may one day cohere into something more.

Although I have argued against Ferguson’s insistence that having a codified American cuisine is necessary for a field of gastronomy to exist, I nevertheless believe having a cuisine is important for other reasons. For one thing, it makes reviewing easier. In one of the most thoughtful and eloquently argued essays on the subject of restaurant criticism, Robert Clark proposes:

What is lacking most in criticism in this country is certainly not culinary knowledge or a palate; nor an appreciation of the problems of small, creative enterprises; nor the capacity to give voice to the consumer’s demand to be fed well in comfort for a reasonable charge. Rather, we require a consensus of what things mean and, based on that, what the meaning of doing them well might be.⁵²

That consensus is cuisine. Building consensus is not equivalent to polling for opinions. Craig Claiborne initiated a process of education and evaluation that has shaped what the people responding to Zagat have to say. Recall that theorists from Bourdieu to Rozin to Fischler believe that taste is defined in the negative, an expression of distaste, an opposition that suggests the forces that push us away from something are stronger than those that pull us toward something else. Whether philosophically debated, socially constructed, or physiologically perceived, tastes serve to separate us into groups that foster complex identities based in part on the aesthetic judgments we share. Only through the discourse generated by the field of gastronomy will we arrive at any consensus about taste, and that is the path to an American cuisine. Clark affirms the role of discourse in this process, noting that professional food

⁵¹ James Beard, “An American Attitude Toward Food,” in *The Armchair James Beard*, ed. John Ferrone (New York: Lyons Press, 1999 [1983]), 317–325.

⁵² Robert Clark, “A Critic’s Critic,” *The Journal of Gastronomy* 3, no. 1 (1987): 57.

journalism and respected restaurant guides create:

An atmosphere in which serious questions about both aesthetic and health-giving aspects of food and drink, inside as well as outside the home, can be posed and seriously pondered. Moreover, these questions can be considered and debated from a point of view that treats eating well as a community resource belonging to all of society rather than as the exclusive and exclusionary hobbyhorse of elites.⁵³

The truth, as my research has shown, is that there is not a lot of disagreement inside or outside the food world about which restaurants and chefs are the “best.” Save for the occasional battle between critics, such as Grimes vs. Gold on the merits of Paul Liebrandt’s creativity, the food media and the general public tend to agree. All but one of the ten restaurants with the highest food rating of 28 in the 2009 Zagat are in the 2009 Michelin Guide,⁵⁴ and the one that is not, Bouley, was removed because it changed location and had not reopened in time to be included. Six of these restaurants are starred in Michelin; three have their coveted three-star designation. (Bouley had two stars in the previous iteration of the guide.) These restaurants have all received favorable reviews from the *Times*. All but one has cooked at an event for the James Beard Foundation, and according to Wojcik, the one restaurant that has not, Garden Café in Brooklyn, is so small, and so overwhelmed with business that they have not been able to find the time to do so. Online, these restaurants engender a tremendous volume of reviews.

Far from suggesting a consensus on taste is not possible in America until we can define a cuisine, this concordance suggests that discourse generated in the field of gastronomy can bring us to consensus even when we

⁵³ Ibid.: 65.

⁵⁴ The top restaurants for food in the 2009 Zagat are: Per Se, Le Bernardin, Daniel, Jean Georges, Sushi Yasuda, Bouley, Mas, L’Atelier de Joël Robuchon, Garden Café, and Gramercy Tavern.

cannot decide exactly what we are agreeing on. Through the education they provide, the opinions they reflect, and the social distinctions those opinions create, reinforce, and maintain, restaurant reviews feed an important discourse about taste that defines not just what we like, but what what we like says about who we are.

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APPENDIX A

UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE ON ACTIVITIES INVOLVING
HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL OF EXEMPT STATUS

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

A private university in the public service

University Committee on Activities Involving Human Subjects

15 Washington Place, #1A
New York, NY 10003-6847
Telephone: 212-998-4808
Fax: 212-995-4304
Internet: www.nyu.edu/ucalhs

MEMORANDUM

TO: Mitchell Davis
262 West 24th Street—1B
New York, NY 10011

FROM: Jan Blustein, M.D., Ph.D., Chair 
University Committee on Activities Involving Human Subjects

DATE: May 1, 2007

RE: HS# 6068, "A Matter of Taste: Restaurant Reviewing, Food Discourse, and the Construction of Taste" (Approval Date: 5/1/2007)

The above-referenced protocol has been granted exempt status from ongoing human subjects review at 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) by the University Committee on Activities Involving Human Subjects.

Please note that, where applicable, subjects must sign and must be given a copy (without signature) of the UCAIHS current stamped consent form before the subjects' participation. All data as well as the investigator's copies of the signed consent forms must be retained by the principal investigator for a period of at least three years following the termination of the project. Should you wish to make changes to the Committee-approved procedures, the following materials must be submitted for Committee review and be approved by the Committee prior to being instituted:

- **description of proposed revisions;**
- *if applicable, any new or revised materials*, such as recruitment fliers, letters to subjects, or consent documents; and
- *if applicable, updated letters of approval from cooperating institutions.*

If you have any questions regarding the Committee's requirements, please contact the UCAIHS office at 212-998-4808 or human.subjects@nyu.edu.

cc: Dr. Amy Bentley – Faculty Sponsor

APPENDIX B

2008/2009 ZAGAT AND MICHELIN TABULATIONS

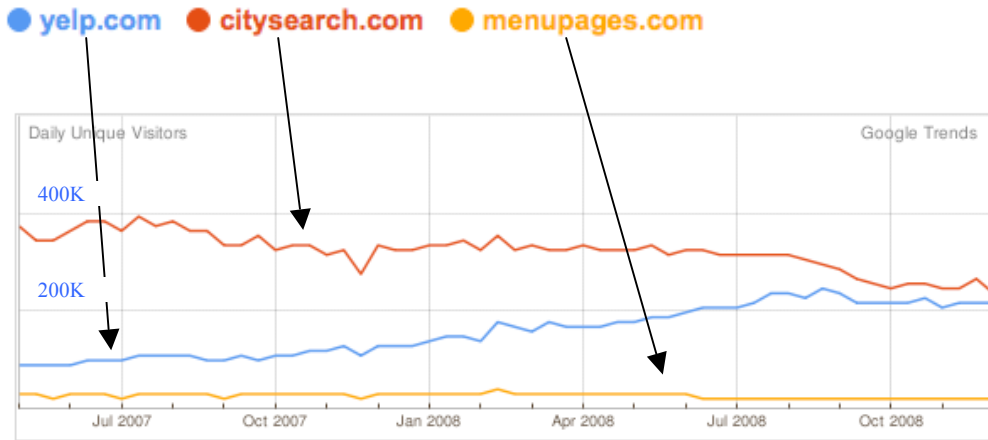
NYT Date	Restaurant Name	Resto new?	Review +, - or neutral?	In 2008 Zagat?	2008 Rating Combined	In 2009 Zagat?	2009 Rating Combined	In 2009 Michelin?
9/5/07	Soto	n	+	y	too new	y	67	y
9/12/08	Bar Stuzzichini	n	-	y	too new	y	55	n
9/19/08	Peter Luger's	n	n	y	62	y	60	y
9/26/08	Gemma	n	n	y	too new	y	58	n
10/3/08	Wakiya	n	-	y	too new	y	63	n
10/10/08	Park Avenue...	n	+	y	too new	y	71	y
10/17/08	Centro Vinoteca	n	n	y	too new	y	60	n
10/24/08	Moim	n	+	y	too new	y	66	y
10/31/08	L'impero	n	n	y	73	y	redone	n
	Alto	n	+	y	76	y	71	y
11/7/08	Pamplona	n	-	y	too new	y	59	n
11/14/08	Harry Cipriani	n	-	y	too new	y	59	n
11/21/08	Tailor	n	-	y	too new	y	66	n
11/28/08	Fiamma	n	+	y	71	y	71	y
12/5/08	Grayz	n	-	y	too new	y	67	n
12/12/08	Allen & Delancy	y	+	n		y	68	y
12/19/08	Primehouse NY	y	n	n		y	68	y
12/26/08	Shortys.32	y	+	n		y	63	n
	Smith's	y	+	n		y	65	y
1/2/08	Irving Mill	y	-	n		y	65	y
1/9/08	Barbuto	n	n	y	58	y	55	y
1/16/08	Blue Ribbon Sushi	y	+	n		y	66	y
1/23/08	Mesa Grill	n	-	y	65	y	62	y
1/30/08	Illi	y	-	n		y	67	n
2/6/08	Le Cirque	n	+	y	71	y	73	y
2/13/08	2nd ave deli	y	+	n		y	50	y
2/20/08	Dovetail	y	+	n		y	70	n
2/27/08	Bar Blanc	y	+	n		y	66	y
3/5/08	WD-50	n	+	y	65	y	64	y
3/12/08	Bar Boulud	y	+	n		y	62	y
3/19/08	La Sirene	n	+	n		n		n
3/26/08	Mas	n	+	n		y	78	y
4/2/08	Mia Donna	y	+	n		y	58	y
4/9/08	Chop Suey	y	+	n		y	54	n
4/16/08	Adour	y	+	n		y	79	y
4/23/08	Merkato 55	y	-	n		y	64	n
4/30/08	Commerce	y	-	n		y	61	y
5/7/08	Momofukuk Ko	y	+	n		y	66	y
5/14/08	Eighty One	y	+	n		y	65	y
5/21/08	Florent	n	n/a	y	50	closed		
5/28/08	The Harrison	n	+	y	68	y	68	y
6/4/08	Elettaria	y	+	n		y	64	n
6/11/08	Ago	y	-	n		y	56	n
6/18/08	Bar Q	y	+	n		y	59	n
6/25/08	Terroir	n	+	n		n		n
	Gottino	n	+	n		n		n
1/7/04	Bar Milano	y	+	n		y	65	y
7/9/08	Benoit	y	n	n		y	54	y
7/16/08	Oceana	n	+	y	73	y	74	y
7/23/08	Szechuan Gourmet	n	+	n		y	n/a	n
7/30/08	Scarpetta	y	+	n		y	73	y
8/6/08	Persimmon	y	n	n		y	too new	n
8/13/08	Matsugen	y	+	n		y	61	n
8/20/08	Perbacco	n	+	y	60	y	64	n
9/3/08	Elizabeth	n	n	n		n		n

APPENDIX C

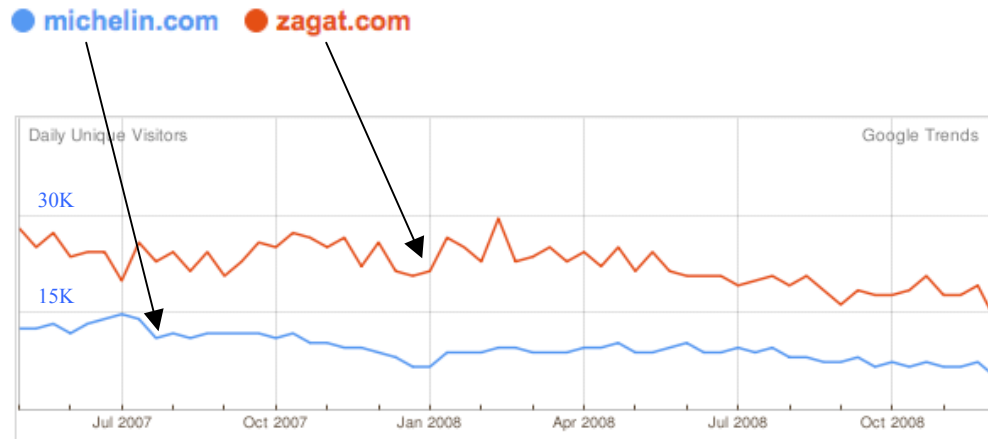
GOOGLE TRENDS DATA FOR RESTAURANT WEB-SITE TRAFFIC

The following graphs of Web site traffic were generated by Google Trends on December 31, 2008.

Restaurant Review Web Sites

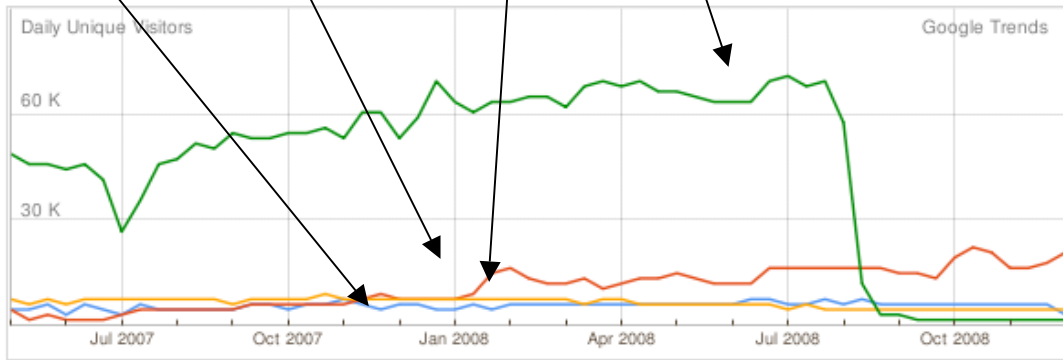


Restaurant Guidebook Web Sites



Food Blogs

eater.com **seriouseats.com** **egullet.org** **chowhound.com**



Food Magazine Web Sites

gourmet.com **foodandwine.com** **bonappetit.com** **saveur.com**

