The Illusion of Democracy in Online Consumer Restaurant Reviews

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ABSTRACT

Food has long served as a form of cultural capital, and historically it was an elite few food critics who held the power to ascribe status to dining experiences. The rise of social and digital media arguably allows anybody to adopt the role of critic. Lowered barriers associated with digital technologies, coupled with the contemporary ‘foodatainment’ boom have opened the floodgates for amateurs to weigh into the critical culinary discourse. The tendency for contemporary high-status dining experiences to include casual, rustic and simple foods suggests that the age of food snobbery is in the past. However, this notion of ‘omnivorousness’ can be viewed as an alternative means of establishing rules surrounding high-status foods. Johnston and Baumann’s US research reveals two frames used in food writing to valorise foods in an omnivorous age: authenticity and exoticism. In this project, Johnston and Baumann’s methodology is developed and applied to Australian professional and amateur reviews. Results show that Australian professional reviews frequently employ frames of distinction whereas amateur reviews do not; it concludes that the contribution by amateurs to the critical culinary discourse is limited.

KEYWORDS

Authenticity, Exoticism, Food Critic, Framing, Omnivorousness, Social and Digital Media

INTRODUCTION

The culture of food and dining have for centuries been inextricably linked to social status (Elias, Norbert & Jephcott, 1978; Goody, 1982; Mennell, 1996; & Korsmeyer 2005). Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of distinction identifies food as a form of cultural capital, and taste as central in the cultural reproduction and legitimation of power. Although the traditional dichotomy between high and low culture has largely receded in the realm of contemporary dining, cultural boundaries are very much still in existence. This paper explores the consecration of taste in Australian restaurant reviews. It examines both professional and amateur reviews to understand how dining experiences are legitimated as high-status cultural signals.
As recently as a decade ago, the power to construct cultural and culinary capital via restaurant reviews was the purview of a virtual handful of professional food critics and journalists – or judges of taste (Shrum, 1996). Luders (2008, pp. 693-694) observes that the evolution of less expensive media production tools, personal computers and the internet allow almost anyone to produce media and find an audience. The rise of social and digital media at the beginning of the twenty-first century heralded momentous changes to the food media landscape; effectively allowing anybody with an internet connection to opine on restaurant experiences to a potentially vast online audience (Goodsir, Neill, Williamson, & Brown, 2014). Amateur, or consumer-generated restaurant reviews are a significant feature of a contemporary foodscape characterised by widespread consumer participation.

The internet is awash with food-related sites populated solely by user-generated content, ratings and social media platforms describing a diverse range of dining experiences. The relatively standardised device known as the ‘online consumer review’ (OCR) is a significant development for interaction and widespread participation in the culinary discourse. Mellet, Beauvisage, Beuscart, & Trespeuch, 2014, 6) describe this as part of a broader movement towards ‘empowerment’ and ‘democratisation’ associated with the internet.

The proliferation of these reviews arguably threatens to disrupt the traditional cultural hierarchy, eroding the authority of the professional restaurant critic as arbiter of taste. Greater participation by amateurs in the culinary discourse has led to assertions in the academy of the ‘democratisation of criticism’ allowing anyone to become ‘an influential reviewer’ (Watson, Morgan, & Hemmington, 2008, p. 299). This paper argues that greater participation in the culinary discourse via OCRs does not displace the traditional cultural hierarchy in restaurant reviews. The following research from Australia demonstrates that an elite few continue to bestow legitimacy and produce new status distinctions within this realm.

The paper begins with a discussion describing the technological and cultural factors contributing to the ubiquity of food-related content in social and digital media in contemporary culture. It proceeds to outline theoretical underpinnings guiding the research in relation to how tastes are consecrated, food as a form of cultural capital and the concept of omnivorosity in the contemporary foodscape. Johnston and Baumann’s (2007) US study of content in gourmet food writing is used as the research model to analyse both professional and online consumer restaurant reviews in the Australian context. Using the analytical tools of ideology and frame research findings show that two dominant omnivorous culinary frames – authenticity and exoticism – are used to socially construct legitimacy within professional food writing. Findings also reveal the absence of these frames online consumer restaurant reviews. This leads to the conclusion that elitism persists within Australian professional restaurant reviews, despite social and digital media countenancing participation in the culinary discourse by amateur reviewers.

THE DIGITAL CULINARY SPECTACLE

The development of social and digital media in the late twentieth century was the vehicle for what Ferguson (2006, p. 151) describes as the most striking feature of our contemporary culinary landscape – the ubiquity of the culinary spectacle:

More and more of us beam out images of food over an increasingly global food culture. If food has lent itself to culinary extravaganzas as far back as history gives us records, and probably well before, only in the last quarter century or so has spectacle come to dominate our eating order.
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