The Importance of Ethnic Restaurants

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The United States has long been known as a melting pot of the world’s cultures. From the Native Americans who once roamed this country to the European settlers who civilized the “natives” to the influx of Asians who inhabit the west coast and Hispanics in the south, the United States has been enriched by the infusion of these ethnic groups. These immigrants came to America for a variety of reasons including religious freedom, employment, and safety from foreign wars. What happened once these groups landed in America had a great influence on the formation of urban developments and the sharing of cultural traditions and foods. Cincinnati is a classic example in which the movement of ethnic groups helped build the city to what it is today. Interestingly, today’s American culture is evolving into something more like a “salad bowl” where new cultures arrive and share their ideas, but also retain their unique identities. Whether the culture is shared or fully embraced, ethnic restaurants serve to broaden the diners’ global understanding.

As a country of immigrants, the founding families brought their food and culture with them. They settled in similar areas for companionship and support. These clusters of commonality formed the nuclei of many major cities. Food from the home country helped to soothe homesickness for new immigrants. “If you give a local population a whiff of their homeland and a comfortable place to hang out, you have a good chance of winning loyalty from folks familiar with the cuisine and customs” (Miller). The familiarity of food attracted new groups of people to particular areas. As these communities grew, restaurants were opened for the townspeople as well as for visitors. According to Don George, “food is an agent of transformation, taking travelers to a deeper and more lasting understanding of and connection with a people, a place, and a culture” (George 9). Whenever someone ventures into a new area, they become a traveler of sorts. Food common to the ethnic population enables the traveler to become a part of the culture and the “native” to become a gracious host.

Ethnic restaurants allow people to reach out to a variety of global offerings to make a connection with the outside world. Wilbur Zelinsky, a cultural geographer, explains, “Mainstream acceptance of a novel ethnic cuisine requires restaurateurs to meet customers halfway with food and experiences that are easy for them to assimilate” (qtd. in Miller). But simply opening a restaurant does not mean it is a success. The restaurant, alone, does not make it a cultural experience for the “traveling diner.” The blueprint for ethnic restaurant success in America requires the creation of something transcultural. According to William Sertl, “food is the key to culture, the easiest way into a relationship with folks you’ve yet to meet” (George 57). An ethnic restaurant offers a taste of the foreign foods for the diner but requires a willingness of the chef to make adjustments to accommodate local preferences. Wait staffs and hosts from the native country enhance the setting, but to make the exploration more comfortable, it is helpful to provide the menu in English. The goal of any ethnic restaurant should be to educate the customer by sharing the culture and developing a global understanding thru food (Miller).

In the recent decades, outlying neighborhoods of most urban areas are becoming more ethnic. For example, Indianapolis used to be known as the “100 percent American city,” but now it is booming with an assortment of ethnic restaurants. The most notable are the Burmese restaurants as a reflection of the influx of Burmese immigrants to the area (Edge). More than 50% of foreign-born Americans now live in the suburbs. “New suburbanites are more likely to be Hispanic than white, according to 2010 data from the American Community Survey” (Edge). Today, suburban restaurants are changing to meet this new demographic. Immigration has allowed for new cuisine to be introduced, and authenticity to flourish. Terry Kits, a professor at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and a member of the Indy Ethnic Food board, said, “When I came here in the mid-’90s, Thai restaurants served lo mein and sweet and sour chicken. Now I order papaya salad and soft-shell crabs with Penang curry” (Edge). Ethnic restaurants help set the tone of food acceptance in the United States, making the American palate more adventurous. "The immigrant population (defined as those with no US citizenship at birth) as a percentage of the total US population has risen from less than 5.0% in the 1970s to about 13.0% today, according to the Migration Policy Institute” (Brennan). The more exposure to ethnic cuisine, the more willing people are to try more authentic dishes. As cuisine becomes accepted, grocery stores expand their ethnic food sections. When considering travel abroad for study or pleasure, ethnic restaurants have the power to provide insight into the culture and a “taste” of what awaits on the other end of the journey. Ethnic restaurants make the world smaller.

Cincinnati is a model of how a city was formed as a melting pot of cultures, but embraces all ethnicities today. Cincinnati transformed from a busy river town to a bustling city with the dedication of many ethnic groups. The Germans and Irish came to Cincinnati in search of a better life. The Irish stayed near the river while the Germans built neighborhoods north of the canals. The Germans were so concentrated in that area that the other Cincinnatians referred to the canals as “Rhine” in reference to Germany’s Rhine River (“Historic OTR”). Over the Rhine was a center for trade and travel because of the river and canals. In addition to German food and craftsmanship, they brought German lager beer to Cincinnati. To honor this love of German food and drink, many festivals are celebrated in Cincinnati. One festival, Bockfest, was created in 1992 to celebrate Cincinnati’s part in the creation of the craft beer market. Bock Beer was brewed during spring as the German monks drank that rather than eating food during Lent (“Historic OTR”). Second, Oktoberfest-Zinzinnati was created in 1974 to showcase the German heritage of Southwest Ohio. Metts, bratwurst, sauerkraut balls, potato pancakes, German potato salad, and schnitzel are served (“What Is Oktoberfest”). As noted in Matthew Fort’s “Dorego’s”, “But food isn’t about frills and fancy gear and plate poetry. Food is about time and place and people and memory, people and memory most of all” (George 135). While German food isn’t fancy, it ties Cincinnatians to the heritage of the past. Entertainment includes events such as the Gemuetlickkeit (Goodwill) Games, bands, dancing, and a Running of the Wieners, or dachshund races. Historian Carl N. Degler of Stanford University created the term “salad bowl” as a metaphor for cultures that come together but maintain and celebrate their diversity (Edge). As Cincinnati has grown and more cultures have embraced the Queen City, it has taken on more of a “salad bowl” of cultures. While Cincinnatians live and work together, they are welcome to celebrate their own heritages and be prideful of their cultures. To honor other ethnicities, Cincinnatians attend the Panegyri (Greek) Festival, Cincinnati Hispanic Festival, and the Cincinnati Celtic Festival. Fort also comments, “To eat ethnic food in the place that gave it life, and to immerse oneself in the history and culture of that place, can transform an otherwise mundane meal into an extraordinary experience” (George 141). Cultural festivals, like ethnic restaurants, enrich and foreshadow the amazing adventures awaiting in the world.

America’s cities and towns were settled by foreigners looking for a better life. They brought their food and cultures to share. America has proven that the “salad bowl” culture allows for the sustainability and pride in one’s heritage while living in a new country. This globalized result promotes the adventuresome palate and culturally mindful understanding of different backgrounds in America today. The art of food ties all to settle and share in cultures. It brings about an experience only imaginable when the global world is fully embraced.

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