

## **BEING JAPONAISE: UNDERSTANDING THE AUTHENTIC IMPLICATIONS OF FUSION CUISINE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The transition from cooking to culinary art is one of the manifold manifestations of the specializations of a society and its foray into the perfection of the physical representation of general ideology. Cooking is born out of necessity, whereas cuisine is the result of gastronomic experimentation and time-honored tradition. Food is as representative of collective identity and ideology as any other art form that a civilization produces and it is just as dynamic as the society that creates it. National cuisines often evoke images of well-known landmarks, providing an easy (and often oversimplified) method of identification. Even if individuals are unaware of the culinary traditions and praxis of a culture, they can still claim that they know that spaghetti is Italian or that sushi is Japanese, using this identification as a basis upon which to understand a complex culture. Fusion cuisine represents a more complex method of identification. The consumer has a more difficult time discerning the various parts of the dish and ascribing them to a particular culture. Fusion occupies the in-between of national identification; it belies the simplified culinary traditions that we have cataloged, forcing us to question our previously held notions of authenticity. Purveyors of fusion cuisine explore an indefinite territory of the reflected self and the other, navigating and negating patriotic pride to instead focus upon their understanding of postnational flavors rather than nationalistic meals. Fusion cuisine thus embodies an acceptance of the indefinite and constantly evolving nature of the transition from cooking to a cuisine of becoming.*

**Keywords:** *authenticity, Bourdieu, cuisine, fusion, taste*

### An Introduction to Food as Flavor: Fusion as a Blending of Tastes

Culinary authenticity is as false a classificatory method as the image of the standardized adherence to a culture that creates it. By attempting to understand cuisine through the lens of “authenticity” rather than examining it through the lens of taste and transnationalism, both the consumer and creator of cuisine are ignoring the role of the bourgeoisie and diasporic communities in shaping contemporary and historical culinary traditions. Therefore, the conceptualization and process of fusion cuisine, as demonstrated by Asian-French fusion, the most prevalent kind of fusion cuisine, is merely the product of a postnational globalized food culture. It is the natural evolution of the trajectory of the transition from cooking to haute cuisine in a rapidly changing cultural economy. The chefs that create fusion cuisine base their creations on the fickle appetites of a bourgeoisie consumer base whose taste is informed by the idealized imaginary of a high class that appreciates the supposed worldliness of the consumption of the cultures embodied in the food they consume. At its heart, fusion is the creative and passionate interpretation of flavors in defiance of what is considered authentic or traditional. It is food that looks ahead to a growing trend of global cuisine, rather than behind to state-created, nuclear culinary praxis. Fusion’s complexity is based in the transition from cooking, born of necessity, to cuisine, born of taste.

Like taste, local communities can produce global communications; intervention is not simply the spark of imagination, but rather an encounter with the seemingly routine. To explore this concept, I had the pleasure of holding a few informal conversations with Chef Akira Hirose of Maison Akira in Pasadena, California, a restaurant billed as serving “French cuisine with a Japanese flair.” In these short sessions, Chef Akira framed the present-day discourse around fusion cuisine: Producers and consumers of fusion cuisine do not see an issue with the blending of two culinary cultures. Chef Akira stressed to me that the seamless blend of cuisines does not stem from their cultural similarities but from the ingredients themselves. Akira claimed that True food philosophy lies in seasonal eating and harmonious flavor pairing. Diners enjoy fusion cuisine because it requires an open mind and signifies that the chef is experimenting with flavor and processes of cooking rather than replicating the flavor of a nationalized cuisine.

Fusion, therefore, signifies the interpretation of flavor rather than the interpretation of Culture. As Anita Mannur observes, at the heart of consumption lies nostalgia and the desire to restructure feelings based on remembered flavors of things rather than the things themselves.<sup>1</sup> In the context of taste, then, flavor supersedes classification.<sup>2</sup> Thus, if taste refers to “fundamental oppositions in the social order,” restaurant-goers are brought to ask the demanding question of whether the oppositions at hand are built on the perceived meaning of flavor or if these oppositions are the grounds upon which the meaning that we grant ourselves in our individualized understanding of flavor is actualized.

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1. Anita Mannur, “Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora,” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 32, no. 4 (2007): 15.

2. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 475.

### Nationalism and Authenticity

Around the world, the nation-state is losing its homogenized ethnic nationalism—“a demonstration of the continued vigor of nationalisms in which land, language, religion, history, and blood are congruent”—being slowly overtaken by a growing postnational transient identification based in immigrant and individual identities.<sup>3</sup> As traditional patriotism fades in importance, the nation-state will inevitably decline. As sociocultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai notes, the nation-state creates an environment in which ethnic definition defies those “arguments that are substantially about power, justice and self-determination” and instead fosters the idea that nationalism is “our common sense and the principal justification for our ambitions, our strategies and our sense of moral well-being.”<sup>4</sup> Such an environment ignores the complexity engendered in the arrival and settlement of diasporic communities and the diverse and plentiful culinary options that arise in an increasingly globalized market. If the nation-state, the global standard of perceived permanence, inevitably fades, beliefs about what constitutes authenticity and high taste are ultimately rendered indefinite and transient.

Patriotism, synonymous with nationalism, one of the most important pillars of the nation-state is, according to Appadurai, “an unstable sentiment, which thrives only at the level of the nation-state. Below that level it is easily supplanted by more intimate loyalties.”<sup>5</sup> As such loyalties grow increasingly disparate and fractured, patriotism inevitably declines as does the sociopolitical power of the state as a governing entity. With the diasporic nature of identity comes the decline of a definitive national cuisine, replaced by a resurgence in territorial and regional pride that is reflected by immigrants around the globe. With these immigrant identities scattered throughout the world, “safe from the depredations of their home states, diasporic communities become doubly loyal to their nations of origin and thus ambivalent about their loyalties to [their new home state].”<sup>6</sup>

As a result, French food, for example, will no longer simply be “French.” It will be divided into the hyphenated variables of the people that continue to cook and consume what they believe constitutes “traditional,” or even “regional,” French food. Pierre Bourdieu, a monolithic figure in French sociology, argued that taste is a means of regaining “social orientation, a sense of one’s place.” Yet giving something so subjective meaning that is fixed and definitive, rather than allowing for its evolution, is impossible.<sup>7</sup> Following Appadurai’s “formula of hyphenation,” we find that “diasporic diversity actually puts loyalty to a non-territorial transnation first,” pushing the formation of subjective identities based on local, ideological, ethnic, and diasporic communities to the forefront of innovation, creativity, and identity.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, taste and ultimately notions of authenticity are fluid, despite the efforts on behalf of the nation-state to rein them into one standardized set of identities.

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3. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 20, 160.

4. Appadurai, 158.

5. *Ibid.*, 160.

6. *Ibid.*, 172.

7. Bourdieu, 466.

8. Appadurai, 172-173.

Taste is defined by the people, not by the government, and thus it is rendered indefinite.

Appadurai extends this irony: "In its preoccupation with control, classification and surveillance of its subjects, the nation-state has often created, revitalized or fractured ethnic identities that were previously fluid, negotiable or nascent."<sup>9</sup> In spite of the short-term desire to keep global fusion from occurring, the nation-states of the world have collectively created the conditions that will inevitably lead to the co-mingling of flavors and culinary ideologies: Class and regional identification supersede the superficiality of national pride. Ultimately, because of this, notions of authenticity are subjective and superficially curated. The reality of cuisine is inadvertent fusion, as the flavors and ingredients that nations use to define their culinary traditions blend together in a transnational world that is defined along diasporic lines.

This subjectivity is summed up in individuals' longing for the simplicity and definitive nature of their past ethnic identity. Their nostalgia for their imagined past shapes their understanding and adherence to what they consider authenticity in culinary tradition. For example, Bengali-American households might strive to readapt traditional Bengali cooking techniques in an attempt to connect with their imagined past.<sup>10</sup>

Nostalgia is the longing for identification within the realm of an idealized imaginary and the re-creation of identity within a mixed and globalized society. Nostalgia operates on multiple levels within the culinary world. It serves as an anchor for the displaced, a reminder of home (and familiarity). It provides an emotional connection to childhood, allowing individuals to re-create their sense of self in the context of their emotional and physical connection to both food and place.<sup>11</sup>

The relationship of the individual to "seemingly intractable culinary practices [that] yoke national identity with culinary taste," creates what is essentially a reversed process of ethnic tyranny: the erasure of nostalgia and diasporic roots from the culinary context as a means of ignoring the reality of transnationalism in favor of conflating a singular majority ethnicity, their disparate yet homogeneous experiences, with nationalism, through the creation of a definitive idea of authenticity.<sup>12</sup> The subjectivity and individuality of this idea contributes to the collective multiplicity of what constitutes culinary authenticity in a global context.

Many individuals involved in thoughtful culinary practices and consumption believe that authenticity lies in ingredients and flavors rather than in methods and meals. This politics, which can contribute to the discourse of fusion cuisine, is hindered by state-controlled organizations like the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The FDA can significantly impede the importation of ingredients that contribute to authentic flavors. Although it is the FDA's job to assess and regulate the health risks associated with the importation of certain goods, it indirectly reinforces national concepts of cuisine by regulating the ingredients available in the market, thereby closing-off the communication of cuisine-as-history through the use of banned ingredients.

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9. Ibid., 162.

10. Krishnendu Ray, *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali-American Households* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2004), 55.

11. Mannur, 11.

12. Ibid., 13.

From this perspective, the chef and owner of Maison Akira in Pasadena argues that authenticity, as a means of bolstering patriotic pride, cannot exceed the boundaries of flavor. Flavor operates beyond theory and is fundamental to the practice of cooking. Flavor crosses cultural borders; ingredients bleed into the culinary traditions of other national cooking methods. As a result, adapting and reinterpreting a national cuisine becomes easier in diasporic communities, increasing the subjectivity of national dishes and decreasing the importance of the state's role in regulating the attitudes behind cuisine.

### **Food from Local to Global, Consumer to Producer**

#### **The High and the Low: Taste and Meaning**

If ideal taste is truly the ability to encapsulate the indefinite in a cultural artifact, as Chef Akira suggests, then fusion is the epitome of high taste. Not only does fusion embody the indefinable by breaking national barriers, it is also constantly evolving as a result of its subjective nature, rendering it indefinite throughout its practice. The culture of those that filter their consumption through the binary of high versus low taste is a "construction implementing schemes of thought and expression [in a] world whose meaning they have helped to produce" and is ultimately exclusionary in nature.<sup>13</sup> But, unlike the exclusionary aspects of authenticity, ethnicity, and identities based in state-sanctioned nationalism, taste itself stretches across national boundaries and is open to evolution. Taste can be as definite as authenticity, but it does not depend on ethnicity for validation because its goal lies in its long-term malleability. Its success in defining cuisine lies in its hollowness: Theoretical taste is not an inherent quality of food or meals; it is given to cultures and cuisines as a result of continued consumption by the historically influential class.

The weakness of using authenticity as an indicator of taste lies in the façade of superimposed meaning used to cover its innate hollowness. Taste as a concept is eternal, whereas authenticity resides permanently within the context of the nation-state. It is given power and credence by those that seek to perpetuate the power and influence of modern governing bodies. Given this global context of taste, it is impossible to ignore the fact that taste, then, refers to "fundamental oppositions within the social order," oppositions that no longer refer solely to class division, but to ethnic barriers as well.<sup>14</sup> Within the context of fusion, the ethnic oppositions entrenched in global sociopolitics highlight the fundamentally different conceptualizations of taste present within the cultures being culinarily juxtaposed.

Fusion thus calls into question the dominance of each culinary Culture and how its respective placement on the transcendental scale of taste impacts the fusion being produced. Fusion itself demands further questioning: Is French cuisine, for example, higher in taste and more sophisticated than Japanese cuisine? Even more, where does the resulting French-Japanese cuisine rank on the spectrum of taste? The answer lies in the relationship between the item being consumed and the consumer. The customer's discernment of "how French" or "how Japanese" a dish is depends on her own palate. The result cannot be classified its the disparate parts because they contribute to the indi-

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13. Bourdieu, 467.

14. Ibid., 471.

vidual's understanding of the meal to varying degrees. The sum of the flavors within the fusion dish is greater than its parts. Just as taste is a method of "correspondence between goods and groups," fusion is the physical communication between cultures manifested in the creations of globally minded chefs, those that acknowledge the existence of a transnational food culture, regional and traditional cooking methods, and their own nostalgic connection to food and creativity.<sup>15</sup>

Taste defines communities, classes, and people on an individual rather than national level. Taste, therefore, represents a system of identification in which "the individual in question is a member of the set defined by that feature." In other words, consumers dictate their identification by their reaction to and subsequent conceptualization of the taste of the goods they consume.<sup>16</sup> Because this identification occurs on a personal level, the individual is not defined by her adherence to authenticity but rather by her adherence to what is considered "high" or "low" taste.<sup>17</sup> This once again speaks to methods of identification in a postnational world, wherein the individual's association with the standard of patriotism (as sanctioned by the nation-state) and its connection to notions of authenticity decreases in favor of adhering to a personal measure of taste. The value of taste and the meaning of the meal are once again shared between the consumer and producer as that value is projected onto the food being consumed rather than the citizen consuming a meal whose meaning is predetermined for political and social reasons. As the symbolic meaning of food is shared communally rather than definitely, must we consider flavor as the defining factor of a dish, or is the sense of nostalgia that it evokes important?

One is led to believe that meaning is dependent on more than flavor. It is dependent upon economic, social, and political factors created by an external source, (the State, the ethnic majority), branded as tasteful, and therefore acceptable by the bourgeoisie (and formerly by the upper class) to enforce a "meaning they helped to produce."<sup>18</sup> As such, the scope of cuisine itself expands beyond the meaning that the chef gives it when created. It is a community-wide constant process of re-evaluation, re-creation, and acceptance. Thus, the idea that fusion destroys some sort of predetermined meaning enforces a false understanding of taste. This false understanding privileges a science of flavor to construct cuisine and taste as definite and objective, rather than as subjective experiences and, therefore, dependent on the "faculty of receiving flavors and the capacity to discern aesthetic values [that are] turned into muscular patterns and body automatisms" – the idea that taste is an external pattern rather than an internal understanding.<sup>19</sup> Fusion reinforces an internal understanding through its transience and "creates the space for symbolic strategies aimed at exploiting the discrepancies between the normal and the real."<sup>20</sup> In other words, fusion belies classification and therefore occupies the "discrepancies" that serve as a means for nations to enforce their artificially cultivated version of

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15. Ibid., 468.

16. Ibid., 475.

17. Ibid., 469.

18. Ibid., 467.

19. Ibid., 474.

20. Ibid., 481.

high culture.

### The Power of French Cooking

For as long as the French have been generating regional cuisine and Europe has been the cultural hub of the West, French cooking has been considered the pinnacle of the culinary arts.<sup>21</sup> Whether it is the Parisian dishes of the upper class or the Mediterranean peasant food, French cooking is considered “high” taste by the upper classes, the bourgeoisie, and culinary schools around the globe. Gastronomy, as the French so proudly assert, is impossible without evolution or “the effect of surprise.”<sup>22</sup> While the rest of the world imagines a national French cuisine, the French themselves embrace their regional differences, and French cooks from all over the globe understand that “the world constituted in French cuisine is not stable; the French culinary discourse is in flux.”<sup>23</sup> Perhaps this is why the French embrace the concept of fusion; they view their own cuisine as one of intermingling while other imperialistic cultures maintain the cuisine of mixture.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the obviously chauvinistic lack of acknowledgement of its own imperialist flavor, French culinary ideology implies the confidence that French people have in the superiority of their own definitive flavors and methods. Beyond brutalization and colonialism, through the instruction of cooking school professors and food critics, the French are confident that their cooking will remain distinctively “French” even if it absorbs the ingredients of another culture. Due in part to “decolonization and immigration, ... professional mobility and increasing leisure time facilitate the opening up of tastes in all walks of life.”<sup>25</sup> French cuisine, especially when juxtaposed with the traditions of Japanese cuisine, is by and large the physical manifestation of transnationalism in food culture. It accepts that cuisine is fluid and not definitive, and although its snobbishness and postcolonial flavor are still present in its pretensions of superiority, French cuisine does not maintain the pretensions of authenticity that other cultures so fiercely proclaim abroad.<sup>26</sup>

Historically, this process of combining the Self and the Other through intentional and inadvertent means can be seen in the “creolization” of food by colonizing presences. Consider, for example, the conquest of the “New World” by mercantilist European nations. The practice of recolorizing native ingredients to fit them into grandiose European notions of culinary art was done to “reduce them to sources of natural ingredients devoid of a culture of their own.”<sup>27</sup> Ingredients of social and spiritual significance such as chocolate were reduced to signifiers of wealth and class, removed entirely from the context in which they originated. By reshaping the flavors present in the Americas to fit their ethnocentric palates, Europeans unconsciously cemented the conquest of native culture by

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21. Zilkia Janer, “(In)edible Nature: New World Food and Coloniality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 385, doi:10.1080/09502380601162597.

22. Jean-Robert Pitte and Jennifer Moody, “French Gastronomy Faced with Globalization,” *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* 82, no. 3, (2002): 35.

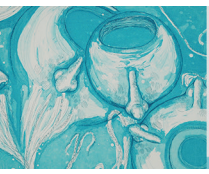
23. Jeffrey Tobin, *Re-Made in Japan: Everyday Life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 163.

24. Ray, 28.

25. Pitte and Moody, 36.

26. *Ibid.*, 37.

27. Zilkia.



reducing the savage Other to resources rather than implied flavors.

The subjugation of an entire population is made easier when the oppressors' concept of the other is superficially internalized and oversimplified. The resulting cuisine is "a process of transculturation, defined as a process that includes the partial loss of a culture, the partial acquisition of another culture, and the eventual creation of a new one." Fusion becomes a means of historicizing the evolution of culture and the nation.<sup>28</sup> The resulting cuisine is proof that flavors are not eternally definitive and immobile; they are open to reinterpretation by both the oppressor and the oppressed. This ultimately means that as far as history is documented in culinary traditions, it is open to conquest, reinterpretation and reclamation.

### **Conclusion: Fusion in the Modern World**

Despite concerns about authenticity and adherence to tradition, fusion, and indeed cuisine in general, is moving toward the mingling of flavors and culinary thoughts and ideas to create a global cuisine based in the subjectivity of diasporic communities with strong ties to their regional traditions. Cuisine is one of many ways of actualizing nostalgia, re-creating a sense of home, peace, or familiarity, reorienting oneself in the context of transnationalism. Fusion is a facet of this idealized form of food sharing. Whether it occurs in high-end restaurants or in humble home kitchens, fusion is the manifestation of transnational culinary ideologies.

Despite the reality of the disintegration of authenticity in a global context, readers and chefs cannot disregard the existence of traditions that have dictated cultural patterns of consumption. I conclude that traditions and practices rooted in necessity or local communities are less subject to change than are traditions held over and enforced upon a large and diverse population. Local traditions will continue to define the cultivated nostalgic memories that inform chefs of all types for years to come. In the meantime, recognizing the roles played by members of diasporic communities, some chefs are defying the transience of borders and ethnic totalitarianism. Through fusion cuisine, they are encouraging the reinterpretation of flavor on a global scale and participating in a resurgence of local traditions, ultimately allowing us to reimagine the landscape of taste.

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28. Janer, 397.



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