Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Turning the Tables: Restaurants and the Rise of the American Middle Class, 1880-1920

Review Number:
1451
Publish date:
Thursday, 18 July, 2013
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ISBN:
9780807834749
Date of Publication:
2011
Price:
£34.95
Pages:
384pp.
Publisher:
University of North Carolina Press
Publisher url:
http://www.uncpress.unc.edu/browse/book_detail?title_id=1899
Place of Publication:
Chapel Hill, NC
Reviewer:
Paul Freedman

With this book Andrew Haley offers an innovative account of changes in restaurants and their customers. The history of dining out in America is not simply a story about increasing culinary options but rather one that features frequent shifts in social class representation and cultural preference. Haley presents the results of thorough research into where Americans ate, how dining was discussed in newspapers and magazines, and the search by moderately well-off people for interesting, affordable food. At the same time, however, his arguments and conclusions are wedded to a simplistic opposition between democracy and snobbery. Rich people are caricatured as fatuous toffs who might as well be wearing top hats and sporting monocles, recalling the comedies of my 1950s youth (the non-American reader will forgive these parochial examples): Chatsworth Osborne Jr. from the Dobie Gillis television show, or Mr. Lodge from the Archie comic-strip. Opposing them are bold middle-class diners presented as 'an unlikely group of cultural insurgents' (p. 8), battling against the Francophile aristocracy to win a place for coffee shops and chop suey.

The result is an indispensable but puzzling, even frustrating, history of restaurants in the United States between 1880 and 1920. Intriguing questions are posed in *Turning the Tables*: What cuisines were

prestigious? Under what circumstances have women been welcomed at restaurants? What settings and what degree of formality have tended to succeed commercially? *Turning the Tables* is new because the rise of what Haley calls the middle-class restaurant is indeed an important social-historical development, one which has never before been discussed in such detail.

There had always been taverns and inns to cater to travelers, drinkers and others who did not regard dining as a destination experience. However, beginning in the 1830s fancy restaurants, with gracious service, menus and choices, served well-off diners whose tastes were modeled on those of France. Before 1880 there was little in the way of mid-level eating establishments between elegant restaurants and bleak workingmen's cafes or oyster bars. The decades after 1880 saw the proliferation of options for the growing managerial and professional class whose members were uncomfortable in the over-refined atmosphere of Delmonico's, but who wanted something nicer than the rough and tumble of coarse eating houses. The new types of middle-class establishments included what would now be called ethnic restaurants ? notably German, Italian and Chinese eateries, but also steakhouses and light lunch spots especially favored by women (or at least intended for them).

Haley emphasizes the conscious choices made by the middle class, taking issue, therefore, with those such as Harvey Levenstein who see average Americans as easily manipulated by food corporations and nutritional experts. Rather than attributing new tastes for lighter and more varied food to urbanization, gender roles, health campaigns or manufactured demand, Haley praises his middle-class diners for their egalitarian spirit and thoughtful opinions. Haley's middle class is not the passive object of schemes of health experts or monopolistic food companies to change consumption patterns; rather it consists of canny and alert customers who change consumption and life-style according to their own desires. This is the major point of the book.

Praising the American middle class and giving it more agency than other historians do, Haley presents its members as admirable but rather severe people who consistently want restaurants that are home-like, unpretentious and economical. On the contrary, it seems to me, during the last 125 years Americans of modest affluence have adored restaurants with flash and gimmicks including attractions such as pretentiousness, ostentation, dancing, music, and exotic decor. They have patronized Tiki restaurants; roadside establishments shaped like wigwams, coffee-pots or chickens; drive-ins served by car-hops on roller skates; so-called continental restaurants with huge leatherette menus; Benihana of Tokyo (featuring comical tableside Japanese chopping and cooking); Outback Steakhouse (pseudo-Australian bonhomie); Hooters (scantily-clad waitresses)... The patrons of these restaurants are seeking not simplicity but spectacle at cheap prices and in a friendly, informal atmosphere.

If the austere virtues of the middle class are exaggerated, so is the arrogance and Francophilia of the elite and their elegant restaurants. Haley asserts (p. 12) that before 1880 'only the elites dined out for pleasure' and that this class distinguished itself by demonstrating the ability to order unfamiliar and expensive dishes. In fact, by 1880 restaurant menus were almost always in English and the names of dishes were only vaguely French in the manner of Chicken fricassee. Prestige items such as oysters, terrapin or canvasback wild ducks were as forthrightly American as anything served at the new establishments. Fine restaurants may not have had a Walt Whitmanesque clientele, but the managerial and professional classes were already well represented among their customers before the Civil War. It is also worth pointing out that however democratic the new middle-class eating places claimed to be, there were racial and other restrictions on equality that were very slow to change.

The first two chapters, 'Terrapin à la Maryland' and 'Playing at make believe: the failure of imitation' explore the snobbish French style and middle-class rejection of elite claims. According to Haley, the middle class regarded the tastes of the wealthy as antithetical to the values of family, civility and love of plain food. Haley devotes almost no attention to one of the great innovations of the turn of the century, the so-called 'lobster palaces' such as Rector's in New York. He thinks (pp. 135?6) these places with their crowds, spectacle and alluringly risqué ambience were simply another permutation of swank dining. In fact they were considerably less exclusive than Delmonico's. They were noisy, borderline disreputable and wildly popular. The lobster palaces fit neither the image of stuffy socialites fussing about the proper cutlery nor of

modest, healthy, sober go-getters.

Part of the confusion about the straight-laced versus the fun-loving middle class is the variety of restaurants forcibly fitted into the mould of supposedly middle-class standards. In chapter three, 'Catering to the great middle stripe', the dining categories include lunchrooms, chophouses, table d'hôtes (offering fixed-price multi-course meals), department store establishments, ice cream parlors, tea shops, and coffee shops. Some of these catered to office workers, especially women who wanted respectable, clean places with minimal alcoholic offerings, others to courting couples or to families. Some featured music and fancy decor while others were modernist and functional. They may all have attracted people who were neither rich nor poor, but their purpose and popularity had little to do with defying the opulence of the American Gilded Age.

A subsequent chapter considers restaurants opened by immigrants and patronized largely by those outside the immigrant community. Here the first adopters were those referred to as 'Bohemians': artists, journalists, but also reasonably well-off professionals who were the antithesis of the frugally respectable patrons of the Automat or of ladies' tea rooms. There has always been considerable diversity within the middle class.

The variety of ethnic restaurants remains to this day a defining characteristic of the American culinary scene. The enthusiasm for experimentation among different kinds of cuisines began in this period. Here, in the fourth chapter of the book, the middle-class diner is presented as 'cosmopolitan' rather than as the revolutionary advocate of down-to-earth simplicity and respectability. This is fine insofar as it describes a desire for variety and a certain savoir faire, but there is a tension between experimentation and regression to an American norm that Haley describes but does not seem to appreciate. Between 1890 and 1910, for example, Chinese and Italian establishments would become less exotic and increasingly bland and formulaic.

The advantages of restaurants featuring foreign cuisine were cheapness, abundance and an interesting assortment of flavors both unfamiliar and appealing. As early as 1893, Haley has found, New Yorkers boasted that their city made up in diversity of cuisines what it lacked in gastronomic tradition. Haley admits that this experimentation was accompanied by a simultaneous tendency to favor the Americanization of ethnic cuisine, but he does not discuss its implications or how it almost comically played out. The chop suey craze began just before 1900 and lasted into the 1920s as Chinese restaurants became stylized exotic destinations with oriental decor and familiar food. The fact that the newly opened Hotel Astor in New York had an 'Indian Rathskeller' (p. 213) is hardly an indication of growing sophistication. Just three pages earlier the Astor is introduced as an example of the hegemony of French cuisine in 1904 giving way to a less pretentious American menu in 1927. Haley assumes that the customers who patronized middle-class ethnic restaurants were knowledgeable gourmands: 'they had visited Chinatown and spoke knowingly about Hungarian dining customs' (p. 218). The threatening allure of Chinatown and its association not only with inexpensive food but with opium and the white slave trade has been explored by historians of Asian-America but here it's just a neighborhood visited with open-minded curiosity.

Haley demonstrates little sense of how tastes were shaped by restaurant owners or how authenticity and familiarity to this day pull in different directions. Restaurant snobbery is very much alive among members of the middle class to this day, especially with regard to knowledge of foreign dining customs Haley writes about, but opinions are formed and reformed in a dynamic process. Yesterday's cutting-edge dish (General Tso's Chicken, for example) becomes today's inauthentic joke. Haley believes that there has been constant progress in democratization of taste: the cosmopolitan temperament is vindicated today by the popularity of the Olive Garden chain. This comes up against the already-mentioned difficulty of matching a supposedly unitary middle class with a complex set of mid-level restaurants.

The most intriguing chapter to my mind is on women and dining in this period, chapter six, 'Satisfying their hunger: middle class women and respectability'. Between 1880 and 1920 women more frequently dined in public places and many establishments catered to them, but the path to this was irregular and its indirection shows the complications of gender roles and perceptions. In the early 19th century there were provisions made in hotels for women traveling alone or in groups. A Ladies' Ordinary was set aside as a place for respectable women to dine and often had a separate entrance to avoid the dubious men and not-respectable

women who congregated in the lobby. The food at these establishments was virtually the same as that served in the Gentlemen's Ordinary. The latter was reserved for men; mixed couples would dine in the ladies' dining room.

This accommodation was by no means the rule, however, and at some restaurants such as Delmonico's, unescorted women were not allowed at all before the 1880s, and for a time admitted only at lunch. At the beginning of Haley's period restaurants for women become more visible. Tea rooms were a feature of this period, places that served light meals and that catered to ordinary women. The spread of clean, economical and reasonably pleasant lunch spots for women working in clerical jobs changed the urban landscape and food options. Chains like Schrafft's and Childs provided sandwiches, salads, fare considered light or feminine, but also (especially Schrafft's) chocolates and ice-cream, thought to be appealing to women's somewhat childish tastes. Both affluent shoppers and female office workers were attracted to such relaxing and unchallenging restaurants. Of course these were not defined as exclusively for women, but then as now certain restaurants and certain times (lunch, generally) were informally understood as gendered female.

As will be evident, Haley shows that several kinds of middle-class dining developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The restaurants were so disparate, however, that the only thing they have in common is their marking off a space away from the opulent French establishment. Haley devotes a final chapter ('Ending Linguistic Disguises: The Decline of French Cuisine') to the replacement of the elite model by informal alternatives. He doubts that Delmonico's and other restaurants that closed after 1920 were simply victims of Prohibition (the outlawing of the sale of alcohol which would last from 1919 to 1933), but rather credits the middle-class diner with their demise: 'The aristocratic restaurant had succumbed to the cosmopolitan, and the middle class now set the nation's table' (p. 223). This is a rather literal estimation of the 1920s, as if *Main Street* and *Babbitt* were all there was (in fact Sinclair Lewis' heroine in the former, Carole Kennicott, gets into trouble out in Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, by serving her neighbors chow mein, lychee nuts and ginger in syrup).

Haley consistently underestimates American snobbery. French restaurants would again assume an unquestioned sway in the mid 20th century beginning with the opening of New York's Le Pavillon in 1941. No one ruled more autocratically or haughtily that its owner Henri Soulé. The dominance of mid 20th-century French restaurants ended in the 1980s, but the evaluation of social class in dining flourishes still even if the measuring tools have changed. The middle classes at times have participated in a certain discourse about the decadent profligacy of the rich, but more often they are interested in the elite as models, as emblems of life-style fantasies and as trend-setters. One doesn't have to be a devoté of French sociology to see that increasing one's cultural capital is a persistent feature of American life.

Following from this unwillingness to appreciate the enduring power of social positioning, Haley is inclined to over-estimate the democratic agenda of middle-class diners. More than preoccupying themselves with those socially above them, the middle classes chose restaurants based on attitudes towards those perceived as inferiors ? the desire to avoid the rude, unclean atmosphere of lower-class haunts; concerns with neatness, hygiene and modernity; assurance of safe spaces for women; arrangements of the ethnic social order so that service was trustworthy. The rise of the middle-class restaurant coincided with the increasingly firm demarcation of racially segregated spaces and increasingly ferocious anti-immigrant sentiment.

Turning the Tables is an excellent piece of research whose interpretive framework quite clearly fits the admittedly well-worn rubric 'raises more questions than it answers'.

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