

Phases of Family-Owned Ethnic Food Establishments

Ethnic restaurants, bakeries and food establishments, or places that sell food specifically associated with a certain ethnic group, nationality or region, are an important staple of the American restaurant scene. Many begin as family businesses and many change, survive, or close due to family input and labor; the evolution of the family restaurant and the idea of family labor and succession are inextricably linked. In this essay I will examine the evolution of family-owned ethnic restaurants through the lens of Jennifer Berg's theory of the phases of ethnic food and will look at how family contributes to that evolution.

Many ethnic restaurants, bakeries, and other food establishments rely on family labor and on eventual family succession. From the Yonah Schimmel Knish Bakery in early 20th century New York City to 1st of Thai in 21st century Faribault, Minnesota, restaurants have benefited from the time, labor and ideas of family members. According to a study of ethnic economies in metropolitan areas, family workers often "form an important component of an enclave work force."ⁱ In her book *We Are What We Eat*, Donna Gabaccia reiterates this point, saying that "family businesses survive because...they use unpaid family labor."ⁱⁱ Indeed, in researching various ethnic food establishments in southern Minnesota, nearly all of the interviews referenced family work, from instances as small as kids working the bakery counter after school to as large as kids dropping out of college in order to help keep the family restaurant afloat.

However, the common thread is that none of these establishments would have survived as long or as robustly as they have without tangible family help.

Another important aspect of ethnic restaurants is that they often change their offerings or their marketing as time goes on and subsequent generations take over the business. The food itself may change, for example becoming less spicy or using more familiar ingredients, and the way it is presented may change as well, to make it seem more familiar or accessible. In the case of ethnic restaurants, these changes are sometimes seen as a de-ethnicization of the food. Gabaccia points out that throughout the 20th century, “Even in companies firmly in family hands, under the supervision of the children and grandchildren of immigrant founders, ethnicity came uncoupled from product as it found success nationwide.”ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, familial succession and the evolution and often de-ethnicization of food are often inextricably linked in the world of ethnic restaurants.

In her article “From the Big Bagel to the Big Roti?: The Evolution of New York City’s Jewish Food Icons,” Jennifer Berg references a phase theory that describes the acceptance or rejection of ethnic food.^{iv} This theory presents an interesting lens through which to view the evolution of family-owned ethnic restaurants. In the article she applies the framework to Jewish foods, positing that in phase one, Jewish immigrants ate certain foods (like knishes, hot dogs and bagels) out of necessity, and that the foods carried no symbolic meaning. In phase two, social-climbing Jews moved out of the city and accordingly abandoned these foods as remnants of a life they no longer wanted. In phase three, suburban Jews who were now financially stable “no longer had to disdain the ethnic markers from earlier days,” and so they began to return to the foods.^v These foods

proceeded to become nostalgic and, in the case of the hot dog and the bagel, de-ethnicized, appealing to both Jews and non-Jews alike. In other words, the food went from being an enclave necessity to being an accessible and more Americanized pleasure.

Although this theory does not apply flawlessly to the evolution of family owned ethnic restaurants, phases one and three do have notable parallels. Phase one in the restaurant track is establishing a restaurant or selling ethnic food that one is familiar with, with less of a focus on marketability and more of a focus on traditional methods and flavors. Phase one often corresponds with the first or first few generations of owners. For example, 1st of Thai Restaurant in Faribault, Minnesota was started by a Thai immigrant who was familiar with the restaurant business due to his time spent working in Chinese and Vietnamese restaurants. According to his son, Somsanith Sithisack, his dad learned to cook “over there” (in Laos and Thailand) because “when you grow up your parents make you cook.” In opening his Thai restaurant, Sithisack said his dad was “going to cook the authentic way and [was] not going to Americanize his own art.”^{vi} In other words, he was enacting the first phase of the family-owned ethnic restaurants.

The equivalent of phase three in ethnic restaurants is the change in approach from the more authentic to the more “Americanized” or marketable goods. This phase often involves a de-ethnicization of the food involved and often occurs at the behest of a younger relative. For example, Junior’s restaurant in New York City (home of the famous Junior’s cheesecake) is now run by the original owner’s two grandsons, who “have expanded the business to include mail-order cheesecakes and egg cream kits,” items that are not a necessity either for the seller or the consumer.^{vii} This is an example of restaurant evolution specifically thanks to family input. In the case of 1st of Thai Restaurant, the

connection between family succession and phase three adaptation of food is a bit more nebulous. Sithisack maintains that he will keep doing things the way his father did, he also admits that customers can control a fair amount about their dishes, saying “you can come in and modify your own dish and we’ll do that for you, no problem.”^{viii} In other words, the restaurant tries to remain authentic, but customer preference and marketability has influenced the practical way the restaurant operates under Sithisack’s management.

1st of Thai’s movement towards phase three—towards marketing foods in a specific and perhaps slightly more Americanized way—can be seen right on the menu. For example, many of the menu items keep their Thai names as the primary dish name. A more detailed description of the dish follows, including things like whether or not it has noodles or what vegetables are involved. This assumes both a desire for authenticity (the fact that the dish has a Thai name implies that it is authentic at some level) and a low level of familiarity with the food in question. The descriptions include words like “popular” and “authentic” and phrases like “The best in town!”^{ix} These descriptors show the compromises that are made between authenticity and accessibility. They serve to remind people that the food they are choosing is exotic yet approachable.

There are many ways that this theory can be twisted, mutated, and applied to other ethnic establishments. Lau’s Czech Bakery in New Prague, Minnesota, provides one interesting spin on the theory. In an interview, owners Doug and Patty Lau described how they had added new flavors to their traditional Czech pastries, offering the Czech kolacky now with raspberry or cream cheese filling in addition to the traditional poppy seed, apricot and prune. Doug explained that evolution was needed to stay in business: “If we were still doing what we were doing 20 years ago, we would have been broke 10 years

ago.”^x However, Lau’s veers from the theory because, although they are not the first owners of the bakery, they are the first in their family to own it, so it is the first generation and not the children or younger relatives who are making the change. The Laus do have children but do not want their children to take over, even though that will likely mean the end of the bakery. This points to the importance of family for restaurant continuation.

One large way that this theory differs from Berg’s original application is that phase two is missing. This is because restaurants are a livelihood. In Berg’s original theory, Jews could afford (literally and symbolically) to distance themselves from ethnic food markers. There were other foods to nourish them in the meantime, and with time the foods were distanced from their old poor connotations and came to have a new nostalgic connotation. With restaurants, the equivalent phase would be a son or a grandson taking over the business, then deciding that he did not like what his restaurant’s food symbolized about his family and his heritage, and subsequently shutting down the restaurant. The family would then lose all funds from the restaurant and be out of work. They would have to find new jobs and would not have the opportunity of ever reaching their particular phase three. Even if the restaurant simply changed its tack, it would still likely undergo significant financial loss, making any sort of phase two simply not viable for restaurants. Even with the lack of phase two, this theory provides an interesting new lens for considering restaurant evolution and family succession and the close ways the two related.

ⁱ John R. Logan, Richard D. Alba, and Thomas L. McNulty, “Ethnic Economies in Metropolitan Regions: Miami and Beyond,” *Social Forces* 72 (1994): 701.

ⁱⁱ Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 87, 161.

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} Jennifer Berg, “From the Big Bagel to the Big Roti? The Evolution of New York City’s Jewish Food Icons,” in *Gastropolis: Food and New York City*, ed. Annie Hauck-Lawson and Jonathan Deutsch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 252-273.

^v *ibid*

^{vi} Interview with Somsanith Sithisack (manager of First of Thai, Faribault, MN), May, 2011.

^{vii} Berg, 262.

^{viii} Interview with Somsanith Sithisack (manager of First of Thai, Faribault, MN), May, 2011.

^{ix} Menu, First of Thai Restaurant, Faribault, MN. Accessed May 27 2010.

^x Interview with Doug and Patty Lau (owners of Lau’s Czech Bakery, New Prague, MN), interview by Lia Bendix, Kelsey Cox, Kelsea Dombrowski, and Hillary Wiener, May 2, 2011.

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