

Ethnic Food Smells: The Unwanted Foodway

“You smell like a doughnut!” The insults of grade school are many and varied, but this insult must surely be unusual. However, it was commonly heard by the children of Doug and Patty Lau, bakers and owners of Lau’s Czech Bakery in New Prague, Minnesota. At first glance being compared to a doughnut does not sound like a very harsh attack—doughnuts are generally considered to smell good—but in this case it was clearly used as a jibe. This could be overlooked as a random example of petty childhood cruelty but for the frequency of negative odor related comments in the interview with the Lau family. The Laus said that they had been accused of smelling like doughnuts themselves, discussed how poppy seeds (a standard ingredient in Czech baking) stank when they were ground, and twice mentioned how “smelly” the sauerkraut they used in their products was.¹ Although not of Czech origin, Doug and Patty had enthusiastically embraced the traditional Czech baked goods when they bought the bakery more than twenty years ago, learning from the community about bake authentic Czech treats. However, they had not accepted the necessarily accompanying food smells to the same degree.

This acceptance of every aspect of a culture’s food, except for the odors, is not I believe unique to the Lau family. Instead, I propose that an aversion to the odors of ethnic foods is common among Americans who otherwise embrace many aspects of another culture’s foodway. This phenomenon can be best understood by looking at Americans eating and making ethnic food as, in the words of Lucy Long, culinary tourists. Culinary tourism is “the intentional, exploratory participation [consumption, preparation, or presentation] in the foodways of a [cultural, regional, chronological,

ethical/religious, or socioeconomic] other.” It is characterized by eating or making foods because of, not in spite of, the fact that they are different and unusual.ⁱⁱ One of the defining features of culinary tourism is the tourist’s ability to pick and choose which aspects of a culture he or she would like to temporarily appropriate.ⁱⁱⁱ

Historically, culinary tourists have eaten modified ethnic foods, dressed in ethnic costumes, performed or watched ethnic dances or music, and decorated their house in an ethnic style, but they have not chosen to not appropriate ethnic food odors. Instead, they have done everything they can to minimized the ethnic food odors. They deodorized their houses after cooking ethnic foods to conceal the smell.^{iv} Sometimes, they even attempted to deodorize the food itself, washing macaroni that they believed might have been exposed to “odors of every kind” during preparation before cooking.^v Furthermore, ethnic cookbook in the late 1800s offered women strategies for cooking ethnic foods without the odors by offering alternatives for smelly ingredients such as garlic.^{vi} This distaste for ethnic food odors persists to this day. A Korean company has developed freeze-dried kimchi, which has been scientifically engineered to not have the strong smell characteristic of this fermented cabbage product. It retains the taste and nutrients of traditional kimchi, but loses the smell and is specifically designed to make Korean food more accessible to a foreign audience.^{vii}^{viii} Doug and Patty Lau’s embarrassment about smelling like an ethnic food appears to be the rule rather than the exception.

This begs the question of why Americans are so unwilling to embrace the odors that necessarily accompany ethnic foods. I believe that there are two primary reasons why this occurs. Ignoring the “ethnic” component of smells for a moment, odors in general have a historical reputation for being a sign of a lack of civilization. Smell is a

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very primal sense, and humans' ability to be guided by our senses other than smell is something that distinguishes people from animals. However, humans do still rely on smell, and a strong smell can uncomfortably remind people of their more earthly characteristics. Potentially for these reasons, a strong or unfamiliar smell is associated with a lack of civilization in civilizations ranging from ancient Rome to modern day America.^{ix} These connotations apply not just to unpleasant odors, but to all strong odors. While the odor of a doughnut is not objectively unpleasant it is still an odor that reminds people of their animalistic origins and past and therefore is something of which to be wary. Given the negative connotations of odors, it makes sense that since culinary tourists have the privilege to choose which aspects of an ethnic foodway to appropriate, they would choose to leave food odors behind.

Second smelling like a particular food can clearly mark a person as a member of a particular ethnic group, something that is not always desirable particularly in the context of culinary tourism. As previously mentioned, in Roman times smell was a distinguishing characteristic between barbarians and civilized peoples.^x More specifically smelling like a certain food can be a powerful marker of belonging to a certain ethnic group. For example in Jeffrey Eugenides's novel *Middlesex*, the heroine can identify members of different ethnic groups with her eyes closed merely by the smell of their food—onions for the Hungarian and garlic and yogurt for herself, the Greek.^{xi} In medieval Europe, Jews were considered to have a “goatlike” odor and could be identified as such.^{xii} Smell was a very powerful and very primal way of categorizing people into ethnic groups.

Culinary tourists walk a delicate line between wanting to participate in another culture's foodway and not wanting to actually become incorporated into the other culture. One reason that they do not want to be incorporated is because they are often imitating people of lower socioeconomic status than their own. For example, American housewives had a Chinese dinner party at a time when the Chinese immigrants were widely looked down upon.^{xiii} The women did not want to actually become Chinese; they just wanted to play at being Chinese for an evening.

More importantly, however, culinary tourism is often used by Americans to reinforce their "Americanness" and their place in the existing group by proving that they were so American they are unafraid to dabble in other cultures. If the purpose of the event is to reinforce American identity, than any sign of actually being in that ethnic group—such as inviting actual immigrants to a party or smelling like a member of a different ethnic group—is to be avoided at all costs.^{xiv} Due to its primal nature, smelling like a particular food appears to be a more powerful ethnic marker than cooking a dish or setting a table in an ethnic matter. In fact, smelling like a particular food may jeopardize your status as a culinary tourist and put you in the same category as an actual member of the ethnic group whose food you are appropriating at the moment.

This paper attempts to explain some of the underlying reasons why culinary tourists do not embrace ethnic food smells, but Doug and Patty's words probably tell it best. As their children discovered, by smelling like any food a person is seen as less sophisticated and therefore becomes open to teasing. However, as Doug and Patty brought up with their comments about smelling of sauerkraut and poppy seeds, smelling like an ethnic food is even riskier. When a person smells like a particular ethnic food, he

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or she is instantly marked as a member of an ethnic group and become vulnerable to any stereotypes or prejudice that others may have against that group. For a culinary tourist who just wants to dabble in another culture, this vulnerability is too deep an insight into the lives of others and so smelling like an ethnic food is a commitment that few are willing to make.

Endnotes

ⁱ Patty Lau, interviewed by Lia Bendix, May 2, 2011, transcript available from author.

ⁱⁱ Lucy M. Long, "Culinary Tourism: A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness," in *Culinary Tourism*, ed. Lucy M. Long. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 20-50.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kristin L. Hoganson, "Entertaining Difference: Popular Geography in Various Guises," in *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of Domesticity, 1865-1920* ed. Kristin L. Hoganson. (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 137-146.

^{iv} Benjamin Aides Wurgaft, "Incensed: Food Smells and Ethnic Tension," *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 6 (Spring 2006), pp. 58.

^v Hoganson, "Entertaining Difference," 128.

^{vi} Hoganson, "Entertaining Difference," 147.

^{vii} Ju-min Park, "South Korean creates kimchi that won't smell," *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 2009. Accessed May 30, 2011. <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jul/23/world/fg-korea-kimchi23>

^{viii} "Longhai Jiasheng Product Description," Longhai Jaiasheng Company, accessed May 30, 2011, http://jiashengfood.en.alibaba.com/product/252160368209790484/Freeze_Dried_Kimchi_Cake.html

^{ix} Wurgaft, "Incensed," 58.

^x Wurgaft, "Incensed," 58.

^{xi} Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002).

^{xii} Wurgatt, "Incensed," 58.

^{xiii} Hoganson, "Entertaining Difference," 147.

^{xiv} Hoganson, "Entertaining Difference," 148-150.