FOOD IN TOURISM
Attraction and Impediment

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Abstract: The common perception of food as a mere attraction in tourism is challenged by stressing the complications and impediments experienced by tourists in the local culinary sphere in unfamiliar destinations, even when attracted to the local cuisine. Hygiene standards, health considerations, communication gaps, and the limited knowledge of tourists concerning the local cuisine are discussed, while the role of ethnic restaurants at home in preparing tourists for the food abroad is questioned. The various ways in which culinary establishments mediate between the tourists and the local cuisine are described. The authenticity of dishes in such establishments and the varieties of culinary experience are considered. Keywords: food, cuisine, culinary establishments, ethnic restaurants.

INTRODUCTION

“...every tourist is a voyeuring gourmand...” (Lacy and Douglass 2002:8).

At an international conference dedicated to “Local Food and Tourism”, held in Cyprus in November 2000, an overwhelming

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majority of papers was dedicated to local food as an attraction in different destinations (Leu 2000; Skinner 2000; van Westering, Poria and Liapis 2000). None of the scholars present suggested that the confrontation with strange local food might also constitute a problem for the tourists. The only issue that did raise some concern was that of health and hygiene standards in certain destinations (Chikhaoui 2000; Duke 2000; Per-Anders 2000), but the prevailing attitude was that such problems are temporary and can be easily resolved.

Most of the papers at this conference dealt with the culinary practices of West European tourists visiting destinations in their own countries or in the same region, such as France, the United Kingdom, Denmark, or Sweden. The most “exotic” and remote destinations discussed were Cyprus and Greece which, according to Herzfeld are “aboriginal European” cultures (1987:49), as well as Tunisia.

However, the eating practices at the conference itself seemed to contradict some of the assumptions and claims made by the participants. The lunches provided at the conference were served in the hotel’s dining room and featured a potpourri of Greek, Cypriot, and West European dishes. The organizers told the second author of this paper that it was “easier, quicker, and more convenient to eat in the hotel”, and that the varied buffet allowed for each participant to choose according to his own taste and preferences. In the evenings, the participants ate in the vicinity of the hotel, in the tourism strip of Larnaka, and chose dishes from Italian, French, German, and English menus. Only two meals were taken at a local restaurant or “taverna”, both of which were clearly tourism-oriented, featuring English menus and English speaking waiters. On both occasions, the food was chosen by the Cypriot hosts. A quick survey among the participants revealed that most of the participants did not eat independently even once in a local restaurant that was not tourism-oriented. Clearly, even for experts in the field, “local food” becomes acceptable only if it is to some extent transformed. This transformation is the principal concern of this article.

The study of food, eating, and culinary institutions became a burgeoning subfield of sociological and anthropological research in recent years (Beardsworth and Keil 1996; Bell and Valentine 1997; Fine 1996; Lupton 1996; MacClancy 1992; Mennell, Murcott and van Otterloo 1992; Warde 1996; Warde and Martens 2000; Watson 1996). However, while the relations between tourism and different aspects of the culture at the destinations—such as art, religion, and sexuality—were thoroughly studied by researchers of tourism, the interface between tourism and food was, until recently, neglected by scholars of both tourism and food.

In the promotional literature, the cuisine of touristic destinations is widely advertised. Indeed, the few publications on food in tourism mostly deal with it as a significant attraction (Hjalager and Richards 2002). There are hardly any detailed studies of the actual eating practices of tourists, or of the processes of transformation of local culinary
establishments in course of the penetration of a locality by tourism (Reynolds 1993).

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it presents the two facets of “local food” in destinations: as an attraction and as an impediment, suggesting that the problem of producing nutritious, hygienic, accessible, and culturally acceptable food to tourists is more complicated than what might be assumed from promotional brochures or magazines. Second, it examines the mechanisms through which this problem is dealt with by local culinary establishments and the tourism industry, showing that these mechanisms evolve along similar lines as in the domain of tourist arts (Cohen 1992, 2000).

While the existing literature is mainly concerned with the gastronomic offerings in Western and some other, touristically developed, destinations, this article focuses on destinations in East and Southeast Asia, whose culinary cultures differ markedly from those the tourists are used to in their countries of origin. Particularly, it is concerned with Western tourists who seek to eat local food rather than on those who merely seek fare familiar from home, since the case of the former exposes more radically the intricate impediments faced by tourists when dealing with the cuisine at strange destinations.

The examples are taken mainly from observations on West Europeans and Israelis traveling individually or in tour-groups in China, Thailand, and Vietnam. The data are derived from more than two decades of extensive research on tourism in Thailand by one of the authors, and more than 10 years of experience in guiding tour-groups and a year of intensive anthropological fieldwork focused on Vietnamese foodways, by the other.

THE TWO FACES OF FOOD IN TOURISM

Theorists of tourism have tended, explicitly or implicitly, to take the “sightseer” as the prototype of “the tourist”. This tendency led to the prioritization of attractions as the principal focus of analysis in the sociology of tourism (MacCanell 1973, 1976) and the accompanying prioritization of the visual over the other senses in the discourse of the tourist’s role and conduct, as, for example, in Urry’s (1990) influential The Tourist’s Gaze. The prioritization of the visual sense had two important corollaries for the study of tourism: tourists were dealt with primarily as uninvolved “observers”, while their more mundane survival needs only rarely became the subject of explicit theorizing or empirical study; and the place of other senses in their experience, beside the visual, was generally neglected. The growing preoccupation with the body in general sociology has recently engendered some attention to bodily feelings (Wang 2000:361–363) and to other sensual experiences in tourism besides the visual (Macmaughten and Urri 1998:104; Ryan 1996:25). Curiously, however, the most bodily of the senses, taste, and more specifically eating and drinking, remained virtually unexplored in the sociological and anthropological study of tourism, notwithstanding their obvious centrality in the experience.
In terms of bodily involvement, vision and taste are polar opposites. In vision, bodily involvement and hence risk to the body are relatively low. Virtually everything can be looked at without serious bodily risks (except in extreme cases, such as gazing without protection at the sun). In contrast, eating or drinking, activities mediated by taste, involve the body directly with the environment and hence pose a potential risk. As Fischler (1988) has pointed out, eating involves the concrete “incorporation” (ingestion) of stuff from the environment into the body; swallowing every bit of food constitutes, in principle, an irreversible decision, which in extreme cases may mean the difference between life and death. Taste is the principal regulator of this ecological exchange between the body and its environment. Its role may be repetitive and routinized in the individual’s everyday life; but it increases in importance in the often novel, unaccustomed, and strange situations in which tourists find themselves on a trip. Thus, strange foods and beverages represent potential bodily risks in a sense in which strange views (though they may be psychologically shattering) do not.

In the popular, and especially the promotional tourism literature, food at a prospective destination is generally presented as an attraction: the fresh, succulent seafood in seaside resorts, the peculiar ethnic cuisines of exotic peoples, the renown restaurants in luxurious hotels, on cruiseliners and in world metropolises. Whole countries or individual cities are promoted for their unique culinary attractions (Dann 1996:236; Noguchi 1992).

Any study of the place of food in tourism will indeed have to analyze its role as an attraction. But it is at least equally important to deal with its other face, as a basic necessity on the trip, a crucial precondition for other touristic activities, as well as for the tourists’ well-being and satisfaction. While they may forego a sightseeing trip on their program if they find it unattractive or intimidating, they cannot avoid eating (and drinking), even if the available food is unfamiliar, unpalatable, and even disgusting or frightening. The two faces of food in tourism, as an attraction and as an impediment, are both of considerable sociological interest. This article will deal with both, but devote greater attention to the latter, whose importance in tourism has up till now passed virtually unnoticed.

Tradition and Novelty in Food

Strangeness and familiarity are general categories of interpretation of the world (Schuetz 1944:507). These categories are particularly important in tourism and have been employed by Cohen (1972) in the formulation of a typology of tourist roles. His basic argument was that tourists travel in quest of novelty and strangeness, but most need a degree of familiarity to enjoy their experience: an “environmental bubble” of their home environment. The extent to which tourists take shelter in that bubble, or expose themselves to the strangeness of the host environment, lies at the basis of the typology.
In the sociology of food, the dimension of familiarity and strangeness implicitly underlies Fischler’s (1988) distinction between the “neophobic” and “neophylic” tendencies in taste. According to Fischler, both tendencies may be found among individuals. They dislike or suspect new, and hence unfamiliar foodstuffs and dishes. Or they tend to search for novel and strange food. These terms, taken from biology, are also applicable to human attitudes to food. But since human eating is not merely adaptive but also a cultural phenomenon (Beardsworth and Keil 1996:102; Mennell, Murcott and van Otterloo 1992:8), neophobia and neophilia among humans are engendered by both biological and cultural influences. There are considerable differences between cultures in the extent to which they encourage neophylic tendencies. Until recently, most Asians shunned novel foods, while modern Westerners increasingly engaged in quests of new foods and dishes. However, within each culture, particularly in the West, there are also considerable differences between social classes and individuals. Indeed, people could be classified in terms of the relative predominance of their neophobic as against neophylic tendencies in food.

Such a classification may be of some significance for the study of culinary habits of people under ordinary everyday circumstances. But it could be particularly significant for the study of food in tourism, where people are exposed to a greater extent than in their daily lives to potentially unfamiliar foodstuffs and dishes. Indeed, the relative strength of the tourist’s neophobic as against neophylic tendencies could be employed to construct a typology in the culinary sphere, paralleling Cohen’s general typology.

However, the crucial trait of touristic culinary situations appears to be that they exacerbate the tension between neophobic and neophylic tendencies in most individuals. On the one hand, since eating involves actual bodily involvement with the unfamiliar environment of the destination, the intake of food and beverages, the neophobic tendencies will become more prominent. Thus, tourists will be generally reluctant to taste or eat “strange” foods, whose ingredients are unknown or unfamiliar to them. Such eating may appear to be more threatening and involving greater “survival risk” than most other kinds of contact with the environment. This is particularly the case in visits by Westerners to destinations in some Third World countries, which are perceived as remote, mysterious, or dangerous. In such situations, neophobia will tend to become the dominant touristic propensity. Few would even dare to taste unknown dishes without first finding out about their ingredients and manner of preparation. “What is this?” is thus the first question asked when dealing with an unknown dish. Indeed, the authors observed that some tourists, who are otherwise fairly adventurous (for instance, Western backpackers in remote destinations), are frequently fastidious regarding local food and reluctant to eat the local fare. An extreme example of such a culinary situation has evolved along Nepal’s tracking routes, where adventurers who dare to climb the high passes of the Himalayas subsist on improvised toasts, pizzas, pancakes, and apple-pies, while their
local porters and guides eat *tzampa* oat porridge, *momo* dumplings, and *dal-bat* (rice-lentils portions).

However, tourists on a trip are frequently eager for new experiences and willing to take greater risks than in their ordinary life. The trip may stimulate their neophylic tendencies, motivating them to try novel and strange dishes and beverages (as well as intoxicants and drugs). But even those who search for new culinary experiences may be repelled by the local culinary situation and reluctant or unable to partake of the food served in local culinary establishments, particularly in Third World countries. Therefore, it is important to analyze the local culinary situation and examine the impediments which it imposes on the tourists.

**Food as a Prospective Tourist Attraction and Actual Impediment**

There is a basic ambivalence in the tourists’ anticipation of a trip to a relatively unfamiliar destination. While excited about the pleasures of novel experiences, they are often worried about the trip’s adaptive aspects: the climate, the accommodations, health risks, and especially the availability of safe, edible, and palatable food and beverage. Such considerations appear to become increasingly salient as the date of departure approaches and as the vague, pleasing images and fantasies regarding the destination are overshadowed by more concrete and practical preparations for the trip. The second author has noted that Israelis departing for Asia commonly express worries that “there would be nothing to eat there”; some of them even carry along basic foodstuffs (such as crackers and instant meals) as an “iron ration.” Though such worries and precautions might be attributed to the Jewish dietary laws (*Kashrut*), he noted that while on the tour, many Israelis tend to relax their avoidance of non-kosher food, but remain extremely worried about hygiene and about culturally unacceptable food such as dog, cat, and reptile meat.

Habitual attachment to accustomed foods and cuisine appears to be a general human tendency. But in modern societies, local cuisines increasingly opened up to external influences and frequently assimilated dishes from other localities and cultures, or fused them with local ones (Mintz 1996:187–189). The neophylic tendencies of modern Westerners led to an accelerated addition of new foodstuffs and dishes from ever more remote cuisines (such as the Chinese and the Japanese) to their daily fare. Modern Western tourists will thus generally maintain some openness even to unfamiliar cuisines. Moreover, moderns have at their disposal a wide range of sources of information about other cuisines (such as cookbooks and newspaper features) and may have experienced some of these cuisines in ethnic restaurants in their home setting. Indeed, with the recent boom in such enterprises, many Westerners have been exposed to a growing variety of foreign cuisines. Thus, they feel that they are acquainted with them, though they have not yet visited the places in which these cuisines originated.

However, the tourists’ everyday knowledge about food at a strange destination, despite their possible previous acquaintance with it in
their home setting, and even their preparations, will in most cases be insufficient to deal with the actual encounter with the local culinary situation. Tourists at the destination face not merely unfamiliar food-stuffs and dishes, but a whole unfamiliar culinary institutional set-up. Since their accustomed domestic arrangements in the preparation and consumption of food are normally not reproducible on the trip, the tourists have to satisfy their alimentary needs in alternative ways, primarily in commercial culinary establishments. Insofar as tourism-oriented establishments are not locally available, they have to struggle with a whole range of unfamiliar and sometimes repulsive or even threatening local culinary arrangements even before they attempt to approach the menu. While for the more adventurous tourists such circumstances may present a challenge, most tourists tend to experience anxiety, insecurity, and frustration. Various contextual features of the local culinary situation may act as impediments to taste or eat local food, even for tourists with a neophylic inclination.

**Impediments on Tourists’ Neophylic Inclinations**

“I don’t eat meat in Thailand; people here touch the meat with their hands” (German female youth tourist, overheard in Pai, northern Thailand, in 1999).

“So I went all the way to India and won’t see the Taj-Mahal?!...” (Israeli tourist who had to see a doctor for severe diarrhea in Agra, India, in 1998).

**Hygiene and Health**

Tourists are concerned about external threats, in particular crime, inclement weather, or illness, which could unexpectedly intervene and spoil their trip or vacation. Indeed, fear of illness may be the principal reason for tourists’ suspicion of local foods, which might make them sick. They are primarily preoccupied with immediate, unwanted effects of food on their well being (such as an upset stomach), rather than with some long-range threats (such as the presence of dangerous chemicals in the food). This emphasis upon the immediate effect is related to the broader attitude of tourists to time (Cohen 1986). Tourist time is “quality time”; most are on a relatively short and expensive trip and desire to make the most of it. They tend to perceive the time on the trip as “nonordinary” (Graburn 1977:21), qualitatively different from everyday ordinary time, and marked by an enhanced sense of well-being which could easily be spoiled by a bad stomach. Such indisposition would not only be unpleasant by itself, but might also cause the loss of various anticipated experiences on the trip.

The second author noted that when tourists seek advice from health specialists and physicians before taking the trip, the latter tend to exacerbate the formers’ health concerns. Seeking to play it safe, so that they would avoid accusations of negligence, physicians often warn their clients of a wide range of dangers in the domain of food
and beverage (just as they tend to provide them with a wide range of preventive drugs and inoculations).

The heightened concern with health problems caused by food is reflected in the many stories tourists tell about their unfortunate culinary experiences, as well as by the widespread tourist myths regarding alleged culinary threats typical of particular destinations. The tourists’ apprehensions regarding the safety of food (and beverage) in prospective destinations can be both assuaged and exacerbated by the routine warnings and advice regarding culinary matters found in guidebooks. A perusal of these popular sources indicates that the most common sickness mentioned is diarrhea: “Travelers diarrhea has been around for a long time—even Marco Polo had it…” (Buckley, Samagalski, Cummings, Storey and Strauss 1994:135). “Almost every traveler who stays in Egypt for more than a week seems to be hit with Pharaoh’s Revenge—diarrhea…” (Wayne and Simonis 1994:71). The most common warning in guidebooks is against drinking tap water. Thus, a guidebook on the Philippines warns that “care in what you eat or drink is the most important health rule; stomach upsets are the most likely travel health problem” (Peters 1991:65). Tap water in many destinations (both in developed and developing countries) is indeed unsafe or contaminated, and even locals often consume bottled water or boil it out of the tap. However, stressing the dangers of consuming the most basic nutrient (second only to oxygen), induces and enhances suspicions and fear that might develop into a general avoidance of local foodstuffs. Indeed, the second author found that tourists avoid salads “because the vegetables were washed in contaminated water”.

Avoiding the local drinking water is only the first line of defense. Many tourists are reluctant to eat local food at hawker’s stalls, though it may look inviting. Indeed, such fastidiousness led the authors of Thai Hawkers’ Food to argue that “One misconception to hawkers’ food is that most of them are [sic] unhygienic”. However, after admitting that “there is bound to be some litter on the floor [around the stall]... terrible looking display of chicken, heaps of unwashed plates and maybe uncovered condiment bottles” the authors ask, “if millions are happy gobbling down hawker fare daily, surely it would not be as clinically disastrous for a visitor to have a go, just for once or more times?” (Yee and Gordon 1993:28). Similarly, a guidebook on the Philippines advises “Don’t become paranoid; trying the local food is part of the experience of travel” (Peters 1991:65).

The tourists’ apprehensions regarding the safety of local food at the destination constitute a significant impediment to novel culinary experiences. Even when they do not suffer from neophobia, tourists are often reluctant to eat, or even sample, local food out of health worries or disgust caused by its unhygienic appearance. To this should be added another common impediment: repulsion from the ways foods are consumed locally.
Local Eating Habits and Table Manners. Western table manners are thoroughly affected by aesthetic conceptions derived from the notion of “civilized conduct” and the ethos of individualism. For Westerners, the use of utensils is not only a hygienic device which safeguards the contamination of food by contact with the fingers, but also mediates between the food and the eater, between the meal as a “natural” substance, and its consumption as a “cultural” habit. Utensils thus symbolize civilized eating as against the animalistic devouring of food by “uncivilized” people (Elias 1978:139ff.).

However, in South and Southeast Asia, it is the local custom to scoop rice balls with one’s hand, tuck them into the curry or sauce and then put in the mouth. In many local eating venues that serve such dishes, there are no utensils available at all. The second author witnessed several occasions in which tourists, when finding out that there were no spoons or forks in a local culinary establishment, were very upset and even gave up the intention of eating there.

Western individualism finds expression in the separate apportioning of food to each eater, and the use of personal eating utensils (Elias 1978:143–144). Sensitive Westerners may be offended by such local habits as tucking one’s fingers or utensils in a shared dish, which are common in Asia. Such manners may appear unhygienic and aesthetically repulsive. Thus, when Western tourists are given the opportunity to experience a Thai meal and “share” the food, they tend to use separate utensils to dish it out. Indeed, in tourism-oriented establishments in northern Thailand, the tourists are served a kantok dinner in miniature “individualized” sets so that eating from a shared dish is avoided.

Even when not repulsed by local eating habits, tourists may feel intimidated by their unfamiliarity. Perhaps the best known example of difficulties experienced in handling local utensils are chopsticks, widely in use in East and Southeast Asia. Much, indeed, has been made of teaching Westerners the relatively simple art of chopstick use by local hosts, most conspicuously by Chinese dignitaries demonstrating their use to visiting US presidents at state dinners. It should be noted that such instruction could not be reciprocated: it would be highly insulting if Western dignitaries would attempt to demonstrate to their Asian guests the use of a fork, since it would imply that they lacked a basic competence of civilized conduct.

The gap between the categories of culture and nature is even more prominent when the raw ingredients used to prepare certain dishes in some destinations are still alive upon the tourists arrival at the restaurant. Though criticized, it is still acceptable in the West to maintain live lobsters in a restaurant’s aquariums and to boil them in front of the customers. Fish restaurants often display fresh-fish and seafood over ice. However, as an Israeli told the second author, “lobsters have no facial expressions and fish make no sounds...”. It is a common practice in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, and other countries to display in restaurants live animals intended for cooking. Fish, shrimps, and eels are kept in water tanks, while several kinds of birds, reptiles and mammals (such as chicken, quail, snakes, rabbits,
bamboo-rats, and even cats and dogs) are kept in cages at the entrance of restaurants. The display is intended to demonstrate variety, quality, and freshness. The local clients point to the creature of choice, which is promptly killed, cleaned, and cooked to order (indeed, game restaurants in the West might display the catch for similar reasons, yet the killing is never done in front of the diners). The second author witnessed several occasions in which tourists refused to eat freshly carved fish because “they were still moving on the plate”. In other instances, the tourists ordered the dish, photographed the killing and cleaning of the animal (as is often the case with snake-soups served in South China), but were so repulsed that they refused to eat it.

Communication Gap. Finally, a common reason for the tourists’ avoidance of local culinary establishments, even if they desire to visit them, is their difficulties in identifying and ordering local dishes. They are unfamiliar with their ingredients and their names on the menu. Lack of competence in the local language often aggravates the situation: more often than not, tourists in East and Southeast Asia cannot read the menu or do not understand the explanations of the local staff.

Communication difficulties exacerbate other anxieties. Despite claims to the contrary, both authors have noticed that tourists are often afraid to enter an eating place patronized solely by locals, and may do so only when reassured by the presence of other tourists in the place. They will frequently feel embarrassed and awkward due to their ignorance of the local cuisine, as well as suspicious of being cheated, and especially of being overcharged. As noted earlier, there is also a common anxiety among tourists traveling in East and Southeast Asia of being served unknowingly meat which is culturally unacceptable and even polluting, such as reptile, pork, dog, or cat meat.

Ethnic Restaurants at Home and Local Eating Places Abroad

It could be argued that the reluctance of tourists to patronize local eating places, even if they would like to do so, may, in the case of Westerners, be mitigated by their previous acquaintance with various ethnic cuisines, especially by way of ethnic restaurants which are said to provide an experience of “tourism at home” (van den Berghe 1984). The question then is whether and to what extent the presence of ethnic restaurants in the tourists’ countries of origin prepare them to deal with the local culinary situation at the destination. In the absence of explicit studies on this topic, it appears that the mitigating role of such restaurants is, on the whole, of rather limited significance. Several arguments can be brought in support of this claim.

First, despite their recent proliferation, ethnic restaurants in Western countries are as yet representative of only a few cuisines. Of the European ones, such “world cuisines” as the Italian and French are most commonly represented; indeed some of the dishes from those cuisines (including pizza or lettuce salad) became so familiar that
they are not considered ethnic any more. Other European cuisines, such as the Turkish or Greek are also widespread. Of the non-European cuisines, predominantly the Chinese, Japanese, and Indian are popular, and, more recently the Thai (Chaitrong 1999). It should be noted that such “world cuisines” originate from countries that are major destinations, and thus tourism might very well be the reason behind their popularity and proliferation. Restaurants representing other ethnic cuisines can be found only in the major metropolitan centers and are often expensive, remaining an exotic treat for the few rather than a familiar experience for a broad circle of customers.

Second, the proliferation of ethnic restaurants does not necessarily mean that a meaningful percentage of the general population frequents such venues. In fact, Warde and Martens, in their survey of “eating out” practices in the United Kingdom, point out that “…multiculturalism is still limited. Only 20 percent of the people had experience of three or more different cuisines while 48 percent had never eaten in an ethnic restaurant in the last twelve months”. Furthermore, when Britons do eat in ethnic restaurants, almost half (47%) order dishes with which they are familiar and have eaten previously at home (2000:84, 149). Thus, the experience of consumption of new and unfamiliar dishes in such venues is rather limited.

Third, familiarity with a wide variety of ethnic cuisines at home appears to be limited to a relatively small number of middle and upper-middle or high-class prospective tourists, who posses the cultural capital to appreciate and enjoy foreign food, and are sophisticated enough to be able to order it. With the growing expansion of tourism into lower and lower-middle classes in Western countries, only a minority can be assumed to be acquainted with such a wide range of foreign cuisines prior to their trip. The findings of Warde and Martens (2000:84) support this claim. They suggest that cultural and socioeconomic factors strongly influence the amount and range of ethnic food consumption. Thus, the increasing numbers of tourists from the lower sociocultural echelons are hardly likely to posses previous experience with the food of their destinations, especially if it did not reach the ranks of a world cuisine.

Fourth, most ethnic restaurants feature only a limited selection of “iconic” dishes from a national culinary repertoire. In linguistic terms, their menus represent a “simplified register” (Ferguson 1981) of the various regional cuisines of the country, and are not representative of their actual diversity, which the tourists might encounter when they visit that country. Rather than preparing prospective tourists for the richness and diversity of the local cuisine, ethnic restaurants may induce them to fix on those iconic dishes with which they are familiar from home. Thus, many Western tourists in Thailand tend to order pat Thai (Thai fried noodles) or khao pat (fried rice) in local restaurants, while in China their preferred dishes are sweet and sour pork, spring rolls, and corn soup, all of which are widely available in Thai and Chinese restaurants abroad but are not necessarily popular among the locals in their home countries.
It should also be noted that there are significant differences between the names of dishes served in ethnic restaurants at home and in local eating venues at the destination. In such restaurants, especially expensive ones, dishes are often given new, appealing, or fancy names, unknown in the country where they originated. For instance, the names of Thai dishes on the menu of a major restaurant chain in Israel were invented by a local public relations agency and are unrelated to their original Thai names.

Even if tourists are able to identify the name of a local dish with which they appear to be familiar from ethnic restaurants at home, it may be rather different in appearance and ingredients than the one they are familiar with. As Lu and Fine (1994:540–541) point out, Chinese food in America might retain its distinct taste and flavor, and thus its “authenticity” for American customers, despite considerable substitution of ingredients used in the American cuisine for those used in the preparation of the dish in China. American tourists in China may thus be taken aback when they find that a dish with which they deemed themselves familiar, contains such ingredients as the internal organs, tendons or tripe of beef, or the feet and tongues of ducks that are regularly used in the Chinese cuisine.

Finally, ethnic restaurants in the West tend to mitigate the more extreme tastes of their distinct cuisines of origin to adapt them to the preferences of Western customers, who are used to blander tastes. The principal example of this tendency is the reduction of spiciness of some Mexican or South and Southeast Asian dishes in Western ethnic restaurants. Facing apparently familiar ethnic dishes in local establishments at the destination, tourists may well be astonished, and possibly overwhelmed, by their unexpected spiciness. For example, the liberal use of chili and pepper in local dishes in Thailand make them unpalatable even to tourists familiar with Thai cuisine from home. Thus, a guidebook for Thailand warns that “native Thai food... can have as many peppers in it as a salad has cucumbers. The result [for tourists] could be what the Thais call ‘walking stomach’ (diarrhea)” (Warren, Black and Rangsit 1989:308–309).

It follows from this exposition that despite the considerable recent heterogeneization of Western food, and the proliferation of ethnic restaurants in the West, tourists to non-Western destinations are, if at all, only partially prepared to face the local culinary scene abroad, and will still face serious difficulties when exposed to it directly, without any mitigating intervention. The emergence of tourism-oriented culinary establishments, offering dishes from the local cuisine in mature destinations thus constitutes an attempt to make local food accessible to those unprepared to consume it in its “raw” local form. Such establishments tend to reproduce in some respects the principal features of ethnic restaurants in the tourists’ home countries. This tendency is a specific instance of a more general trend to adapt a maturing destination and its attractions to the preconceived images which the tourists entertain at the outset of their trips. In Schuetzian terms, the direct “knowledge of” the local culinary domain which the tourists acquire at the destination is adapted so as to replicate the
indirect “knowledge about” it, which they had acquired prior to their trips.

Tourism-Oriented Culinary Establishments

As the preceding discussion indicates, both neophobic and the majority of neophylic tourists tend to abstain from strange food in its local context, as even those who would like to taste or eat the local food are often put off by various aspects of the local culinary situation. The emergence of tourism-oriented culinary establishments is thus a precondition for destination development for two somewhat contrary reasons: to provide neophobic tourists with familiar food and to make novel and strange food accessible and attractive to neophylic tourists. Such culinary establishments serve the tourists as “environmental bubbles” (Cohen 1972:171) of various degrees of permeability to local culinary influences. Some are virtually impermeable, serving those who crave familiar fare in a familiar environment. But most are to some degree permeable: they tend to eliminate those constraints which previously repulsed neophylic tourists from partaking of local food and serve local dishes in a manner acceptable to them.

Indeed, for a local cuisine to become a popular attraction in its own right, it has to be filtered through tourism-oriented culinary establishments. Local foods, like local crafts (Cohen 2000) become popular with most tourists only after they are in some ways, and to some degree, transformed. The manner of their transformation, however, cannot be simply represented on some unidirectional and uni-dimensional scale, for example merely as differential mixtures of “strangeness and familiarity” or “tradition and modernity”. In food, as in crafts (Cohen 1992; Graburn 1976), the process of change is multidirectional and multidimensional. Local foods are transformed on different dimensions and in various ways to suit tourists, and foreign dishes are introduced by tourism into the local cuisine and transformed to suit local tastes. In the encounter between the foreign and local cuisines and tastes, new dishes and even new cuisines often emerge. These are not and cannot be reduced to mere fusion or hybridization of strange and local elements, but include an innovative or creative element. Just like tourist arts, tourist cuisines are new, sui generis cultural products.

Tourism-oriented culinary establishments may develop in two principal ways: either in a spontaneous process of transformation of local eating places into touristic ones, or through implantation from the outside of new establishments into a developing destination. The former is usually a slow, incremental process in which a local eating place becomes, often for fortuitous reasons, popular with tourists (initially often with drifters or backpackers prepared to expose themselves to a higher degree to the strangeness of the host environment than more sedate mass tourists). As they adapt their offerings to the clients’ tastes, such establishments go through an intermediate stage, in which they serve both locals and tourists, before becoming
“fully fledged” tourism-oriented establishments, increasingly catering to a widening, less adventurous foreign clientele.

While adapting local dishes to foreign tastes, such establishments also invent new dishes, creating an embryonic tourist cuisine. Good examples of this type of dynamics are the Daret restaurant in Chiang-Mai in northern Thailand and the restaurants at the bungalows on the beaches in southern Thailand. In the 70s, when trekking tourism began to be popular among backpackers, Daret was just one among several Chinese food-stall keepers close to Tha Pae Gate, a focal point of old Chiang Mai. This stall was patronized by young tourists more than the others.

Towards the end of the 70s, Daret relocated into a shop-house opposite its former location and opened a small restaurant. The establishment was listed in several guidebooks for young tourists. While the other stalls closed down, Daret prospered, serving for some time increasing numbers of tourists as well as locals. After a few years, the establishment relocated again, to larger premises across the road, adding a guesthouse to the restaurant, which now caters virtually exclusively to young tourists. While its menu is based on the general Thai and Sino-Thai cuisine, the taste of the dishes is adapted to the Western palate, principally by way of considerably reducing their spiciness. The latter phenomenon was even more pronounced in the little restaurants attached to the bungalows on the beaches of the islands popular with young tourists in the late 70s and early 80s (Cohen 1996:179–213). Here, several new dishes constituting a simple “youth tourist cuisine” emerged, featuring specialties such as banana pancake and pineapple shake, as well as magic soup and crazy mushroom omelet.

In China, where individual tourism was permitted only since the beginning of the 90’s, the process of establishing tourism-oriented restaurants, mainly in backpacker centers such as Yangshow, Chengdu, Lijiang or Dali, was swift. Though serving mainly “backpacker favorites”—including fruit salad with yogurt, cheese-omelet, or French-fries, and simple Chinese dishes (fried noodles, stir-fried vegetables)—some of them feature “local specialties”. Several restaurants in Dali (Yunan)—a regional center of the Bai minority—offer a “Bai dinner” on certain evenings. The menu consists of a combination of Bai dishes such as goat-cheese crisps, Er-Hai (a local lake) fish and fried sea-weed, along with more common Chinese dishes and rice wine. The proprietors, wearing Bai costume and head-dress, explain the food to their guests and suggest how to eat it. Bai music often accompanies the event.

Implanted culinary establishments are introduced into a locality “ready made” and often outsider-owned. The most common example of these kind of establishments in the Third World in recent years is the proliferation of branches of major international fast-food chains, such as McDonald, KFC, and Pizza Hut. These establishments are not specifically tourism-oriented, but rather seek to attract the younger set of locals, for whom they represent the equivalent of ethnic restaurants in the Western world (Ritzer 1993; Yunxiang 1996); but they
also serve as convenient environmental bubbles for foreign tourists seeking familiar food. However, even these establishments are not totally impermeable to local culinary influences. Insofar as adaptations are made to their standardized products, these are intended to accommodate the tastes and preferences of the local public, rather than to add some exotic flavor, attractive to tourists (Watson 1996).

The most salient example of explicitly tourism-oriented implanted culinary establishments is luxurious restaurants in hotels or in popular spots or areas. These may specialize in particular cuisines, including those of the tourists’ countries of origin, of the destination’s national or regional cuisines, or of some globalized world cuisines, such as the French, Italian or Chinese. Specialties of the house may be fused “signature dishes”, created by the chef from local and foreign ingredients. Buffets in such restaurants often feature a choice of dishes from a variety of cuisines, from which guests can select according to their tastes and preferences. Though the principal customers are tourists, in Third World countries such luxurious restaurants often become popular with local elites, and serve to acquaint them with various foreign cuisines.

**Culinary Establishments and Authenticity**

Tourism-oriented culinary establishments constitute environmental bubbles which are not only permeable to local influences to varying degrees, but also in different respects or on different dimensions. Of principal interest for the present purposes are those establishments that seek to serve tourists “authentic”, but palatable, local food, under environmental conditions which filter out those aspects of the local culinary situation which are repulsive to tourists. It is important to learn which dimensions of the process of preparation, presentation, and consumption of food are in the eyes of tourists diacritical indicators of the “authenticity” (Cohen 1988) of the local cuisine, and which can be safely filtered out without impairing that apparent authenticity.

The experience in the study of tourist arts can be helpful in formulating a response to this question. Recent studies in that field indicate that most tourists are not looking for some total authenticity of ethnic art objects. According to Littrell, Anderson and Brown (1993) their judgements are mostly based on some aspects or dimensions which metonymically stand for the authenticity of the object as a whole: the ethnic origins of the producer, the production techniques, the materials used, the designs or colors of the object, or even the locality in which it has been purchased. The tourists may be indifferent to other aspects of the product. Analogously, not all aspects of the local cuisine are equally relevant to the “authenticity” of the food offered by a tourism-oriented establishment. Thus, some may undergo a degree of transformation in order to make the food more acceptable to the tourists without impairing its authenticity. This paper will attempt to identify those aspects in the processes of prep-
paration, presentation, and consumption of food which appear to be diacritical in the tourists’ perception of its authenticity.

The preparatory stage of food production involves the selection of raw materials and the technical means and modes of preparation of the dishes. Among these, the raw materials are the more important, though problematic, marker of authenticity for tourists. For many tourists the authenticity of a dish depends on the use of “authentic” ingredients: Peking duck has to be made with duck, and not with chicken. However, most tourists are at the same time reluctant to eat, or are repulsed by some ingredients “inedible” in their own culture (such as dog and snake meat, duck’s feet or chickens’ entrails, found in some Chinese and Southeast Asian cuisines). The substitution for these by ingredients more acceptable to Western tourists would usually not impair the authenticity of the food in their eyes (Fischler 1988), while making it more acceptable.

The preparation of the dishes is generally conducted in the back-stage of the establishment, away from and often inaccessible to the tourist gaze (Urry 1990), and is usually touristically unmarked. The use of modern technologies, such as electric appliances, instead of traditional cooking methods, to improve the sanitary conditions and expedite the preparation of big quantities of food supplied to large groups of tourists, does generally not impair the dish’s authenticity. However, as MacCanell (1976:99) has pointed out, the kitchen in some instances may be made observable or accessible to tourists as a “staged back region”. In such instances, the preparation of food becomes a performance for the customers, and as such a criterion for the judgement of the food’s authenticity. The Seafood Market in Bangkok, where the kitchen is displayed behind glass at the entrance to the restaurant, or the Korean-BBQ restaurant in Shanghai (located in a jade factory and intended to attract tourists to the shop), where the diners select the raw ingredients and hand them to the cooks, who perform a kind of “cooking-dance” while roasting the food over a sizzling pan, are good examples of such staged back-regions. The mode of preparation in such instances is sometimes a recent invention, intended to impress or attract the tourists, as in the case of the spectacle of the “flying vegetables” in food-stall markets in Thailand, where vegetables are thrown by the cook from the stir-frying pan into the serving plate held by the waiter or by volunteering customers at some great distance.

In contrast to the preparatory stage, the stage of presentation of the dishes is, by definition, frontal. It consists of the display, advertisement, and explanation of the dishes offered by the establishment. This is when the principal, often staged, markers by which prospective customers will judge the authenticity of the food are displayed. In most tourism-oriented establishments, the menu is the principal means of presentation.

The menu can be approached as the culinary equivalent of the geographical map, guiding the customer through the fare offered by the establishment. Like the map, it is of greater importance as a guide through the culinary territory to outsiders, such as tourists, than to
locals. It is the principal means of mediation between the establishment’s offerings and prospective customers (although the display of ready-made dishes and oral explanations and recommendations by the staff may supplement it or even substitute for it). Again, just as there are tourist maps, menus in these establishments are adapted to tourists’ needs and thus differ from those in local establishments in several significant respects.

A menu can be conceived as a systematic list of dishes offered, reflecting a wider system of culinary ethnoclassification. This system is expressed primarily in its division into sections and subsections, according to the principal types of meals, and classes of dishes within each type. For example, a menu in a Western restaurant will be usually divided into breakfast, lunch, and dinner; within each there will be further subdivisions, such as soups, salads, main courses, and desserts; these may be further grouped by more specific diacritic criteria of classification. For example, main courses, may be divided into poultry, beef, and pork, followed by a list of various ways of preparation, or different side-servings. This classification into sections and subsections reflects Western eating habits, such as mealtimes and the customary structure of various types of meals (Douglas 1972). But this would not be meaningful in a society where thrice-a-day meals are not customary, where there is no differentiation between dishes eaten at various times of the day, or where all dishes are eaten simultaneously at a meal (MacClancy 1992:54–57). Hence, the structure and content of the menu in a local Chinese, Burmese, or Cambodian restaurant will be meaningless for Western tourists, unfamiliar with the respective local eating habits. Even if they are desirous of tasting local food, they will be at a loss when attempting to put an order. Like in the domains of music, arts, and religion, a problem of cultural translation emerges: to make the culinary ethnoclassification of one culture at least to some degree comprehensible in terms of that of another. In tourism-oriented restaurants, such a translation may take place on several increasingly more detailed and more easily comprehensible levels, analogous to some extent to ever more user-friendly tourist maps.

Primary is the transliteration or translation of local culinary terms into a writing or language familiar to tourists: rendering the equivalent of the local names of dishes in the Latin alphabet, or translating them literally. However, even if translated, such names often say little to one unfamiliar with the local cuisine. A slightly more elaborate mode would be the addition of brief descriptions to the transliterated or translated local names for dishes in a European language.

Next comes rendition of local culinary categories in what appear to be equivalent Western ones, thus switching from the local ethnoclassification to that of the tourists. For example, the Thai *tom yam* may be reclassified as a (hot) soup, *som tam* as (spicy) salad, and Vietnamese *pho* as ‘noodle soup’. This is a form of cultural translation found in other domains as for example, when a local string instrument is represented to tourists as a guitar, or a religious invocation as a hymn.
Finally, the problem of translation or explanation may be set aside by simply depicting the dishes offered on the menu, a procedure found in the more popular tourism-oriented Southeast Asian eating places (but not in the classy refined ones). It resembles the inclusion of iconic drawings of major edifices, monuments, or “typical” costumes of ethnic groups on tourist maps.

An important auxiliary role at the stage of presentation, which amplifies the menu or may even substitute for it, are various “culinary brokers” mediating between the tourists and the local food. They include waiters, guides, and local friends or hosts who explain the dishes on the menu and make recommendations. These intermediaries may function in two opposite directions: on the one hand, they may reassure the tourists and thus encourage them to become more adventurous in the choice of otherwise strange dishes. But, by repeatedly playing their intermediary role, they may learn from previous experience which dishes tourists generally prefer, and thus act to restrict the choices to a few “iconic” dishes.

The last stage of the process, consumption, embraces the structure of the meal (as chosen by the tourist), the taste of the food, the manner of serving, the style of eating, and the spatial organization and decoration of the establishment.

The literature on culinary anthropology indicates that each cuisine tends to be marked by a distinctive “taste” (Fischler 1988; Goody 1981). Therefore, it can be assumed that taste will also serve tourists as the principal criterion of authenticity of local food served in a tourism-oriented establishment. However, though an important marker of authenticity, the taste of local food may also not be agreeable to the palate as tourists may find it too hot, too smelly, too oily, or too salty. Tourist-oriented establishments tend to mitigate the taste of local food to suit the tourists, but leave enough of it that it metonymically impresses the tourists as the “real thing”. The degree of permeability of the environmental bubble is crucial. If it is too great, the tourist may reject the food; if too limited, the dish may lose its attractiveness. Some establishments seek to resolve that problem by offering choices with various grades of intensity of local taste; Thai or Indian dishes may be thus served in mild, medium, and hot versions, leaving the choice of intensity of the local taste to the tourists.

The structure of the meal, manner of serving, and style of eating seem to be generally perceived by tourists as less significant markers of authenticity than taste. According to the authors’ experience, tourists rarely care whether the selection of dishes and their sequence corresponds to local custom, and tend to order dishes according to their personal preference (although some may order a set meal, thus letting the establishment determine the structure of their meal). Local ways of serving and eating, if they diverge considerably from Western ones, may be, as was shown, perceived as an irritant, rather than a marker of authenticity. However, some Westerners in Asia may ostentatiously ask for chop-sticks with their food (instead of the spoon and fork offered), whether because they find them a more authentic way
to eat their food, desire to playfully experiment, or to demonstrate their dexterity with them.

The spatial organization and decoration of the eating place contribute many important markers of authenticity. Establishments are tempted to stage their authenticity, overtly or covertly, while, at the same time, safeguarding the tourists’ comfort. Thus, at the popular kantok (low, round, northern Thai table) dinner participants have to sit on the floor, an uncomfortable position for most Westerners. However, in some restaurants, holes have been dug in the floor for the customers’ legs, so they can sit in their accustomed way, while still enjoying the staged authentic style of northern-Thai dining.

The decoration of the public space of the establishment, in tune with the style of food served, provides the appropriate ambience for a “total restaurant experience”, enhancing the tourists’ sense of authenticity, even though this may often be staged. Thus, a Chinese restaurant in China or Thailand, will be decorated by a variety of markers of Chineseness, such as Chinese lanterns or paintings, even though those serving the locals are mostly quite plain.

The Diversity of Touristic Culinary Experiences

Tourism is a highly diversified phenomenon, and major differences may be expected between different kinds of tourists in their approach to food at the destination, as already indicated. Departing from Cohen’s modes of tourist experiences (1979), this article presents some ideas on the diversity of tourists’ culinary experience: each of Cohen’s “modes” involving a different approach to food. The crucial difference with regard to food will be found between what he calls the recreational (and diversionary) modes, on the one hand, and the experiential (and experimental and existential) modes, on the other.

Recreational tourists, seeking to relax and enjoy themselves in a liminal, often playful mood, care little for authenticity. They tend to suspend ordinary normative controls over their conduct, and be more permissive and self-indulging on their trip than in ordinary daily life. These tendencies predispose them to spend more money during the trip than at home to indulge their desires. Recreational tourists will generally not expose themselves to the strangeness of the host environment, and will use predominantly the facilities provided. In the sphere of food and drink, such tourists will tend to show predominantly neophobic tendencies. However, they may look for familiar food of a higher quality, and in greater quantities than consumed in their daily life. Even those who manifest an explorative neophylic tendency will mainly seek new foods which are enjoyable, rather than authentic or otherwise interesting. An excellent example of the eating habits of recreational tourists is found in Brown’s (1996) description of Jewish guests in the Catskill Mountains resorts in the 70s, where over-indulging on familiar Jewish fare was one of the principal pastimes. Another is the major concentrations of European mass tourists from different countries on the Spanish and Greek beaches,
where they can feast on their respective national cuisines supplied by restaurants.

In contrast, experiential tourists seek, in MacCanells’ (1973) terms, to vicariously experience the authentic life of others (Cohen 1979:188). This implies that, in the culinary domain, they will show a marked interest in local dishes and food habits. They will visit local markets for unfamiliar vegetables, fruits, spices, and condiments and ask about their names and uses or follow the preparation process at street stalls. They may taste local foods, out of curiosity rather than in quest of enjoyment. However, though such tourists will probably show stronger neophylic tendencies, they might be reluctant to expose themselves directly to the local cuisine and will opt to eat local food in the sheltered environment of tourism-oriented establishments.

The few tourists who seek more direct, rather than vicarious, experience of authenticity, those traveling in the “experimental” or “existential” modes, will patronize local establishments and subsist on the local fare, whether as part of their experimenting with local life or because they have adopted it in preference to life in their place of origin. Permanent subsistence on local food, in a kind of culinary “switching worlds”, can be expected mainly among existential tourists. This occurs primarily in situations where cuisine closely relates to a broader “worldview” selected as their “elective center” (Cohen 1979:189–191), as for example the adoption of a vegetarian cuisine upon conversion to Hinduism.

As destinations mature, recreational tourists, many on repeat visits, predominate over experiential and other authenticity-seeking counterparts, who tend to move further a field. This has an important impact on the culinary sphere, and especially on the dynamics of change in local establishments undergoing spontaneous reorientation to the touristic clientele. Two trends, paralleling those found in the domain of commercialized tourism crafts, can be discerned in such establishments. One, they will tend to carry a growing number of foreign (as against local) dishes, in response to the primarily neophobic inclinations among the visiting public. This tendency corresponds to the heterogeneization of tourist arts—a process of substitution of foreign art styles (congenial to the new, external clientele) for the local “traditional” ones (Cohen 2000:185–220). Two, the variety of the local dishes on offer will be reduced and homogenized—just as there is a gradual stereotyping of craft products in local styles for the tourist market. Thus, one of the few studies of that process, Reynold’s research on restaurants in Sanur village, Bali, showed that

...the percentage of Balinese dishes offered [on local menus] had fallen dramatically over [five years]. There was also a great commonality of names of the dishes offered by the restaurants, but there was great variation in presentation, ingredients and flavor (Reynolds 1993:51–52).

The last point suggests that the homogenization is primarily in the names of dishes, namely in the marker by which dishes are chosen from the menu, rather than in the marked dishes themselves.
CONCLUSION

Despite its considerable importance, the role and meaning of food in tourism has been surprisingly little discussed in the sociological literature. The principal aim of this article was to propose an approach to the topic by integrating some such culinary notions in culinary sociology with conceptions of the sociology of tourism.

This article has departed from the general tension between the attraction and repulsion of novelty in food, to analyze the dilemmas faced by tourists in unfamiliar culinary situations at their destinations. The principal line of the presentation was to deal first with the variety of constraints experienced in such situations, and then turn to the different ways by which culinary establishments facilitate the overcoming of those constraints. The article has shown how they provide a “culinary environmental bubble” to tourists. However, through this process aspects of the local cuisine are, to different degrees, filtered and transformed, thus making local dishes accessible to tourists. In the process a tourist cuisine frequently emerges, which, like tourist arts, is not just an impoverished variant of local food, but often features innovative dishes, creatively composed of elements from different origins.

The analysis related primarily to Western tourists’ encounters with Third World cuisines, with which they may be only superficially acquainted at home and to which they are generally positively disposed. This article did not deal extensively with Western tourism to other Western countries, with whose cuisines tourists might be considerably more familiar. It is surmised that in such cases the various constraints dealt with in this article will be less salient when making the local food more directly accessible to tourists. This way, they will be less dependent on the intermediation of a “culinary environmental bubble”. Consequently, such cuisines will undergo fewer adaptations or transformations under the impact of tourism than those with which the tourists are less familiar. The existing literature on the topic (Hjalager and Richards 2002), by focusing on Western tourism to well-developed Western destinations, overemphasizes food as an attraction, while remaining mostly oblivious to its role as an impediment in less developed areas.

This article has purposely abstained from a systematic consideration of the culinary aspects of Asian tourism in Western countries. This is a topic in need of separate analysis, since it cannot be dealt with as a simple obverse of the preceding presentation. The cuisines of Asian countries have not been penetrated by outside influences to the same extent as the Western ones. Consequently, Asians abroad tend to be less disposed than Westerners to partake of the food of others, and are more dependent than the latter on establishments providing their own national cuisines. In the case of major national groups of Asian tourists, such as the Japanese, this predilection for their own food means that they will be reluctant to visit a given destination in significant numbers, unless it features restaurants serving their national cuisine. The paper here has done no more than outline a systematic
approach to the study of the place of food in tourism. Only comparative empirical research, focusing on the issues touched upon, will show the usefulness of the approach and indicate ways for its further elaboration.

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