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“I Am Not a Foodie. . .”: Culinary Capital in Online Reviews of Michelin Restaurants

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This article adds to the growing literature on foodie discourse, by providing an analysis of amateur reviews of one-star Michelin restaurants sampled from two different websites, OpenRice and Yelp, which reflect two different geocultural contexts: Hong Kong and New York City. We demonstrate that online restaurant reviews provide a means through which individuals can display their culinary capital—to an audience who is likely to share similar interests—as they establish their expertise on matters such as authenticity, taste, quality, and the perceived value of their dining experiences. Furthermore, we explore how issues of social class and access to economic capital are implicated in user-generated reviews of this category of restaurants. By asserting their right to participate in a larger conversation about Michelin standards, online reviewers place themselves on equal footing with culinary elites and professional food reviewers. Consequently, we argue that new media genres such as online reviews challenge well-established hierarchies in food culture, yet at the same time, they also reproduce some existing forms of culinary capital.

INTRODUCTION

Online restaurant reviews provide a means through which individuals can display their culinary capital—to an audience who is likely to share similar interests—as they establish their expertise on matters such as authenticity, taste, quality, and the perceived value of their dining experiences. Using

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a Bourdieuan framework, Naccarato and LeBesco conceptualize culinary capital as engagement in “food related practices that reflect a certain set of values that are privileged over others” (5). Recent research acknowledging the growing role of digital media in contemporary food discourses has shown how such discourses circulate in various forms of user-generated online content, from foodie blogs to online discussion fora, such as *Chowbound*. Much of this research has concentrated on Anglophone discourses from Western countries. We add to this growing literature by providing a broader cultural perspective, in our analysis of user-generated reviews of one-star Michelin restaurants sampled from two different websites, *OpenRice* and *Yelp*, which reflect two different geographic—and linguistic—contexts: Hong Kong and New York City, respectively. Sites such as these represent a global trend, and one that is not solely restricted to the West. As a result, our analysis brings a much needed global perspective to current conversations about the circulation of culinary capital in online spaces. We demonstrate diverse ways in which online reviewers construct expertise and claim culinary capital, and we argue that online reviews of Michelin-starred restaurants found in popular online fora such as these highlight a paradox central to the discussion of a growing “democratizing tendency” in contemporary food discourses. On the one hand, online review sites such as these provide an alternative to elite forms of restaurant reviewing, in allowing for the presence of—and access to—a greater diversity of voices, perspectives, and opinions about “high end” dining than ever before. For example, as Rousseau argues, “The authority of the print press has given way to online media and the last word authority of those [...] employed by media outfits are [sic] relentlessly challenged by anyone with a blog or a Yelp or an Urbanspoon account who also wants to review restaurants” (52). On the other hand, review sites may simultaneously reproduce existing social hierarchies. For example, in the case of online reviews of Michelin-starred restaurants, only those individuals in possession of a certain amount of economic capital can afford to dine at such restaurants—and consequently, post reviews of such establishments. At the same time, our analysis suggests that the concern with cost that often gets voiced in these reviews belies a middle-class sensibility (and associated class anxiety), which points to the aspirational dimension of dining in this category of restaurants. Finally, while some authors and diners may dismiss online reviews as not wielding much influence with respect to tastemaking,¹ we argue that among their many functions, online restaurant review sites do provide an audience for foodies to claim diverse forms of culinary capital and to share their gastronomic experiences with others.

Who are Foodies?

As the excerpt in our title indicates, “foodie” is a complex category, and one that may be claimed, embraced, resisted or contested. A basic definition

offered by Cairns, Johnston and Bauman is that a foodie is a person “with a passion for eating and learning about food” (591). As this definition suggests, being a foodie is not restricted to the particular kinds of food that one chooses to consume or to avoid. Rather, being a foodie involves taking up a particular disposition or stance, toward food consumption. Such a stance includes a spirit of openness, curiosity, interest, as well as an intellectual fascination with, and aesthetic appreciation of, food.

However, being a foodie extends even beyond being passionate about all things culinary. Johnston and Bauman stress that gastronomic practices are textually constructed and that “contemporary food culture is deeply discursive” (43). This means that being a foodie also entails engaging in discourses about food. In the twenty-first century, these discursive activities encompass not only talking about food but also participating in a range of digital practices, such as food blogging, posting food-related multimedia texts on social media such as *Facebook* and *Instagram*, and participating in online discussion fora (such as those found on *Chowhound*), as well as writing restaurant reviews for a variety of online review sites (Rousseau). In what follows, we focus on how foodie identities are constructed on two reviewing sites, which operate in two different geocultural contexts.

There is, of course, a social dimension to engaging in culinary discourses, since any discourse requires an audience of some sort. As Johnston and Bauman explain, “self-presentation as food-obsessed is an important marker of who is a foodie and also explains how being a foodie is most often understood as a social, rather than solitary activity” (64). Online environments offer unique spaces where individuals can locate others who are similarly “food-obsessed” and who share their specific tastes and preferences. For instance, in her study of diners who frequent high-end, Michelin-starred restaurants, Lane found that most diners do want to share their dining experiences with others after the fact—often as a way of appreciating, reminiscing, or re-living the experience. Yet at the same time, a number of the diners that Lane interviewed indicated that they tended to be very selective about the people who they tell about such dining experiences: “Several respondents tell me that they would not seek to communicate their dining experience to friends or colleagues because the latter do not share their passion for exquisite and inevitably expensive food. [...] Friends, they suggest, would disapprove or think that the diners were showing off” (Lane 252–253). One of Lane’s participants mentioned using social networking sites as a resource for sharing her gastronomic experiences with others. Social media provide foodies such as these—whose immediate circles of friends, family, and co-workers may not share their passion for food—“affinity spaces” (Gee, “Social Semiotic Spaces and Affinity Spaces”), where they can reach an audience whose interests are likely to align with their own. Online restaurant reviews sites can also serve this function. In addition, as Naccarato and Lebesco have noted, online reviews give participants an opportunity to claim culinary

expertise. And for many people, participatory sites such as these are among “the most viable opportunities to shape discourse about food” (Naccarato and Lebesco 114).

INCREASING DEMOCRATIZATION IN FOOD CONSUMPTION AND IN FOOD DISCOURSE

Although it has been argued that being a foodie requires a certain degree of cultural and economic capital, food scholars have also observed several concomitant trends that point to increasingly democratizing tendencies in this realm. On one level, while “eating well” may still connote exclusivity and dining in elite, high-end establishments, the scope of what eating well means has been widened to include a broader range of cuisines and an emphasis on authenticity in foods associated with diverse cultural traditions. Some scholars refer to this trend in terms of “cultural omnivorousness” (Warde, Wright, and Gayo-Cal)—which does not mean literally eating everything but instead refers to an appreciation of both high and low forms of cultural and culinary production.

This trend toward democratization can also be observed in the circulation of information about food, especially in the domain of restaurant reviews. Restaurant reviewing became a widespread phenomenon in the early twentieth century, with the advent of restaurant ratings in guide books, such as the *Michelin Guide* (Mellet et al.; Pitte). Historically, and up to the present day, the *Michelin Guide* has relied on a standard set of reviewing practices, conducted by a small cadre of specially trained reviewers (Lane). While the *Michelin Guide* remains remarkably influential world wide, in recent decades, newer restaurant guides have emerged which have incorporated the voices of diners, along with those of specialized reviewers: the *Zagat Guide*, to name one example. It could even be argued that the *Michelin Guide* itself—which has been critiqued for being Eurocentric and too focused on French cuisine—has become more democratic in the last 10–15 years, by assigning stars to a greater number of restaurants outside of Europe, as well as to “ethnic”² restaurants located within Europe (Lane 296). Indeed, a greater number of “ethnic” restaurants with a Michelin 1-star rating can be found today, compared to 20 years ago.

Besides the undisputed influence of the *Michelin Guide*, restaurant critics writing for major newspapers in cities associated with culinary innovation have also traditionally served as tastemakers. Focusing on the restaurant scene in New York City, Sietsema describes the evolution of restaurant reviewing practices and discusses how conventions of restaurant reviewing became established over time by the city’s top newspapers. However, several of these practices have been disrupted, as food bloggers recently

embraced the potential of participatory forms of digital media, began writing their own reviews, and changed several of the conventions associated with restaurant reviewing (Rousseau). While some proponents characterize this shift from few-to-many food writers “as a wondrous blow for democracy, a long-overdue rising up of the masses against the elitist overlords of the culinary realm” (Sietsema), others have countered such claims by arguing that new media innovations only serve to reproduce existing hierarchies—or that they simply create *new* hierarchies in the realm of gastronomic practices and tastemaking.

Against this background, user-generated restaurant reviews posted on sites such as *Yelp* and *OpenRice* can be conceptualized as another manifestation of this cultural shift, moving restaurant reviewing from a cultural activity restricted to a few elite writers to a cultural activity which has now fully entered the vernacular realm, and one that can be practiced by anyone. As such, user-generated restaurant reviews represent an interesting intersection of “participatory culture” (Jenkins) and foodie discourse, and one that has—with few exceptions—remained unexplored. Restaurant review sites are online spaces that allow consumers to entextualize and inscribe information about their food-related choices that are connected to their sense of self (Naccarato and Lebesco 113). As a consequence, social class is often implicated in reviewing practices, since—in addition to having access to the necessary technology—individuals’ economic realities constrain the types of dining options available to them. One recent study locates such class-based differences in online restaurant reviews. In their analysis of over 800,000 *Yelp* reviews, Jurafsky et al. found that class-based differences were realized at the level of linguistic expression: reviewers of more expensive restaurants wrote longer reviews and used more complex words, in order “to portray the reviewer as educated and possessed of higher linguistic capital.” Although the researchers conclude that the online review space provides reviewers with opportunities for diverse forms of self-presentation, they acknowledge that one limitation of their study is their exclusive focus on anglophone reviews of US restaurants. In contrast, the present study broadens the scope of review research by considering user-generated restaurant reviews from two geographic contexts (NYC and Hong Kong), written in two languages (English and Chinese), and posted on two different review sites (*Yelp* and *OpenRice*). Like Lane, we used restaurants’ Michelin-star status as a sampling device.

Michelin-Starred Restaurants Enter the Realm of Online Reviews

Over the last few decades, dining in “higher end” restaurants has become less exclusive and more affordable than it has ever been before. Lane’s study, based on interviews with chefs, staff, and diners of Michelin restaurants in

England and Germany, found that today's Michelin-starred restaurant diners "are not a homogenous social group. The main distinction in terms of economic capital possessed may be drawn between those who dine there fairly regularly (and may not always pay themselves) and those who have lower financial resources and enjoy this pleasure only intermittently" (Lane 240). Lane also points out that for the non-wealthy who dine in these types of restaurants, doing so may represent an exceptional event such as marking a special occasion, celebrating a birthday, etc. Furthermore, for most diners, the Michelin imprimatur functions indirectly, since most diners do not actually purchase or read the *Michelin Guide* (Lane). Instead, information about a restaurant's Michelin star rating is made available and distributed to consumers through different channels of media (newspapers, magazines, etc).

Three additional points from Lane's study are relevant to our discussion of online restaurant reviews. The first is her finding that guests of such restaurants rarely complain while they are dining. However, as we discuss below, numerous complaints about Michelin-starred restaurants (made after the dining experience) can be found on review sites like *Yelp* and *Open Rice*. Next, most diners who Lane interviewed felt that the high prices in such establishments were well justified, given the quality of the meal. In contrast, as we will detail below, the reviewers in our sample frequently discussed and often questioned whether the cost of an item or a meal in such establishments was justified or not. Finally, Lane's participants were somewhat dismissive of online review sites: none of the diners interviewed claimed to use review sites themselves; one British chef was quoted as saying that "*TripAdvisor* is a pain but not worth worrying about" (Lane 309); and the author herself concluded that "despite all the hype about the Internet, it has not sufficiently empowered [users] to exert significant influence" (311). Clearly, online reviewers are not tastemakers in the same sense as the *Michelin Guide* or a *New York Times* restaurant critic; nevertheless, it is fair to say that online user-generated reviews of Michelin-starred restaurant are clearly linked with an increased ability by more individuals to claim culinary capital (Naccarato and Lebesco 111; Rousseau). Therefore, the overarching research question that guided our exploration was: In what ways do online reviewers use discourse to claim culinary capital and to construct diverse foodie identities?

METHODS

Website Descriptions

As we have mentioned, in order to broaden the scope of analysis, we sampled reviews of restaurants found in two major international cities. These reviews were posted on two popular review websites designed for local audiences: *OpenRice* in Hong Kong, and *Yelp* in the New York City. Although

the *Yelp* site features reviews of a wide variety of businesses types, the site is associated primarily with restaurant reviews (Kuehn; Luca). As a public company, *Yelp* claimed an average of about 139 million monthly unique visitors in the third quarter of 2014. Unlike *Yelp*, *OpenRice* only features restaurant reviews and claims to have about 1.19 million member-reviewers. The membership number is significant, given that the total population of Hong Kong is around 7.1 million. *OpenRice* operates a bilingual interface (Chinese and English) while *Yelp* provides a multilingual interface, and both websites are accessible through their dedicated mobile apps. Both *Yelp* and *OpenRice* are sites which have “definable boundaries for membership because members are required to register in order to post reviews [or] rate reviews” (Forman et al. 294). Reviewing on both sites requires the completion of both procedural and connoisseurial reviews (Blank)—i.e. providing overall numeric ratings, as well as a descriptive narrative text. In this study, we provide an analysis of the text-based connoisseurial reviews. Like many influential review sites (e.g., *TripAdvisor*), both of these sites are also known to control content—though in different ways. *Yelp* uses an algorithm to “filter” out suspicious content. Similarly, *OpenRice* editors screen reviews before they are published.³

Data Collection

So that data from the two sites would be as comparable as possible, we imposed the following parameter: we sampled reviews of restaurants that had received a 1-star Michelin rating. According to recent online data, there were a similar number of 1-star Michelin restaurants in the two cities at the time of our data collection: around 58 in New York City and 48 in Hong Kong. In order to keep the type of food as consistent as possible, only “Asian” restaurants were included in our sample. As may be expected, the majority of Michelin 1-star restaurants in Hong Kong feature various types of Chinese cuisine, whereas a greater diversity of cuisines could be found among the Michelin-rated restaurants in NYC (e.g., Chinese, Korean, Japanese). However it is worth pointing out that our Hong Kong sample also included some diversity in terms of regional Chinese cuisines (e.g., Sichuan, Shanghainese). And although some might question whether it is possible to compare, for example, a sushi restaurant in New York City with a dim sum restaurant in Hong Kong, Michelin representatives themselves maintain that their standards do allow for comparable ratings, even of such different cuisines (Lane).

Due to Lane’s finding that diners rarely complain about their Michelin restaurant experiences, we decided to focus specifically on this underexamined type of discourse: i.e. non-positive reviews of restaurants in this category. We therefore selected an equal number of “average” and “negative”

reviews published between late 2012 and early 2013 from both sites to create a balanced dataset of 120 reviews: 60 from each city. Besides written opinions, *OpenRice* uses a three-level rating system, expressed by corresponding emoji that stand for good (“Smile”), average (“Ok”), and bad (“Cry”), while *Yelp* uses a five-star rating system. We sampled twice as many negative reviews than average reviews to reflect the general proportions of each type of reviews found on the sites.⁴ This yielded a total of 40 “average” reviews (i.e. 20 “Ok” reviews from *OpenRice*, and 20 three-star reviews from *Yelp*), and a total of 80 “negative” reviews (40 “Cry” reviews from *OpenRice*, and 40 one-star reviews from *Yelp*). Our sample comprises reviews of 20 restaurants from each city. Our prior analysis of these data (Chik and Vázquez) found that the general distribution of character/word length was quite similar on the two sites.

Translation, Coding and Analysis

The 120 reviews collected from both sites were downloaded, and the meta-data for each review (e.g., subject line, user name, date of posting) was recorded into a database. All of the *Yelp* reviews were written in English. Among the 60 *OpenRice* reviews, half were written in Chinese only, and the other half included English words or phrases. However, the extent of code-mixing was very low, with 22/30 containing only one English word (e.g. *menu*, *dinner*), and 8/30 including only a short phrase, often a formulaic expression (e.g. *Oh my goodness!*). In order to generate a comparable dataset, the *OpenRice* reviews were translated from Chinese into English by the second author. Prior to the translation process, a bilingual table of frequently used lexical terms was compiled to provide consistency in the translation. In our translation, original words or phrases in English were underlined in the transcripts.

Online reviewing is a social and communal act, so it follows social and cultural conventions of the targeted communities (Watson, Morgan, and Hemmington). Thus, in addition to examining the content of reviews, we adopted a discourse analytic approach to tease out language-in-use by looking at *what* was written to create the *who* (i.e. specific reviewer identities) in the online reviews sampled (Gee, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*). We conducted close and repeated readings of the data, which allowed for the diverse strategies used to claim culinary capital to emerge in a grounded way.

The Discursive Constructions of “Foodie” Identities

Online reviewers construct situated identities (Page) when they self-identify in terms of their relationship with food and/or their dining practices, for

example: as a *foodie*, a *gastronome*, or a *sushi lover*. In these ways, reviewers orient to types of identity categories that are situationally relevant both to the activity of restaurant reviewing and to this particular online context. Such explicit self-identification practices, however, are quite rare, since most reviewers show rather than tell—that is, they imply their foodie status more indirectly, rather than claiming it overtly through the use of such labels. Nevertheless, we begin by examining a few examples of these inscribed identities before turning to some of the more subtle ways through which the category of foodie is discursively constructed.

The reviewer below describes himself in terms of food-related attributes, characterizing himself both as a “gastronome” and as “extremely materialistic when it comes to restaurants.” He further explains that he deliberately seeks out those highly rated restaurants, which have received positive reviews from traditional media outlets (e.g., newspapers, restaurant guides, television programs).

My friends all know that I'm extremely materialistic when it comes to restaurants. What exactly does that mean when it's used to describe a gastronome? It means, I make it a mission to try all the Michelin restaurants, all positive NY Times reviews and whatever restaurants have received public accolades from popular channels of food news. It's terrible, but, ergo, I would have to try out [*restaurant name*] given its status as a one star Michelin.

This type of self-disclosure provides readers with insights into the reviewer's motivation for choosing to dine at this particular restaurant. And although he claims culinary capital by classifying himself as a “gastronome,” in his comments toward the end of the review, it becomes evident that food may not be the primary focus of this reviewer's dining practices. As he complains about the low volume in the restaurant, he adds: “It's like you had to just focus on the food, which really destroys any value of having a meal with some of your best friends.” This reviewer's comments recall the distinction between foodies and *Chowbounds*, as discussed by Naccarato and Lebesco, who observed that individuals active on the *Chowbound* website often dismiss foodies “as those who are more likely to follow passively the recommendations of traditional food critics, seek out the most popular or trendy restaurants, and emphasize style over substance, atmosphere over quality, presentation over preparation, hype over taste” (Naccarato and Lebesco 77).

It is no wonder then, that a different reviewer prefaces his review by self-identifying as “*not* a foodie” (emphasis ours). And yet, as the review continues, other details in his text—related to his greater-than-average knowledge about food and the fine dining scene in NYC—seem to belie one type of foodie sensibility.

Two things to disclose first: 1) After dining out 2 times a week in NYC for the past 2 years this is the first time I've felt compelled to write a yelp review and 2) I am not a "foodie"...however my fiancée is (it is her absolute passion) and I have picked up some things from her via osmosis after 3 years of hearing about famous restaurants and visiting a number of them. I still think that spending in the neighborhood of \$600 for a 2 person meal (with wine) is absolute LUNACY but she has helped me understand and recognize the effort, thought, skill, creativity, etc. that goes into these "fine dining" experiences. Overall they have all been excellent and it is something that makes her happy so I can live with it on special occasions. With that said I was excited to take my fiancée to [restaurant name] last night for her birthday. It was one of the 4–5 NYC restaurants she has on her list of "must go" places. And to be honest I was excited myself more so than normal because the whole molecular gastronomy thing interests me. We both liked the restaurant ambiance—classy, fun, upscale, not stuffy...

This is the only review in our dataset in which the word "foodie" appears—and we see that the reviewer actively distances himself from the term. It is possible that this is because the reviewer does not want to be perceived as a trend follower, as discussed above. Furthermore, Johnston and Bauman found that many individuals were reluctant to associate themselves with the term "foodie" because of its associations with culinary elitism. In fact, this particular reviewer makes a concerted effort to construct a non-elitist identity (e.g., "I still think that spending in the neighborhood of \$600 for a 2 person meal (with wine) is *absolute LUNACY*"; "We both liked the restaurant ambiance - classy, fun, upscale, *not stuffy*"). Yet in spite of his "non-foodie" status, the reviewer acknowledges—and indeed formulates through multiple means—that, when it comes to food and dining out, he does know what he is talking about. He attributes this knowledge to learning "via osmosis" from his fiancée (who, in contrast to him, *is* a foodie), and to having dined out regularly in New York for two years, including visits to several famous restaurants. In addition, his comments reveal not only an interest in molecular gastronomy—but we can also notice that he was aware, even prior to his visit, that this restaurant happened to specialize in this particular style of cuisine.

Other restaurant reviewers exploit more implicit strategies for claiming culinary capital, and in doing so, they perform diverse foodie identities. One implicit way of performing culinary expertise is by making references to famous celebrity chefs. The excerpt below comes from the opening lines of a NYC review and displays the author's knowledge about the restaurant's chef, which is based on various popular media sources.

I was severely disappointed with [name of restaurant] :(I've been a huge fan of [first name of chef] from seeing him make his over the top

concoctions on [TV program] and watching his judge various other food-related shows. I've read a lot about him, and his interest in molecular gastronomy, and have always been excited to go eat his food.

The fact that the reviewer uses the chef's first name only indicates her expectation that her (real or imagined) reading audience will be foodies who share some knowledge about this particular chef.

While some Hong Kong reviewers' comments reveal that they, too, derive knowledge of local restaurants via the mass media (e.g., "I've often seen famous people dining at [name of restaurant] in newspapers and magazines"), when it comes to performing their identities as foodies, they are much more likely to rely on detailed descriptions of individual dishes, often referring to the taste, texture, and smell of each dish, and sometimes also including assessments of individual ingredients. In the following example, the reviewer constructs herself as a tofu connoisseur, by describing the visual appearance of the dish and detailing the preparation, texture, and taste of the primary ingredient.

The quality of the crispy tofu: 12 pieces of fried tofu were like gold bricks, neatly placed on a rectangular plate, with a few leaves of decoration. I'd call it ordinary but nice. The surface of the tofu was fried to crispness, it wasn't greasy at all, and not too salty, just right. But it's a pity that local frozen tofu was used. Although it was very smooth, there was no soya taste.

Perhaps even more impressive, the author of the next review indexes his gastronomic expertise not only by describing the dish in detail but also by being able to identify the omission of a particular ingredient.

The best dish: Shrimp with Longjing tea leaves. The river shrimp were fresh and crunchy, crystal in appearance, and cooked without any baking soda. I'd say these could be among the most delicious stir-fried shrimp I've ever had. This dish totally showcased the freshness of ingredients.

Without a doubt, Hong Kong reviewers attend in far greater detail to flavors, texture, temperature, and smell in their descriptions of individual dishes, whereas their New York counterparts are more likely to use general adjectives to evaluate the meal as a whole (e.g., "the food was great") or to offer much more general descriptions of specific dishes (e.g., "the dish was cold," "Ma Po Tofu is very underwhelming"). This finding—i.e. that the Hong Kong reviewers communicate in much more detail about the dishes and specific ingredients of their meals—is not entirely surprising, given that the majority of reviewers on *OpenRice* are likely individuals who are ethnically Chinese,⁵ reviewing dishes with which they are very familiar. In contrast, the NYC reviewers are likely comprised of multi-ethnic Americans reviewing food

from a range of different ethnic traditions, and therefore the degree of their knowledge about particular dishes and specific ingredients is much more variable. Furthermore, there is no Cantonese equivalent to the term “foodie,” and the Standard Chinese term (美食家) is not usually used in Hong Kong media; moreover, the Cantonese equivalent for “gourmet” (食家) is reserved for established or celebrity food critics and is typically not a label used by ordinary people to describe themselves.

Claims of Culinary Expertise based on Authenticity

A dominant theme in the literature on foodies (e.g., Johnston and Baumann; Naccarato and Lebesco) is that discourses of authenticity are common ways to claim culinary capital; in other words, having the ability to distinguish “real” cuisine from an inauthentic, and thus inferior, version is one way of presenting oneself as having specialized knowledge. A very common strategy for claiming expertise, used especially by American restaurant reviewers writing about “ethnic” cuisines, is mentioning or implying travels to the country from which the cuisine originates, as in the example below.

I probably shouldn't compare the sushi in NY to one in Japan, but the same Michelin one star, those in Tokyo seem to offer much higher quality sushi.

This reviewer claims culinary capital by demonstrating his ability to discern between sushi quality in Japan and New York. Although this knowledge claim is constructed indirectly (i.e. the reviewer does not say “I am a sushi expert”), he nevertheless does suggest specialized knowledge of sushi based on international travel, thus establishing himself as an authority on the subject.

Another way for reviewers to perform their culinary capital with respect to a restaurant's authenticity is to indicate a heritage connection to the cuisine described. This can be seen in the following excerpt, where the NYC reviewer constructs culinary knowledge based on a family connection with the type of cuisine: “I really loved [*restaurant name*] the first time I went because it reminded me of my Grandma's cooking.” Similarly, a Hong Kong reviewer makes a connection with a specific regional cuisine in her review of a restaurant, known for serving Shanghainese food: “I am a Hongkonger who grew up in Shanghai, ate Shanghai cuisine since I was young, therefore I am a bit more demanding.” We also found several statements in our data about “real Chinese food” or “authentic Korean food,” which position the reviewer as a knowledgeable, authoritative source on a certain type of cuisine—even if the precise basis of that expertise is not explicitly indicated in the text.

The Performance of a Knowledgeable Self: Highlighting one's Dining History

Another way that reviewers establish a credible persona is to present readers with information about their dining practices. Nearly one fourth of the *Yelp* reviewers (14/60) mentioned other restaurants in their reviews, making this one of the most common strategies for New York reviewers to construct their expertise. For instance, the reviewer in the excerpt below provides his readers with what he calls his “pseudo-sushi credentials,” in the form of a list of other NYC sushi restaurants, where he claims to dine “regularly.”

The first piece of sushi comes out and I am genuinely confused as I have never seen sushi prepared this way. (Now come the pseudo-sushi credentials, for the naysayers: I regularly eat at [restaurant name 1], [restaurant name 2], [restaurant name 3], among others).

The three restaurants he mentions are all high-end NYC sushi restaurants, one of which also has a Michelin star. His characterization of his experience with these types of restaurants as “regular” not only indicates his level of expertise on the subject of sushi but also establishes him as habituated to Michelin-level dining and, consequently, as belonging to a certain class or income category (i.e. dinner for one, at one of these restaurants, starts from 100 USD per person). In this excerpt, the reviewer addresses a particular segment of his reading audience (i.e. “the naysayers”), indicating an expectation that at least some segment of his audience may doubt his expertise, thus motivating his decision to claim his culinary capital explicitly in the form of a sort-of “sushi resume.” Hong Kong reviewers use this strategy to perform their culinary capital as well. For instance, the author of this *OpenRice* review concludes her review by complaining about a transaction with a member of the restaurant staff. Her final move indicates that, next time, instead of returning to this restaurant, she will instead return to more “civilized”⁶ establishments, and she then proceeds to list seven high-end restaurants and hotels.

Next time, I'll go back to civilized places, e.g., [restaurant name 1], [restaurant name 2], [hotel name 1], [hotel name 2], [name of restaurant group] eateries ([restaurant name 3], [restaurant name 4]) etc. . .

The reviewer's choice of wording (i.e. “go back to”) can also be construed as a way of claiming culinary capital by presenting herself as an experienced diner at this category of restaurant.

Besides mentioning past dining experiences in similar establishments, reviewers can also assert their culinary knowledge by discussing prior experiences at the specific restaurant being reviewed, as seen in the example below.

I have been dining here for years, from when it was a small restaurant in [*Street X*] to the famous restaurant in [*Street Y*] where it now is. I've seen it go from no star to two stars, and have always felt the food and service were extremely good. I had recommended the restaurant highly to friends and relatives. . .

Here, the Hong Kong reviewer highlights her status as a long-time customer, who has witnessed and experienced first-hand the evolution of the business. Discussing multiple experiences at the same restaurant enables a reviewer to claim expertise as well to comment on consistency, or inconsistency, in food and service. This helps to further contextualize the review for readers by framing it against a wider historical background, thereby offering a broader perspective for interpreting the evaluation of a single specific visit. In this case, the reviewer uses this background information about her long-term relationship with the establishment to set up her disappointment about both food quality and service on her most recent visit to the restaurant. *Yelp* reviewers also used this strategy, describing their ongoing or long-term relationships with a restaurant (e.g., “I’ve been back several times since then. . .”; “This used to be my family’s go-to yakitori place. . .”; “Almost always good food here. . .”).

References to Cost and Category

In her sample of Michelin restaurant diners from England and Germany, Lane found that diners rarely complained about the cost associated with a fine-dining Michelin restaurant experience. Yet in our sample of negative and average online reviews of Michelin restaurants in Hong Kong and NYC, we found that nearly half of the reviewers made some reference to the cost of their meal. This proportion was higher among the Hong Kong reviewers (60%) than among the New York reviewers (35%). Several reviewers from both contexts mentioned the precise amount spent on a meal or on a dish (e.g., “we paid a \$500 dollars bill for two” [NYC]; “80 bucks for 2 drinks and dumplings is criminal” [NYC]; “four people sharing the bill, even with 15% off, it still cost \$1,400” [HK]; “I remember clearly that it cost about \$2000” [HK]); whereas others gave a more vague indication that the high cost of their meal was not warranted (e.g., “the prices were astronomical” [NYC]; “not worth the amount charged for each plate” [NYC]; “if you want to know what ‘seriously expensive’ means, then check out the bill when you come to this place!” [HK]).

Notable among these were reviewers who indicated that they did not mind spending a considerable sum of money on a good meal. As an appeal to a reviewer’s ethos, this discourse strategy functions to construct the reviewer as a reasonable and well-informed consumer (Vázquez), who is well-aware

that restaurants in this category will be expensive, as can be seen in the following Hong Kong review excerpt.

Going to [*restaurant name*] for dinner, I knew it wasn't going to be a "super value meal." So I was prepared to pay \$2000 to have a good time and delicious meal.

Similarly, the New York reviewer below constructs a particular kind of foodie identity by defining herself as someone who is willing to "pay good money for good food." As the review continues, she complains more specifically about the dish's high cost relative to the small portion of food served—and explains that even *that* would have been justifiable had the quality of the dish been truly exceptional.

I will pay good money for good food. But that is not what we got with [*restaurant name*]. We went for my husband's birthday [...] I had the scallops with squid ink risotto. At \$36 I received 4 bite-sized scallops with about a half teaspoon of risotto each. . . 4 bites of food. If the dish were outstanding I wouldn't have minded too much, but the scallops were over cooked, and the dish was cold. We felt totally ripped off.

Similar to the author of the previously-discussed "not a foodie" excerpt, who indicated that the dining experience he was writing about was on the occasion of his fiancée's birthday, the author of the above excerpt mentions that the restaurant visit was on the occasion of her husband's birthday. Several other reviewers—15% of the NYC sample and 20% of the HK sample—also mentioned some special occasion in connection with their dining experience. These special occasions included birthdays, anniversaries, Mother's/Father's day, other holidays, and entertaining clients. In this respect, our findings align with Lane's observation that, among some contemporary consumers, dining out at Michelin-starred restaurants is an activity used to mark a special event.

In addition to discussing the cost, and mentioning a special circumstance as occasioning a visit to the restaurant, another phenomenon we observed was an explicit mention of the establishment's Michelin star status. This occurred in 28% of the Hong Kong reviews and 15% of the NYC reviews. A few NYC reviewers indicated that the Michelin rating was the primary reason for their visit (e.g., "I heard of this place because of its Michelin star" [NYC]; "I came here because of the Michelin star and the great Yelp reviews" [NYC]). This tendency was even more pronounced among the HK diners, often appearing in the first few lines of the review and framing some larger narrative (e.g., "Met up with four friends today specifically to try this Michelin award winning restaurant" [HK]; "As a father whose daughter has been away for a while, I arranged a nicer restaurant to welcome her home. I

chose this Michelin one star” [HK]). Besides mentioning the restaurant’s star status as the reason for the visit, on both sites, the restaurant’s Michelin star status was invoked even more often as part of an assessment of the overall dining experience (e.g., “I was thinking, with this quality, how could it be one Michelin Star?” [HK]; “Overall the food was okay, but the service was not worth a Michelin star.” [HK]; “It’s good but not Michelin good” [NYC]; “I have no idea how they got their Michelin star” [NYC]).

Approximately half of Hong Kong and New York City restaurant reviewers raised issues related to the cost of their dining experience, often based on a mismatch between their expectations for a Michelin-starred restaurant and the reality that they encountered on their visit. This reveals a difference between our findings and those of Lane, whose sample of British and German customers of Michelin-starred restaurants felt that the high costs of meals in such establishments were well-justified, given the quality of meals and the costs incurred by such restaurants; notably, this same group of diners also indicated that they did not use or participate in online restaurant review sites. It is possible that these differences may have some social and/or cultural basis (i.e. British and German consumers as generally more accustomed to spending more money on food than their US and HK counterparts; US and HK consumers relying more on social media for information than British and German consumers, etc.). At the same time, it could also be that online review sites, which enable “regular people’ to voice their opinions, share their views, and connect with each other” (Naccarato and Lebesco 74) represent an even broader segment of the Michelin restaurant dining spectrum than the 32 diners that Lane interviewed. Whether or not those consumers who post online reviews about their fine-dining experiences tend to come from the more aspirational category of Michelin-restaurant diners is unclear. However, the fact that reviewers use several different strategies to claim culinary capital suggests that they are very much aware that presenting a well-informed, experienced, and knowledgeable perspective is essential if their comments are to be taken seriously by their reading audience, instead of being dismissed as originating from uninformed amateurs (as we saw, perhaps most clearly, in the previously-discussed “pseudo-sushi credentials” excerpt).

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis presented here aligns with prior work, which has pointed to an increasing trend, over the last two decades, toward democratization in certain culinary practices. The first of these practices is that more individuals (representing a wider range of social classes) have gained information about—as well as access to—a broader spectrum of dining options than ever before. This is equally true of the segment of consumers who dine at Michelin-rated restaurants. As Lane has argued, such diners “now come

from a broader swathe of society, among which the professional-managerial are particularly prominent. They do not necessarily own wealth, and many enjoy comfortable rather than very high incomes” (239). While only the very wealthy may have the economic capital to dine at such establishments frequently, those members of the middle classes who are in possession of some degree of culinary capital may now also choose to spend their discretionary income in this class of restaurants as well—often doing so to mark a special occasion.

Contemporaneous with this trend toward democratization in restaurant dining, restaurant reviewing has also shifted from being an exclusive cultural activity that was once restricted to an elite few to a vernacular practice which has now fully entered the mainstream. Online restaurant reviews serve numerous functions. They present information from a wider range of perspectives available than ever before. By representing the voices of “real people,” this form of digital media may contribute to breaking down the elite barrier in restaurant reviewing—and consequently, in restaurant dining, as review sites such as these help to portray the aspirational as attainable. Yet, as Naccarato and Lebesco point out, it is also important to keep in mind that sites such as these which “distinguish themselves from their traditional counterparts by emphasizing their democratic impulse nonetheless [...] assume their own role in the circulation of privileged versions of culinary capital” (76). In the case of the restaurants discussed here, even though online reviewers may question or challenge the legitimacy of a particular restaurant’s Michelin-star status based on their own dining experiences, such reviews simultaneously reproduce existing ideologies about what is to be expected at an establishment of this category. Besides providing virtual spaces for sharing one’s experiences and perspectives, restaurant review sites also enable users to claim culinary capital using a variety of discourse strategies and, in so doing, to position themselves as specific kinds of foodies (e.g., trend followers, sushi experts, tofu connoisseurs). Discursive displays of culinary capital simultaneously help to construct online reviewers as credible sources of information, which is especially important in online contexts where authors and audience may be unknown to one another. Interestingly, performing one’s “foodie credentials” overtly may also be a key feature that distinguishes amateur reviewers from professional reviewers (Vásquez); the credibility of professional restaurant reviewers is often either assumed or derived from the venue that publishes their work, but rarely is it established in the ways that we have seen here. At the same time, when online reviewers display their culinary capital, they claim a particular subject position, which authorizes them to appropriate themes from the dominant discourses that exist throughout the culinary landscape.

Our analysis of online reviewers’ discourse further illustrates several motivations for visiting Michelin-rated restaurants. Among these is the prestige associated with dining in this category of restaurant, which may be linked

to recommendations presented in the mass media or a desire to emulate the rich and famous. As we have seen, for some individuals, doing so may represent an exceptional experience and may be a means for commemorating or celebrating a special occasion. But “special occasion” Michelin diners run the risk of being perceived by others as relatively inexperienced with this category of restaurants. For this reason, many of the same reviewers who mention the special circumstances prompting their Michelin restaurant visit also rely on a range of discourse strategies to index their culinary capital and, in doing so, to perform their expertise as they discuss their fine dining experiences. The extent to which *Yelp* or *OpenRice* reviews wield any actual influence in terms of shaping or dictating the tastes of others has yet to be established. Nonetheless, it is evident that online reviewers feel that it is absolutely within their rights to publicly weigh in about whether or not a restaurant merits a Michelin star on the basis of their own first-hand experience. This suggests that even if online reviewers may not be perceived as tastemakers, they clearly are arbiters of taste. By asserting their right to participate in a larger conversation about Michelin standards, they place themselves on equal footing with culinary elites and professional food reviewers. In this way, new media genres such as online reviews reproduce existing forms of culinary capital, while at the same time challenging some well-established hierarchies in food culture.

Finally, we would like to stress that participation in online reviewing is a global phenomenon. By including reviews written in two different languages, posted on two different online sites, which represent two different geographic settings, we were able to demonstrate that many of the discourse strategies used to claim culinary capital and to construct expertise about fine dining are not specific to a particular language, a unique cultural context, or to a particular website—but are actually shared conventions in the larger global genre of user-generated online restaurant reviews. We hope that our study opens the door for further research on restaurant review discourse, especially of texts written and posted by reviewers writing—and eating—from a wider range of locations around the world.⁷

NOTES

1. See Rousseau for a discussion of this found in popular media sources.
2. The authors who use this descriptor are presumably referring to non-European cuisines.
3. The *OpenRice* website requires reviewers to post rather detailed restaurant reviews, and the site will not accept (and ultimately does not post) reviews that are too general. (One of the authors once experienced having a rejected review from *OpenRice* on the basis of not providing enough detail.) While *Yelp* uses an algorithm to filter out content that it considers to be suspicious, in our experience, the site does not reject reviews solely on the basis of lack of detail. In fact, several of the *Yelp* reviews in our data set were both unelaborated and brief, consisting of only two to three sentences.
4. Research evidence shows that, in general, online reviews tend to appear as a “J-shaped distribution” with mostly 5-star ratings, some 1-star ratings, and hardly any ratings in between (Hu et al.; see also Jurafsky).

5. We make this claim based on the following observations. Ninety percent of reviews on *OpenRice* are written in Chinese. And while the population of Hong Kong is very international, those Hong Kongers who are not ethnically Chinese typically rely on English to communicate. As we explain below, all of the reviews in our sample were written primarily in Chinese, and there was no evidence in any of the examples of “non-nativeness” in reviewers’ linguistic expression. On the contrary, we found numerous instances of puns and sophisticated word play in the *Open Rice* reviews, which would be quite difficult to accomplish if reviewers were using Chinese as their second (or additional) language.

6. In this otherwise Chinese-language review, the word “civilized” is written in English.

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