

David Inglis

Comment on Josée Johnston and Shyon Bau- mann/3. Towards the Post-Foodie

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Comment on Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann/3

Towards the Post-Foodie

by David Inglis

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The contemporary food connoisseur – the foodie – is a strange creature. Caught as they are between conflicting norms of aesthetic pleasure and environmental concern, hedonistic lifestyle and political correctness, ostentatious display of culinary capital and discreet deployment of economic wealth, the foodie must attempt to create a viable sense of self through managing divergent social forces, contending cultural dispositions, and a whole series of lifestyle contradictions.

Johnston and Baumann's paper is like a good restaurant guide – it leads us through the contemporary terrain of the foodie, noting the major features of the culinary landscape within which such a person is constrained to manoeuvre. Through systematic collection of a range of data – from in-depth interviews with those for whom “good food” is a passion, to content analysis of the silken, but often dissembling, prose of the lifestyle food journalist – Johnston and Baumann lay out the main contours of contemporary foodie thought and practice.

We find that in the present day in North American foodie circles, unrepentant snobbery is out and apparent democratisation is in. Even the humble hot-dog can be subjected to an aestheticizing discourse which renders it part of an allegedly *bona fide* food culture. Outright condemnation of the food habits of non-foodies itself has been coded as being in bad taste. Ethics increasingly combine with aesthetics, as concerns about the environmental sustainability of food production and the conditions in which food animals are reared, come ever more to be interwoven with accounts of the taste of particular ingredients and dishes. Deliciousness these days, it seems,

is a characteristic only of food that can prove its own apparently natural, organic, biodiversity-friendly credentials. In this way, argue Johnston and Baumann, the hippie food culture of the 1960s and 1970s has become intertwined with the historically-earlier, French-inspired discourses of the gourmet and the gourmand, creating a new hybrid form, a kind of discursive version of the fusion cuisine that was up until recently so fashionable in foodie circles from San Francisco to Sydney.

But just as the discursive activities of foodies have become more hybrid, that discourse itself has ever more fetishized notions of authenticity, locality, and origins. Food's connections to imagined forms of *Gemeinschaft* are highly characteristic of a world haunted by financial crises, environmental disasters and political catastrophes. Although Johnston and Baumann do not say so explicitly, their paper points towards various ways in which foodie discourses are, in essence, attempts to forge meaningful forms of ontological security in a world which seems ever more complicated, uncontrollable, and foreboding. Visions of ethically-sourced fruits, rich products from the local dairy, and smiling bourgeois market-gardeners selling their untainted wares at the neighbourhood farmer's market – all these are dreams of an anxious society and class that disguise their privilege at the same time as they exercise it. But even in the most honeyed of their fantasies, the foodies – and the bourgeois groups to which they belong – seem dimly to realise that what they are engaged in is an ever more desperate conjuring up of modes of self-denial, manufacturing a gauze through which a radically unequal, exploitative and ugly world-condition is momentarily transformed into a nirvana of good taste, material plenty, and environmental stability: a Land of Cockaigne for late modernity.

Johnston and Baumann have done analysts of food matters and mores a great service, for they have unpicked many of the contradictions – and hypocrisies – in the food culture of relatively highly privileged groups in the present day. Their analysis suggests a number of different avenues for future research on such matters.

First, there needs to be a move beyond the discursive dimensions of foodie culture towards analysis of that discourse's capacities to structure more material conditions of food worlds. How, for instance, are changing foodie tastes impacting materially on the restaurant field, in terms of the different kinds of restaurants available to foodies and the varieties of specific capitals – organic capital, local-production capital, animal-rights capital, and so on – that particular sorts of restaurants both embody and purvey? Some hint of the materially structuring capacities of foodie discourses is already pointed to by Johnston and Baumann, but we will need in the future to know more about how discourse affects both material conditions and the constellation of capitals that constitute the restaurant field and close to it, the specialist fields of restricted-market (“high quality”) production, distribution and supply.

Second, Johnston and Baumann's analysis of conditions in North America also pushes us towards the need for more international, comparative studies of foodie cultures in different parts of the world. The renaissance among bourgeois groups of (allegedly) national food-ways in France and Italy is already well-documented [Petri- ni 2001], but these are national locales where we might expect to find self-consciously nationalistic – or regionalising – foodie discourses, aimed at what is seen as the defence of locality and authenticity against the homogenising effects of global agro- industry and American-inspired fast food production and consumption. But what of other locations, such as Scandinavia or Latin America? We might plausibly expect that, even under conditions of advanced, if uneven, globalization, contemporary foodie culture will still very much express certain national and regional characteristics and idiosyncracies. To what extent are these now also marked by the sorts of contradictions and silences that Johnston and Baumann identify in the US? And is the nervousness about overt snobbishness and the display of capital a peculiarly North American phenomenon, or has it begun to characterise more traditionally and explicitly class-based societies like Germany?

In the UK, perhaps still the most self-consciously class-aware country in the world, certain elements of North American-style “casualization” of dining practices have in fact appeared over the last decade or so, even in the highest-level restaurants basking in the consecration of Michelin stars. The dress code “smart casual” has become ever more the norm – men's neck-ties have disappeared as *de rigueur* apparel in such dining rooms, and the styles of suit-jacket required have become more and more informal. But I doubt that the tie-less men sitting down to dinner realise the broader sociological significance of the oxymoronic moniker “smart casual” that they now pay obeisance to, for it points towards quite profound “de-civilizing” processes of the kind Norbert Elias was fascinated by. For many centuries in Europe and in the more bourgeois sectors of North America and Australasia, behaviour and dress were subjected to ever stricter forms of regulation, with an upper middle class group eating dinner together in a formal, upper-level restaurant in the mid-twentieth century probably exhibiting some of the most formalised eating behaviours seen in history, outside of royal courts and aristocratic circles [Mennell 1995]. But now, with the relaxation of what counts as good form vis-a-vis neck-wear and other vestments, some of the most important of the regulatory processes of the last few centuries are being subtly, but nonetheless forcefully, undermined. It seems to me intriguing to try to connect such deformalisation processes – being enacted right now in London and similar places – with the kinds of hippie food discourses of the 1960s and 1970s, that Johnston and Baumann have shown to have infiltrated gourmet ways of thinking, possibly profoundly changing the rules of what a gourmet “is” and what s/he does,

at the table or anywhere else, in the process. The “smart casual” foodie diner may not seem like a descendant of the brown-rice-boiling hippie of the counter-culture, but perhaps we are in the presence of an ideational-performative constellation that conjoins them both and which is continuing to have great, but unacknowledged, effects on eating norms over a long period of time.

The third and final set of phenomena that I think Johnston and Baumann’s paper points towards to is the role of irony in foodie discourse and practice. There is not much sense from the interviews or the journalistic pieces that are presented in the paper of interviewees and journalists having much sense of ironic distance from what they are saying. While we would not expect such a sense to be present much in such a highly regulated realm as food journalism – any deviation from some fairly tight discursive norms, and a given article may well end up in the editor’s waste-paper basket – we might expect perhaps some trace of this in the interview material. Perhaps in other work which presents their research Johnston and Baumann might reflect on the more ironic elements in what interviewees were saying, if there were indeed such traces. Perhaps irony is not the strong suit of North American foodies. But certainly in the UK context, I have discerned in recent years the emergence of a new, more ironic set of sensibilities in foodie discourse. This seems very much to arise from the pressures felt by foodies to continue to pursue hedonistic gratifications on the one hand, whilst seeming to remain politically correct – being seen to be environmentally-sound, committed to local food production, wholly responsible as regards animal rights, etc. – on the other.

This balancing act is hard to achieve on a constant basis, hence it can provoke a retreat into ironic deconstruction of both sides of the equation, poking fun at one’s own bourgeois taste dispositions and tendencies towards self-indulgence (*unconstrained consumption*, associated with the political right-wing), while at the same time subjecting to ironic critique one’s own more liberal, guilt-laden worries about environmental sustainability, animal welfare ethics, supporting small producers and so on (*constrained consumption*, associated with the political left-wing). Both one’s more “responsible” and “irresponsible,” more ethical and more hedonistic, dispositions are laughingly ironised, as a way of escaping the impasse experienced when one is caught uncomfortably between them. To avoid being crushed by the contradictions attendant upon being driven both by pleasure and social distinction on the one side, and community-oriented and environmental sensibilities on the other, irony is turned by the self upon the self, and a certain, albeit uneasy, *modus vivendi* is achieved.

Just as the “post-tourist” revels ironically in the fabricated nature of all the supposedly “authentic” experiences that have been manufactured by the tourist industries for her on her travels [Rojek and Urry 1997], so too does the *post-foodie* self-con-

sciously dissect with the mocking eye of the ironist the various contradictions between hedonism and virtue which she lives through and embodies. If post-foodies in the UK have a patron saint, it is the restaurant review journalist A.A. Gill [2007], whose highly influential weekly columns in *The Sunday Times* capture the *esprit* of foodie self-deconstruction perfectly. Johnston and Baumann's American foodies seem to express a certain dash of sweet naivety as they attempt to voice both their love of food and, through it, their senses of self. But across the Atlantic, foodie culture is increasingly being served up by those who consume it as a rather more acidic and knowing repast.

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Abstract: What does it mean to engage with “food politics”? This article seeks to investigate the implicit and explicit dimensions of food politics by exploring the various ways political goals are both articulated and submerged. Our focus is on foodie discourse, which we argue combines classical gourmet concerns with the progressive impulses of the 1960s and 1970s countercuisine. Within this discourse, explicit political commitments focus on progressive goals regarding the environment and animal welfare, giving less attention to other political dimensions – like labour rights and food security. While explicit political commitments are important, we argue that the implicit political implications of foodie culture are also important to explore. At this implicit level, the politics of social inequality remain largely unarticulated, despite the role that food choices and preferences have historically played in generating status distinctions, and despite the growing disparity between rich and poor in the United States. To make our argument, we draw on an analysis of American food journalism as well as in-depth interviews with foodies.

Keywords: foodie, omnivore, food politics, inequality.

David Inglis is professor of sociology at the University of Aberdeen, where he teaches courses in the areas of classical sociological theory, modern social theory, and the sociology of art and culture. Among his publications: *Culture and Everyday Life* (2005); *Art and Aesthetics: Critical Concepts in the Social Sciences* (2009); *A Sociological History of Excretory Experience* (2001).