A Lingering Taste in my Mouth

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ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic work seeks to explore food anthropologically and interrogate the power relations imbued in ideas of spice. Through the embodied experience of having a meal at Maisha, an "Authentic Indian & Seafood Restaurant", this work centres the ways in which senses, particularly taste, create cultural meanings. Crucially, through a consideration of the author's positionality and St Andrews as a field site, this work analyses the role of globalisation, consumption, and colonialism in creating cultural meanings of food and spice.

Of the flavours that punctuate my day, I crave spice in St Andrews. I search for hints of it in the jalapeño and chorizo library toasties, Tesco meal deal sweet chili chicken wraps, and in the spice sachet of my midnight pot noodles. Dissatisfied, I interrogate its absence on my lips, on the tip of my tongue, at the roof of my mouth–the lingering heat of something spicy. 'Spice' is a heavy word. It carries long histories of imperialism, connoting a racialised Other, a part of an Orientalist imaginary; it leaves the foul taste of the colonial project in my mouth.

I feel this tension lodged in my throat. I'm an outsider here, in 'the heart of the Empire', but I've come to St Andrews from the United States, which represents its own project of cultural imperialism and hegemony. Yet there too, I'm an outsider and an immigrant. And even then, my mother's home (and my birthplace) of Kazakhstan and my father's home of Colombia do not have long traditions of spiciness.

So how do I approach this question of 'spice' as an amalgam of transnational identities made possible through the dynamics of globalisation? How do I approach the power relations imbued in ideas about food and how it constitutes culture as a student of British social anthropology 'in the heart of the Empire'? Drawing from Phillips' (2006) aim of "interrogating ideas about food through the lens of globalisation, and globalisation through the lens of food" (2006: 38), I decided to explore my desire for spice as a flavour and spiciness as a sensorial experience through the embodied experience of eating at Maisha, "An Authentic Indian & Seafood Restaurant".

Likewise proposing "an approach in which taste is central to exploring other aspects of culture" (2010: 213), David Sutton conceptualises an anthropology of food through a particular attention to the senses to understand "cultural issues around taste and other sensory aspects of food" (2010: 215). Emphasising a "robust collaboration of the senses" in the experience of taste (Korsmeyer 2011: 467) and a synesthetic "union of the senses" (Sutton 2010: 217–218), both Sutton (2010, 2011) and Korsmeyer (2011) suggest that food is experienced through the interaction of the senses of taste, sight, sound, and smell, as well as touch, texture, and temperature, challenging Western sensory models which privilege sight and recognizing 'taste' as socially and culturally constructed. With a similar attention to the senses, Rotter (2011) examines imperial encounters as wielding the power to mediate and organise ideas about the senses such that "the entire human sensorium was engaged in tacts of making and accommodating and resisting empire" (2011: 4).

With this focus on the senses and sensory experience in creating the cultural meanings of taste and food, I use auto-ethnography as my methodology in approaching, analysing, and reflecting on spice as an embodied experience of eating a meal at Maisha. In using auto-ethnography, I pay attention to various different aspects of my sensory experiences of taste, sound, smell, and sight "to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner 2011: 273). Crucially, in contextualising my positionality as an international Kazakh-Colombian student at St Andrews experiencing spice in a South Asian restaurant, I can use auto-ethnography to better "understand how the kinds of people we claim, or are perceived, to be influence interpretations of what we study, how we study it, and what we say about our topic" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner 2011: 275).

When 'looking for spice' in St Andrews, I chose a restaurant as my field site for its role in mediating encounters with ideas of globalisation, multiculturalism, commodification, consumption, and colonialism. As such I am drawing from Turgeon and Pastinelli's (2002) writings of ethnic restaurants in Quebec City in a postcolonial context where "cultural difference has been commodified and consumed in more condensed and localized forms than ever before" (2002: 263), describing ethnic

restaurants as "a modernized reflection of colonialism and cannibalism practiced on the home front" (2002: 261) and "a place for the consumption of the world" (2002: 263). My engagement with these ideas is intensified by the setting of a South Asian 'ethnic restaurant' in the U.K., where empire has played a central role in constructing 'Indian' cuisine: both during British colonial rule and in the subsequent tension of 'Indian' restaurants as spaces marked by exclusion and racism, multicultural hybridity and tolerance, and appropriation into British national culture (Buettner 2008).


Maisha

Bengali & Indian Dining

Welcome to our family run authentic Indian and Seafood Restaurant in the heart of the royal and ancient town of St Andrews. Maisha, means working with pride. Our aim is to introduce a truly high quality Indian and Seafood Restaurant which was created with ambition, determination and desire. A desire to succeed, in every sense of the word as we understand it. It is therefore Important that we start by listening to you, our guest. By doing so, we will be able to deliver the best food, the best service and all in all, a friendly atmosphere second to none.

We have a burning desire to please our guests.

We specialize in fish and Seafood in an authentic and traditional way. Throughout the world people are becoming more aware of the health advantages of inducing more fish and seafood in their daily diets. Bengali cuisine has always marinated fish as an integral theme. The Bay of Bengal provides a sweet water delicious fish and seafood such as Bengal Rupchanda - a silvery white pomphet and Tilpia.

We have introduced a Tuna Fish Kebab, Bengal Rupchanda (Pomphet fish) Bhuna, Fresh local Crab Bhuna recipe developed by Mahfuza, Mohi's wife, which Is featured on the menu. We use as much fresh local produce as we can in all our dishes with a highly skilled team of chefs producing a mouth watering range of delicious dishes from Bangladesh, India, Thailand and Scotland which coupled with an extensive wine, Bangladeshi and Indian beer, and spirit list, produces a unique experience.

These dynamics and histories are themselves embodied in the marketing, presentation, and decoration of restaurants and were immediately apparent as I made my way up to Maisha's front door. At the entrance, along the corridors, and on the walls a great variety of different identities were represented through framed paintings and photographs. Hung next to each other, my eyes simultaneously took in and juxtaposed paintings of familiar St Andrews landmarks–Market Street, the Old Course, golfing–with paintings of small wooden river boats along the Ganges. A framed, signed Bangladesh cricket jersey. Holographic images of the Scottish thistle and Tower Bridge. A drum and painting of African warriors. Photographs of the owner–a St Andrews alumni–with various patrons. Framed certificates from the Scottish Curry Awards. From these representations of the restaurant to customers but also back to itself, Maisha expresses its complex identity as embedded in the local St Andrews community, a participant in the tourist economy, nationally linked to Bangladesh yet espousing an idyllic imaginary of India, and perhaps even perpetuating further 'multiculturalist' exoticism through generalising symbols of the African continent. At the same time, aspects of the décor conformed to stereotypical and generalised features of Indian curry restaurants (Buettner 2008): the walls were painted a deep shade of red, the lighting gave a soft orange undertone, and there was an abundance of plants and verdant foliage by the windows. The music also presented this mix of complicated identities: lo-fi Hindi pop songs played faintly in the background, raising questions as to whether a stereotypical aesthetic of 'Indian music' has been 'modernised' and for whom it is playing.

I was seated semi-awkwardly at a table in the corner. It was the perfect vantage point from which to observe the small dining space, but it was also in the direct line of sight of a raised platform from which the service staff observed me. In this way, my identity as a customer was reciprocally constituted by my interactions with the staff:

When I asked for recommendations of their spicy dishes, the waiter directed me to the "mild" section and proposed the chicken tikka masala. I laughed and indicated my higher spice preference after which he pointed me to the "Madras heat" which he described as "a 7/10 spiciness". Immediately after, he and his colleagues asked me where I was from. And then: "What religion are you?" And then: "Are you Muslim?" I gave a half-smile: "I come from the U.S." "Ah," they said, making a dismissive hand gesture.

I ordered a South Indian Garlic Chili curry and Naan[1].

It was very tasty! Though it was nowhere near as spicy as I had been expecting for "7/10 Madras heat"; it was flavourful. The curry left a pleasant tingling, lingering burn at the back of my mouth, on the top of my tongue, and on my lips. The green chilis felt fresh with an aftertaste kick which spread to the top of my mouth and into my sinuses. It had a lovely mix of textures: the baked vegetable made a rich sauce, the chicken was soft and buttery, contrasted by crispy freshly chopped spring onion. The roasted cloves of garlic brought a lovely smoky bite. The naan was warm and fluffy; a vessel with which to clean the plate to get the last residual flavours. I was eating with my hands, paying attention to how each of my senses were being engaged. In the end, I even got some of it in my notebook.

Significantly, the sense of smell was largely absent. The food arrived, already plated, from a little dumbwaiter elevator. The kitchen was distanced from the dining room; there was no wafting aroma nor sizzling sound of food being prepared. Neither was it supplanted by any other scent beyond a faint, ambiguous aroma of 'spices' from my own plate – no candles or incense or aromatic plants. This begs the question whether this absence is merely circumstantial or a conscious distancing in response to the racialized degradation of the "scent of curry" (Buettner 2008 and Rotter 2011).

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1 Maisha advertise their specialty in fish and seafood (as shown in images of menu above) which I was interested in trying, particularly as they said it is central to Bengali cuisine. Unfortunately, the pricing for the Seafood and Fish Specialties was out of my budget.

The racialized dynamics of spice and spiciness were also performed and recreated when the room filled up into a nice chatter. From the customers around me, I picked up conversations centring spice from a group of British and American university boys and a young British couple sat next to me:

One of the university boys opened with: "Guys, why are you looking at the menu like you're not going to get chicken tikka masala and rice?"

"I've got a crazy spice tolerance, actually", another responds. He orders butter chicken instead and asks it to be "mild, please".

A third hesitates before ordering biryani, asking if it's spicy. "Noo, it's not spicy", the waiter reassures, gesturing up and down to his white skin, "not spicy for you!"

The couple and I laughed at the biryani comment. They both got biryani as well. The girl was enjoying hers while her boyfriend struggled through a bite. "Too spicy?" she asked. "Not *too* spicy" he said, before asking for tap water in a "request of shame". They laughed again but when the waiter returned, he pre-emptively brought a glass of water for the girlfriend as well.

The mediation of spice through these conversations, both cocky and bashful, re-iterates dynamics of consumption, appropriation, and hybridity. This intersects with large questions of the authenticity of "Indian restaurants" which claim they are 'authentic' but are often criticised for homogeneously and generically misrepresenting a wide variety of regional cuisines adapted to white tastes (Buettner 2008). Indeed, my friends from Bangalore, Bombay, and Delhi bemoaned my Maisha meal and all offered to cook me "real Indian food" instead. Given my positionality outside knowledge of 'authentic Indian' food and flavour as well as the British national context which claims it as part of its multi-cultural identity, I cannot personally speak to the question of 'authenticity. My search for 'spicy food' was for something that engages all my senses, that leaves a lingering taste in my mouth. In engaging in this embodied experience, however, I can contextualise myself and St Andrews and contend with the power dynamics inherent in culturally constructing food, in this case arising from and often replicating histories of colonialism.

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