FOREIGN CUISINE IN WEST GERMANY

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When eating out, 56 percent of German customers today prefer foreign cuisine: Italian, Chinese, and Greek restaurants are the most popular among diners.¹ This is a relatively new phenomenon. Before the Second World War, eateries offering foreign food were confined to cosmopolitan cities like Berlin or Hamburg. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that the picture started to change, and Italian, Greek, Spanish, Chinese, and Turkish restaurants and snack bars spread all over West Germany. These new places of consumption are the subject of my research project, which analyzes the role of the ausländisches Spezialitätenrestaurant in the economic, social, and cultural history of the Federal Republic. The following considerations do not aim at providing a comprehensive picture, but seek to outline the key questions, research perspectives, and analytical framework for an analysis of these new institutions.

Combining research on migration to West Germany and on postwar consumerism, I am particularly interested in transnational food migration and its impact on (re)defining ethnic identities. My attempt to empirically test some of the theoretical claims of transnational and transcultural research is guided by a historical interest in the ways in which cultural differences have been rearticulated in Germany after 1945. What does the consumption of “foreign” food mean in the context of reconfiguring German society and its relation to “the other” after the experiences of National Socialism and the Second World War?² Although in this respect the German case might be unique, the spread of ethnic food in the FRG was part of an international trend in Western consumer societies. Therefore, the foreign or ethnic³ restaurant in Germany—in itself a transnational place—will be contextualized by comparisons to ethnic restaurants in other Western countries, especially the US and the UK, but also to the GDR⁴, and thus to different cultures of consumption. The period of investigation comprises primarily the 1950s to the 1980s; the regional focus is on the metropolises Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, and Cologne, and on the cities of Leverkusen in the west, Konstanz in the south, and Flensburg in the north of the Republic. This way, I hope to grasp more precisely the processes of diffusion of foreign cuisines and different geographies of consumption.

Whereas Hasia Diner in her seminal study Hungering for America understands transnational food migration primarily in terms of the
changes in food habits occurring within the new homes of migrants, focusing on the function of food as an “agent of memory,” I am interested in the public consumption of ethnic food, by migrants and non-migrants. Therefore, the main units of analysis will be the place of consumption (the ethnic restaurant and snack bar); the social actors involved; and the commodities sold and served. They all form part of a “culinary network” that also comprises the ways food is produced and distributed. In an ethnic restaurant, globally traded foods are consumed in a highly specific context; here, the global and the local meet in ways that must be analyzed from the perspectives of socioeconomic as well as cultural history.

Drawing on evidence from a wide variety of sources—reports of the German Hotel and Restaurant Federation (DEHOGA), documents of foreign restaurateurs’ unions, contemporary newspapers and journals, cookbooks, market research, advertising, literature and film, as well as oral history interviews—my project has several aims. First, I attempt to conceptualize the ethnic restaurant as a translocal space that is characterized by intercultural transfers of foods, technologies, and information, and that functions as a nodal point in transnational networks. Second, I intend to write a socioeconomic history of ethnic restaurants that reconstructs the historical development of this branch of the West German food sector and critically investigates the concept of an “ethnic business.” Third, I strive to analyze some of the major changes in terms of an internationalization of German food consumption patterns in the postwar period. Finally, I aim to discuss the cultural meanings surrounding ethnic food, focusing on the political dimension of ethnicized commodities.

Whereas the aspect of migration has so far been neglected in research on consumerism in Germany, the sphere of consumption has rarely been of interest in the historical research on migration, which still mainly focuses on migrants in the industrial sector. The ethnic restaurant is a good example of immigrant (small) business; moreover, it has fundamentally changed food consumption patterns in the Federal Republic. Since no historical study exists on ethnic restaurants or snack bars in West Germany, not even a satisfactory account of the restaurant culture in general, reconstructing the process of diffusion of ethnic restaurants is an important aspect of my work.

I. The Ethnic Restaurant: A Transnational/Translocal Place

Taking into account the “heterotopic effect” of migrant cuisines, the ethnic restaurant has to be conceptualized as a local place of food consumption, the locality of which is translocal from the outset.
Spezialitätenrestaurants are “microspaces of intercultural encounter and exchange,” and the social actors—migrant and non-migrant owners of the restaurant, cooks, waiters, and (illegal) kitchen workers, as well as migrant and non-migrant patrons—all participate in this transnational or translocal space of the ethnic restaurant, though with differing investments. Whereas the bourgeois restaurant of the nineteenth century presented regional cuisines as part of an emerging national cuisine, and thus can be understood as a place where “the nation” was consumed, the ethnic restaurant of the twentieth century can be regarded as a place where “the world” is consumed.

Eating out in its various forms demands further research not only because of its economic importance but also because of its social and cultural significance. Studying the restaurant is, as Joanne Finkelstein has pointed out, “tantamount to drawing an ethnography of modernity.” Furthermore, restaurants, and ethnic restaurants in particular, have played a major role in changing eating habits. But what is an ethnic restaurant? In his definition of ethnic restaurants, Wilbur Zelinsky emphasizes that “a self-consciously ethnic restaurant will show its colors in one of three places: in its name, in its inclusion under an ethnic heading in a special section of the telephone directory, or by listing the specialties of the house in a display ad.” I follow this definition in that telephone directories represent an essential part of my source material for reconstructing when and where ethnic restaurants were established in Germany. Since the distinction between German and foreign food, between here and there, is anything but self-evident, the processes of constructing these placings have to be analyzed, thus questioning and historicizing the whole concept of the ethnic restaurant and ethnic cuisine (ausländische Gastronomie). What defines an ethnic restaurant and how definitions have changed over time is part of my analysis and cannot be taken for granted.

As proposed by the editors of Orte der Moderne (spaces of modernity), I will analyze the ethnic restaurant as a material, social, and imaginary space. The material aspects of the ethnic restaurant—the style of furniture, the decoration, etc.—point to a specific “architecture of desire,” and thus to the imaginary aspects of the establishment. For the migrant restaurateur and the migrant patron, the ethnic restaurant might provide a memory of “home”; for the other patrons it is, above all, associated with vacation and/or the exotic. Eating out in an ethnic restaurant has often been described as a “substitute for travel.” The tourist experiences of an increasing part of the population, but also the informality and the mostly inexpensive food served in many ethnic restaurants, were decisive factors for the success of these enterprises.
II. Ethnic Restaurants in West Germany: Ethnic Businesses?

Whereas there is some continuity of ethnic restaurants throughout the twentieth century, with Italian restaurants functioning as a kind of door-opener for other foreign cuisines, only in postwar West Germany can a noteworthy number of ethnic restaurants be found, most of them offering Mediterranean cuisine. Most of these eateries were established by immigrants, some of them former “guest workers” who had been recruited in the years 1955 to 1974. The spread of ethnic restaurants, which started in the 1960s, accelerated in the 1970s and 1980s. Within the period 1975 to 1985, the number of ethnic restaurants doubled from around 20,000 to around 40,000. In 1985, every fourth restaurant was run by a non-German owner. In 1992, of the 55,000 foreign restaurateurs in Germany, approximately 18,000 were Italian; the second biggest group were the Turkish restaurateurs.

What were the reasons for immigrants to open up their own businesses? In the 1970s, the economic restructuring in the aftermath of the oil crisis affected immigrants in particular, and the unemployment rates of foreign residents were disproportionately high. Since non-EU nationals, i.e. until the 1980s all “guest-workers” except for the Italians, were at risk of losing their residence permits if they became dependent on social welfare (after their eligibility for unemployment benefits expired), opening up one’s own business often was the only way to make a living in Germany, for oneself as well as for family members who came to Germany in the course of family reunification.

Invoking the risk of unemployment to explain the decision of immigrants to become self-employed places me right in the middle of the discussions on the ethnic economy that dominate the field of research on immigrant self-employment. Whereas research on ethnic business in the United States tends to stress the socioeconomic opportunities and the success of self-employed immigrants, the European debate tends to see ethnic business as a reaction to discrimination in the labor market. In Germany, the job market is highly regulated, and institutional barriers make access to the formal labor market difficult for immigrants. Whereas in the United States immigrant business has been supported by the ideology of free enterprise and the myth of the “self-made man,” in Germany, an immigration country in denial with a migration regime based on rotation, ethnic business has a very different history—a history still to be written.

The concept of ethnic economy is based on the idea that co-ethnicity functions as a vital resource for the (ethnic) entrepreneur. Whereas this may be true in historically specific situations and for a certain period of time, any universal concept of ethnic business is in danger of essential-
izing the notion of ethnicity. Instead of explaining socioeconomic or cultural processes with recourse to ethnicity, it is strategies of ethnicization and self-ethnicization that have to be taken into consideration, underlining the fluidity and variability of “ethnic communities,” especially in the context of migration. The whole debate on the so-called ethnic economy itself forms part of the discourses that have to be analyzed in a study on ethnic restaurants.

III. The Internationalization of Food Consumption in West Germany

Not only in regard to the restaurant cuisines available in any city in Germany, but also with respect to the food prepared and eaten at home, an internationalization of food consumption has taken place over the last decades. Ethnic cuisines are no longer only offered in ausländische Spezialitätenrestaurants, but also in countless snack bars, in canteens, and other places of communal feeding, as well as at home. Foreign products such as olive oil or eggplants show enormous growth rates.

This differentiation and commodification of various national, but also regional and local, foodstuffs and cuisines are effects of globalizing processes in the food sector. Differentiation can be considered an answer to global standardization; both processes co-evolve with each other, so that any one-sided account of a homogenizing “McDonaldization of society” is problematic. Based on the assumptions that globalization in the food sector is best understood as a process of “glocalization,” and that stressing processes of Americanization is not sufficient when studying West German consumer cultures, in my project, I switch the focus to parallel and intertwined processes like the “Italianization” of food consumption in West Germany.

An important aspect of the internationalization of food consumption is the enormous accumulation of international culinary knowledge. Since the 1950s, the cooking columns of women’s magazines and Hausfrauenblätter (housewives’ magazines) have shown an increasing interest in “foreign” cuisines. An analysis of cookbooks of the twentieth century demonstrates that there had been a tradition of “international cooking” predating the advent of a considerable number of ethnic restaurants in Germany, but that the spread of eateries offering foreign cuisine dramatically fostered the popularity of recipes for “exotic” dishes.

Since the 1960s, not only cookbooks on “international specialties,” but also a new genre of cookbooks dedicated to only one specific “foreign” cuisine proliferated. The public and private consumption of ethnic food added to each other’s success; in both spheres, an internationalization or, to be more precise, a transnationalization and hybridiza-
tion of food consumption has taken place. Therefore, redefinitions of taste in postwar Germany were initiated not only by migrant restaurateurs, but also by (German) housewives, who were key players in these transformation processes as they were situated at the interface of public and private consumption.  

IV. Food and Identities: The Cultural Meanings of Ethnic Food  

Food plays a fundamental role in processes of identity formation, on the personal as well as the social level. It serves as a “powerful metonym for national cultures” and has been a “source of racial stereotyping” for a long time. What images circulate about specific foods and the people who eat these foods? Advertising, popular magazines, literature, and film provide rich material for analyzing the cultural meanings of various ethnic foods. With the greatly increased availability of ethnic foods in the 1960s, images of “exotic” foodstuffs and narrations about their origin started to proliferate widely in the public. With the help of “cultural biographies” of selected ethnic food items, not only the commodity-specific characteristics, but also the changes of cultural meanings over time and with regard to different social contexts can be addressed. An important aspect of these biographies is the historically specific knowledge of the nutritional value of certain food items. Last but not least, it was nutritional science that contributed decisively to the success of the so-called Mediterranean diet.  

The images and narratives surrounding foreign foods in an ausländerisches Spezialitätenrestaurant are characterized by processes of exoticization and authentication (especially for restaurants, in contrast to snack bars). An ethnic restaurant is viewed as authentic when it is not only frequented by Germans, but also by co-nationals of the restaurateur. Together with the staff, these guests are considered as a guarantee for the authenticity of the food served; they are believed to “imbue the food with their ethnicity,” stressing the importance of the embodiment of ethnicity and the performative character of culture.  

The ethnic restaurant can be conceptualized as a theatrical space, with the kitchen as backstage area and the dining hall as center stage, where a certain ethnic performance is expected and practiced by both sides, whether intended or not. An exceptionally complex ethnic performance takes place when, e.g., a pizzeria is managed by Turks, or Muslim Pakistani and Bangladeshi act as Indians. Ethnic drag and ethnic passing here go hand in hand, making visible the mechanisms of “normal” ethnic performances. The body as a carrier and producer of signs of
ethnicity has so far been neglected in migration studies;\textsuperscript{41} in the context of the ethnic restaurant, the bodily performance in its exploitative (racist and sexist) as well as subversive dimensions\textsuperscript{42} has to be taken into consideration to draw a complex picture of the social interactions of staff and guests.

\section*{Conclusion}

Not only ethnic but also class and gender differences are articulated in the act of eating out, and this happens in sometimes conflicting ways, suggesting that food consumption practices are precariously flexible markers of identity.\textsuperscript{43} In the postwar German context, eating out in ethnic restaurants might have been motivated by the desire to become cosmopolitan, to internationalize German identity after 1945. After years of exclusion from global consumer culture during the Nazi period, many Germans wished to participate again in a Western lifestyle—for which eating out became more and more important. Tracing the cross-cultural consumption in ethnic restaurants is, of course, but one arena for discussing the (re)configurations of race and ethnicity in postwar Germany. The omnipresence of ethnic food, however, makes it an ideal object for studying the complex and ambivalent renegotiations of cultural differences in everyday life.

\section*{Notes}


\textsuperscript{2} The history of the reconceptualizations of race or ethnicity in postwar Germany is still under-researched. For an excellent account of the transnational reconfiguration of race, see Heike Fehrenbach, Race after Hitler: Black Occupation Children in Postwar Germany and America (Princeton, 2005).

\textsuperscript{3} Since it is the most common term in the English-speaking world, I use “ethnic restaurant” as a synonym for \textit{ausländisches Spezialitätenrestaurant}. On the problematic use of the term “ethnic,” especially in the German context, see the next section of this essay.

\textsuperscript{4} In the GDR, restaurants offering the cuisine of other socialist countries (the only available cuisines) were called \textit{Nationalitätengaststätten}.

\textsuperscript{5} Hasia Diner, Hungering for America (Cambridge MA, 2002), 8.


\textsuperscript{7} A short survey is given by Albrecht Jenn, \textit{Die deutsche Gastronomie: Eine historische und betriebswissenschaftliche Betrachtung} (Frankfurt am Main, 1993), 10–90. In the social sciences, some research on ethnic restaurants, mainly on \textit{Döner} food stalls, has been undertaken in recent years. See Tim Fallenbacher, “Ethnic Business in Nürnberg: Fallstudie Dönerkebab,” Mitteilungen der Fränkischen Geographischen Gesellschaft 48 (2001): 247–272; Ayse Caglar, “Mc-


10 “They may occupy its spaces momentarily (during the consumption of a meal, for example) or for a lifetime (as members of ethnically defined transnational communities).” Peter Jackson, Philip Crang, and Claire Dwyer, “Introduction: The Spaces of Transnationality,” in *Transnational Spaces*, ed. Peter Jackson, Philip Crang, and Claire Dwyer (London, 2004), 3. “Translocal” might be an even more appropriate term for an ethnic restaurant, since it is not necessarily national contexts, but specific localities which merge with other localities and produce something new. See Maren Möhring, “TransLokal: Ausländerische Gaststätten in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland,” *traverse* 41, no. 2 (2007).

11 On the history of the genuinely modern institution of the restaurant, see Rebecca L. Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 2000). In premodern times, eating out did not belong to the experience of a considerable number of people, and the inns providing food for travelers did not offer a range of dishes from which to choose.


18 For the German case, statistical data on traveling abroad, especially to Italy, and the growing market for Italian restaurants in the 1960s seem to confirm the correlation of travel and eating out in an ethnic restaurant.


20 Horst Heinz Grimm, *Das Gastgewerbe in der Bundesrepublik* (dpa Hintergrund: No. 3245, 21 July 1987), 11.


Italian cuisine was the first generally available and is still the most successful of all foreign cuisines in Germany, both with regard to private and public consumption. See Köhler, “Kulurelle Vielfalt,” 331, 335.


Michael Wildt, Vom kleinen Wohlstand: Eine Konsumgeschichte der fünfziger Jahre (Frankfurt am Main, 1996), 177.

On the following, see Maren Möhring, “Transnational Food Migration and the Internationalization of Food Consumption: Ethnic Cuisine in West Germany,” in Food and Globalization, ed. Alexander Nützenadel and Frank Trentmann (forthcoming).

Similarly, in the US in the 1950s, more and more Americans became interested in foreign cuisines, and specialty cookbooks made “significant inroads into the cookbook market.” Jessamyn Neuhaus, Manly Meals and Mom’s Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America (Baltimore, 2003), 165.

Implicitly or explicitly, the cookbooks of the 1950s to the 1970s mainly addressed middle-class housewives and did not refer to lower-class or migrant women’s different experiences.


Anne J. Kershen, “Introduction: Food in the Migrant Experience,” in Food in the Migrant Experience, ed. Anne J. Kershen (Aldershot, 2002), 8. In Germany, Italians were, and sometimes still are, called “Spaghettifresser.”


This is a typical situation, especially in eastern Germany, but not only there. See D. Soyez, “Der ‘Kölsche Chinese’ und andere Hybride: Kölner Restaurants als Bühnen von Globalisierungsprozessen,” Kölner Geographische Arbeiten 82 (2004): 32.

41 For the need to address the corporeal face-to-face communication in migration research, see Bernd Bröskamp, “Ethnische Grenzen des Geschmacks: Perspektiven einer praxeologischen Migrationsforschung,” in Praxis und Ästhetik: Neue Perspektiven im Denken Pierre Bourdieu, ed. Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf (Frankfurt am Main, 1993), 199.
