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Immigrant Cuisine in Paris: Un Espace Potentiel d'Intégration

The historical supremacy of French cuisine is rarely challenged in the restaurant industry. Not only the flavors and techniques of French cooking, but the process of eating a meal “à la russe” have become commonplace in the last century and a half due to France’s place at the forefront of global food service practices. However, as the term “à la russe” implies, France has often adopted food practices from other cultures and made them its own. The ubiquity of dishes such as kebab and tagine on the streets and in the supermarkets of Paris speaks to this and reveals the colonial history behind many of the daily Parisian food practices. During my semester abroad in Paris, I noticed a divide between conceptions of traditional French cuisine and the many immigrant cuisines available in France’s capital. This divide is often along socioeconomic lines: French cuisine is saved for the sit-down, pricier bistros and cafés, while immigrant cuisine is made and sold cheaply to the masses. This surprised me, as I would assume that a country that so values the quality and flavor of food would be quick to incorporate the wonderful and complex flavors of other cultures into their cuisine. I used the Friedberg Fellowship to explore these issues and the relationship between France’s immigrant cuisines and France’s national cuisine in Paris, with particular attention paid to white, traditional French attitudes towards non-traditional French cuisines.

The timing of my trip to Paris threw the socioeconomic and geographic divides between the city’s populations in stark relief. I visited Paris from August 5th through the 20th, squarely in the middle of the period of summer vacation from late July to late August, during which many parisians leave the city. I stayed in the 16th arrondissement, known to be a more bourgeois district and home to a generally older and whiter population. During my stay, the 16th was all

but deserted-- the bakery, stores and restaurants I patronized during my semester abroad were all shut, with notes on the storefront windows wishing “de bonnes vacances et de bons retours.”

The only restaurant in my neighborhood that stayed open was a small North African spot called “Le Paradis du Couscous,” which, unsurprisingly, serves couscous with various accompaniments. From talking to some friends in Paris, I learned that the economically disadvantaged classes in Paris often cannot afford to go on vacation during “les grandes vacances.” This includes many restaurant owners and operators, who stay in Paris to cater to the tourists who fill the city while its inhabitants are away on holiday. Nelly Chhor, a Cambodian chef who works at a Korean barbecue restaurant in the banlieues outside of Paris, says that, “immigrants and refugees often don’t have any qualifications [when they arrive in France].” For these people, “the restaurant industry is a field where it is...easier for them to adapt.” However, as I saw during my stay in Paris, adapting and integrating as an immigrant restaurateur can be difficult, and often requires sacrifices such as staying to work during the summer vacations. While owning a restaurant can be an opportunity for unskilled workers to get a leg up in the French economy, it is by no means easy to do so.

I conducted a large part of my research in Belleville, a neighborhood in Paris’ 18th arrondissement known to be densely populated with immigrants. The emptiness of the 16th arrondissement was sharply contrasted by the hustle and bustle of Belleville. At a weekend market I visited just outside of the Belleville metro station, it appeared that the entire neighborhood was out picking up groceries. The market runs along the Boulevard de Belleville for at least 5 blocks, with enough space between the stalls for two narrow lines to file through. The usual summer fruits and vegetables were available, figs, peaches, courgettes, but there were also booths with bags of spices and butchers’ stands with handmade merguez and other halal

meats. The restaurants in the area further reflect the diversity of the neighborhood: the majority are Chinese or East-Asian, but there are pockets of North African cuisine as well.

At La Cave de Belleville, I asked the saleswoman about the neighborhood and the people who call it home. She told me that Bellville has recently become a trendy neighborhood, reminiscent of Williamsburg in Brooklyn, with younger populations moving in to join the immigrant and older French populations that have lived there for decades. She also claimed that the older “Français de souche” are generally not very welcoming to new populations who they see as disrupting the way things used to be. One is unlikely to find older white French people in the restaurants around the Belleville; they stick to what they know, and what they know is traditional French cuisine.

These sentiments were echoed by Robbie Cox, a friend of my brother’s who works in Paris at Septime, a restaurant recently ranked 40th best in the world by The World’s 50 Best Restaurants. He had heard about my project, and he and I met up in Belleville to grab a meal and talk about his experience as a chef at a Michelin-starred restaurant in Paris. He brought me to Le Grand Bol, a Chinese restaurant just down the street from the Belleville market. Le Grand Bol is a small, 20-seat restaurant with a rather nondescript storefront and a somewhat bland tiled interior. While the decor was unremarkable, the food was anything but: we shared cockles in a light broth, peking duck with small pancakes, and a thick pork soup, all of which were delicious, and all of which Robbie raved about. He claimed that Le Grand Bol was one of the spots that chefs who are in the know frequent. The prices are extremely cheap (this meal came out to 15 euros split between three people) and the food is as good as that found in higher-end restaurants. I asked Robbie how French people generally conceive of immigrant cuisine and restaurants: “If you’re asking me if French people are racist, then, yes. We [chefs and those in the restaurant

industry] eat whatever is delicious and don't care about where it comes from, but the average French person won't come to a place like [le Grand Bol]." While this is an oversimplification, it reflects the general attitude I perceived during my stay in Paris. There is clearly a difference between how the average "Français de souche" conceives of immigrant cuisine and how French chefs do so. The conception of immigrant cuisine as lower class means that immigrant restaurants have to price lower to bring in customers. This is unfortunate, as the soft, delicate cockles I ate at Le Grand Bol far surpassed the tough, greasy and more expensive escargot I ate at a French bistro the next day.

The differences between French and immigrant cuisines are reflected not only in patrons' attitudes, but in the ways that immigrant restaurants market themselves to their customers. As I walked by Pho Bom in the 7th arrondissement, I couldn't help but notice the caricature the



its
and



restaurant
displays on
front window
sign (see
photos
below).

The fact that such a stereotypical sign could exist in an extremely populous part of Paris was astonishing to me. My friend Fernando Choi, who was with me at the time and who is a French citizen of Chinese descent, was similarly shocked. According to him, such racialized caricatures are rare, but their mere presence speaks volume about immigrant cuisine in Paris. The fact that the restaurants owners of Pho Bom believe that such an image will distinguish them from the competition shows the necessity of catering to French palates to get by, even if this means indulging stereotypes.

This is not to say that there are not positive developments on the Parisian food scene. La Résidence, The Refugee Food Festival's pop-up restaurant at Ground Control in Paris, features a new French refugee chef every 2 to 6 months. La Résidence looks to provide a stepping stone into the Parisian food scene for these refugee chefs and to share the chefs' cuisines and stories with the public. There is also Le Chateaubriand, whose chef, Inaki Aizpitarte, is combining Moroccan, Mexican and Basque flavors with those of traditional French cuisine. Le Chateaubriand is one of several cutting edge restaurants in Paris that is embracing new flavors and ingredients, incorporating them into French cuisine and bringing them to the public.

During my fellowship I learned that French cuisine, despite its almost mythological status in French culture, can and has served as a means of integration for France's growing immigrant populations. Although there is still hesitancy on the part of France's older generations and those whetted to tradition to accept new flavors and styles of cooking, attitudes are changing, especially in the chef community and younger generations. Paris is a place of rich diversity and culture. This diversity should be celebrated and embraced, especially given the political climate in Europe and France at the moment. Restaurants are places where this diversity can become

normalized and even lauded. It is hard to deny good food, and there are plenty of immigrant chefs in Paris who are serving it up.