

Abstract

The objective of this qualitative study was to examine the restaurant culture in America. Emphasis was placed on all aspects of the restaurant industry, including restaurant owners, employees, and customers. Four informants were purposively picked, based on their food and restaurant history. Two informants were restaurant employees, including an owner and a server, ages 45 and 25 respectively. Two informants were restaurant patrons, who eat out on a fairly regular basis, ages 28 and 34. The informants were asked a set of questions, each set pertaining to their specific purpose. Results of this study indicate that there is a connection between owner/employees and restaurant patrons. Examples of connections in this study are lunch served/eaten out, and the concept of “regular” customers, large menus and comfort food. It indicates that a restaurant culture does develop and exist. In conclusion, however, there need to be larger studies done to confirm the results of this study.

Introduction and Literature Review

Restaurant Culture is an ever-present notion when looking at not only employees, but also restaurant patron and customers. Personal experience has led this line of research, exploring the owners, workers and patrons of restaurants. Having worked in restaurants for over seven years, both as a cook and as a server, I am fully aware of the restaurant mentality of having its own culture. Not only do the workers (chefs, cooks, servers, etc.) have their own internal culture, a family, but there is also the influence of true culture on the food and atmosphere.

Take for example cooks and chefs, especially of high-end cuisine. Chefs and cooks pride themselves on creativity and consistency. They tend to share recipes and ideas with others in

their field, and also try to acquire ideas by adventuring out and sampling other foods from restaurants that are similar to theirs. Yet, they also need to keep a certain level of authenticity, including conforming to the norms and keeping originality (1). As is with most everything, the food served in restaurants is geared toward a certain audience, and that audience is the public, the lay people, when it comes to culinary art. It also ends up as a for-profit cultural production (1). In order for restaurants to make that profit, the cooks and chefs need to walk a fine line between conformity and originality, not being too innovative to scare away the customers.

Then there is also the topic of “Citizen Restaurant”, where food and citizenship are equal, or “Restaurant Citizen”, referring to the low-paid characteristic of the industry (2). The consumption of food has become a social activity, leading to food being a core element of cultural affirmation and cultural resistance (2). It gives people a way to evaluate others, by their experiences, their arts, sciences and their lives (2). The choices people make about their cuisines, can sometimes embrace the food origins, and yet sometimes belittle them. And then there is also taking the food outside of its natural social and cultural contexts.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore restaurants, owners, employees, and patrons of the restaurants to find out what exactly restaurant culture is.

Methods

The study was conducted in a manner of which both restaurant workers and restaurant patrons were interviewed, and their answers were written down and analyzed. There were four participants, three female and one male, all between the ages of 25 and 45. The interviews were conducted on an individual basis, one over the phone, and three in person. All of the interviews took place in the afternoon, and lasted approximately 15 to 30 minutes in length.

There were two sets of open-ended questions; one set was given to the employees (table 1), and one set given to the patrons (table 2).

Table 1: Qualitative Research Questions, Restaurant Owner/server
1. How would you classify the restaurant you own/work at? Probe: What kind of cuisine? Price?
2. How long have you worked in this restaurant? In the industry? Probe: Do you notice a “restaurant family” or culture that develops between the workers?
3. Are there any specific qualities that you notice about the patrons/customers? Probe: Regular customers, religious practices, specific foods eaten/avoided?
4. Do your customers expect/receive a certain experience at your restaurant? Probe: Does the menu change at all, or is it consistently the same? Is the menu unique from other local establishments to keep the customer base?

The first person to be interviewed was a 25 year-old female restaurant server (Informant 1). Her interview was the only one conducted over the phone. The reason behind the phone interview is that she currently is a full-time student who is working two jobs. She has very little free time and was exhausted at the time of the interview. She has worked in the restaurant industry for over nine years. The last person to be interviewed was a 45 year-old female restaurant owner (Informant 2). The interview was conducted at her establishment in the middle of the afternoon, when business had slowed for the day. Although she has owned the restaurant for three years, and has worked in the restaurant industry most of her life, she has spent most of those years working on the East Coast (New York area).

Table 2: Qualitative Research Questions, Restaurant Patron. Customer
1. How often do you eat out, away from home? Probe: Which meal do you eat out most: breakfast, lunch or dinner?
2. Do you frequent the same restaurant(s) or do you try new ones? Probe: Why do you choose these restaurants, money? Food? Cuisine? Location?
3. If you eat at home, do you use cookbooks, or just recipes that you know?

Probe: What kind of food do you consume at home?
4. Do you seek out new foods by trying ethnic cuisine at certain restaurants (i.e. Thai, Chinese, Indian, Mexican, etc...)? Probe: Is authenticity important in your choice of ethnic cuisine?

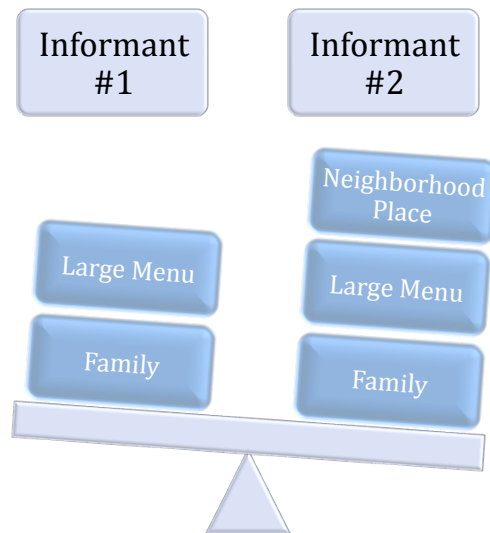
The two middle informants to be interviewed are restaurant patrons. The first is a 34 year-old male, who is a Chico resident and regular restaurant patron (Informant 3). The interview took place in his living room, a casual and comfortable atmosphere, where the questions were asked and answered face to face. The second restaurant patron is a 28 year-old female, a Chico resident and former restaurant employee (Informant 4). The interview took place in her living room, again a casual and comfortable atmosphere, where the questions were asked and answered face to face.

The motivation of the research and the methods were explained to each informant prior to each interview. Consent was given and the interview was started. Each informant was asked the questions in a professional and casual manner, and were allowed time to answer the questions. The probe questions facilitated the open-ended answers that were desired for the study. Each participant was thanked at the end of the interview.

After the interview was complete, the field notes were typed up and analyzed. Edge coding was done to the field notes to compare the answers that were given, and to find common themes that emerged. The results of this data analysis are explained below.

Results (owner/employee)

From the interviews with the restaurant owner/employee, there are several themes that stand out. While they each had their own unique answers and observations about the industry, there were three most common threads.



◆ Figure 1: Restaurant owner/employee themes

Family Development

The first, and most important theme that was emphasized by both informants, is the family that develops within each restaurant. The members of the staff become a part of each other's lives and form a "family."

Both of the informants work at a restaurant that serves breakfast and lunch, and they both have been working in the industry for many years. Yet the staff profile at these two establishments are very different. Informant 2 stated that there is "most definitely a family that develops" in restaurants. At her current establishment, the staff is almost exclusively all female, which seems to work for them, but "at moments can be tricky balancing all of the estrogen and keeping the drama to a minimum."

Informant number two placed an emphasis on the fact that a family definitely develops between staff members at restaurants. At her current job, she stated "everyone gets along, both the front and back of the house, as friends and coworkers." She feels that this bond helps

to create a more productive work environment. With a history of working in the industry for nine years, she explained that the current job is one of the best she has ever had, and that the management there is the best she has ever worked with, which also fosters a better work environment. Informant number two also explained the bond exists between coworkers as a “common like/preference or hatred among coworkers.” An example of this common hatred would be if they all disliked their boss, or another coworker.

Menu Consistency

A second common theme that links informants one and two is the consistency of the menu. They both expressed that they provide a large menu, with many options for the customer to choose from.

Both of these informants work at restaurants that are locally owned and provide affordable food to their patrons. They both serve as local family restaurants, with informant number two describing her establishment as a “neighborhood place.” Both of the restaurants serve standard breakfast and lunch fare, with their own unique twist, which makes them stand out from other restaurants. Informant number one explained that at her place of work, they serve breakfast and lunch standards, but they also serve twists on those standards. For example, they serve eggs Benedict, and what they call “green eggs and ham.” Informant number two serves traditional breakfast and lunch items, yet also has a twist, because the restaurant serves wraps, Paninis, salads and other menu items. They don’t just serve scrambled eggs, but they wrap those eggs up with fresh local vegetables, cheese and other ingredients in a tortilla and heat that wrap up on a Panini machine. Both of these restaurants serve items to please a wide variety of patrons.

Both of the restaurants that these informants work in have large menus, also to provide a variety to their patrons. Informant number one explained that “the large menu puts some people off, scaring them, but most people like the variety.” Informant number two goes on to explain that when people eat at her establishment for the first time, they are surprised at what is on the menu, and how big the menu is, “the number of items offered.” At the same time, informant number one notices and explained that many people tend to order the same foods off of the menu because they feel comfortable with what they know.

Patrons Expect Certain Service

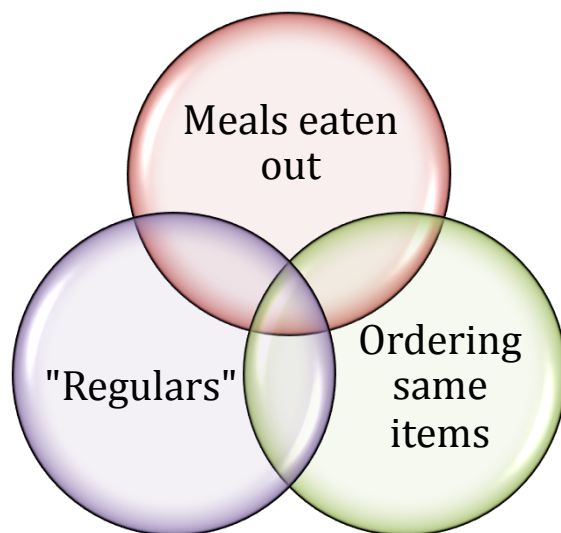
The third common theme in this qualitative study was the kind of service that is expected by patrons and customers of restaurants. The most common service that is expected from a restaurant is “friendly service”. All customers and patrons have certain expectations of each establishment that they enter. People who frequent restaurants on a regular basis might have different expectations than first time customers.

Both informants one and two expressed that customers usually expect friendly service when they frequent a restaurant. Informant number two expressed that the patrons that frequent her establishment want and expect the staff to be friendly and welcoming. She stated that: “when they don’t get that, they let us know.” A similar sentiment was expressed by informant number one, who said that the customers at her place of employment want fast and friendly service. She stated that: “the customers want to talk and ask a lot of questions. That can be really annoying.” She clarified this statement by explaining that the customers stop you to talk, but they still want the service to be really fast.

Both of these informants commented on the patrons who “regular” their establishments. They both expressed how friendly, supportive and understanding regular patrons are when they frequent the restaurant. Informant number two stated that the regulars feel safe and comfortable, and that her establishment can be considered to be like “Cheers”, where everyone knows who everyone else is, they know most of the people who come in to eat. Informant number one mentioned how regulars are comfortable and understanding. She also said that they are more compassionate than normal patrons, yet they can sometimes become “too comfortable”. By this she means that they start to modify the food options from the menu, because they feel like they can.

Results (customer)

The interviews with the informants exemplified the uniqueness of each individual, yet at the same time there were many commonalities between the two informants that were interviewed for this study. As with the owner/employee, there are three common themes in this qualitative study that stand out.



◆ Figure 2: Restaurant Patron Themes

Meals Eaten Out

The first common theme among the restaurant customers is that multiple meals per week are eaten away from home. Both of the informants expressed that they eat several meals out, in restaurants, each week. The main meal that was eaten out by both informants is lunch, with the reasoning for each informant being similar yet different.

Informant number three expressed “I usually eat lunch out because I am usually on my own, and it is just easier to grab a sandwich on the run.” This can be seen as an act of convenience. She has certain meal habits that lead her to eating lunch out more than any other meal. She is in the habit of eating a quick breakfast at home that is easily available to her. Also, she cooks dinner at night with her fiancé. This informant also stated that she “eats out in phases, some weeks/months she will eat out more or less than others.”

Informant number four also considers lunch as his primary meal eaten out, partly due to convenience. Due to the nature of his job, he is constantly waking up late, so he doesn’t always eat breakfast. By the time he “realizes he should eat, it is lunch time. At this point I would rather go get something to eat than make it myself.” He conveys that hunger drives him to eat out due to the convenience of local restaurants.

Frequent the Same Restaurants

The second common theme is eating meals out in the same restaurants. Both of the informants stated that they frequent the same four to seven restaurants, when they make the decision to eat away from home. They have become what are called “regulars”, where they know the owners and employees of the establishments, and those people know them.

Informant number four “chooses restaurants based on friendly staff and the quality of food.”

Informant number three had similar responses to the same question. She stated: “the most important reason I choose a restaurant is the atmosphere, the people who work there, if I know them, and the food quality.” She also mentioned that she eats at new and old restaurants, but is more likely to try new restaurants if she is with other people. Informant three also talked about not really seeking out the food, but she “seeks out the restaurant. If I know I like the food then I will have a good experience.” She also mentioned that she “will try something new, a new restaurant, but they somehow don’t end up in the normal rotation.”

Ordering the Same Menu Items

The third common theme produced by the interviews was the fact that people like to order the same food or menu items at the same places. This can lead to a feeling of comfort, control and a good dining experience.

Informant number three likes to have a good dining experience when she eats out. So she seeks out “the food that appeals to me, kind of my version of authentic.” In addition to frequenting the same restaurants, she also “usually orders the same food.” As explained earlier, she will try something new, but it somehow just “doesn’t stick.” She also expressed that her ultimate favorite cuisine is Mexican: “I can’t live without Mexican food because it is amazing. Mexico has it figured out!”

Informant number four didn’t expressly say he eats the same menu items, but he hinted at it. He tends to “stick with foods I know, and that I know I will enjoy.” He likes to “eat foods that he is comfortable with. Comfort food is more important as a food, something that I enjoy, rather than being important for its nutrient value.” He doesn’t try a lot of new foods and tends to eat the foods that he knows he will like.

There was a difference between informant three and informant four. That was that informant three enjoys making dinner with her fiancé, and keeps a fairly regular meal pattern with regular breakfasts. Informant four doesn't cook. He can make breakfast and lunch for himself, but out of convenience eats those meals out. While informant three goes through a cyclic pattern of eating out and eating more at home, informant four is constantly eating 4-6 meals out of the home in a week.

Summary of Results

In summary, there are connections between the owner and employee, and well as between the customers. There are also links between the two subgroups that define restaurant culture. The importance of having regular customers as well as being a regular customer is an important theme that developed in this research. The food quality, menu, and dining experience are other themes that grew from the interview of both groups. The "restaurant family" is not the only relationship and connection that is built in the industry. It also involves the connection to the patrons and customers not only as paying customers, but also as friends and "regulars".

Discussion

There have been some studies done on the topic of restaurant culture, one in particular examines conformity and originality with regards to the food that is being created and produced in restaurants (1). This study also examines the individualized production, which refers to cultural production and using the ideas of others to create something new (1). This is connected to the restaurant field by way of food production. Restaurant owners and chefs strive to create menus that are original and unique, but at the same time are appealing to the

customer. In connection with the current qualitative study, that can be seen by the responses of all of the informants.

Informants one and two explained the appealing nature of the larger menus that people were able to enjoy because of the selection. They also offered items that were standard, the items people knew, and yet also offered new and different items. The informants three and four exemplified how customers order. Although they have the options, they tend to order and eat the same items. They also tend to eat at the same restaurants due a comfort factor.

In another study that was conducted, the phrase “Citizen Restaurant” was defined as “is its resort to commerce, where food and citizenship are equally up for grabs.” This study explains that many different people have their own definition of this term, yet it somehow connects restaurant food, service and employees to business and community. A link to the “Restaurant Citizen” can be connected to the informants that were interviewed for the current study. They have become regulars, and frequently serve regulars. These patrons come back to the restaurant for the friendly service and good food. Meanwhile, the owners and employees make the connection between serving these “regulars” and keep them coming back, which in a way illustrates good business. Connecting the informants in this study also connects the community to the business.

While patrons frequent restaurants for the food and good service, they are also patrons, paying money to a business for a service. It just so happens that many patrons frequent the same establishments, creating what they call “regulars” but can in some ways be seen as the restaurant citizens. These are the people who create a restaurant community, a family with the employees as they pay to support the business.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that there is a culture that is developed in the restaurant industry. Not only is this culture considered the “restaurant family” of restaurant owners and employees, but there is also a culture of those patrons who frequent restaurants. It was important, with regards to this study, that both sides of the restaurant industry (employees/patrons) be examined. However, this study is only a small sampling, with only four informants being interviewed, of the real restaurant industry that is alive in America today. For this study, only two employees were interviewed, and both happened to work for a breakfast/lunch restaurant. It is interesting, however, to have randomly selected the informants, and they were all connected by the commonality of lunch. In the future, there needs to be a larger sampling of informants, with differing backgrounds, such as: age, number of years in the restaurant industry, cuisines, economic status, locations, and meals offered.

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Restaurant Culture in America

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NFSC 429: Cultural Foods

May 3, 2010