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**Krishnendu Ray, 2016, *The ethnic restaurateur*  
Bloomsbury, London, 238 p.**

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*The Ethnic Restaurateur* comprises an extensive reflective introduction, four interconnected substantive essays (chapters 2–5), and a brief conclusion. It is an account of how recent immigrants, now commonly referred to as ‘ethnic’ groups, make a living from the catering trade and who, in making use the cuisine of their countries of origin, alter the foodscape of their country of destination. Focused on a section of the American population which is subordinate, but neither rebellious nor supine, its key themes are the following: the predicament of immigrants, the inadequacies of theories of aesthetic taste and the centrality of the senses to the understanding of eating, the co-emergence of ethnic cuisine and immigrant groups, and the variation in the reception of ethnic cuisine.

Chapter 1 discusses the scholarly neglect of ‘the ethnic provider’ and how this skews understandings of taste. Ethnicity for Ray is ‘an obfuscating term’ (p.10) which he would prefer to abandon. Nevertheless, he finds it useful in describing historical process in America since the 1950s, for at that point ‘Ethnicity became the dominant mode of framing difference without falling into the problem of race’ (p.4). The chapter proceeds to place immigrants and their tastes in the context of other accounts, particularly those emanating from the Bourdieusian tradition, which fail to detect the roles of literal taste and popular disputation over what is good food.

Running a small food business presents immigrants with a particular set of opportunities and gives them a particular position in the social structure:

the ethnic restaurateur carries that connotation of subordination yet potential strength, the inferiority of the foreign-born yet the possibility of some cultural capital, a person who, due to limits of money, social or cultural capital, could never play in the domain of high culture yet cannot be excluded from American culture (p.11).

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Ray in Chapter 2 presents two contrasting case studies of ethnic restaurateurs selling Indian food in New York. The first is Muhammad Rasool, a male graduate of Punjabi-Pakistani origin, who set up a business despite at the beginning not knowing how to cook, and indeed without wanting to be a cook. He is embarrassed that, as a man, he is following this particular trade. His business, on a very busy corner of lower Manhattan, in a very small, narrow, and inauspicious shop, attracts fluctuating passing trade. His business has survived for many years despite paying little attention to culinary tradition—Rasool describes the 20 inexpensive dishes for sale as ‘Indian, Pakistani spicy food. I also carry less spicy Spanish-American food.’ In response to surprise at the latter, he says, ‘you see we have rice and we have beans, and chicken of course everyone eats. It is the same food without spices’ (p.34). The other business, Chitrita Mukherjee’s Vada Pao, despite much greater investment and concern for design, marketing, and the authenticity of the dishes, which achieved some initial acclaim, closed down fairly quickly. Ray speculates that her ‘attention to the global hierarchy of taste may be her precise disadvantage, making her unfit to occupy the street corner she had landed on’ (p.60).

Ray uses the two cases to demonstrate the difficulty of establishing and maintaining a small business in a highly competitive market place for food in a city like New York. He emphasises the precariousness of the small ethnic food business, its undistinguished cooking, the changing standards, the importance of location, the unrelenting work, and the limited ensuing prestige. On the other hand, however, it is a form of economic opportunity, and better and worse strategies on the part of the entrepreneur owners make the difference between survival and closure. For Ray, it shows the resilience of the ethnic restaurateur and the possibilities for survival without the *imprimatur* of the institutional guardians of legitimate cuisine.

Almost 50 pages long, chapter 3 is an ambitious and flowing overview of the influence of immigration on how America eats. It presents an account of the interweaving of patterns of migration, employment in food work, uneven achievements in upward mobility for different groups, and the media reception of ethnic and foreign cuisine within the USA. The ethnicity of the labour force and the ethnicity of the food served in restaurants are the twin prongs of the story. As Ray says:

American taste-makers – that is, journalists, restaurant critics, and professional chefs – have framed their appropriation of twentieth-century culinary cultures in two diverging ways: first, as high-status foreign foods, initially limited to Continental and French cuisines, eventually consecrating Italian and Japanese cookery at the end of the century. Second, as the low status product of the labor and implicit knowledge of the immigrant poor classified as ethnic fare. The appropriation of the first sort is understood primarily in aesthetic terms of taste and notions of skill, while the latter is understood as a matter of necessity, primarily in terms of undifferentiated toil (p.63).

The story of this bifurcation is at the heart of the chapter. Data is gleaned from newspaper coverage since the 1840s of venues for eating away from home (cafes, saloons, restaurants, and taverns). Content analysis of the newspaper columns is combined with editions of the Michelin Guide and Zagat to reveal patterns in the popularity and prestige of different cuisines. German cuisine, distinct in the nineteenth

century, gradually merged into the standard American diet and ceased to be singled out as distinctive. French, Chinese, and Italian cuisines received the most coverage in the twentieth century, with Italian rising to the top during the last quarter while at the same time losing the epithet 'ethnic'. Other cuisines, like those from the south of the USA, Mexican and Tex-Mex, and Chinese, have remained at the bottom of the pile, in a market place where price and prestige parallel one another quite closely. There is, however, movement over time.

In explanation, Ray maintains that 'with the broadest brush-strokes, the changing accent of American cuisine can be explained by immigration patterns' (p.104). He comments on successive periods of immigration, emphasising the importance of 'the 20 million or so "new immigrants" between 1880 and 1924'. In those years, a national market was established, founded upon innovations in transport, mass media, and refrigeration technology, which 'produced a national diet'. But the immigrant labour making this possible 'also produced enclave eating, as racism, xenophobia, and cheap housing contained new immigrants in demarcated urban neighbourhoods. That is where the ethnic entrepreneur operated ...' (p.71). In the period when immigration was much restricted between 1934 and 1965, 'Americans would elaborate a naturalized and standardized American cooking with the help of a new kind of mass media – radio and television. It is the food of this period that most Americans today would come to identify as unambiguously American food – Germanic food often delivered by corporations, with a few ethnic accents. *Cuisine* on the other hand, would be Continental, which would be a vague shorthand for the imagined food of European elites' (p.106).

Subsequently, a fresh inflow of migrants, Asians and Latinos, once again changed the foodscape. One of the major developments was, however, the ascent of 'Italian-American food', as a telling example in the story of ethnic succession in food work. As he comments, 'too much or too little upward mobility is bad for leaving a mark on American fine dining' (p.109). Latterly, the Italians got the balance right. The fate of the cuisine and the fate of the population group are intimately intertwined—'changing sources of migration have both changed the supply of cooks and transformed our palates' (p.109)—and their combination impacts on the wider, national culture of food.

This instructive chapter demonstrates the importance of immigration, although the story has overtones of American exceptionalism. Perhaps Ray underestimates the influence of global corporations on the circulation of ethnic foods, since the specifics of the popularity and prestige of restaurant cuisines in USA are similar in Europe, despite migration patterns being very different. The powers of global communication and the versatility of cooks and chefs make it increasingly easy to transport cuisines in the absence of supporting migrant populations.

Ray pays considerable attention to gender and class as well as ethnicity. Chapter 4, an essay on the professionalism and training of chefs, is based on a study of the evolution of the Culinary Institute of America (CIA). It examines the making of *haute cuisine* by contrast with ethnic cooking. Listings of the best restaurants in the world, he observes, are very narrow, exclude many culinary traditions and parts of the world, and very, very rarely select restaurants where women chefs are in charge. These biases are prefigured in the elite training schools for chefs, of which Ray has some insider knowledge having been on site daily at the CIA over several years. The CIA, he argues, works to marginalise women and people of colour as it teaches mostly white working class boys, using quasi-military discipline, but also liberal arts classes, to

eliminate their working class and masculine habits; ‘training is as much in morals and manners, where technical skills are seen as a medium to inculcate professional values’ (p.143). The ideology of professionalism acts as a cloak for promotion and privileging of a particular section of the restaurant workforce.

Chapter 5 also revolves around the contrast between the ethnic cook and the professional chef. Ray argues that ethnic cooks in the commercial sector rarely get the symbolic and material rewards to which their skills and competence should entitle them. Most ethnic cooks learn on the job, having had no experience of meal preparation before becoming employees, for example, in a restaurant or in the galleys of merchant ships. Such men live in a different world and inhabit a different part of the culinary field to those who ‘belong to the other network of cooking-school-trained or European-apprenticed chefs and commentators’. There is little doubt where Ray’s sympathies lie and he is both critical of the procedures of the cookery school and indignant on behalf of cooks.

He locates ‘the new American chef’ as ‘[t]he mirror-image of the foreign-born, untrained ethnic cook’, one who ‘occupies the height of the culinary field in the USA today, just as the ethnic cook inhabits the bottom rungs of the hierarchy’ (p.179). He contrasts the fates of four chefs aspiring to enter the world of *haute cuisine*, two of whom had ethnic origins. They faced predictable obstacles and had to make career compromises not required of trained, white Anglophone professional chefs. Ray’s exposition proposes, tendentiously, that process of improvement in the status of the trained chef can be likened to that of medical occupations. However, professionalism is a label adopted by many occupations struggling for recognition and reward in the occupational hierarchy, but it is usually mostly aspiration, for the occupation of chef does not share the structural properties of the established and privileged professions.

A brief final chapter concludes that despite social subordination, the ethnic restaurateur has had considerable impact on American culture, that ‘the migrant had the resources to turn the table on the dominant culture of taste’ and that ‘Disputing taste has become a legitimate and popular activity, some of which is the doing of the ethnic restaurateur’ (p.194). Ray disputes throughout sociological accounts of taste on the basis that ‘elite consumers do not control the modes of reproduction of cultural hierarchies in the culinary field’ (p.189). Even though his insistence that most studies neglect sensory taste (‘literal taste’) in favour of cerebral aesthetic judgement is well measured, his reservations about the role of consumers of higher social status are not entirely convincing. The claim that elite influence has declined takes very limited notice of the omnivorousness thesis which anticipates precisely that people of high socio-economic status will incorporate tastes for the popular into their portfolios. Ray implies that this process is governed by the strategic nous of the immigrant entrepreneur in the face of the passivity of dominant classes, but this seems a little overstated. Cultural trends rarely *emanate* from the higher social echelons—that is, the function of cultural intermediaries—but elite adoption is very often critical to the economic success of innovations. Ray may be correct to argue that recent scholarship has attended too much to processes of consumption and too little to labour, but a total reversal of direction, seeking the dynamics of change solely among the activities of providers and commentators, is hazardous. The resilience of immigrant entrepreneurs can be acknowledged without necessarily requiring that they be principal agents of the transformation of the culinary order of tastes of the whole US population.

The postcolonial theoretical framing of the account is sometimes hard to fathom and not always conducive to transparent argument. Nevertheless, important themes shine through the four main essays. Ray corrects misunderstandings about the role of migrants in the USA as a step towards saving marginal and disadvantaged groups from the condescension of official national histories. That ethnic entrepreneurs have had significant impact on transformations in the American culinary field is put beyond doubt: ‘immigrant entrepreneurs had turned their familiar foreignness into an object of taste. Their food could no longer be dismissed as trivial and secondary’ (p.192). Equally certain is that the American culinary field considered as a whole is far from fair to women, African-Americans, and recent immigrant ethnic groups.

This is an engaging and sometimes polemical book which contributes to understanding ethnic entrepreneurs and the circulation and appreciation of culinary traditions, as well as beckoning towards comparison with other national experiences.