

Culinary tourism in the Music City: The place of culinary icons and local flavors in Nashville tourism

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Food and culinary traditions are among the most important cultural markers that define community and regional identity. They often reflect locally grown plants and locally raised animals, as well as traditional recipes and cooking techniques of the specific region. While traditional sight-seeing allows tourist to view the cultural Other, culinary tourism provides a more integrated way to explore the diverse cultural offerings of unfamiliar communities through taste, smell, and touch as well as sight. The development of a distinctive culinary style is common to all cultures, so culinary tourism provides a way for travelers to explore another culture while remaining grounded in a familiar context. The present content analysis examines culinary tourism in Nashville, Tennessee through in-depth study of restaurants along two indices: locality and iconicity. Four restaurants were selected as representative of the quadrants that correspond to the intersection of these indices. These restaurants are examined on two criteria directly controlled by the restaurant (self-description and menu) and two criteria not directly under the restaurant's control (location and reviews). Local restaurants are more creative in their menu offerings and more favorably reviewed than non-local restaurants. Iconic restaurants are more likely to capitalize on their visibility by promoting their name, whereas non-iconic restaurants must market themselves through other means. This study examines the many dimensions along which restaurants offer culinary products to tourists and locals alike.

Food has long been a marker of personal, ethnic, or regional identity: urban immigrants to America retain their traditional meals and cooks in rural communities take pride in the recognition they receive for their unique barbecue recipes. Throughout history foodways have provided a means for establishing in-group identity and for marking the Other. Increasingly, tourists seek to explore this Other, and the tourism industry has catered to the new demand by developing infrastructure around culinary tourism. Culinary tourism has been variously defined as “the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of an Other”¹ and the “geographical travel for the purpose of sampling foods of foreign lands...[and] any journey outside of one's own dietary routine into the realm of the exotic ‘other.’”² The explosion of culinary tourism can be a way for food to occupy an elevated place as artistic expression rather than as a mere means of sustenance.³ In exploring culinary tourism it is important not only to understand the nature of food as a source of regional or ethnic identity, but also to understand the place of chain restaurants in creating a homogenized national product that provides a comfort zone of the familiar to travelers. In this exploration of culinary tourism

in Nashville, Tennessee two indices are used to describe restaurants: locality and iconicity. Four Nashville restaurants have been selected to typify the intersections of these two indices: the Loveless Café (local and iconic), Tayst (local and non-iconic), the Hard Rock Café (non-local and iconic), and The Melting Pot (non-local and non-iconic). Each of these restaurants will be addressed in terms of the way they represent themselves through self-descriptions and menus and the ways in which others represent them to tourists by nature of their location and reviews.

Culinary tourism has risen in popular consciousness in recent years because there has been an increasing recognition of the importance that food plays in both uniting and dividing societies. Food is a unique aspect of culture that provides a base from which to delve into the foodways of other peoples; as a commonality amongst all cultures, food provides a unique opportunity to remain grounded in the familiar while journeying into the diversity and unfamiliarity of the Other.⁴ In addition, food itself combines many features of a culture to provide an interesting way in which to explore another place: “More of the elements that make up a civilization come together at its dinner

tables than in any other place.”⁵ This integration of cultural elements into the culinary identity of a society provides a deeper and more engaged way in which to explore other cultures. Tourism through exploration of food can add to and is in some ways superior to traditional sightseeing because of the use of multiple senses to engage in the Other; while sightseeing only partially engages another culture, culinary tourism uses taste, touch, smell, and the vision employed by traditional sightseeing to provide a more integrated experience of the Other.⁶ Food and culinary tourism can provide a more stimulating way to approach and explore the offerings of exotic cultures.

Food and culture are strongly intertwined topics and, as such, food is one salient means of establishing a strong regional or ethnic identity. Postmodern society increasingly pressures people to establish their unique local identities in order to counteract the process of homogenization; a countercurrent to homogenized experience has arisen in the form of a strengthened search for local individualism.⁷ Food has been particularly effective in establishing regional identities in the face of homogenizing national culture because it provides a point from which to view the histories and identities of the specific cultures tied to local environments.⁸ Each region of the United States has been shaped by distinctive environments and climates that influence the kinds of available ingredients. Indeed, most foods that are associated with specific regions, and that appear characteristically in restaurant of that area, rely on the plants and animals common to that region.⁹ Regions have also experienced different historical influences from different ethnic and racial groups; the North has been shaped by Irish, German and Italian immigrants, among others, whereas the South has been influenced by involuntary African immigration in the form of slavery. Each of these influences has affected the culinary tastes and preferences of the region and contributed to the development of distinctly regional food that helps to establish and affirm regional identities. Because it is influenced by so many aspects of local culture, food serves as one of the primary ways in which people establish regional or ethnic identities, more than either language or other traditions.¹⁰ The culinary traditions of a region are integrated into many aspects of its culture and serve to clearly delineate a regional identity.

One unique example of food’s importance in establishing regional identity is Cincinnati chili; Cincinnati-style chili is an example of a food that

has distinct associations within the region and serves as a marker of regional identity. There are only a handful of companies that specialize in Cincinnati-style chili, which serves to preserve the food as a special marker of the region by preventing its spread across the nation. These companies are often family-owned and each has its own recipe with a specific blend of spice and ingredients; it should be noted, however, that these secret recipes are more a marker of family and regional pride than of culinary knowledge. It follows therefore that for many Cincinnatians the best chili is determined by family tradition and childhood habits, rather than by authenticity or by specific spices.¹¹ Thus, chili serves not only as a marker of the region as a whole, but also as a personal marker for individual residents as they associate the food with regional and personal histories.

In direct contrast to the use of food to establish a regional identity, chain restaurants increasingly use food in order to homogenize and standardize a product across the nation, regardless of local tastes or preferences. Many people have attacked chain stores and restaurants for precisely this reason; they argue that chain stores operate through standardization which depersonalizes the community and destroys the local flavor of community life. However, they do serve a useful purpose, particularly in the tourism industry, by providing a familiar base in new situations. Chains have allowed people moving between communities to do so without forcing them to adapt to unfamiliar foodways;¹² the possibility for culinary exploration is present but the necessity for it is not. For tourists, the physical move to a new location is often jarring and the presence of familiar chain restaurants eases the process of adaptation to the new environs. While food can serve as a means of exploring new cultures, it can also serve as a source of familiarity and comfort when a tourist is in a strange situation.

Methods

In analyzing the interplay of local and chain restaurants in culinary tourism, this paper presents two primary indices on which a restaurant can be placed: local or non-local and iconic or non-iconic. Locality is important in describing a restaurant because this influences the degree to which the menu and décor of the restaurant will be influenced by local tastes and preferences. In some cases, this means that the restaurant will represent

regional identity by embracing regional recipes and traditions. In other cases, the restaurant does not provide a marker of regional identity, but it is still molded by local tastes and responsive to local preferences. Iconicity is important in describing these restaurants because it is an indication of the extent to which the restaurant can attract tourists. Iconic restaurants are likely to be tourist attractions that draw in large numbers of travelers, whereas non-iconic restaurants appeal more to locals who do not expect their meal to be a part of a tourist experience. Iconic restaurants do not only produce and serve of food; they also produce an experience and an atmosphere for tourists' consumption.

This analysis of restaurants and their role in culinary tourism is best understood when applied to a city that habitually hosts tourists. I have chosen Nashville, Tennessee as the site for my exploration into culinary tourism. Nashville may seem like an odd choice for this analysis because it is a city known for its music and universities rather than for its food; however, in analyzing a city which is not known for its culinary offerings I can provide a representative view of culinary tourism in a wide spectrum of tourist destinations. An analysis of culinary tourism in Paris, for example, would not be representative of most tourist experiences because Paris is often a tourist destination precisely for its food. In looking at culinary tourism in Nashville, four restaurants will be highlighted as typical of each of the four quadrants created by the locality and iconicity indices: the Loveless Café (local and iconic), Tayst (local and non-iconic), the Hard Rock Café (non-local and iconic), and The Melting Pot (non-local and non-iconic). The Loveless Café is a nationally-acclaimed restaurant specializing in Southern cooking and country charm; its website invites visitors to "experience Southern dining and hospitality at their best."¹³ Tayst specializes in "ingredient-driven" American cuisine and emphasizes its staff's passion for food and service.¹⁴ In contrast to these local restaurants, Hard Rock Café Nashville is one location of an international chain of restaurants that advertises a unique dining experience because of its celebrity clientele and appearances by musical artists. The Melting Pot is a national chain of restaurants specializing in fondue; the national website claims that at Melting Pot "fondue becomes a memorable four-course dining experience, where you can really dip into something different."¹⁵ Each of these restaurants highlights some of the typical characteristics of restaurants on the two indices of locality and iconicity.

There are two ways that representations of restaurants are made available to potential customers: 1) information produced and mediated by the restaurant itself, such as self-descriptions and menu selection, and 2) information gleaned from sources not directly manipulated by the restaurant, such as restaurant location and reviews. When the restaurants produce self-descriptions of the restaurant or food on their websites or menus, they actively influence the way in which their customers experience the restaurant. Restaurateurs have the ability to manipulate and guide how visitors interpret the food or atmosphere of the restaurant by carefully choosing the ways that they describe it. The menu itself is important in influencing interpretations of the restaurant, because customers look to the menu selection to provide cues about the nature of the restaurant as a whole; the owners select the specific courses which they think will appeal to their target customers and which will fit with the atmosphere of the restaurant.¹⁶ The items on the menu influence how the dining experience is interpreted and remembered by diners.

Restaurant owners control how the restaurant is described on websites and menus and select which items to include in the menu, but they have less control over external factors that also influence visitors' perceptions of the restaurant. Two of these external factors are the location of the restaurant and reviews in newspapers and guidebooks. The location of a restaurant can influence the dining experience because the other establishments in the vicinity set the tone for the entire area. For example, a restaurant located in the midst of several trendy bars would be interpreted differently than the same restaurant located in a strip mall. The surrounding businesses provide context for the restaurant in question. Restaurant reviews and write-ups in tourist guidebooks also directly influence visitors' perceptions of the restaurant because they frame what aspects of the experience diners will attend to and how they will be interpreted. For instance, a reviewer who raves about a restaurant's ambience guides customers to notice the atmosphere, indirectly influencing them to ignore or downplay other aspects of the experience, like menu selection or service. Each of these four factors, self-description, menu, location, and reviews, will be analyzed with respect to each of the four restaurants selected in the Nashville area, with the expectation that this will highlight trends that emerge based on the locality and iconicity of the restaurants.

Self-description

The Loveless Café. The Loveless identifies itself primarily by its reputation as a local landmark, citing its place as a “true Tennessee tradition.” The restaurant understands itself to be an integral part of local life, holding a “remarkable place in the community,” while also representing the region to tourists and Others as an icon of Nashville. It builds this reputation on the fact that it “remains unchanged in the quaint country charm and good cooking that has made it a landmark in the South since its doors opened over half a century ago.”¹⁷ The restaurant builds on the understanding that tourists will choose restaurants that serve food which contrasts with their familiar culinary selections.¹⁸ The Loveless presents Southern home cooking as a contrast to the presumably different food styles of their visitors. In order to make this contrasting food an effective tourist attraction, the Loveless assigns associations between its menu and the cultural heritage and identity of the South, whether these associations are real or only imagined.¹⁹ Biscuits and country ham are part of the cultural heritage of the South, and the Loveless exploits this to define themselves as an attraction of Southern heritage as well as excellent food. Through analysis of self-description found on the restaurant’s website, it is clear that the Loveless conceives of itself as truly iconic of Nashville and the South as whole, while also remaining local in nature by maintaining an important position in the community.

Tayst. Most of the description found on the Tayst website focuses on the distinctive attributes of the owners, chefs, managers, and other staff that serve to draw in customers. A recurring theme on this website is the passion that the owners feel for the restaurant; they have a “passion for food and service” and they “pour [their] hearts and souls into this restaurant.”²⁰ The visibility of the owners in the restaurant contributes to the restaurant’s reputation for being “hip”; this is an example of a visible and successful local restaurant where social elites strive to become familiar with the chef-owner as a public confirmation of their social position.²¹ There is also a focus on the warm and relaxed atmosphere that provides a fun and memorable dining experience; one of the owners expresses the sentiment that “laughter is a thing that is as good as the perfect meal, but to combine them makes for an unbelievable experience.”²² For Tayst, self-descrip-

tion focuses on the unique relationship between owners, staff and customers that makes this local restaurant responsive to customers and the community.

Hard Rock Café. The Hard Rock Café, although it is an international chain of restaurants, describes itself as being uniquely suited to Nashville. The website draws on the reputation of Nashville as Music City, claiming “Music City, U.S.A. Now where could there possibly be a better place for the Hard Rock Cafe?”²³ The website goes on to describe the Nashville country music and honky-tonk scene in order to give a restaurant based on music some credibility, but because it is a chain the website creators ensured broader appeal by also describing Nashville as Athens of the South and home of several professional sports teams. Hard Rock Café self-descriptions are interesting because they seek to attract a broad range of customers by detailing Nashville’s many attractions while simultaneously attempting to garner some local credibility by emphasizing its association with music.

The Melting Pot. Description on The Melting Pot’s website emphasizes the unique or special nature of a dining experience in this restaurant. The company’s slogan concisely conveys the dining philosophy outlined on the website: “Dip into something different.” Words such as memorable, unique, upscale, and intimate are interspersed throughout the website, inviting customers to “savor the moment.” Although it is a restaurant chain with more than 100 locations, The Melting Pot describes itself as a place where visitors can consume a truly unique experience.²⁴

Menu

Loveless Café. Menu selections at Loveless bombard the customer with the message that everything is traditional, Southern, homemade, or made from scratch. From individual menu items like “homemade preserves” to entire categories like “supper platters – made from scratch,” the menu indicates that the dining experience will be authentic Southern home cooking. There are also many menu items that are identified to be the “Loveless” version, including “famous Loveless country ham” and “Loveless stone ground grits from Falls Mill.”²⁵ These menu items identify the Loveless Café as a restaurant with unique and iconic offerings that set it apart from other establishments.

Tayst. The Tayst menu focuses on unique

ingredients and combinations to set it apart from the more mundane or typical offerings of a chain restaurant that must appeal to mainstream tastes in order to be viable. Many menu items combine uncommon ingredients in unique ways: the Churrito pairs pork cheek hash and sour cream crepes, while the Frito Pie features duck breast cured with lavender.²⁶ These menu choices reflect the growing popular and media interest in star chefs who create signature dishes and use individualized techniques to attract patrons to particular restaurants.²⁷ The menu also focuses on upscale ingredients such as escargot, foie gras, and lobster. The wine pairing with each menu selection also indicates that Tayst is an upscale establishment.

Hard Rock Café. In contrast to the unique and specialized offerings of Loveless or Tayst, the Hard Rock Café offers more typical “American” options found in many national chain restaurants, such as chicken tenders, onion rings, and potato skins for appetizers and pasta, steak, and chicken for the main course. The selection is more generic and more expansive, offering a wide variety of choices to appeal to a diverse set of tastes from visitors across the country. Many menu items are labeled as specifically Hard Rock, such as the HRC cheeseburger, indicating that there is something unique about Hard Rock’s version of this traditional item; that is, there is a reason to order the cheeseburger at Hard Rock over another dining establishment because the Hard Rock Café is iconic of American cuisine and music culture.

The Melting Pot. Menu selections and pricing at the Melting Pot indicate to the customer that the dining experience should be intimate and romantic. Certain menu selections are billed as the “Big Night Out” and “designed to be shared by two” and priced as such.²⁸ The Melting Pot menu indicates that a dining experience at this restaurant should be truly special and memorable for the visitors.

Location

Loveless Café. The Loveless is located on Highway 100 outside of the western suburbs of Nashville. This is a major highway running through Nashville but the restaurant itself is outside of the downtown city limits.

Tayst. Tayst is positioned on 21st Avenue near both Belmont and Vanderbilt Universities and a variety of other local restaurants.

Hard Rock Café. The Hard Rock Café sits in

the midst of the Lower Broadway tourist district amidst souvenir shops, honky-tonks, and other tourist-driven restaurants. Many music-related landmarks surround the Hard Rock, most notably the Ryman Auditorium which has been called the mother church of country music.

The Melting Pot. Historic Second Avenue is home to The Melting Pot as well as many other chain restaurants and attractions (i.e. Old Spaghetti Factory and Hooters) and local establishments (i.e. Wildhorse Saloon). Second Avenue crosses Lower Broad and the two streets together form the historic tourist district.

Reviews

Loveless Café. Tourist guide books review the Loveless almost without exception as a moderately priced restaurant that visitors should partake in if they wish to experience the true Nashville. One guidebook claims “for some of the best country cooking in the Nashville area, take a trip out past the city’s western suburbs to this old-fashioned roadhouse and popular Nashville institution... This restaurant may be a little out of the way, but it’s well worth it if you like down-home cookin’.”²⁹ Another emphasizes “no trip to Nashville would be complete without a pilgrimage to The Loveless, a landmark for more than four decades.”³⁰ Despite these positive evaluations of the food and atmosphere, most of the guidebooks add that visitors should be prepared for a long wait and crowds.³¹ A restaurant review found in *The Tennessean* similarly raves about the Loveless Café’s legendary biscuits and grits that are “the real freaking deal” and praises the owner for renovating but keeping “enough residual charm to keep me happy.”³² These reviews reflect the Loveless Café’s self-identification with authentic Southern cooking but provide additional information about crowds that the restaurant downplayed in its self-description.

Tayst. Of the three guidebooks sampled, Tayst only appeared in one, but is described as having “acquired a reputation as the hottest restaurant with the most inventive American food in town.” *Hidden Tennessee* describes the restaurant as both “hip and cozy” and praises the innovative offerings from the kitchen and the extensive wine list.³³ *The Tennessean* claims that Tayst “could easily become your new favorite neighborhood dining spot,” raving about the unique menu selections offered by chef-owner Jeremy Barlow.³⁴

Hard Rock Café. The Hard Rock Café was not reviewed in any of the three Nashville or Tennessee guidebooks selected. The restaurant was also neglected in the review sections of the local newspapers, most likely because it is universally recognized as a “tourist attraction.”

The Melting Pot. The Melting Pot was only reviewed in one of the three guidebooks sampled where it is billed as a “blast from the past,” reminiscent of ‘70s fondue restaurants.³⁵ This is a distinctly different impression than the restaurant itself attempted to create, emphasizing a quirky identity rather than a romantic or intimate one. *The Tennessean’s* review falls more in line with the image projected by the restaurant itself, claiming “if you want the time to talk over dinner, and the intimate atmosphere in which to do so, this is the perfect place. The dark woods, dark lighting and nighttime view of the river have helped make this restaurant one of Nashville’s favorite romantic spots.”³⁶

Conclusion

This analysis of four Nashville restaurants in relation to culinary tourism leads to a number of conclusions. The first of these is that local restaurants emphasize their unique and specialized culinary offerings in contrast to non-local, or chain, restaurants which offer more generic menus that appeal to a broader range of people. For example, both Loveless and Tayst offered menu selections that were either very specific to the region (i.e. grits at the Loveless) or very creative and experimental (i.e. Frito Pie at Tayst). Chain restaurants are forced by their very nature to offer menu selections that will appeal to customers in every region in which a franchise is located. This broad appeal reduces the degree of experimentation and specialization which chain restaurants can offer in their dishes. In contrast, local restaurants can afford to exercise creativity and experiment with local foods and ingredients. This freedom to experiment with food becomes an emphasis in local restaurants’ self-representations because it is something that allows them to stand apart and attract customers away from their non-local competitors, most of which are more financially stable.

The second broad conclusion that can be drawn from this analysis is that local restaurants are more often and more favorably reviewed in guidebooks and newspapers, as opposed to non-local restaurants which appear less often in reviews. Reviews of

Loveless and Tayst were not only more easily found in guidebooks and local newspapers, and were also more positive. The Hard Rock Café was conspicuously absent from all reviews sampled, whereas Loveless received raves from multiple sources. Reviewers are likely to call attention to the restaurant offerings which are unique to a particular area and perhaps less visible to those unfamiliar with the region, than to chain restaurants which are universally recognized and known.

Local restaurants are also more likely to be located outside of recognizable tourist districts than are chain restaurants, which must be located where tourists can access them. It is clear that the non-local chain restaurants must be located in the tourist district to access their target customers. As was previously noted, chain restaurants can provide a familiar base for the tourist who experiences trepidation at exploring a new culture too deeply; the familiar name of The Melting Pot or Hard Rock Café can provide a level of comfort in the tourist district for a traveler who feels overwhelmed by the difference of the new culture. Local restaurants, in contrast, thrive outside of tourist areas because local residents prefer a dining experience that does not include the intrusion of non-local tourists.

A final conclusion developed from this analysis is that iconic restaurants describe their own importance in community identity and reflect this by naming menu items after themselves (i.e. Loveless Fried Chicken or HRC Cheeseburger), a process largely absent in non-iconic restaurants. The very nature of being an icon means that the restaurants can rely on nearly universal recognition in order to sell their product. It is effective for these businesses to market their iconicity and build their reputation as cultural icons. In contrast, non-iconic restaurants do not have the same cultural power with which to market themselves and cannot effectively use their own names to sell their product.

In any city, a restaurant must create its own identity by advertising itself to elicit the desired response from the community and selecting a menu that caters to the tastes of its intended customers. The restaurant must also rely on external sources of information, such as restaurant location and reviews to corroborate the image that the restaurant attempts to portray. Each of these factors interacts with the locality and iconicity of a restaurant to create a complete image of the restaurant that the public then consumes and interprets. It is clear that there are a variety of factors that combine to determine the hottest restaurant in town.

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