

American Behavioral Scientist

<http://abs.sagepub.com>

The Taste of Boredom: McDonaldization and Australian Food Culture

Joanne Finkelstein

American Behavioral Scientist 2003; 47; 187

DOI: 10.1177/0002764203256183

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://abs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/47/2/187>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *American Behavioral Scientist* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://abs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://abs.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

The Taste of Boredom

McDonaldization and Australian Food Culture

JOANNE FINKELSTEIN

University of Sydney, Australia

The idea of food as a source of amusement has been parallel to the experience of eating since gastronomy began. Turning the eating of food into entertainment has encouraged further developments in the culture industries. At the same time, making food a form of amusement means that it can also become a source of boredom. Consumers experience food fatigue just as they experience other forms of sensory and intellectual overload. This article explores the idea that the cultural reworking of food as entertainment also generates new experiences of detachment, boredom, and ennui.

Keywords: *food; entertainment; culture industries; popular culture*

Much of culinary history has been about a sense of playfulness associated with food. The development of exotic dishes, the manner of food presentation, the theatricality of the restaurant, and the display of taste are all aspects of eating rituals that express our continuous amusement and engagement with food. With the industrialization of food, however, and the advent of the fast-food outlet, the social repertoires around cooking and eating have changed and the social functions of food have been radically altered. An examination of the social consequences of some of the changes provides insights into the character of contemporary pleasure as well as the insinuating spread of global regulation and mass boredom it can generate.

In recent years, largely through the work of George Ritzer (1993, 1998), the effects of increased regulation and rationalization have been returned to the center of sociological debate. Ritzer has examined the application of a rational or “scientific management” paradigm to the analysis of social life and found that it produces a welter of irrational consequences. He has lifted the metaphor of McDonaldization from the globally recognized chain restaurant McDonald’s and used it to dissect some of the ironies of modernity and mass democracy. His main point is that as services become “McDonaldized,” they produce “consequences that are the exact opposite of what is intended” (Ritzer, 2001, p. 2).

AMERICAN BEHAVIORAL SCIENTIST, Vol. 47 No. 2, October 2003 187-200

DOI: 10.1177/0002764203256183

© 2003 Sage Publications

Many of these consequences are unanticipated and this in turn creates situations that can have long-term deleterious effects. Ritzer (2001) states that

McDonaldized systems wrap themselves in a variety of illusions; they tend to disenchant the world; they have a wide range of dehumanizing effects on people as workers and consumers as well as on human relationships; and they tend to have an homogenizing effect that often serves to make life far less interesting and exciting. (p. 2)

Most modern societies are now irreversibly systems oriented as well as being technologically sophisticated. Most governments and industries in these societies express a strong ideological commitment to the future continuation of instrumental rationality and technological development. Rationalization produces elevated levels of predictability and efficiency that succeed in delivering goods and services en masse but, at the same time, as the critics of economic rationalization point out, they instantiate regimes of mass boredom and disenchantment. In this way, modernity has, in practice, become synonymous with the systematic development and widespread application of rationalized technology, which means, in turn, that we have tacitly accepted the circumstances in which Ritzer states a less interesting and less exciting social milieu is produced.

ON BOREDOM

Boredom is the opposite of engagement. It is a state of mind associated with the routines and tedium found in the patterned life of the highly industrialized and bureaucratized society (Spacks, 1995). Boredom is a form of psychic distress and an index of dissatisfaction largely associated with political powerlessness and increased consumption (Akerman, 1993; Zijderfeld, 1979). Boredom is overcome by action, desire, and the will to take a position (the will to power). In an analysis of boredom as a cultural idea, Spacks (1995, pp. 249-252) describes how boredom has been invoked as a reason for mass consumption. She cites advertising campaigns that promise to eradicate boredom with the purchase of luxury holidays, a flight on the Concorde, chocolates, coffee, and various other fashionable commodities.

The idea of boredom as a cultural product also finds resonance in the recent work of Zygmunt Bauman (2002), who asks why the levels of modern consumption remain high when many popular objects and services (such as food and eating out) have become so formulaic and disenchanting. He recognizes that consumption is a panacea responding to the difficulties of the "engaged life"; it is employed to provide pleasure and purpose. At one level, Bauman is not critical of this; after all, shopping and taking possession of an object is a means of expressing human impulse. Thus, consumption has an attractive and exuberant dimension that animates and transforms everyday life; as Bauman (2001) states,

“life turns into a shopping spree” (p. 24). At the same time, he recognizes the pleasures of acquisition as being less about the actual objects and services and more about the expression of desire itself. Shopping is more about feeling purposeful and active; it is a means of avoiding passivity and boredom and it gives expression to a sense of agitation, which, Bauman argues, is an old idea that has long permeated Western thought. Agitation finds expression in the pursuit of a goal, the urgency of a mission, in traveling, going on pilgrimage—these are all instances of being purposefully engaged. Bauman opines that humans are happier when so occupied, and the desire to consume fits with this as it elevates the renewal of desires into a continuous source of engagement; thus, shopping is like a mission, a pilgrimage, a quest.

The thrill of acquisition weakens, though, when the desired object radically changes its nature if, for instance, it becomes standardized, globalized, rationalized, and overregulated. With a less exciting quest, the enchantment of consumption begins to wane. Ritzer has identified McDonaldization as evidence of this transformation. The homogenization and standardization of consumer items reduces their capacity to provide the unexpected and to emit that element of surprise necessary to allay the onset of boredom and dissatisfaction. These ideas are shared by various theorists of consumption who all understand that it is an ambiguous experience. Consumption provides the modern shopper with a sense of freedom to experience new desires and escape the restrictions of tradition; at the same time, it is an activity that engages the individual in the pursuit of superfluous objects designed and presented, through the tricks of advertising, to function as another form of containment (Bowlby, 2000; Campbell, 1987; Packard, 1957). Insofar as consumption is both a source of pleasure and dissatisfaction, insofar as it delivers both a sense of ecstasy and a sense of waste, it is valuable in the unraveling of the irrationalities and ambiguities of modern social life.

PLAYING WITH FOOD

The international food system ensures access to an ever-increasing diversity of tastes. We live in an era where the availability of food is so widespread that its selection is limited only by the conceptual boundaries around its recognition. Many commonplace items such as ice cream, confectioneries, savory sauces, dehydrated soups, and so on are constituted largely from artificial ingredients that we have come to accept as edible. The changes to the nature and appearance of foods have increased the range of possible items that can be consumed and, as a consequence, many definitions of food have changed, as have our expectations of where we source food and how we judge its value (Nelson, 2001).

Prior to the 19th century, imported, foreign, and exotic goods of all kinds were exclusive and available only to social elites, but with the industrial

revolution and the incremental expansion of trade, it became possible for more people to acquire material wealth and thus expand their range of possessions, tastes, and sources of amusement. The commercialization of food on a global scale has been accelerated by technological innovations in food preparation and preservation as well as the growth of extensive transport systems. Various innovations of the past century have changed the appearance, availability, and costs of food products, and although they are not singularly responsible for the emergence of a mass cuisine, they have contributed to changing perceptions of food and, in some cases, to the very taste of food itself.

Before the commercialization of food technologies, there were well-known ways of preserving foods that extended their life and allowed them to be transported to distant locations. Techniques of drying, salting, and pickling preceded the mechanization of canning and bottling by hundreds of years. The use of additives and innovative packaging now enables a much greater range of foods to be preserved and more widely distributed. The effect of these changes is to influence the eating behavior and health standards of a greater number of people. In turn, this ensures that food remains an entertaining and engaging item that affords unmediated pleasures both physical and social. In practice, however, the popularity of preprepared and convenience foods has created the circumstances in which the opportunities for being innovative and playful with food are being reduced; in this sense, then, industrialization has changed many foods into less interesting objects that in some senses become impregnable, closed products.

The history of industrial foods is littered with names that started this revolution and continue to be associated with today's household brand products: Kellogg, Carr, Lea and Perrin, Pears, and Schweppes. These individual pioneers of food production changed the look and cost of food; they made new items such as cereals, biscuits, sauces, and carbonated beverages into everyday staples. Such innovations were exciting and popular with large numbers of consumers. They were also the preliminary step in the creation of a mass cuisine that has markedly improved the quantity, quality, and variety of diet for the urban working populations of the Western world (Goody, 1997).

Beyond these immediate benefits, however, there are numerous unanticipated consequences that industrialization and the mass production of comestibles have brought to various aspects of social life. Among them are changes in the importance of food to cultural and personal identity and to the opportunities for the emergence of new hybridized or creolized tastes. Food is always indicative of social values; local, regional, and ethnic cuisines are readily used to claim a specific identity and protect against the loss of difference and individuality. Yet, paradoxically, even as the internationalization of food can be seen to have broadened awareness of different lifestyles, comestibles, and cuisines, it also has reduced the distinctiveness and increased the homogenization of some food staples. Such are the paradoxes at the heart of the McDonaldization process.

THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF FOOD

Irrespective of a society's economic organization as agrarian, feudal, capitalist, or communal, food is always part of an elaborate symbol system that conveys cultural messages. Food is both an empty and overdetermined signifier that functions as a text through which much of modern social life becomes intelligible. For instance, where and what we eat, with whom, and at what time of day or night are directly influenced by a variety of everyday factors such as age, gender, social status, and income. Bell and Valentine (1997) have noted that "every mouthful, every meal, can tell us something about our selves, and about our place in the world" (p. 3). To acknowledge the diverse and important social functions fulfilled by food leads to a consideration of the consequences that follow when these functions are changed, challenged, and/or debased. For example, when foods are universally available, when they are homogenized and prepackaged, it can be the case that they lose the possibility of symbolizing distinctive social identities. Instead, they generate conventionalized social meanings that serve commercial interests, namely, the successful advertising campaigns that created the Pepsi Generation, Midori crowd, Benetton tribe, and the McDonald's family. Such affiliations and memberships provide a new sense of identity that is detached from local and idiosyncratic influences and is instead sustained by global marketing campaigns, which themselves are developed at a great distance from the locations where these identities are expressed.

Food is also capable of representing ephemeral personal qualities such as cosmopolitanism and conservatism. Tastes for specialized items such as squid, squab pigeon, oysters, raw tuna, and offal speak of claims to cosmopolitanism, whereas a meal of hamburger and fries does the opposite. In various ways, food is deeply associative; for example, Peter Mayle's (1991) best-selling travel novel contains recipes and descriptions of local dishes and he provides the reader with insights into a regional cuisine as part of the interiorized process of self-discovery that travel can provoke. In a commentary on cultural difference and tourism, Alphonso Lingis (1994) has offered a philosophy of appetite that includes an explanation of such exotic habits as that of the ancient Inca who dined alone using elaborate gold and jeweled utensils. Freud (1900), too, has discussed the meaning of food and has provided a memorable interpretation of a dream about smoked salmon that is less about fish and more about the anxiety of being socially respectable.

The history of eating is one of constant adaptation to new foods and new cooking techniques. Food tastes and cuisines are not stable. The tomato, chili, and capsicum, for example, have highly mobile histories. Although they may now seem ordinary ingredients in our diets, they are relatively recent European discoveries. The same is true of certain Asian ingredients such as coconut milk, bean sprouts, water chestnuts, and coriander. The consolidation of a cuisine

most often results from a complex interplay of various social forces, including inventiveness, nostalgia, and commercial pressure. Of interest here is Levenstein's (1988) analysis of changing tastes and the integrity of a cuisine in relation to patterns of migration. His work provides an important example of how effectively styles of eating function as reservoirs of information about specific social groups, their divisions between classes and categories of people, and the coherence or fragility of structures maintaining social identity.

Other explanations of food's importance have been provided by Mary Douglas (1970), who developed a taxonomy of foods based on whether they were pure and edible or unclean and polluting. Douglas explained that individuals could not afford to consume "unclean" foods or cross-cultural barriers by tasting novel food items because by doing so they took the risk of incorporating the "foreign" into the body, thereby exposing themselves to a possible attack on their vital essence. Her classification of foods also functioned as a theory of human subjectivity. Douglas (1979) deciphered the meal as both an idiosyncratic cultural practice as well as a cosmology of subjectivity. She famously argued that social order derived from the ability to impose classifications that implied differences. When an individual classified food items as either appealing or repulsive, he or she was exercising a sense of self. Choices in food, and the decision to maintain certain taboos and prohibitions, enabled the individual to prevent the dissolution of the self by controlling ingestion (Douglas, 1970). More recently, Doris Witt (1998) has demonstrated the same idea with her analysis of the changing social value of "soul food." The absorption of this cuisine, which has generally been regarded as inferior (as have many regional cuisines), was linked to the changing tastes, political position, and racial identity of African Americans (pp. 258-287). Witt argued that tastes shift as part of a dynamic that links the production of the psyche or self-consciousness with the relations of economic production and social status. Thus, tastes are part of an interior process of making choices, and the cultural practices circulating around food are techniques that allow individuals to engage with one another, to define and display a sense of pleasure and amusement, and to assert a sense of self and purpose.

CLASSIFYING TASTES

By 1914, large corporations were transforming the food industry in America by introducing new technologies in food processing and distribution. Alongside these changes, World War I and the Great Depression also galvanized government bodies into exerting more control over domestic economic markets. Food businesses became more industrialized and more regulated through government interventions (such as taxation, revenue sourcing, and trade agreements) and the dietary habits and tastes of a vast population began undergoing change in a relatively short period of time. In this context, Levenstein (1988, pp. 30-43) notes

that the Italian diet survived into the 20th century in a largely unchanged state despite the zeal of American reformers in the 19th century to change the food habits of new immigrants (supposedly to improve standards of general health) and despite the successful industrialization of food by various big corporations in the early decades of the new century.

Levenstein compared the success of Italian cuisine in America with other migrant cuisines. He observed that pizza, spaghetti, and meatballs, which have now become staples of the American diet, were able to retain their original, homegrown style because of their strong association with an ethnic identity. As well, he noted the influence of more abstract socioeconomic conditions, including the significance of the giant food corporations and their extensive advertising campaigns. He cites, for example, the successes of the grain-based companies Kellogg's and Post at the turn of the 20th century, when they changed the breakfast meal of an entire population by substituting grains for meat (James, 1996; Levenstein, 1988, p. 41).

Levenstein's study is an interesting example of how food fashions emerge and evolve not arbitrarily or inexplicably but most decidedly in concert with socioeconomic, cultural, and political influences. He describes how Italian dishes were adopted into the American food vernacular even though they were initially regarded as highly exotic. For example, the Italian diet relies heavily on tomatoes and these were skeptically viewed by Americans in the late 19th century. Furthermore, the Italian habit of mixing meat, beans, cheese, and pasta together was thought by many Americans to destroy food value. In contrast to the new migrant's diet, the American style was to cook and eat food products separately because this supposedly retained their nutritional value. In the early 1920s, with new research into nutrition and the discovery of vitamins, the conventional Italian diet was reconsidered and found to be well balanced and rich in energy. The food reformers of the previous decade were thus compelled to revise their attitudes toward the imported dietary regimes of migrants, and by World War II, pasta, tomatoes, and meat sauce had become staples of the American diet.

In the Australian context, many of the same dynamics can be seen at work. For instance, the incorporation of German food styles into 19th-century colonial Australia continued to be resisted until after the hostilities to all things German began to abate in the decades after World War II. Heuzenroeder (1999) has examined the Barossa Valley in South Australia as an example of a mature and genuine regional cuisine that remained distinctively Germanic despite a series of cultural assaults from generations of intermarriage, hostilities between Anglo and German nationalities, and the incursions into the food market from international conglomerates, including the arrival of the supermarket in Australia in 1956. From a cursory review of how ethnic and local cuisines maintain their identity and resist external influences, it becomes apparent that when a new style of eating develops, such as the popularity of snack and fast foods, then changes to the everyday routines of millions of people have far-reaching consequences

that penetrate deeply into the fabric of ordinary social life and into the individual's sense of identity and social position.

MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIA AND McDONALD'S

In the Australian setting, the experience of McDonald's provides an example of the multifarious ways in which consumers have been progressively redefined by the globalizing food economy. Since the 1970s, Australia has been self-consciously a multicultural society. The term entered public discourse through the Federal Minister for Immigration, Al(bert) Grassby, who was born in Australia in 1926 from Spanish-Irish parents. He entered politics at the state and then federal level during the decade from the mid-1960s until the mid-1970s.¹ In 1973, he was appointed the Minister for Immigration in the soon-to-be controversial Whitlam Government. His outstanding accomplishments were, first, the formal abolition of the so-called White Australia Policy, which privileged British migrants over all others, and second, the successful insertion of ethnic affairs and multiculturalism onto the national political agenda.

Grassby was repeatedly described in pejorative terms by the mass media largely because his sartorial choices were not the gray-and-blue, pin-striped suits favored by his professional colleagues. Instead, Grassby wore vividly painted neckties and strongly colored shirts. The sustained critical commentary against him in the mass media, however, was not about fashion but was a form of political attack. Grassby was a public figure bringing in significant cultural changes to a conservative electorate. At the time, the Australian population was largely homogeneous as a result of a highly regulated immigration system that favored the English speaker. Associating Grassby's "colorful" appearance with the beginnings of multiculturalism (which would later adopt other colorful metaphors such as "the rainbow alliance" and "mosaic culture") was a trope designed to trivialize the social changes taking place. In the next two decades, from 1970 to 1990, the population mix in Australia, influenced further by the popularization of indigenous politics, was thoroughly transformed. The significance of this in a discussion of the Australian local food culture is that the introduction and success of McDonald's in particular and the fast-food industry in general must be linked to the changing size and character of the population and the Australian marketplace from about the mid-20th century onward (Greisman & Ritzer, 1981).

By the 1990s, Australians were annually spending \$13 billion to dine out, with 40% spent on take-away and fast foods and more than 30% at cafes and restaurants. Currently, in Australia, there are about 20,000 restaurants and another 20,000 fast-food and take-away outlets, an increase of more than 50% from 1985 to 2000. There are about 700 McDonald's outlets, which control 42% of the \$3.5 billion fast-food market, ahead of KFC and Pizza Hut (Dore, Harris, & Whittaker, 2001). The closest competitors are Hungry Jacks with 198 outlets in

Australia and Burger King with 76. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the consumption of take-away foods steadily increased; now, the total number of meals eaten outside the home is estimated to be one in three (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000). At the same time, supermarkets are selling more prepared foods from their salad bars, delicatessens, and rotisseries in an attempt to compete with the trend toward fast-food take-away.

The Australian food service industry is estimated to be worth about \$24 billion a year in retail sales (including supermarkets, restaurants, home meal replacements, and delivery services) in a national economy of about \$500 billion (see the Energy Information Administration [EIA] Web site: www.eia.doe.gov). For a small country with a total population of less than 20 million, this represents a significant part of the consumer economy. The growth in the fast-food field is strong, with an expected increased turnover of \$32 billion within the next 10 years (Mangosi, 2001). These changes are predicted on the basis of further alterations in the character of the Australian population. Australians are spending more each year on dining out. The average Australian income is \$45,000 per annum, and of that, about \$700 is spent in restaurants. From 1994 to 1995, it was estimated that an average of one in four meals was eaten outside the home, but by 2002, that number had increased to one in three, creating an industry worth billions of dollars per year. The dine-out boom of the past decade has caused a 150% jump in the number of restaurants and cafes and a trebling of fast-food outlets. Some estimates claim there are about 10 fast-food outlets (including cafes, street stalls, and chain restaurants) for every 10,000 people. In comparison, Australia still lags behind America in terms of the large fast-food outlets. The major chains in Australia (such as McDonald's, KFC, and Hungry Jacks) have about 14 outlets per 100,000 people compared to 28 outlets per 100,000 in the United States (Nestle, 2002).

A survey of consumer tastes undertaken by the reputable research institute Food Science Australia in conjunction with Commonwealth Scientific Industry and Research Organisation (CSIRO) found that Australians were increasingly interested in health foods and the convenience of purchasing a wider variety of foods in new ways (through home delivery, gourmet outlets, supermarkets, producers, or farmers markets) (Marcure, 1999). The trends indicated that the purchase of more prepared foods to eat at home was increasing, with reduced spending on cheaper fast foods such as fried snacks and hamburgers. During the 1990s, the consumption of beef and veal dropped by about 50% and butter by about 400%, indicating a growing consciousness of high-fat food items. In the meantime, consumption of sugar in prepared foods has increased fourfold and margarine threefold. Snack, health, and home replacement fast foods also significantly increased in popularity, as have wines, aerated and carbonated water, coffee, and fruit juices.

A common explanation for these changes is the increased number of dual-income families, which leave little time for adult members to shop and cook. There is also the influence of multiculturalism; it is estimated that about 75% of

Australians eat ethnic foods regularly, and when cooking, they add spices, which was largely unheard of before the changes Al Grassby initiated in the 1970s. The most favored food style is Italian, followed by Asian cuisines including Thai, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Japanese. An important influence in the popularity of a cuisine is its perceived healthiness. The Mediterranean phenomenon of low heart disease has made the Italian diet of pasta, olive oil, tomatoes, basil, and small quantities of red meat widely appealing to the health-conscious middle classes. The desire for low fat and additive-free foods has favored Asian cooking styles, which are quickly prepared from fresh foods and well-spiced for flavor.

A market in gourmet goods has rapidly emerged in Australia; the mild, local climate has encouraged boutique farming in herbs, organic vegetables, and grapes, and specialist outlets now offer such exotic items as saffron tips, red capicum pesto, extra-virgin olive oil, squid ink noodles, chili linguini, and caramelized onion. A "foodie" culture has developed from the combined influences of a restaurant and café society where a fusion cuisine of Asian-Mediterranean-Australian fare is served. Important also in the generating of Australian food awareness has been a constant media broadcast of food programs on television (beginning with Graham Kerr in the 1960s), which have remained popular for more than 40 years. The cultivation of this food culture has been supported by glamorous magazine publications such as *Delicious*, *Epicure*, *Decanter*, *Food and Wine*, *The Wine Magazine*, and the large supermarkets and department stores that have imitated the elaborate food halls found in London's Harrod's and Fortnum and Mason. These new food halls offer a wide range of freshly cooked mini-meals that include roasted vegetables, fresh salads, pastries, and cheeses elegantly displayed in elaborate physical settings that in turn contribute to the increasing commodification of a wide variety of food items.

Throughout the past 50 years, the food culture of Australia has changed significantly, largely as a result of the changing population as well as the introduction of multinational food industries. Under these influences, Al Grassby's prescient vision has been realized. European and Asian influences on mainstream Australian tastes, especially in food styles, have shifted emphasis away from traditional British food habits and have created a demand for greater variety in foods. At the same time, the influences of industrialization in food and agribusiness have produced stable patterns of consumption that reflect rationalized attitudes toward consumption. Indeed, the consumption of preprepared foods such as convenience, snack, and fast foods also have received widespread acceptance in Australia. These trends appear to divide the local food market into two opposed segments: the gourmet and the mass industrial. As distinctive as these developments are, nonetheless, they both illustrate aspects of a larger transformation, namely, the McDonaldization of Australia's food and eating habits.

With the industrial takeover of the commercial kitchen, for example, a new trend has come into existence that reduces the amount of cooking and food preparation performed on-site. The foods coming into restaurant kitchens are often

preprepared and require only assembling; potatoes arrive ready-peeled and pearly white (after being dipped in a sodium metabisulfite solution); they are trimmed, sectioned, diced, sliced, or chipped to order. Likewise, carrots come peeled, sliced, shredded, or in julienne strips; pumpkin is peeled and diced; beans are topped and tipped; cabbage and lettuce are shredded; and onions are diced. Char-grilled vegetables are often sourced from a commercial distributor because few small restaurants have the char-grill facilities to prepare such items on-site, and pasta is commonly prepared in commercial factory kitchens. Various salads are prepared off-site and delivered fresh daily; they can be ordered dressed or “dry,” with the dressing delivered separately; desserts are ordered from a patisserie or commercial bakery and delivered with only the sprinkle of sugar or lick of coulis to add. Cuisine assemblage is the preferred style of food preparation for many restaurants. Thus, the diner’s expectations that restaurants have distinctive food styles must be tempered by the realization that off-site food preparation is increasingly common. Indeed, the industrialization of food service delivery is now so extensive that many of the idiosyncratic pleasures of dining out have been replaced with the homogenizing qualities of standardized food items.

THE TASTE OF BOREDOM

Since the appearance of the global or chain restaurant in the marketplace, the rates of dining out have increased rapidly. The ubiquity of the fast-food outlet has had a significant impact on general attitudes toward nutrition, recreational foods, and taste preferences. The standardized products delivered through the chain restaurant are considered appealing because of their guaranteed quality. In this respect, a much-touted promise of McDonald’s has been its reliability and cleanliness. In Australia, McDonald’s “has staked its 30 year reputation” on being consistent, clean, and cheap (Dore et al., 2001). This has proved an effective marketing technique because it has addressed a heightened public awareness of health standards. An increase in the regulation of the food service industry has been taking place for some time across the industrialized world. In many American cities, for example, it is a legal requirement to have at least one person in every restaurant with professional certification related to the proper techniques of food preparation and handling (Kolbert, 2002). This requirement has been based not only on the need to address the technical hazards of food preparation such as cross-contamination and the prevention of food-borne illnesses such as scombroid poisoning, shigellosis, and listeriosis but also on the basis of a perceived need to maintain the pleasures (and allay the anxieties) of dining out. After all, the consumption of food purchased in the public domain rests on a tacit relationship of trust between the purveyor and customer. Every food worker, from chef to sous chef to waiter to dishwasher, must demonstrate a great deal of

care and be ever-vigilant about the food they work with but will not themselves eat.

The industrialization of food has meant standardization, which in turn reduces anxieties about food contamination and quality, but it has also meant a reduction in the playful engagement the individual can have with food. In an era where the mass production of goods has increased the distance between the consumer and the consumed, where the origins, ingredients, and production processes of most items are unknown to the consumer, a guarantee that a food item is what it claims and appears to be is welcomed as very reassuring. The McDonald's promise to its customers has been to be always and everywhere the same, although in reality, many of its far-flung outlets do cater to regional tastes with the inclusions of specific local products. Nonetheless, the popular belief remains that McDonald's provides a universal experience and a guarantee of its product, which has proved to be of fundamental importance to the commercial success of this business (Boas & Chain, 1976; Love, 1986). Indeed, in terms of consumer responses to the purchase of food in general, the reassurances provided by a McDonaldized food system have been overwhelmingly popular.

Yet the McDonald's experience has been widely criticized for being bland and boring. Indeed, the brand name has been corrupted into neologisms (such as *News McNuggets*, *McDoctors*, *McWork*, *McAdemy*, and *McHealth*) used to signify instances of unwelcome trivialization and debasement brought about by rationalization and, by the close of the 20th century, the McDonald's empire, along with other global corporations, is showing signs of exhaustion. It appears that the consumer tolerance of homogenized products is beginning to weaken. The corporation's executives in Australia have reported that "sales growth has stalled, satisfaction is falling, fascination is at a standstill, the remarkably high market share is under pressure and dissatisfaction among the 480 (Australian) licensed owner-operators is building" (Dore et al., 2001, p. 15). It is not only that the current market for McDonald's products is saturated but other abstract forces, such as the changing nature of consumption, are beginning to impinge directly on the fundamentals underpinning economic globalization.

CONCLUSION

The conventions associated with eating have always been closely intertwined with claims of social status and identity (Douglas, 1970; Elias, 1978; Freud, 1900; Lingis, 1994). Eating is never a simple matter of fuelling the physical body; eating habits are reflective of interpersonal conduct, the pursuit of pleasure and a variety of social expectations. They indicate levels of social understanding and thresholds of tolerance for differences; they also have provided entertainment for individuals who cultivate their own tastes and knowledge of cuisines. With the standardization of foods, however, a great deal of apprehension and anxiety about the qualities of foods have been allayed but, at the same

time, the opportunities for playfulness and sustained amusement over the consumption of food have been curtailed. Although the creation of a mass cuisine and the industrialization of food have the virtue of delivering different kinds of foods to a global marketplace, they have also fundamentally changed the individual's relationship to food by standardizing and transforming comestibles into a highly regulated and closed commodity, which can produce greater passivity, disinterest, and boredom in the consumer.

This article has explored some of the aspects of rationalization in terms of the Australian food culture and the implicit costs of increased boredom that may accompany McDonaldization. The ordinary activities of eating and shopping can enmesh the individual in routinized systems that produce high levels of monotony and irrationality. In these ways, the McDonaldization processes show that the disenchantment of the world, as described by Weber's (1921/1968) iron cage, is ever present. Commentaries by Ritzer, Spacks, Bauman, Akerman, and others also have recognized the necessity of the individual to act against clichés, to disrupt patterns and habituated lifestyles, and to transgress systems of order as a means of annulling the passivity and homogeneity common to a highly rationalized social order. It is, after all, only through the experience of "agitation" and the individual's willingness to seek social novelties and be inventive that resistance to monotony and the deleterious consequences of McDonaldization can be ensured.

NOTE

1. Grassby held the New South Wales State Labor seat of Murrumbidgee from 1965 to 1969 and then transferred to national politics holding the federal seat of Riverina in the House of Representatives from 1969 to 1974.

REFERENCES

- Akerman, N. (Ed.). (1993). *The necessity of friction*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (ABS). (2000). Canberra, Australia: Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS). Retrieved September 5, 2002, from www.abs.gov.au
- Bauman, Z. (2001). Consuming life. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 1(1), 9-29.
- Bauman, Z. (2002). *Society under siege*. Oxford: Polity.
- Bell, D., & Valentine, G. (Eds.). (1997). *Consuming geographies*. London: Routledge.
- Boas, M., & Chain, S. (1976). *Big Mac: The unauthorized story of McDonald's*. New York: Dutton.
- Bowlby, R. (2000). *Carried away: The invention of modern shopping*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Campbell, C. (1987). *The romantic ethic and the spirit of modern consumerism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Dore, C., Harris, T., & Whittaker, M. (2001, December 22-23). Inside McDonald's. *The Weekend Australian*, pp. 15, 17-18.
- Douglas, M. (1970). *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge Kegan Paul.

- Douglas, M. (1979). Les structures du culinaire [Deciphering a meal]. *Communications*, 31, 145-170.
- Elias, N. (1978). *The civilizing process*. New York: Urizen.
- Freud, S. (1900). The interpretation of dreams. In J. Strachey (Trans. and Ed.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 4, p. 147). London: Hogarth.
- Goody, J. (1997). Industrial food: Towards the development of a world cuisine. In C. Counihan & P. van Esterik (Eds.), *Food and culture* (pp. 338-356). New York: Routledge.
- Greisman, H., & Ritzer, G. (1981). Max Weber: Critical theory and the administered world. *Qualitative Sociology*, 4, 34-55.
- Heuzenroeder, A. (1999). The history of Barossa Valley Food. In R. Dare (Ed.), *Food, power and community*. South Australia: Wakefield Press.
- James, A. (1996). Cooking the books: Global or local identities in contemporary British food cultures. In D. Howes (Ed.), *Cross-cultural consumption: Global markets, local realities* (pp. 77-92). London: Routledge.
- Kolbert, E. (2002, August 19, 26). Everyone lies: Making the rounds with restaurant inspectors. *The New Yorker*, pp. 84-86.
- Levenstein, H. (1988). *Revolution at the table*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Lingis, A. (1994). *Abuses*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Love, J. F. (1986). *McDonald's: Behind the arches*. Toronto, Canada: Bantam.
- Mangosi, S. (2001). *Fast food in Australia 1999-2001* (4th ed.). Sydney, Australia: BIS Shrapnel.
- Marcure, J. (1999). *Cassandra: The future of food-related innovation*. Australia: Commonwealth Scientific Industry and Research Organisation.
- Mayle, P. (1991). *A year in Provence*. New York: Random House.
- Nelson, J. (2001). On mass distribution: A case study of chain stores in the restaurant industry. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 1(1): 119-137.
- Nestle, M. (2002). *Food politics: How the food industry influences nutrition and health*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Packard, V. (1957). *The hidden persuaders*. New York: Penguin.
- Ritzer, G. (1993). *The McDonaldization of society: An investigation into the changing character of contemporary social life*. Newbury Park, CA: Pine Forge.
- Ritzer, G. (1998). *The McDonaldization thesis*. London: Sage Ltd.
- Ritzer, G. (2001). *Explorations in the sociology of consumption*. London: Sage Ltd.
- Spacks, P. M. (1995). *Boredom: The literary history of a state of mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Weber, M. (1968). *Economy and society* (Vols. 1-3). Totowa, NJ: Bedminster Press. (Original work published 1921)
- Witt, D. (1998). Soul food: Where the chitterling hits the (primal) pan. In R. Scapp & B. Seitz (Eds.), *Eating culture* (pp. 258-287). New York: State University of New York Press.
- Zijderveld, A. (1979). *On clichés: The supersedure of meaning by function in modernity*. London: Routledge.

JOANNE FINKELSTEIN teaches sociology and cultural studies at the University of Sydney. She is the author of *Dining Out* (New York University Press) and *The Fashioned Self* (Temple University Press).