When I went away to graduate school, I entered a world of experimental cooking and eating, a world heavily populated by academics and people with disposable incomes who like to travel. It’s a world where entire cuisines go in and out of vogue in a calendar year. Where lists of “in” cuisines, ingredients, techniques, and restaurants are published in glamorous magazines featuring pictures of gorgeous food on their covers and articles inside about how saffron is harvested. It’s a world in which people whisper conspiratorially about the great little place serving Ethiopian food—well, Eritrean, actually—that just opened up. The world of food adventuring was a wonderful world, full of tastes, textures, and smells I had never, ever encountered growing up in Rice Lake, Wisconsin. In my home town, meat-potatoes-and-vegetable meals predominated in most homes, and an “ethnic” meal most likely meant spaghetti with red sauce at the Bona Casa in Cumberland, fifteen miles away. As a 4-H-er, my favorite project was cooking, and my favorite year the one during which I was enrolled in a cooking project called “International Foods.” There I learned how to make Swedish Christmas cookies and chili with V-8 juice.

Moving to Evanston right next to Chicago for graduate school was like moving to a culinary Disneyland. Within the first few months, I’d jettisoned the boxes of instant mashed potatoes and cans of Campbell’s soup I’d brought with me and started stocking my cupboard with bulgur and tree ear fungus purchased at small neighborhood groceries that looked nothing like Duke’s Family Grocery on Rice Lake’s Main Street. Each week, I scoured the Chicago Reader for two-for-one restaurant coupons for interesting ethnic restaurants I could get to on the “El.” Even a graduate student could afford to eat in those places.

In the mid-1980s, Thai restaurants were opening in large numbers in Chicago, and I still remember my first visit to one. My roommate’s parents were in town, and they took us to dinner at the Thai Star Cafe on State Street. I tasted Kai Thom Kha—a chicken soup made with coconut milk, lemon grass, and kha or galangal, a spice related to ginger—and realized that I’d never tasted anything like it before. The food I experienced that evening probably contained at least six spices with which I’d never come in contact. After the meal, the four of us sat around marveling at how wonderful the food had been—and my, how very inexpensive, too! (Now, I marvel at the fact that I can buy a shiny foil packet of powdered Kai Thom Kha mix in my local food co-op.)

After eating my way through the inexpensive ethnic restaurants of Chicago and Evanston during graduate school (the weekend I defended my dissertation, I celebrated with meals at both an Indian and a Peruvian restaurant), I moved to a small town in Minnesota, and then to another small town in Minnesota. There, I found my food adventuring severely curtailed; the few restaurants tended toward pizza, burgers, and the occasional steak, and in the grocery stores food from major American conglomerates dominated the shelves. Of course, some of my colleagues who were not products of the upper Midwest did find the foods of the area exotic—and often unrecognizable. They did feel like food adventurers when they found Jello with peas in it at the restaurant salad bar, or when they went to a lutefisk dinner sponsored by the local Lutheran church. But for me, Jello salad and lutefisk were very old, as well as very unappetizing, news.

Despite the dearth of opportunities for food adventuring in my new hometown, I found ways to scrape by. On weekend visits to Minneapolis and St. Paul, trips to professional conventions, sabbaticals in other towns, and summer vacations, I managed to collect dining experiences in restaurants serving all sorts of ethnic cuisines, ranging from the relatively routine (Vietnamese food in St. Paul) to the more unusual (Tibetan food at “America’s Second Only Tibetan Restaurant” in Bloomington, Indiana), to the really-pretty-darn-rare (dinner at a short-lived Hmong restaurant in Minneapolis). By scouring the “Restaurants by Ethnicity” section of the Manhattan Yellow Pages, I found a place serving Burmese food within walking distance of the hotel where I was staying for the American Philosophical Association convention. Following a friend—a newspaper
food critic and self-described food adventurer on an “eat your way around the world” tour for his paper—through the streets of Cochin, India, late one night, I landed at a neighborhood family restaurant featuring Moghul food. And when I had dinner in Minneapolis with another friend, we would eat at her idea of a comfort-food restaurant: an Ethiopian place right near her office at the university.

“Experiment” was my middle name; I’d try (nearly) anything once, and I actively sought any and all opportunities to increase the number and range of eating adventures I had. Experimentation had its risks and dangers of course—

Just by eating “ethnic” we adventurers don’t have a claim on another culture. Neither can we pretend to understand it because we think we know how the natives eat.

the dangers of ordering a dish that was too spicy, too full of “weird” foods—but that risk was just part of the adventure. I was not alone on my quests; wherever I adventured, I could always be sure of company. No matter what crowd I was in, there was always someone else like me, eager to eat things she’d never heard of before. I was becoming a food adventurer, and I (mostly) didn’t look back.

Over time, though, I started to have some suspicions about my food adventuring. For one thing, various experiences made me feel uncomfortable about the easy acquisitiveness with which I approached a new kind of food, the tenacity with which I collected adventures. Was such collecting really just a benign recreation, like collecting Pogs or Pez containers or, God forbid, Hummel figurines? Or was it more like collecting cultural artifacts—Hopi ceremonial masks, say—a kind of collecting that many Hopi regard as a particularly invasive form of appropriation? It seemed to me that foods were often intertwined in their cultures in ways that many ritual objects are. Did that mean that my easy, breezy sampling of them also counted as appropriation? Was I stealing their bones—roasted, braised, or boiled, perhaps—but stealing nonetheless?

Other experiences made me reflect on the circumstances that conspired to bring these cuisines into my world in the first place. On my first visit to an Eritrean restaurant, for example, I found myself thinking about how disturbing and complicated it was to be tasting the food of people who were in the middle of a calamitous famine—and also thinking about the fact that not eating in the restaurant wouldn’t exactly solve anything either (whatever the anything was that needed solving). If it’s exploitative of me to eat the foods of marginalized Others in casual ignorance, with no regard for the cultural context of those foods, then what is it to refuse to eat the food of the Other (especially when this very concrete Other is attempting to make a living by selling it to me and people like me)?

An offhand remark in a murder mystery started me thinking about the reasons there were so many Vietnamese restaurants in Minneapolis/St. Paul, reasons directly connected to the U.S. war in Vietnam, and the resultant dislocation of Vietnamese, Laotian, and Hmong people. (So, since the Other didn’t want to move to Minneapolis, and since they probably only started a restaurant out of necessity, am I acting in solidarity with them, or am I just taking advantage of their disadvantage? And don’t try to tell me that “this is just dinner, so lighten up.”)

Eventually, I put a name to my strange penchant for cooking and eating ethnic foods—most frequently and most notably the foods of third-world cultures. (And yes, that’s a term I worry about.) The unflattering name I chose for my activities was “cultural food colonialism,” which made me your basic colonizer. As I saw it, my adventure eating was motivated by an attitude that bore an uncomfortable
resemblance to the various ideologies of western colonialism. When I began to examine my culture-hopping in the kitchen and in restaurants, I found echoes of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European painters and explorers, who set out in search of ever “newer,” ever more “remote” cultures which they could co-opt, borrow from freely and out of context, and use as the raw materials for their own efforts at creation and discovery. Richard Burton and Henry Schoolcraft, for example, reported that they had “discovered” the headwaters of the Nile and the Mississippi, respectively—but only after local folks had led them to the spots they sought. Later, Paul Gauguin went to Tahiti to “immerse [himself] in virgin nature, see no one but savages, live their life…” in order that he might make “simple, very simple art”—using their lives and art as his raw material."

Of course I knew that it was much too simplistic to label my adventuring unregenerately colonialist and reject it out of hand, which is at least one of the reasons I didn’t stop eating out. After all, weren’t my eating and cooking also efforts to play, and to learn about other cultures in ways I genuinely intended to be respectful? Surely such noble intentions deserve some credit! Perhaps. But though the picture grew more complicated, I could not ignore the fact that underneath, or alongside, or over and above all these other reasons for my adventuring, I was motivated by a deep desire to have contact with and somehow to own an experience of an Exotic Other to make myself more interesting. Food adventuring, as I was coming to think about it, made me a participant in cultural colonialism, just as surely as eating Mexican strawberries in January made me a participant in economic colonialism.

Move ahead fifteen years from my first adventure in that Chicago Thai restaurant, to a Thai restaurant in Dublin. In fifteen years, I’d had countless adventures, as well as countless opportunities to experience misgivings about my adventuring ways. I’d also tried to develop ways to resist my colonizing tendencies, to disrupt the colonizing scripts that present themselves so readily when I set foot in an ethnic restaurant or grocery store or open an ethnic cookbook.

While vacationing in Ireland, my partner and I found ourselves ravenously hungry very early one evening in Dublin. Five thirty is an inconvenient time to be hungry in Ireland; most restaurants don’t open for dinner until a much more fashionable hour, so unless you can satisfy yourself with pub food, your only options are to tough it out or wander the streets in hopes of finding somewhere open. Luck, however, was with us that evening; we stumbled upon an open Thai restaurant.

Sounds odd, I know, but finding a Thai restaurant in Ireland felt strangely reassuring. When we’re at home in Minnesota, we eat Thai food whenever we get the chance—which means whenever we can manage to be in Minneapolis or St. Paul around dinner time. I’m always shopping around for another Thai restaurant to visit, and once inside, I tend to try lots of dishes on the menu (surprise). Peg, on the other hand, prefers familiar foods; she sticks to her favorite dish, pad thai (the Thai national dish, restaurant menus inform me). She’s become something of a pad thai connoisseur in the last few years. She knows which places use too much nam pla (fish sauce) or ketchup in the sauce, the ones that pile on the scallions (also a no-no), and the ones where the peanuts dusting the noodles are fresh and generous. Pad thai has become comfort food for her, the way grilled cheese sandwiches and ginger ale were when she was a kid.

So, here we were in a Thai restaurant in Ireland, feeling surreally confident after days of moving tentatively (and somewhat squeamishly) through an unfamiliar world of pub lunches and full Irish breakfasts. (Do you know what black pudding is? Have you ever confronted it at the breakfast table?) I remember walking into the restaurant thinking, “Well, at least I’ll know how to behave here; I know how to behave in Thai restaurants.” Armed with this sense of belonging, of being in the know, I immediately began deciding which features of the restaurant’s decor were genuinely Thai, and which were of obvious Irish origin—this despite my never having been in Thailand in my life, and having spent a grand total of six days in Ireland so far. I found myself chuckling at the sight of the red-haired, freckled Irish teenager dressed in traditional Thai shirt and trousers who filled our water glasses. What in the world did those wacky Irish think they were trying to prove by dressing up in traditional Thai costumes? Surely they didn’t think they were passing for Thai—with that hair?!

In the midst of my complacency, however, I also found myself confused and a bit ill at ease. Here I was, staring in the face of a cross-cultural entrepreneurial enterprise that did not in any (apparent or necessary) way involve the United States, or a U.S. influence. Some Thai people apparently just moved to Ireland and opened a restaurant—and it looked like they didn’t even pass Go (a.k.a. the United States) to do it. How could this be? (And, more to the point, what would their pad thai taste like?)

Then our server came. I’d already decided, upon seeing her, that she had to be Thai, given her facial features and hair. Imagine my surprise and confusion when I said, in my best American-Thai-restaurant language, “Pad thai, please,”
and she responded, “Excuse me?” I tried it again. No luck. After the third time, I resorted to ostensive definition, and she said “Ohhhh,” followed by something I didn’t understand, then went off to place our order. I decided, in that instant, that she must not be Thai, must be from some other Southeast Asian nation, and didn’t in fact even speak Thai. (Note to self: ethnicity of servers doesn’t “match” cuisine, appearances to the contrary. Authentic anyway?) What other possible explanation could there be for the fact that she didn’t understand my request for pad thai? Surely it couldn’t be that my rendition of the term pad thai was unintelligible to a native speaker of the language—could it? And surely if she were Thai, she would speak Thai—wouldn’t she? Unbelievably, it bothered me that I was not understood when I uttered a single phrase in a language I don’t speak, to a person who may or may not have spoken that language either.

All the while that I assessed the restaurant and its staff, another part of me (the cynical bystander part) watched myself in operation and wryly noted my eagerness to separate the authentically Thai elements from the “Irish Thai” ones. I was surprised—and embarrassed—to realize how willing and easily I slipped into my food adventurer ways, with all the presumptions and ideological underpinnings essential to that role:

1) Novel and exotic is always better. Thai food in Minneapolis? Not bad. Thai food in Ireland? Even better.

2) Slavish devotion to authenticity is a must. Is that the pot They would use to make a dish? Do the Thai really use ketchup in pad thai? (And aren’t I, the white girl, just the person to make that assessment?)

3) The ethnic Other (the server, in this case) is a resource I may use to meet my own expectations, fill my own desires, and thereby embellish my own identity. Wouldn’t my server always understand me? Wouldn’t she be happy to tell me some insider anecdotes about her “native land” (never mind that she’s actually from Co. Kerry and not Bangkok)?

4) The United States is culinary central, the place through which any “foreign” culture must pass before relocating to another “foreign” locale. And American culture is a plain white plate, ideal for setting off the features of an ethnic cuisine without imparting any flavors of its own. Why wouldn’t I be knowledgeable about the difference between “authentic” Thai and Irish-influenced Thai restaurants? I’m American for God’s sake—the perfect person to judge true authenticity!

Are you still with me? Okay, I know: you want to hear about the pad thai. Fine. It was really pretty good. A little too sweet for my taste (could Irish ketchup be even sweeter than American?), but really very tasty. And no evidence of black pudding anywhere.

Fifteen years of food adventuring and billions of calories later, I’m no more settled about my actions, no clearer about my choices than I was before. If anything, I’ve come to feel that my actions, and their context, are much more complicated than my categories of analysis can possibly reveal.

So what have I learned? Well, I’ve learned to stop trying to satisfy my philosopher’s desire for clarity, and my Good Girl’s desire to have clean hands in all of this. And I’ve learned that despite my valiant efforts to take all the fun out of food, I won’t destroy or save the world at the dinner table. And I’ve learned that at the end of the day, around dinner time to be precise, I still love food, especially something that is new and different to me. But I’ve also admitted that just by eating “ethnic” we adventurers don’t have a claim on another culture. Neither can we pretend to understand it because we think we know how the natives eat. Good intentions aside, that is simply impossible.

Try looking at it this way: diving into all the squid, olives, dolmades, and baklava in the world just isn’t going to teach me all that much about Athenian culture or Peloponnesian traditions. At the end of the day, it’s all Greek to me.

Now would you please pass the lemon soup?


FURTHER READING


