Public Engagement Essay

The Role of Atmosphere in Ethnic Restaurants

Over the past century, ethnic restaurants have become increasingly prevalent in the United States. They have established themselves within the restaurant industry as places for American diners to eat new foods and experience a taste of an unknown culture. This experience is not limited to the food served in these restaurants; the environment of the ethnic restaurant plays an important role as well. A case study on consumers in ethnic restaurants by Jennifer DeJesus and Robert Tian notes, “Eating is not the only reason for going to an ethnic restaurant. Rather, the whole process of the greeting, ordering, dining, and interacting contribute to an overall favorable experience which leads to a greater awareness of culture.”¹ These processes, while also influential in traditional American restaurants, are particularly critical in ethnic restaurants because they can shape the customer’s view of the represented culture. If we define atmosphere as “the quality of the surrounding space”² based on music, lighting, and decoration, it is clearly an essential component in this regard. However, though atmosphere unquestionably contributes to a customer’s experience with the culture, it is far less influential than other aspects of ethnic restaurants. While restaurant owners often attempt to use décor to establish authenticity and lead to a positive customer experience, most customers do not actively take it into account when forming their perception of a restaurant.

Atmosphere in ethnic restaurants can serve as a visual expression of the culture. Material objects such as centerpieces, artwork, and table linens contribute to this representation. Thomas J. Schlereth, scholar of material culture, highlights the significance of material objects for the representation of cultural identity. He notes that some scholars “argue that [material culture] is
the oldest manifestation of our humanness.”

His theory is that by examining material objects from a foreign culture, we can come to understand and engage with the culture in a deeply unique way. Though customers do not perform formal analyses of objects in a restaurant, the objects, along with other atmospheric factors, have the potential to shape the customer’s first impression of the culture. In this way, the material culture of a restaurant could either perpetuate or subvert cultural stereotypes. At best, ethnic restaurants can use their physical environment as a sort of authentic cultural showcase, illustrating what the culture associates with food and the ritual of eating. At worst, restaurants might be decorated with gaudy, kitschy items that wouldn’t really be found in the culture’s home country.

If we concern ourselves solely with the more positive examples, the efforts of restaurant owners demonstrate that authenticity and its influence on the customer experience are high priorities: “Compared with American restaurants, ethnic restaurants usually make use of ethnic art, décor, music and various signals to create an ‘authentic’ dining experience for customers.”

For the purposes of this analysis, “Authenticity refers to whether the food and environment reflect the genuine or ‘real’ taste and culture of the ethnic origin. In other words, the environment and cuisine are not adjusted to meet local tastes and customers who are familiar with the culture of the ethnic origin can judge its authenticity.”

Restaurant owners seeking to achieve this authenticity deliberately design their spaces with décor that is genuinely and recognizably connected to their culture.

Much thought goes into this design with hopes that customers will perceive it as authentic, but also that they enjoy the atmosphere and feel that their meal is enhanced by their surroundings. With all of this in mind, restaurant owners must strike a balance between creating a genuine cultural experience and keeping their customers comfortable. One study claims,
“Those who dine at an ethnic restaurant with little knowledge about that cuisine often judge the entire cuisine on a favorable or unfavorable dining experience, which ultimately determines whether or not they opt to eat it again.” A restaurant with an entirely foreign appearance could intimidate many American diners and drive them away from the restaurant with a negative perception of the culture in question. Under this pressure, ethnic restaurant owners must choose carefully which cultural influences to honor and which to ignore.

Looking more specifically at the outcome of these efforts, research on a Mexican restaurant in Texas observed, “The décor utilizes bright colors; strings of colored lights hang by the ceiling, bright mosaic tiles are on the table tops, and pictures and murals hang on the stone walls…The music is played at a medium volume to support the illusion of a real Mexican cantina and create a lively atmosphere.” These choices are made with both Mexican culture and American customers in mind; they represent the vibrant culture of Mexico but do not alienate diners. By emphasizing this vitality through cheerful colors and artwork, the restaurant can achieve an air of authenticity without using Mexican cultural icons that American customers might not like or understand, such as skeletons celebrating Día de los Muertos or other unfamiliar cultural symbols.

Other ethnic restaurants operate with similarly balanced goals in mind. In Figure 1, showing a Chinese restaurant, we can see elaborate art on the walls depicting a Chinese dragon and other traditional, ornate decorations. The bright red napkins and table settings match the red of the Chinese flag that is often associated with the country. These qualities, all inextricably linked to Chinese culture, correspond with what Americans would consider a Chinese atmosphere. Likewise, in Figure 2, the Italian restaurant pictured has red and white checkered tablecloths, Italian flags and art, and soft, romantic lighting. All of these features are iconic of...
Italy in one way or another, and create an environment that is unmistakably evocative of the culture. Both examples show objects of material culture used to symbolize their respective ethnic groups.

Such attempts to create a culturally influenced atmosphere are not always perfectly successful. A Czech bakery in Minnesota hangs signs with simple Czech words and phrases such as “How are you” and “Thanks!” on its walls. The signs have been there for many years, even though the current owners have no Czech heritage and don’t speak the language. Several years ago, their inexperience with the culture ran them into a bit of trouble: “We cleaned one time and put the signs back up and they were up there for a couple of years before somebody pointed out that we had them wrong.” This humorous example shows that constructing an “authentic” atmosphere is difficult and requires both cultural sensitivity and expertise.

However, though restaurant owners appear to be prioritizing a cultural atmosphere, their work may not be paying off. Numerous case studies indicate that ethnic restaurant décor does not factor into a customer’s perception of the restaurant’s authenticity. According to one study, “[This] indicated that subjects are more concerned with the food being authentic in flavor than the overall atmosphere being authentic.” Not only is it often considered less important than food, but certain cases show that it isn’t thought of as important at all: “Real authentic Thai exterior design was not important for authentic Thai restaurants. Neither was authentic Thai interior décor.” This suggests that customers do not actively judge a restaurant’s authenticity based on atmosphere.

Furthermore, décor consistently appears to be one of the least significant qualities for a diner’s overall experience. Although the studies often cite the factors beyond food as contributing to the cultural experience, such as the report that concluded by stating that
customers “went mainly for the food but also for the ethnic cultural experience,” atmosphere seems to be among the least crucial factor for such an experience. Liu and Jang report that, “The five least important attributes were healthy food options, atmospheric authenticity, lighting, interior design and décor, and music. Atmospheric attributes account for four of the five least important factors, indicating that customers do not expect much from the dining environment in Chinese restaurants.”

Their concerns in this case were more focused on attributes such as “taste, food safety, food freshness, environmental cleanliness and appropriate food temperature.”

Different case studies might come to different conclusions, but the general trend seems to be a discrepancy between the efforts of ethnic restaurants and their actual influence on customers. These restaurants strive to have their atmosphere reflect the culture of their food, but even when they are successful, their customers do not always take it into account. Material objects are not the center of attention, despite the careful planning on the part of the restaurant owners. Customers do not necessarily require an authentically ethnic atmosphere to have an authentically ethnic dining experience, suggesting that food is indeed the main event.
Figure 1: Chinese Restaurant with Elaborate Décor, JPG

http://www.ship-technology.com/projects/msorchestra/msorchestra2.html

Figure 2: Italian Restaurant with Elaborate Décor, JPG

4 Liu, Jang 341.
5 Liu, Jang 341.
6 DeJesus, Tian 27.
7 DeJesus, Tian 29.
8 Doug Lau, interview by Lia Bendix, April 2011, transcript.
10 Sukalakamala, Boyce 73.
11 DeJesus, Tian 37.
12 Liu, Jang 342.
13 Liu, Jang 342.
Sources


