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Taste Tests: Pizza and the Gastropolitical Laboratory in Mumbai

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Taste Tests: Pizza and the Gastropolitical Laboratory in Mumbai

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ABSTRACT *This article is about experiments in taste. Focused on the cultural politics of pizza in Mumbai, it highlights the visceral work required to naturalize consumer choice as a catalyst of social futures in contemporary India. It emerges out of interviews and observations among food marketers and among customers and workers in a pizza restaurant. Guided by the concept of 'experimentality' elaborated in medical anthropology and science and technology studies, the article reframes definitions of food in experimental terms through two ethnographic registers. The first narrative focuses on the marketing of pizza, and explains how marketers turned their restaurants into laboratories of cosmopolitan cultivation. The second narrative shows how laboring bodies become enrolled in that laboratory, as young adults recruited from low-income neighborhoods come to work at a pizza restaurant. Such experiments blur the lines between evidence and enjoyment, and ultimately add up to a revaluation of public eating itself.*

KEYWORDS *India, taste, fast food, consumerism, labor*

> The aspiration of an urban child is to perhaps eat very good pizzas . . . . –N.R. Narayana Murthy (Roy 2009)

The Phenomenon

Families sipped soft drinks and drummed fingers on tables expectantly. They seemed unsure where to focus when the Bhangra music blared suddenly like an alarm. Waiters put down their serving platters and slid into a single-file line. Hands clapped, shoulders shrugged, and hips thrust to the rhythm, with care taken to avoid knocking over plates. The music was Amar Arshi's song *Kala Chashma* ('Black Sunglasses'), a Punjabi hit. 'Something like

a phenomenon!' sang the loudspeaker. Even the restaurant manager joined in, his tie flopping as he grooved, and he smiled as tourists clicked photos. One moment brought the orderly movements of pizza from kitchen to counter to table, but in the next, the servers' hands redirected the flow of attention through movements both improvisational and choreographed. This was a 'breakout dance' at Pizza Hut in India, caught on video and spread digitally through YouTube. Several viewer comments on the videos treated the spectacle as a spontaneous local ornament that added Bollywood flair to homogenized fast food. 'You people get a song and dance routine', one commenter wrote. 'In America, all we get is breadsticks'.[1]

However, this dance was anything but spontaneous entertainment. In a newspaper interview about it, Pizza Hut's marketing director in New Delhi described it as a facet of their strategically planned 'customer mania'. 'All the crew members do a dance during peak hours every day', he explained to a reporter. 'It kind of breaks the ice in what otherwise can be a standoffish atmosphere. Customers just love it' (Prasso 2007). Enacted through this 'mania', pizza is not merely a food to be consumed. Rather, the disruptive moment of the dance around pizza crystallizes experiments in consumerism, and the anticipatory knowledge and labor that shape them.

This article is about experiments in taste. Focused on pizza, it highlights the visceral work required to naturalize consumer choice as a catalyst of social futures in contemporary India. Families and individuals 'go for pizza' to try eating outside the home in a comfortable environment, while pizza marketers deploy a consumer research science that can fine-tune class esthetics and train would-be workers. This article explains the connections between these forms of experimentation. It emerges from a broader ethnographic project about the connections between food, consumerism, and health in Mumbai, conducted from 2007 to 2011. My analysis here draws on over 30 interviews with food industry executives, marketers, public relations specialists, and journalists to learn more about marketing, and with fast-food restaurant managers, workers, and customers to better understand the commercialization of fast food. I focus on one pizza restaurant I call 'Tasty Slice' whose operations I observed in depth.[2]

In one sense, 'experimental' describes a cultural logic of eating in the pursuit of worldliness: fast food as cosmpolitanism's vehicle. For example, there was a conviction among food company marketers that eating pizza outside the home enticed customer-subjects to taste a host of novel experiences: new flavors, new decor, and perhaps most importantly, a level of comfort with spending money on cheesy bread. The act of consumption in this vision is the act of

experimentation, and the ideal consumer is the one with an experimental palate. In turn, these marketers hatched experiments of their own, and tinkered with pizza's tastes, textures, and presentation. Matters of individual taste and marketing strategies were reciprocally translated, one feeding the other.[3] This business of food and desire remained unfinished, however, because the discovery of new tastes was a constantly shifting target. Experiments to make 'consumer preferences' valuable required complex cultural work. If one aspect of the experiment refers to individual attempts to engage novelty, then a second constellation of meanings I explore here involves the careful attempts to enroll the body, the senses, and the self into consumer public cultures.[4] This work established experimental relations not only between marketers and consumers, but also between workers and a hungry public.

The context for this experimentation is beset with constant reminders, however accurate or idealized, of a rapidly growing fast-food industry in India. As an invitation for the Food Ingredients India conference in Mumbai put it: 'Each year, 25 million people join India's urban middle class, and their tastes are evolving. Economic growth, interest in global cuisine and the need for convenience are changing the dietary choices of this exciting market' (FI India 2011). India's Ministry of Food Processing Industries offers an overview of 'Indian consumers' on its Web site, and frames culinary experimentation as a signifier of an inherent, local inclination to channel cash directly toward indulgent eating. 'The food industry is on a high as Indians continue to have a feast,' the site exclaims. 'Fuelled by what can be termed a perfect ingredient for any industry – large disposable incomes – the food sector has been witnessing a marked change in consumption patterns, especially in terms of food' (Ministry of Food Processing Industries 2011). The document identifies that 'Nuclear Urban Family' as the fulcrum of this change. A widespread shift from joint to nuclear families in India, it argues, has muddied decisions about what to eat:

> It's not the just the man, woman, or the kid but the family that makes the purchase decisions. Herein lies the paradox in choice of like and dislike. Though the family members consume separate products, the choice is taken as one.

In this rendering, the 'paradox' of like and dislike has imprints of classic South Asian anthropological debates about dividuality, and frames the intractability of the family as a natural (if confused) site for cosmopolitan enjoyment and industry growth.

Taking a step away from the givenness of consumer choice and its substitution for worldliness, might we instead approach taste as an experiment in process? In the article's first section, I connect the cultural politics of experiments and of food consumption in South Asia. I then explore these links through two ethnographic registers. The first focuses on the marketing strategy of Tasty Slice, and explains how marketers turned their restaurants into laboratories of cosmopolitan cultivation. The second narrative shows how laboring bodies become enrolled in that laboratory, as young adults recruited from low-income neighborhoods in Mumbai come to work at Tasty Slice. The experiments I describe produce pizza as a cosmopolitan food, restaurants as laboratories of social aspiration, and a sensitive labor force that can bridge consumable goods, subjects, and environments. What is at stake in the lively worlds created around pizza is a comingling of medico-scientific and consumerist sensibilities, the deeper corporatization of Mumbai's food systems, and the bodily demands facing the city's youth. I argue that these experiments call into question the distinction between evidence and enjoyment, and add up to a revaluation of public eating itself.

Consumption as Experimental

Mumbai's flashy fast-food ads color the city's streetscapes, and trumpet the newest flavors (Mexican and Italian are increasingly popular), along with their Indian 'fusion' counterparts. Pizza was among the most vivid and mutable of foods in these ads, and I frequently heard pizza treated with both indignation and celebration in the middle-class neighborhood I lived in. Pizza was deemed a health risk by nutritionists, and a Saturday night indulgence by the neighborhood youth. It could be tailored to almost any taste via the toppings and sauces, and so pizza appealed to both vegetarians and non-vegetarians. It also was a shareable food, making it amenable to families eating together. Although pizza was expensive enough to be a splurge, it was not markedly pricier than other regional Indian dine-in or takeout options. Of course, there were generational differences. Young adults in the neighborhood regularly ate pizza, while their parents were often far more cautious; and if parents did eat 'outside food', it was usually takeaway fish and meat curries from local vendors. My neighbors patiently addressed my questions about the iterative growth of pizza outlets in the city: yes, there was a lot of pizza in Mumbai. But no, it was not especially remarkable, because Mumbai was India's cosmopolitan center and pizza was just one of hundreds of possible cuisines to explore. They made it clear that it was not a novel taste combination that

made people eat pizza – bread, tomatoes, and cheese were regular and familiar ingredients. What, then, was the link between pizza and this emerging cosmo-politan appetite?

Roy (2010) has analyzed what she calls the 'alimentary investments' that create symbolic economies around the consumption of food in India. These investments include the morals of diet and eating idealized by governing powers, and the reciprocal incorporations of and resistances to such ideals. Roy's framing of alimentation as integral to colonial powers highlights the cen-trality of food to past and present representations of modern India. However, these representations are not geographically epiphenomenal. From the kinds of aversion that structured commensality between Anglo-Indians and 'native' bodies, to Gandhi's renunciations of meat in the name of *ahimsa* (nonviolence), Roy (2010: 20) suggests that a 'gastropolitics' of South Asia is decisively trans-national: 'At almost all points the purported particularities of a South Asian ali-mentary grammar are interlinked with and illumined by non-South Asian modes of alimentary discourse', she writes.[5] This permeable globality of food and eating is integral to the micropolitics of fast food in Mumbai.[6] Western fast-food outlets in India may tempt an analysis of the 'Indian-ness' of fast food, or the creation of 'Indian' markets, as the endless pings of food industry conferences alerts bring to my email inbox: take one pizza, add masala sauce, and a South Asian market brilliantly emerges. But in order to make 'Indian fast food' coherent, I wish to resist what Lawrence Cohen calls 'the binary machine' that forces comparisons between India and the West (2010: 253). Such forced binary thinking would frame 'local' consumer desire in terms of the attractiveness of Western capital and modes of consumption.

Instead, my focus is on how pizza's alimentary investments – affective, econ-omic, and embodied – exhibit experimental qualities and produce embodied knowledge about food specifically and about consumption more generally. These qualities emerge as a result of the trial-and-error efforts involved in mar-keting, cooking, serving, and eating pizza, wherein the restaurant is a laboratory space of iterative investigation and performance. Thus, my analysis here back-grounds the voices of pizza customers, in order to explore consumerism as it is produced by more marginalized but hard-at-work subjects and objects. Bour-dieu's (1984) concepts of habitus, field, and trajectory offer one possibility for mapping relationships between class, capital, and their social performance, and ethnographers have productively engaged these concepts to grapple with the dynamic cultural politics of middle classes in South Asia (Liechty 2002; Fernandes 2006; Jeffrey 2010). The core of my approach here, however, stems

more from an interest in how taste becomes interpretable through power arrangements between the human (consumers and workers) and the non-human (food and restaurants). Put differently, while Roy explores Indian gastro-politics in the register of the vow (of abstinence, of disgust, and of intimacy), I am concerned here with gastropolitics in the register of the experiment, which makes 'Indian consumers' visible, anticipated subjects and public eating the grounds of social value. In this frame, the consumption of pizza shows how one's ability to become 'locally and provisionally competent' emerges in response to a world of possible objects and agencies (Latour 2005: 210). Tracking the makeup of such a world is what I attempt here.

One might locate such a world through spaces of consumption – what Bell and Valentine (1997) call 'consuming geographies' – and examine how these spaces catalyze modes of experimentation and estimation. In her study of experiments in neoliberalism in China, Lisa Rofel details such an approach. She observes that fast-food environments

> foster the idea that you are what you eat. But the food is actually not the attraction. It's the mise-en-scène that beckons . . . this mise-en-scène is protectively enclosed, a place not to see or be seen but to display one's ability to maneuver in such a place. It is a cross between an airport waiting room and a street fair. (2007: 121)

From this perspective, there are compelling themes of improvisation, creativity, co-optation, commensality, and political power that thread through fast food and connect to similar themes materialized in culinary artifacts such as cookbooks (Appadurai 1981, 1988), recipes (Khare 1992); supermarkets (Mankekar 2002); spices (Collingham 2006), and restaurants (Conlon 1995; Liechty 2005). These themes also inflect articulations of caste and class in public eating spaces. Consuming geographies thus become implicated in the complex work of the self and the social, in both vernacular and transnational terms.

Flagging this cultural work as experimental opens up conceptual questions about how consumption becomes a common ground of symbolic and social meaning. It is this melding of knowledge and value that underlies my transposition of analytics from medical anthropology to food studies. As Petryna (2009: 30) points out in her study of global clinical trials, experiments 'are not only hypothesis-testing instruments: they are operative environments that redistribute public health resources and occasion new and often tense medical and social fields'. That is, as much as experiments are matters of controlled procedure founded on trial and error, they also generate new horizons of

science, value, and personhood (Sunder Rajan 2005, 2007).[7] The similarities between restaurants and global clinical trials direct our attention to the ways in which consumption indexes cosmopolitanism or middle-class status. Additionally, we see the uneven grounds of consumption in terms of the labor needed to make it cohere for hungry eaters and social analysts. If food is experimental, and selves are too, we must also account for the ways in which consumption itself is deemed both open-ended *and* an appropriate anthropological operative environment.

I have thus chosen to frame eating via the experimentality literature, much of which comes from medical anthropology and science studies, to explore a pro-vocation from David Graeber that '… we might begin by treating consumption not as an analytic term but as an ideology to be investigated' (2011: 502). Exam-ining traces of the experimental in eating shows the makings of consumption as ideology and affect as opposed to consumption merely as a neoliberal self-evident logic. By extending the paradigm of experimentality to fast food, I ques-tion how food coordinates between demands for discovery, profit-making, and the evolving aspirational palate in order to revalue bodies and pleasures. I examine the interface of science, food, and labor to think about the very terms of relations between pizza thinkers, makers, and eaters. These terms, I suggest, are experimental. Experiments in pizza make selected bodies available for enjoyment and others into diviners of that pleasure. Experiments in food solidify consumption as the arbiter of such pleasures and enjoyments. The knowledge gleaned through these interactions feeds back into a mode of science – consumer research – that invests foods with the promise of social futures. These relations between bodies, knowledge, and profit highlight the finely tuned procedures intended to produce cosmopolitan subjects. As these procedures circulate between marketing conference rooms and the controlled laboratory space of pizza restaurants, they saturate consuming environments with themes of unmet needs and help naturalize food consumption as a source of social fulfillment.

Pizza Wars and Need States: Food in the Laboratory

Writing about advertising competitions between Coca-Cola and Pepsi in India – what he calls 'the cola wars' – Mazzarella (2003: 220) observes that battles between corporate giants can be understood as 'a kind of morality play about the perils of multi-national marketing'. He explains that Pepsi suc-cessfully appealed to national celebrities, but Coke's tactics of a 'one-world, delocalized approach' fell short in terms of the success of sales and perceived

efficacy among marketers. Similarly, the differential advertising tactics surrounding pizza in India dramatized how best to multiply middle-class cravings. For example, a 2007 *Fortune* Magazine article titled 'India's Pizza Wars' placed Indian megacities 'at the epicenter of a heated battle for domination' globally between Pizza Hut and Domino's. The article proposed strategic contrasts between the Indian operations of two chains: while Pizza Hut has invested more in making pizza the centerpiece of 'casual dining', Domino's has focused more on delivery. The article suggested that the pizza wars should come as no surprise, given the 'native' culinary inclinations of Indians: 'Unlike Chinese and Japanese, Indians eat leavened bread (naan), and a popular traditional version slathers it in butter and garlic – not unlike garlic bread, the most often ordered side dish at both Domino's and Pizza Hut franchises in India' (Prasso 2007). By circulating claims that 'being able to afford a night out at Pizza Hut is a mark of success in increasingly affluent India', and that 'Indians are great socializers', this kind of business reportage situates pizza at the profitable intersection between naturalized, nationalized tastes for carbohydrates and social one-upsmanship.

Curious about the process of marketing pizza, I cold-called the national headquarters of Tasty Slice – a national chain with several outlets in Mumbai – and asked if I might talk with someone who worked in marketing. To my surprise, this was a relatively smooth affair, and a few months later I landed at their marketing headquarters in a business park just outside of New Delhi. Manish, the marketing director, met me in a coffee shop in the middle of a vast parking lot. He entered the cafe clutching his Blackberry, and never quite let it go during our time together. Prior to marketing pizzas, he worked in marketing at a multi-national consumer electronics company: 'I can market anything', he said matter-of-factly when I asked if there was something specific to pizza that accounted for its success. Pizza, it turned out, was materially different than microwaves, but 'the science is the same' when it came to marketing strategies. That science was based on the assumption that Indians want to 'equate themselves globally – to match up and catch up'. They want to make the same money and to enjoy the same life that someone in the West enjoys, he said, 'but the competition is fierce'. This rhetoric of worldly competition inflected much of our conversation, and framed the kinds of exact science he pursued in his restaurants. He called it 'responding to the customer balance of achievement and indulgence'.[8]

At first, the inherent novelty of pizza paved the way for Tasty Slice's marketing research and sales strategies. 'Fifteen years ago, we could coast on the wave

of newness of pizza', he said. 'People hadn't heard of pizza – '*pizza kya hai*?' ('what's pizza?') is what people said when they heard the word.' Manish pronounced the word as 'pijja' to effect the ways that Hindi speakers presumably unfamiliar with the Italian/English word might say it, due to its spelling in Devanagari script. Although he did not expressly denigrate this pronunciation, the slip between the 'j' and 'z' in 'pizza' could be read as a colloquial jab at the cultural figure of the uneducated Hindi-belt villager. Aravind Adiga makes light of this slip at several points in his novel *The White Tiger* to describe the humiliation of the book's central character, Balram, who is from rural Bihar and who works as a servant/driver in New Delhi for the urbane couple named Ashok and Pinky. Balram, the book's narrator, recounts one evening when Ashok and Pinky commanded him to bring them pizza:

> [Ashok] got me to serve some of that stinking stuff that comes in cardboard boxes and drives all the rich absolutely crazy . . .
> 'Ashok', [Pinky] said. 'Now hear this. Balram, what is it we're eating?'
> I knew it was a trap, but what could I do? – I answered. The two of them burst into giggles.
> Say it again, Balram.
> They laughed again.
> It's not piJJA. It's piZZa. Say it properly....
> I had to hold my breath as I stood there waiting for them to finish. The stuff smelled so awful. (Adiga 2008: 130)[9]

At several points in the book, pizza's invocation in language marks an alternative, more privileged life, with Balram even wishing that he could pronounce it with the z's 'like a rich man's son' despite his visceral disgust with the food (271).

This enunciation of a different future accomplished by literally pronouncing the word 'correctly' was part of Tasty Slice's first stage of marketing, what Manish called 'educational' messages. But once pizza became increasingly ubiquitous, they had to market the experience around the product. Their marketing team set out to research possible eating patterns created around pizza. They discovered that people tended to eat pizza at nights and on weekends, and as a result they advertised the pleasures of eating during these times. His team's primary goal was to research and understand 'indulgence', a quality they defined as 'what makes customers happy' and 'what raises their mood'. 'Indulgence means gathering around a table, and catching up on old times', Manish explained. Pizza was at the center of that table as a now-recognizable object,

but the question of what inspired the gathering required careful market testing as well.

For instance, the marketing team recognized that 'indulgence' had multiple affective possibilities that relied on pizza's very substance and texture. Popular flavors for vegetarians included 'spicy tomato' (with the addition of green chilies and red chili powder), combinations such as corn and mushroom, and more 'Indian masala' flavors that incorporated spiced paneer. For those seeking meaty flavors, they could find anything from chicken tikka to pepperoni among their choices. Yet, while eating pizza was an act of pleasure, it also could be a source of anxiety in some circumstances. The team realized that no matter the flavor, pizza could potentially repel customers they labeled as 'health con-scious' – that is, dieters – and whose numbers were growing. For these custo-mers, Tasty Slice offered salads and pasta dishes, and specified nutritional values such as calorie counts and fat grams. For this segment of their clientele, knowl-edge was more important than sheer sensory indulgence, and Manish found that simply posting nutritional information in the restaurants satisfied such needs. The salads also helped solidify the message that customers could eat 'clean' food at Tasty Slice. This meant 'clean' in the sense of unadulterated, and also 'clean' in opposition to 'traditional' Indian food that Manish described as 'messy'. Pizza, he explained, was served in individuated slices that were easy to eat. When I made the comparison to a *thali* to try and grasp what made pizza slices any more 'individual' than a serving of *dal* or rice, Manish clarified that pizza's indulgence lay in its personalization. Unlike a *thali*'s single serving from a communal pot, pizza was 'personal' food shared in the company of friends, and marketers could play with sensibilities of ownership or sharing by altering the size and texture of the pizza. By recalibrating the very substance of pizza into something improvisational and creative, Manish banked on chan-ging both a fundamental vernacular experience of commensality and how that experience mapped onto specific substances.[10]

This mutable commensality was integral to capturing Tasty Slice's largest potential audience of younger customers. Manish viewed the sleekness and cleanliness of a plate of pizza and salad as a marker of maturity. Tasty Slice was a place 'where young people can express their adulthood', by making decisions and purchases based upon gratification. 'The rest of the day, they're not necessarily given that independence', he said, so Tasty Slice was an island of decisive maturity. This indulgent independence did not develop spon-taneously; however, it required a structural backbone of scientifically developed

options offered in print on menus and verbally by servers. These elements added up to Manish's framing of the restaurant as a laboratory:

> Our restaurants are a great first place for urban socialization. You can make a purchase, you can make decisions, you can eat with a fork and a knife, which none of us do at home. It's chic, it's globalized, it's Western. It's cool. You can navigate a menu, you can speak English, you can experience the Western world without having to step outside the country. You're level with the world. You're doing what a youngster in New York is doing – you're eating out.

Sparkling marketing language aside, Manish's vision was clear: cosmopolitanism was within the reach of India's youth inside the doors and on the plates of Tasty Slice, but it required practice in the form of repeated visits. It was this practiced cosmopolitanism that connected experiments with pizza itself to those with consumer subjectivity. Manish emphasized that merely *trying* to speak English with servers, or *trying* to eat with a knife and fork made Tasty Slice meaningful to young customers. A person who wanted to develop a cosmopolitan subjectivity through pizza needed to be willing to try, and might stumble, but the ability to make that attempt by establishing favorite toppings and sauces made pizza distinctive.

A second feature of the restaurant as laboratory emerged from Manish's conviction that eating pizza produced a set of interpellative interactions. After speaking at length about the virtues of young people becoming 'cool' and 'level' with the world, he described certain expectations of public comportment inside Tasty Slice:

> In the restaurant, you're not anonymous, you're identified, you're at table six. You're being observed. You're being observed to see how comfortable you are in the setting. Restaurants filter out behaviors. You can't spit. You can't be loud. You behave a certain way. You're looking Western. People know that the best way to make them feel important is to take them to a restaurant. When we have office parties for someone, we take them to a restaurant. It's a boost to your ego, and you have a servant at your call.

In this rendering, eating at Tasty Slice was enjoyable because of the sense of surveillance that eating pizza produced. To 'feel important', as Manish put it, meant being observed in one's adherence to unspoken rules of public conduct. This public was decisively separate from imagined behaviors that marked the public space of the street, such as spitting or shouting. Manish

and his team of Tasty Slice marketers worked to fashion a fast-food environ-
ment that could be 'a world in miniature', an enclosed laboratory for young
people's aspirations (Rofel 2007: 120). He insisted that this enclosed space
was democratic in terms of who was allowed in, and that the *aam admi*
(common man) was welcome inside. Once inside, anyone could play with
the forces of silent observation, all while enjoying a taste of the world.[11]

Manish pointed out that market research both preceded and followed those
moments of experimentation. His team based their work on a discrete set of
psychosocial formations they called 'need states'. The most common one was
called 'quick-fix hunger', which Manish explained was 'when you just want to
fill yourself'. He free listed several other need states, including 'taste adventure',
'catch up and connect', 'break routine', 'home service', 'special occasion',
'impress others', and 'pamper yourself'. From the perspective of Tasty Slice's
marketers, when customers came for pizza, they came in order to satisfy one
or more of these need states – and other customers were watching this
unfold. By quantifying perceived need states, Tasty Slice could change their
flavors and store promotions to approach taste as a malleable quality available
for inquiry and intervention. Young people's need states were deemed
especially dynamic, making youth ideal customers and ideal experimental
subjects.[12]

The common thread linking need states, and market research by extension,
was a preoccupation with absence. While the public image of Tasty Slice took
shape as a source of novelty and cosmopolitanism, the engineers of that image
understood their work in terms of satisfying gaps in the need for love, servi-
tude, companionship, collegiality, or respect. By emphasizing the importance
of surveillance to worldly aspirations, they approached eating as something
akin to what Appadurai and Breckenridge (1995) have called an 'interocular
field' of public culture, in which the public gaze takes shape through multiple
intersocial expectations and impulses to learn and assess. As the next section
explains, however, marketing alone was not sufficient to satisfy the 'need
states' of customers, nor was the inclinations of the customers themselves.
Pizza required an additional layer of laboring bodies to produce its spectacle
of consumption.

'We're Here To Make Them Comfortable': The Job Laboratory

The trumpeting of pizza's newness and symbolic cache and the assertion of
market research as an experimental science were relatively common themes in
my interviews with marketers and, frankly, were unsurprising. This was, after all,

an expected narrative of advertising: Customers were missing something in their lives, and pizza offered to fill that absence by targeting frailties and opportunities of the senses. But this overemphasis on absence created another gap: one of visibility around the everyday labor required to coordinate and carry out the Tasty Slice 'experience'. Pizza made the senses of customers available for experimentation in the world of the restaurant, but what effects did it impart upon those already inside the glass doors, waiting to greet them? Even as experiments with pizza produced a mutable food and an aspirational consumption experience, they also relied on the laboring bodies of restaurant employees to uphold the esthetics of that experience. Both on- and off-the-job training programs ensured that potential workers matched the experimental qualities of pizza and its consumers with a comportment that would create a sense of spontaneous choice. Workers needed to be experimentally savvy in their own right, and to be able to anticipate the requirements that accompanied a field of adventurous eating. Pizza anchored this sensibility of predictive service.

The recruitment of Tasty Slice workers that I observed was the result of an non-governmental organization-sponsored initiative I call Kamkar, which trained young high-school and college dropouts for careers in the service industry. Kamkar is a national organization that receives funding from several philanthropic foundations, including the corporate social responsibility arms of India's major banks and industrial houses. The work I observed at one chapter of Mumbai's several Kamkar programs was both formally and informally called a 'laboratory' by its teachers and students, out of a belief that employability and opportunity grew out of careful self-cultivation. The laboratory program has been in operation for over a decade, and according to project documents has reached over 15,000 poor families nationally through its livelihood programs that target 'economically disadvantaged youth'. The program includes multiple tracks for enrolled youth, with a special focus on spoken English and financial basics. Kamkar partners with over 100 Indian businesses that recruit graduates of the program for mostly entry-level positions. Because of my interest in food issues, I observed a 'food and beverage service' special track within the broader program.

I first learned about Kamkar from a neighbor, Terry, who had worked in the catering business, and had taught at one of Mumbai's most respected culinary training programs. Now retired from teaching, Terry had taken on a new job with Kamkar, and ran their food and beverage service unit. He offered to allow me to observe the program in action, beginning with the 'recruitment'

stage. This involved a trip from the suburb of Bandra, where we lived, to Andheri, a suburb several kilometers to the north. Terry brought along a co-worker, Joseph, and the three of us jumped between trains, buses, and rickshaws in order to reach a slum area of Andheri East scheduled for that day. The main road abutting the slum was crowded with office buildings; next to the path into the residential areas was a large billboard advertising a new high-end housing development complex called 'The Gardenia', described as a place to enjoy 'Life-time Value' and where one could 'Wake Up To Floral Bliss'.

The path leading to the neighborhood was not filled with flowers. It mean-dered through low housing units and shacks, quiet in the middle of the workday. Terry and Joseph set up at a local vocational tech training center in the middle of the neighborhood. The staff of the center gathered about 10 young people, all around 20, who were living in the neighborhood and who had dropped out of high school. They sat on a woven mat outside beneath a tree, and Terry and Joseph began their concise presentation: a Kamkar partici-pant could enroll in a 45-day special food and beverage program, and could expect to gain employment in fast-food restaurants, coffee shops, hotels, or supermarkets. Starting salaries for graduates averaged at 4000 rupees per month (~US$90), and some employers offered free or low-cost accommo-dations along with the positions. Both Terry and Joseph emphasized that this was not simply about money, although that was a tangible benefit. The program was equally about 'life skills': responsibility, punctuality, respect, and service. They gave their audience a chance to ask questions, and there were several from girls about how to navigate families who wanted them to stay in the home and do domestic work. Terry promised to speak to their parents, and took down specific addresses in the neighborhood to visit, which he did after the presentation. He gave the new students who signed up the date, time, and location for the next Kamkar hospitality program session.

Terry led the hospitality program out of an elementary school in Bandra's eastern zone. The program occupied two classrooms on the top floor of the school, set off from other classrooms so that participants had their own dedi-cated learning area. The hallway bridging the two classrooms was covered with photos of individual graduates and their accompanying success stories. In the larger classroom, the walls were plastered with magazine cutouts of pic-tures of different foods. A bulletin board held letters of appreciation from com-panies who employed Kamkar graduates. Computers lined up against another wall. At the front of the room stood a large clear glass cabinet crowded with condiments, stacks of plates and glasses, and mini-bottles of liquor and wine

(filled with water, Terry assured me). The 6-week unit I observed enrolled 20 young women and 15 young men, most who had dropped out of high school. The students all wore uniforms: white dress shirts and black ties for the men, and collared white blouses, black pants, and black neck scarves for the women.

The classroom was meant to simulate a restaurant, Terry explained. Students may never have eaten 'service' foods such as pizza, so the pictures on the walls helped acquaint them with what it looks like, well before any potential job interview. The contents of the glass cabinet were used for tangible lessons on how to set a table, and how to serve customers. In one exercise, students took turns pretending to be customers, servers, or cooks. One would yell out: 'Bring me chili sauce!' and the 'waiter' had to identify the right condiment in the glass cabinet, carry it properly, and set it on the table in front of the customer with a pleasant, 'Here you are, sir!' From pouring water to recording food orders, the students worked through hundreds of possible scenarios they would encounter as workers in the restaurant industry. Some students prided themselves on playing especially choosy customers when it came their time to sit at the table with the menu. The creative interplay of servitude and patronage emphasized that one could never know exactly what a customer wanted, but the closer the approximation, the better the overall experience would be for those at the table. Servers were expected to be active participants in the dining experience by inserting themselves, their tastes, and their knowledge into the equation of 'choice'.

These classroom scenarios emphasized the importance of predictive service: the ability of employees to anticipate the unfulfilled needs of customers and to guide them through such needs. Predictive service followed two broad assumptions: First, that restaurant customers had unmet needs that could not be voiced without a server's assistance; and second, that prediction was as much a science as it was an art, and therefore servers could train their senses to usher customers toward satisfaction. Terry often stood by the bulletin boards holding letters of appreciation from employers of Kamkar graduates, and described to students the success story of the person in question. Without exception, the letters celebrated graduates for their abilities to cater to customers, and Terry did not let this go unheralded. 'It's called the hospitality business for a reason', he would tell them. He would caution any student who merely carried out the exact request of the 'customer' in a given role-play; they were always supposed to ask what *more* they could do. He taught them that there was added value to this service, because it was usually the case that customers had lingering, unaddressed needs. Predictive service had a surplus value built in. Once the students

worked in the restaurant such as Tasty Slice, they would learn quickly that this remainder could add up to large profits for the company, and even to possible career advancement. There was experimental value for servers at stake in every order (Sunder Rajan 2007).

The culmination of Kamkar's program was a job application field trip that would transfer the students to jobs where they could further hone this sensibility of predictive service. One late March morning, I accompanied Terry and a small group of students on a trip to Tasty Slice. The students had decided that working with pizza was the best fit for their skills and interests, and on this trip they would fill out an application, take an entrance exam, and have an interview with their potential supervisor. Before we set out from the classroom, Terry reminded them to be on their best behavior, because *Abhi recession hai, toh 5500 rupees bahut barabar salary hai* ('There's a recession now, so 5500 rupees [~US$120] is a very good salary'). He stood by the door and gave them each a word of encouragement as they filed out of the classroom, and straightened any crooked neckties or scarves. After an ambling bus ride, we arrived at Tasty Slice in Juhu, amidst the madness of the lunch rush. The interior was sleek and modern, with families and office-workers gathered around large tables. A manager named Nita escorted the group to the restaurant's third floor, sat them down in one of several spacious 'birthday party rooms', and asked them to complete a biographical info form and a lengthy entrance exam.

Nita knew this routine well, she told me as the students worked quietly. She had worked at Tasty Slice for over seven years herself. She grew up in a fishing village neighborhood on Mumbai's coast and came out of Marathi-medium schools. When she interviewed for her first job at Tasty Slice as a 'Team Member', she recalled the surprise on the interviewer's face when she spoke clear English. Her lower-class upbringing and ostensibly weak English education – at least, on paper – did not make for a promising file. 'My biggest challenge was speaking in front of other people', she admitted, especially when speaking to customers. But her good spoken English and service-oriented attitude enabled her to ascend to the rank of Assistant Manager.

Nita explained that in order to satisfy customers' need states, confident communication skills were essential to servers in their work of understanding, divining, and shepherding customer needs. Marketers were deeply invested in profiling the need states of customers, but those investments and profiles meant nothing without the dialogic interaction between consumer and worker. More fundamentally, the need 'state' was not stative at all, but rather was highly intersubjective. It could not exist without the restaurant's employees,

because it materialized at the conjuncture of interpreted desires and the labor done to fulfill them. Through manual and affective labor, the confident server was necessary to the cosmopolitan consumer's experience and imagination. The confident server was also a tester on his own accord, constantly challenged to affect a sensibility of predictive service, and to invest in the figure of the choosy cosmopolitan customer. Both pizza and the forms of affect it coordinated made up the currency for these kinds of experimental exchange.

As Nita went downstairs to take a seat in the interview room, I walked over to the students to check in. Their entrance test had 80 questions, several which were phrased to estimate the kind of working personality the students would exhibit. Some questions asked them to rate themselves on a scale in response to statements such as 'I am always on time' and 'I always tell my manager about complicated situations'. Other questions were more situational. One described an imaginary scenario in which you witness a co-worker stealing from the cash register. What do you do? (Answer: Tell the manager.) Another section had questions concerned with back-of-the-house details, and required complex number crunching to figure the correct proportions of toppings, sauce, and dough for specific pizzas in terms of metric weight. Another was about conserving energy. It listed the average daily sales volume in a given Tasty Slice restaurant, and asked about the oven temperatures and baking times required both to bake pizzas and to clean the ovens according to that sales volume. Externalities were everyone's responsibility, it seemed. If the first section was a personality test to ensure a good work ethic, this later section separated the cooks from the servers, while assuring would-be workers of the acceptable limits of risk taking.

The ultimate test of the potential for predictive service came in the exam's final section. Constructed as a logic test, it involved several pages of scenarios based around customer likes and dislikes related to pizza toppings, crusts, and sauces. It also explained some of Tasty Slice's predictive service algorithms. The students had to match a scenario from one column with the appropriate form of service in another. For example, if a customer was dining in, then the correct course of action was to suggest politely that she try the salad bar (even if she said nothing about salad in the first place). If the customer was a vegetarian, the server should encourage him to double the amount of veg toppings. Even at this early employment screening stage, the experimental and accumulative properties of the restaurant were clear. The exam emphasized that servers had a critical role to play in shaping customer needs from the moment of expression to the moment of satisfaction. Nita and Terry had also

told the students that they would often be serving their peers in terms of age group, making 'the sell' even more influential. Being deemed fit to serve at Tasty Slice was a judgement about an employee's potential alimentary invest-ments in the ideal young customer. 'After all', Nita said, 'we're here to make them comfortable'.

Conclusion

I have suggested three experimental routes for pizza that complicate assump-tions about the natural quality of consumer choice and its value to social futures. First, for marketers at Tasty Slice, pizza worked as an indulgence that could create and index happiness and family unity in new, unexpected public venues. Marketers made pizza into an experimental object through its many possible incarnations, and by catering to specific 'need states', they saw open-ended potentials in pizza and in public eating because young people could prac-tice gustatory expressions of a reward-driven life. Second, these expressions invited a reciprocal gaze and generated a field of surveillance in which custo-mers could test out class-appropriate behaviors.

Third, the narrative of the Kamkar students shows how pizza's public life was not solely delimited by atomized consuming desires. In their attempts to become Tasty Slice workers, the Kamkar students carried out experiments of their own to attune their senses to the needs of customers. Their role-play in the classroom, for example, taught them that prediction was at the heart of good service. Once on the job, those who directly interacted with customers would practice menu suggestions for watchful managers. Anticipation and improvisation were at the core of this work, which marshaled a cadre of working bodies even as it trafficked in individual desire. Across ethnographic contexts, what emerged was the rise of the restaurant as a social laboratory, and experiments in taste that made the nuances of consumption intelligible. This laboratory put etiquette, propriety, and exacting service to the test. The restaurant worked in ways similar to Latour's (2005: 209) description of super-markets: 'A supermarket', he writes, 'has preformatted you to be a consumer, but only a generic one. To transform yourself into an active and understanding con-sumer, you also need to be equipped with an ability *to calculate* and *to choose*'. These abilities are not inborn, but instead are both intersubjective and interob-jective, and allow the figure of the consumer 'to *become* locally and provisionally competent' (210). Experiments inseparably produce specific people and specific values.

The case of pizza thus shows how estimation mediates and naturalizes consumer preferences and the idea of a class-based shift toward cosmopolitan tastes. We certainly have many of the makings of a story of neoliberalism here: individuated desire, recombinant profit possibilities in terms of pizza toppings, and the extension of labor responsibilities to non-governmental actors (to name just a few). However, these are not merely investments in the monetary sense. They are also alimentary investments, crafted in an experimental register, that branch out from food and make a broader field of consumption coherent and open to inquiry (by marketers as well as by anthropologists). With evidence and enjoyment each blending into the other, food can offer useful inroads into the micropolitics of consumer cultures in India, especially into how youth inhabit and reshape such fields. In rich ethnographies of Indian youth cultures by Jeffrey (2010) and Lukose (2009), the authors elaborate how young people describe a sense of waiting that is integral to their social worlds ('timepass', in Jeffrey's work, and 'wandering', in Lukose's). Perhaps, we might also add to this analysis the modes of anticipation generated in the gastropolitics of fast food: the anticipation for contentment, the anticipation extended to meet it, and the experiments made in the name of both that usher some young people into dine-in booths, and others in between the tables to dance.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Numerous videos of Pizza Hut in India circulate on the Web; the actual locations are often speculative or not given. This particular video is entitled 'Crazy Pizza Hut Waiters in India, at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gf1CckuMF30
2. All names of persons and institutions in this article are pseudonyms.
3. According to Bruno Latour, it is these 'flows of translations' that make a network coherent (2005: 132).
4. See Sutton (2010) for a recent review on anthropology's engagements with the senses and food.
5. On Gandhi's gastropolitics, also see Alter (2000).
6. My focus on pizza should certainly not eclipse the numerous forms of more 'local' fast foods and their enjoyment, a topic that is beyond the scope of this article. On

the dynamics of fast food's territoriality, see Nandy (2004) and Watson (2006). Nandy reflects on this de- and re-territorialization through food: The contours of this life are increasingly defined not merely within the geographical boundaries of India but by, what most Indians consider, the less familiar territory of Indianness as a form of ethnicity that is being re-imported from the diaspora into India to reshape many domains of life, including the cultures of food within the country. (2004: 10)

7. Also, see Marks (1997) and Rheinberger (1997) for extended treatments of the epistemic workings of experiments. As Hacking (2006: 86) notes : 'The experiment does not strictly prove anything, but it is a significant anecdote'.

8. See Mazzarella (2003) and Applbaum (2009) for extended discussions on the 'hype' of marketing language, and on doing fieldwork among marketing and advertising agencies.

9. Hindi, Marathi, and English were the operative linguistic environments for my research into pizza in Mumbai. Both written and spoken Hindi and Marathi allow for /z/ through diacritical marking of the Devanagri letter *ja*. Although Adiga's novel is set in the Hindi-speaking North, its sociolinguistic esthetics certainly extend to Mumbai.

10. For engagements with substance in South Asia, see Alter (2000), Copeman (2009), Fruzzetti and Ostor (1982), and Marriott (1968).

11. See Lukose (2009) for a discussion on the gendered ways that young people 'style' themselves to enter public space and to account for the observations and judgments of others.

12. See Mazzarella (2003: 243) on the consumer psychology applied to Indian teenagers.

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