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# Show the animal: Constructing and communicating new elite food tastes at upscale butcher shops



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 5 November 2014

### Keywords:

Taste  
Craft  
Service work  
Postindustrialism  
Food

## ABSTRACT

Research on cultural omnivorousness has mainly focused on consumption practices among economic and cultural elites and the dissemination of omnivorous tastes through the media. Through ethnographic research this paper argues for the significance of physical points of purchase in the production and inculcation of omnivorous taste. Focusing on the workers at upscale butcher shops, this paper examines how workers at new elite retail establishments use skilled performances to construct and communicate notions of taste and quality in their products. I explain how the “meat philosophy” of these shops makes them distinct from other meat retail outlets, fits with omnivorous tastes, and underpins the work their cultural workers do. I then show how craft butchers and counter workers at these shops use “functional aesthetics” and “interactive service,” respectively, to prepare and sell meat, as well as to teach “good” taste in meat to customers. Exploring the intersection of restructured tastes and values in food, new places for elite consumption, and the recoding of occupations in the postindustrial city, this paper furthers our understanding of cultural omnivorousness and, more broadly, the sociology of taste.

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## 1. Introduction

A significant contribution to the sociology of taste in the last few decades, the concept of cultural omnivorousness seeks to explain fundamental shifts in consumption in the postindustrial era, and potentially challenges Bourdieu's (1984) classic model of distinction. Based on his research on musical tastes (Peterson and Simkus, 1992), Peterson (1992, 1997, 2005) coined the term "cultural omnivore" to describe those elites who were becoming more open to incorporating some examples of low- and middlebrow culture into their consumption habits (also see Peterson and Kern, 1996). Elite cultural "snobs" (i.e. people high in economic and cultural capital) were participating in activities that they once excluded, hence demonstrating an omnivorous desire to be open to a broad array of cultural genres (from classical music and opera to rock and country). Building from Peterson's work, scholars have applied the concept to analyze people's tastes in music and the fine arts in the United States (Atkinson, 2011; DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004) and other countries (Fisher and Preece, 2003; Kanazawa, 2001; van Eijck, 1999, 2001, 2004), in other cultural industries such as television (Rebers et al., 2006), comedy (Friedman, 2012), and film (Rossel, 2006), and to such phenomena as youth cultures (van Wel et al., 2008) and the role of advertising in the shift toward omnivorousness (Taylor, 2009). To theorize the concept, researchers have mainly focused on consumers and the consumption of cultural products, or on omnivores and their preferences, and either the social factors that influence people's tastes or how they actually interpret them (see Bryson, 1996). Johnston and Baumann's (2007, 2010) unique take emphasizes the role of food magazines as producers and disseminators of omnivorousness, particularly how they seemingly promote the inclusion of lowbrow foods and food cultures, like hamburgers and fried chicken, (democracy) but in fact reinforce exclusion along new symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Fournier, 1992; Lamont, 1992) of taste (distinction).

Other than through the media, how else do omnivorous tastes get produced and disseminated? And what other ideologies underpin their dissemination? Based on ethnographic and interview data on butchers and counter workers at new upscale butcher shops in New York City, this paper argues for the significant role of retail locations, workers, and work practices in the construction and inculcation of taste. I show how workers at these shops use a "meat philosophy," which promotes meat quality and reflects omnivorous tastes in food, to produce and teach taste through two different occupational performances: functional esthetics and interactive service. At butcher shops that represent what I call the "new elite" in retail, butchers use technical skills to endow meat with certain sensory properties and an ease of preparation while counter workers endow the shop's products with cultural knowledge through interaction with customers. The construction and communication of taste in these shops is practice-based, philosophically driven, and collectively fuses physical, technical skills with social, interpersonal skills in the context of a dynamic retail and work place (Ocejo, 2010, 2012). Through skilled performances these workers combine form and function based on a value-laden meat philosophy, or a notion of meat quality that serves as the "occupational aesthetic" (Fine, 1992) of new elite butcher shops, to teach consumers about taste.

## 2. New upscale butcher shops and craft butchery

A closer look at the historical changes and contemporary conditions of the meat industry and butcher shops informs us of the intersection of shifts in the symbolic boundaries around elite food tastes, new dynamics of places for work and retail, and the historically contingent recoding of retail and manual labor occupations in the postindustrial city. The butcher as a trade and neighborhood butcher shops as community institutions were staples within the context of modern urban life and the industrial city. Both experienced significant impacts as the meat industry, like many other food industries in Western societies during the twentieth century, transformed its production methods and restructured its supply chains for efficiency and to maximize output and profits (Lang, 2003). Kamp (2006) shows how prior to World War II meat consumption in the United States was largely seasonal, as pasture-raised animals only reached an optimal weight for slaughter when grass was abundant. The advent of the railroad system and advances in refrigeration technology affected the industry in terms of distance between farmer and butcher (Cronon, 1992). But a number of post-war innovations truly

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