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Testing Albala’s Authenticity:

A Critique of “Food ‘Columbusing’”

“Authentic Italian Cuisine”. These three words are seen plastered over the awning of a small-town pizza restaurant. Is it though? Is any of it authentic? In his Great Courses Daily article, “Food ‘Columbusing’ and the Debate Over Cultural Appropriation”, Ken Albala, Ph.D., a professor and food aficionado that runs a food blog, asks the reader what aspect makes a dish authentic: the ingredients? the cook? the environment? Going through these different factors, Albala deconstructs each one, and shows that these factors simply do not make sense when discussing if something is “authentic”. If these aspects don’t make a food authentic, what does? Albala’s simple, conclusive message, that the concept of authenticity in cooking is nothing, and that it should be done away with, rings true, but it isn’t without its issues.

Albala discusses a few controversies where white chefs cooked bona fide Mexican dishes, sometimes profiting quite heavily off these dishes. Albala considers the profitability or the compliance of a dish to be irrelevant to critics, but rather the cook is the problem. Albala argues that if the cook’s ethnicity played into the matter, that if “only Mexicans should be cooking Mexican food, Thais Thai food, Japanese Japanese food”, etc., do those “of mixed ethnicity” have exclusive and restrictive access to creating dishes that combine two ethnically-differing dishes? He says that this isn’t really the case, that people are going to cook what they want to, but these concepts are still widely-believed and can’t just be dismissed. Albala points out that if his audience were to go back in time, they’ll find that “every cuisine on earth is the result of mixing, of people from one ethnicity cooking food from somewhere else and profiting from it.” He brings up how it’s quite rare for people to criticize hybrid dishes that come from immigrant populations (like spaghetti and meatballs in the United States), despite most people understanding what authenticity is, so why put weight on “authenticity” at all? Albala proposes that perhaps authenticity comes from a dish being “codified… with a certain stock repertoire of classic dishes that over time have been defined both by professionals and ordinary cooks who made these dishes”, but that’s unlikely because even those native to a dish’s birthplace don’t all make said dish the exact same way, due to little factors (ingredient quality, oven preparation, etc.) or larger factors (lack of access to certain ingredients). Albala says that a dish doesn’t need to be authentic, or have someone with the right genetics prepare it, but the prospective chef should treat “cuisines not [their] own… with reverence and respect, as [they] would any facet of culture not [their] own.” If someone wants to make a food professionally, their “skill, research and devotion to it should” be what makes them a proper choice; other aspects that make up authenticity are just unnecessary boundaries that divide people.

Looking past a few spelling errors and Albala putting the same paragraph in his article twice (for some unknown reason), his bold message is presented quite well. Albala respectfully covers differing viewpoints in his essay, which is likely to keep more readers’ attention so that he has time to make his points. He takes small steps to introduce the reader to concepts such as Columbusing and the origins of the concept of authenticity, so he can expand towards the bigger concepts and concerns that relate to food authenticity, all without meandering. Albala does, however, raise one counterpoint to his own that seems to be quite obscure: that “people are genetically adapted to certain regions and its local food over time,” just like physical features through evolution. While this point lends itself moderately well to his following point, of how ingredients have been moving around for thousands of years, it perhaps would’ve been more beneficial to have brought up a more widely-held point of view, rather than relying on a concept that rings of biological determinism.

Albala does seem to have missed a more universal, stable concern with food authenticity: the aspect of health. Claiming a dish is “the real, authentic thing” can be dubious, but what about the ingredients of that dish? What if those ingredients are inauthentic or fraudulent? In her 2018 QA Magazine article, “Food Authenticity: What is spurring this anti-fraud movement?”, Lisa Lupo interviews several food safety experts about “food authenticity.” One of these experts, Karen Everstine, Senior Manager of Scientific Affairs at Decernis, brings up her “biggest concern with food fraud”: “if the substances used will be harmful to human health” (Lupo). Everstine brings up an incident in China about a decade ago where companies were adding melamine (a flame retardant chemical compound that when “ingested in large doses [by humans] may cause stones and illness” (Skinner)) to pet food and milk, which “result[ed] in illnesses and deaths in babies who consumed infant formula made from that milk.” (Lupo) Concern shouldn’t be pointed at whether the dish is authentic but more so the quality of the ingredients. Adding cream cheese to sushi is just Americanized sushi; putting seriously harmful additives in that cream cheese is a real concern. Whether Albala personally classifies this aspect as a part of food authenticity or not is irrelevant; many people do consider this a part of food authenticity, as they should, due to the significant health risks that may follow, which is something Albala should’ve addressed.

Authenticity does have a place in society. The problem that has arisen is that it’s had too much weight put on it, in faulty ways. Albala’s address of this problem shows his thorough knowledge of the subject, but he took his conclusion a step too far. Perhaps if his proposal of doing away with the concept of authenticity was executed, “food authenticity” as Karen Everstein defines it would just be referred to by another name. If this was guaranteed to happen, Albala’s article would be a definite must-read from which many people would greatly benefit. The problem is that it’s uncertain whether Everstein’s definition would be caught up in a discreditation of food authenticity. Albala’s piece is still an enriching article that should be read by many, but there’s an underlying problem with the knowledge that would come from it: many people could develop a harmful dichotomous viewpoint that could make food regulations viewed as mere suggestions. This is something that is already a bad enough problem in the United States, and one that needs to be addressed as well. Albala has a point, but people need to be careful to not make matters worse.

Works Cited

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