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Chain Reaction

Is it wrong for an avowed family-restaurant lover to eat at P.F. Chang's? Is it a breach of foodie trust to enjoy the occasional slice of CPK? Who knew dining out could create such a culinary crisis of conscience?

By Stefanie Ellis January 5, 2007 12:00 AM



ILLUSTRATION BY JANE SANDERS

Forgive me, Rachael Ray, for I have sinned. It's been four homogenized meals since my last confession.

While you were yum-o'ing your way across America, dining at independently owned establishments on \$40 a day, I was unwittingly supporting urban sprawl, dining on mass-produced sweet-and-sour chicken at a Chinese chain.

I'd like to say my foray into chain dining was for research, but it wasn't. I'd like to tell you the food was bad, but it was actually pretty good. I'd like to say I'll never go back, but I'd be lying.

The truth is, I'm torn. I've got a resolute opinion for most every hot-button issue there is, but when it comes to making a choice about restaurants, I get a little tug at my heart. I know why I choose locally owned restaurants: I love their intimate feel, the established rapport I have with the owners and their families, the connection these places have to the community and the originality of the food they serve. For these reasons, choosing to dine at a chain often seems a conflict of interest. Most are so big, you could get lost in them, and it's nearly impossible to develop rapport with "family" who're tucked away in some corporate office on the West Coast. True, most chains donate to local charities and pay local taxes, but I can't help wondering whether a restaurant with hundreds of locations can ever truly be rooted in any community.

But just as every independent has its pluses, so, too, do chains. Many of the newest casual and upscale-



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casual chains serve high-quality ingredients in creative ways and strike a chord with consumers looking for a bit of novelty. Above all, though, the popularity of chains might be best summed up in two words: consistency and convenience.

So as more and more chains begin to encroach upon the metropolitan area—a greater number having done so within the last five years—it may be time for me to consider the big picture:

How does the growth of chains affect local restaurateurs?

Dramatically, says Andy Ayers, owner and chef of Riddle's Penultimate Café & Wine Bar. "When I opened in the Loop, in 1985, there were two locally owned hardware stores, an outstanding independent bookstore and two owner-operated movie houses," he recalls. "Those local entrepreneurs are now gone, and every one of them would point—quite convincingly—at the competitive pressure they came under from well-financed chains eating into their specific markets as the biggest reason. Why would the restaurant business be any different?"

David Guempel, owner and chef of Zinnia, in Webster Groves, agrees.

"We have a glut of wonderful locally owned establishments," he says. "Every time people file into the Cheesecake Factory or the Macaroni Grill, it hurts the people who are the backbone of this city."

Some restaurateurs in areas of constant development have already begun to bruise as a result of the competitive crunch. That's just the name of the game, says Pat Bergauer, executive vice president of the Missouri Restaurant Association. Anytime you put more operators into a market and you aren't closing something to open something else up, you will see an impact. She points to the Chesterfield market, where both chains and independents were lost as a result of the influx of restaurants into the area.

"With over 45 new restaurants in a two-year period, there is bound to be some fallout," she adds. "Still, it's amazing how many independents are opening all the time. You look around and you see a lot of them going strong and still existing in neighborhoods where there's an Applebee's and an Outback Steakhouse."

Consistency and Convenience

The National Restaurant Association says seven of every 10 of the 925,000 restaurants in the United States are independently owned. With projected sales of \$511 billion for this year alone, dining out clearly ranks high on the list of priorities for Americans. On an average day, 130 million of us are patrons of the food-service industry, be it buying a donut or sitting down to filet mignon.

What influences our dining decisions? Time? Appearance? Familiarity?

In life, as in business, it often comes down to convenience. You certainly don't have to be a chef to understand that. Just ask single mom of three Christy Bradford. Gone are the days when she ponders where to go for dinner. Little League, soccer practice and spelling bees have overruled such luxury. "Most times we just run to Applebee's because the kids know what they like, the service is fast and I don't have to think about anything," she says. Bradford admits that she prefers independent restaurants, but with her life it's all about what's on the way as she's driving from one place to the next. "When I have time, I always make an effort not to go to chains," she says. "Unfortunately, that's less frequent than I'd like."

Because chains are formula-based, every tangible aspect of the dining experience is the same no matter which location you visit. There's predictability in such a formula, and that's often a big selling point for consumers who don't like to play guessing games when it comes to their food. It makes ordering easy, and it makes traveling to a new place a bit more familiar. I'll be the first to admit that sometimes it's a luxury not to have to think too hard about what's on my plate. I spend a large part of my time writing about food, and there is always an element of surprise when it comes to trying something new. When I want a break from that kind of scrutiny, I go to a chain. I read once that even Ruth Reichl, former food critic for *The New York Times* and editor of *Gourmet*, sometimes dreams of a bowl of cereal. It certainly requires less thought than a flambé.

Still, most days there's nothing I'd rather think about than the shrimp-wonton soup from Little Saigon Café, where tiger shrimp reaches an exalted status, puréed with scallions and sesame oil and tucked inside plump wontons. Owner Joan Ho makes her chicken broth from scratch and tosses in a hearty mound of the egg noodles she buys special from an Asian market in town (the wonton skins come from a different local market). In the five years I've been going there, the soup has never changed—but even if it did, I trust Ho to make the new version just as consistently excellent.

Taste

With individual touches like those Ho provides with her hand-selected noodles, it's easy to write off the mass-produced fare at chain restaurants as bland and boring—I'm guilty of doing it myself from time to time. Yet many of the chains have taken significant steps to add some flavor to their menus. I wouldn't normally have given much thought to dining at a place such as Brio had a friend not introduced me to the house-made sun-dried tomato olive oil and rosemary flaxseed crackers. Now I'm addicted. The same goes for the salt-and-pepper prawns at P.F. Chang's—succulent and perfectly seasoned, they're always a sure bet.

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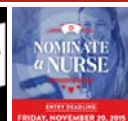
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Though I don't love every inch of their menus, I am pleased to see that even the big guys seek to draw our attention not just with glitzy décor and national advertising, but also with menus that reflect the culinary preferences of the diners who read them. Formula or no formula, the taste buds dominate.

This is certainly no surprise to Larry Flax, co-founder of California Pizza Kitchen. He believes that a creative menu is one that explores different taste experiences. For Flax, that means creating two menus a year, suited to the seasons, and frequent monitoring of high- and low-selling items. "The barbecued-chicken pizza has been on our menu for 21 years," he says. "It's our best seller, even in Asia." Other creations haven't been so lucky. "We've taken things off the menu if they don't sell," he admits. "We know we have to keep changing the experience."

If a changing menu is what's needed to freshen up the diner's experience, then some of St. Louis' most popular independents are getting it right. Harvest is perhaps best known for changing the menu to reflect the change in seasons. Terrene does so even more frequently, basing the menu on the availability of produce from local farmers. The same goes for Cardwell's at the Plaza, An American Place and Riddle's—all menu-driven success stories on the local dining scene.

Personality

Chains have more in their corner than just consistency and convenience. They've got money—a reality that comes in handy when creating restaurant designs that often have the visual allure of culinary amusement parks. "We are continuously shifting the ingredients in our designs to keep our stores fresh and different," says David Shillinglaw, project manager of P.F. Chang's design-and-architecture group. "We want our restaurants to stand out from the crowd. Today's consumer is more design-savvy than ever before. People see good design all around them, and they gravitate toward it. When we achieve that look that is typically reserved for the more expensive custom or one-of-a-kind restaurants, our designers have hit their mark yet again."

Flat-screen televisions, colorful lights, towering chandeliers, marble pillars and even carousel horses are just a few of the splashy touches making their mark in some of the newest chains. That's not even counting the menus, which are often just as lengthy as the restaurants are large.

"Great restaurants are those that offer so many things that I can't make up my mind," says Flax. His menu, which boasts nearly 30 pizzas, not to mention appetizers, salads, sandwiches and desserts, is proof positive that the ideology "bigger is better" is often taken quite literally by chains. After all, the bottom line doesn't lie. CPK, which began with one restaurant in 1985, ranked No. 20 in the *Nation's Restaurant News'* top 100 chains for 2005 and has since grown to 192 restaurants. You won't see towering chandeliers or marble pillars, but you will see imported wood-burning ovens from Italy and a bevy of creatively complementary pizzas, such as BLT and jerk chicken.

Unorthodox yet surprisingly palatable pizzas may be the formula with which CPK earned its fame, but that's just the beginning in the world of chain restaurants. Gourmet burgers with unending bowls of steak fries; food you cook at your table; waiters who mix sauces tableside, draw their name in crayons on your table or dance across the room to funky music; car-side service; carb-conscious menus and safari themes ... each chain has a different way to set itself apart from the competition.

What independent restaurants lack in safari maps and dancing waiters they typically make up for in personality. I would give up the bells and whistles any day to dine at a place where the owner knows me by name and the waiter knows that I like *nuoc mam* instead of peanut sauce with my spring rolls. For me, people have always been as much a part of the dining experience as the food—people like Lorna, the owner of Lee's, my family's neighborhood Chinese restaurant, who always shows up at our table with a plate of complimentary crab rangoon; and Abby, the pleasantly round owner of Casablanca, who, with his happy smile and gruff Jordanian accent, has been greeting my family for more than two decades. He always knows exactly what I'll order and, every time I pretend to deliberate over the menu, teases me, saying, "Maybe in another 20 years you'll actually try something different."

"I don't need anything different," I tell him. "Everything is perfect the way it is."

Personal Tastes

Nothing will change the way I feel about my favorite independent restaurants—not even those times when I simply can't do without a piece of key lime pie or tiramisu from CPK, knowing full well that Abby sells pies and baklava.

I have to wonder, though, whether my choice to take my pie elsewhere will affect him in the long run.

Don Luria thinks so. President and co-founder of the Council of Independent Restaurants of America, he's concerned about the health of independent restaurants across the country. His greatest fear is that a lack of support for independents will result in restaurants that are nothing more than mirror images of one other: "You'll never get the flavor of a community that way."

That's a flavor that doesn't come from a formula and one that I wouldn't dream of disputing. Of course, if

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chains keep improving *their* formula, I can't promise I won't sin again. Hey, Rachael—we'll be in touch ...

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