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DINING BY THE SEA

IL MOLETTO OSTRICHERIA GRILL

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ABSTRACT. The paper investigates a specific ethnographic context, a restaurant in central-eastern Sardinia located on the seashore, facing an isthmus that delimits and at the same time opens to the infinity of water. Such configuration gives form to a space in which food and place become central and blur into each other in a continuous sensory renegotiation. The food served gets, therefore, substantiated through the place in which is consumed while the place, in turn, fills it with meaning.

KEYWORDS: Food, places, restaurants, emotional spaces, Sardinia.

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

In recent decades, the vast and multifaceted interdisciplinary literature on food, nutrition, and food practices has primarily focused on the processes of food production, exchange, preparation, and consumption, food-related language

and rituals, and, increasingly, food-related fears, the media dimension of the gastronomic world, and culinary identities¹. Scholarly debate, particularly in the Social Sciences, has also focused, albeit sparingly, on the role of consumers in their favorite food consumption

¹ To mention only the classics: Barthes 1961; Bourdieu 1979; Douglas 1972, 1984; Fischler 1990; Goody 1982; Harris 1985; Lévi-Strauss 1958, 1962, 1964, 1968; Mintz 1996; Poulain 2002. If not otherwise stated, all translations are by Francesco Caruso.

spaces, in particular on restaurants², as public places where convivial practices are structured, imaginaries refashioned, experiences created, and differences emphasized. In *Dining Out. A Sociology of Modern Manners* (1989), Joanne Finkelstein was among the very first to investigate the public dimension of food consumption, eating-out behaviors or, on a more general level, non-canonical ways of food consumption in different societies. In doing so, she has elucidated the behavioral complexity that is produced within restaurants, the polysemy of food in the public sphere, the consumer's pleasure in dining out, and the social value of dining venues: the modern restaurant as a "diorama of desire", as she puts it. In studying the restaurant, consideration has been given to food and its emotional, evocative power, the relationship between food and local sourcing, the traditional or innovative quality of the menu offerings, how a particular food is served, and the price charged. On the other hand, little attention has been paid to the restaurant as a place, as an ambience evocative of a specific atmosphere, that is, its location, which we believe plays a critical mediating role in the relationship between food and consumer and between consumers themselves. Today, the location of a restaurant, trattoria, tavern, or other establishment in a renowned location with a spectacular view and narrative potential is a value that increasingly guides the patron's choice. In fact, when it comes to dining out, one of the most pressing concerns is: where to eat? If one assumes that a dining experience is usually pre-planned by the diners and oriented toward the consumption of one type of food over another, the place where one spends the evening defines a discursive space in which communication can be both agreement and conflict. In addition to one's personal experience, online reviews can help those who want to know if a particular restaurant is good, if the

service is efficient, if the quality-for-price ratio is optimal, and whether the location meets the consumer's tastes.

On a more specific level, it may happen that the person who has proposed to dine together has already decided where to eat. This decision has to be shared, accepted and pondered: the chosen establishment is thus a location chosen in advance. Whoever has elected it is familiar with it, loves it, and therefore attaches to it a value that extends beyond the food sphere, because it reflects personal desire and taste.

It is no longer only the food that is a sign and becomes language, but also the location: they both engage in a dialog, communicate with each other, with others and about others or at least about those who think of that space as an individual identity place. Both are symbolized: the food takes center stage next to the location and in doing so defines a complex symbolic field. Finkelstein writes:

when we elect to dine out at a specific restaurant with particular companions we are manifesting a moral posture, an expression of what we consider to be personally pleasurable, socially appropriate and generally appealing. In a wider sense, embedded in all our choices and actions is a view of what we consider to be the proper and good society. To see dining out as part of this perspective is to see it as an event of much greater sociological interest than if we see it primarily as an idiosyncratic expression of the individual's private proclivities (1989, p. 110).

To be sure, the choice of a restaurant can be determined by current fads or influenced by reviews published online or in trade magazines, but it still reflects a subjective opinion and judgment, even more relevant than the decision on what to eat when "limited" by a menu or tradition. What happens in a restaurant parallels what happens in a theater with the actors and the audience playing their roles against a well-defined backdrop. The restaurant, too, is crisply designed,

² For further reference, see also: Appelbaum 2012; Beriss, Sutton, ed. 2007a; Capatti 2009; Finkelstein 2014; Pitte 1999; Quellier 2022; Segalla 2016; Spang 2000.

for it conveys and evokes specific feelings, which explains seeking for a specific location which can be romantic, homely, friendly, formal, etc. It has to arouse feelings, fulfill desires, affect moods.

A restaurant's location transcends its physical space and defines a symbolic space that

suggests a specific relationship with the surrounding space and with the others: it may be a formal or informal, private or public, homely or not. This enables me to anticipate or visualize in advance my place, my role, what is expected of me, what I might do at the table or in the presence of others. In short, the context allows me to glimpse at a whole apparatus of prescriptions and suggestions. However, in this space, both social and symbolic, the prefiguration of the situation equally depends on the spatio-temporal framework. Indeed, a candlelight dinner does not have the same dramaturgy as a quick meal with coworkers; much less do the same codes apply in the two cases, in terms of how to dress, what to say, what to do, and how to behave (Boutaud 2011, pp. 14-15).

The significance of the place where food is shared often incorporates a restaurant's history, and a restaurant's name itself tells a story, anticipating in part what the diner will find there. Christoph Ribbat (2016) cautions that when studying a restaurant, in addition to the food served and the work involved, one should also consider the ambience, the establishment per se and all that it evokes. In fact, a person dining out does not just fulfill physiological needs and pleasures but chooses to eat a meal in a public place, according to a ritual and based on a social script followed by the actors involved. The ambience intentionally affects the diner's consciousness and conditions their desires. Therefore, serving delicious food is not enough to substantiate a restaurant's reputation: "ambience is the ornament of mood, the physical realization of a state of mind. The diner extracts from the physical character of the restaurant the elements for temporarily reshaping his/her consciousness" (Finkelstein 1989, p. 60).

In this perspective, the purpose of this essay is to define the role that a restaurant's location plays in the experience of

dining out. This role has an emotional dimension, it signifies something, that is to say, it is invested with meaning; it is created and mediated as a cultural expression and thus contributes to defining one's sense of self as well as their individual identity. Within this framework, this essay focuses on a specific ethnographic context that is both emblematical and exemplary of the relationship we are investigating, namely a restaurant on the coast of central-eastern Sardinia. The establishment is located opposite to an isthmus holding back the water and simultaneously opening up to it, creating a space where food and place take central stage and their boundaries blur in unceasing sensory renegotiations. In other words, the food is imbued with and signified by the place where it is served. Through fieldwork carried out in recent years, the analysis of online content, and the conduction of semi-structured interviews, this essay aims to demonstrate that certain places where certain food is served are decisive factors in the diner's choice more than the food itself.

2. DINING BY THE SEA: IL MOLETTA OSTRICHERIA GRILL AT CAPO COMINO

As a kid, I used to come here to get ice cream after an afternoon of diving off the pier with my brother, sister, and cousins. Once a year, my father and I would organize a "crossing", swimming from the last stretch of beach to the Ruja Island in front of us [...]. The scenery hasn't changed a bit. Crystal clear seawater with Tavolara in the background. To the left, the clear profile of Montalbo, the limestone massif dominating the towns of Lodé, Siniscola and Lula. Behind, on the mountain, the old lighthouse at Capo Comino (there, too, I remember fantastic afternoon hikes ending up with my mom's well-deserved caramelized pineapple cake). The snack bar hasn't changed much either. The shack remains the same, though I don't think they are permitted to build so close to the sea anymore. But now there is a lovely veranda with French doors that are always open, from which you can step out and find yourself just a few meters from the water, amidst the bushes, immersed in the fragrant Mediterranean scrub.

Nowadays you don't go to Moletto to get ice cream, but to taste Stefano Gatto's specialties, the chef who inherited the place from his grandma and over time has turned it into an oyster restaurant. Initially serving only ap-

petizers and meat or fish courses, traditional Sardinian dishes with a modern twist are now available. I was there at the beginning of August. I had two aperitifs (the bartender's inventions, the myrtle cocktail and the pompia cocktail), two appetizers (raw shrimp caught at Caletta and tuna tartare), octopus soup (a pleasant surprise), fried shrimp in *carasau* bread, house dessert, and lemon sorbet. Sciala, a fantastic Vermentino wine by Vigne Surrau, which won an award at Vinitaly this year, accompanied the food. Final bill: 101 Euros and worth every cent (Serra 2017).

This is the account of Il Moletto Ostricheria Grill, a restaurant in Capo Comino, a seaside resort, written by journalist and writer Elvira Serra in the *Corriere della Sera*. What Serra describes, based on her personal recollections, is what anyone who has visited or continues to visit such an evocative place would describe, albeit less poetically. The *moletto* is a small stretch of beach named after a series of concrete cubes that were intended to serve as mooring points for small boats but are now used as diving boards. It is certainly not the concrete blocks that make the place enchanting. In fact, their presence would be quite discouraging if our gaze were not captured by the majestic dunes on the left, the red island – separated by an isthmus that frontally almost delimits the familiar land from the unknown sea –, the newly built lighthouse on the right, whose imposing figure and night light guards and makes visible that stretch of coastline; and again, by the very white sand, the crystal clear sea, the mountain and the old lighthouse overlooking the bay; and the profile of Tavolara island in the distance. Serra describes a restaurant that has made a name for itself in recent years, but even she falls in the trap of talking about the location first, for that location is the restaurant. Il Moletto Ostricheria Grill might be one of the many mid- to high-end restaurants populating the central-eastern coast of Sardinia, notable for their fresh and locally-sourced ingredients and whose menu offerings are inspired by local traditions. However, Moletto stands out precisely because of its location, confirming that in our case study place and food are in-

extricably linked and, more importantly, barely distinguishable.

The restaurant is located on a thoroughfare that provides access to several beaches, in a large space with no other establishments or houses, and you have to get there on purpose: this implies that people go to that stretch of coast and that restaurant for a reason. Il Moletto Ostricheria Grill is built on a raised platform, allowing a panoramic view of the sea. Large windows run around the length of the restaurant so that as you are dining you can enjoy the aesthetic pleasure brought the scenery and admire the surrounding region, from where chef Stefano Gatto supplies his ingredients: “dish, location, and scenery blend together and express the same culinary philosophy, deeply pondered, cunningly orchestrated and effectively communicated” (Giannitrapani 2014, p. 282).

One might wonder whether diners go for the location or the food. As will be discussed further below, ethnographic research has shown that a restaurant's location and offerings form a synergistic attractor. Many people are already familiar with that beach and restaurant; many who enjoy the view will eventually decide to stop and eat, and others will come there after browsing review websites that recommend precisely the location and food. The food and the environment create a multi-sensory dimension in which flavors, sounds, colors, and fragrances allow for the establishment of links between food and the surrounding landscape. Locations are increasingly being designed to impress customers, capture their attention, excite their senses, and take them to a different dimension. Sensory thematization can revolve around a variety of values and Il Moletto Ostricheria Grill, for example, invests in the empathic relationship between the diners and the location. On the other hand, looking at a specific place triggers a sensibility that highlights an esthetic affect

that characterizes our “pre-reflective” state of presence in the world, the immediacy of our participation in it. Which is what happens

when our sentient body is anchored in the *here* and *now* of a concrete situation that is nonetheless subjectively experienced. At this stage, there is no reflective mediation, but rather a *pathic* impression and an *empathetic* reaction which vary depending on whether there is a connection (meant in a broader sense towards those beings and elements whose presence is perceived) or a distancing (dislike) (Boutaud 2011, pp. 180-181).

Il Moletto Ostricheria Grill – a seasonal restaurant usually opened between mid- to late April and September or October ³ is recognized and recognizable, and is a place with a history. In the words of its current manager and chef, Stefano Gatto:

Moletto was born with my grandfather who bought it in the 1980s from a gentleman who was leasing it. My grandparents managed it for nearly 20 years, but at first it was just a snack-bar with a cane-brake. I took over in 2004, after taking several cooking classes and having a life-changing experience in 2003: I worked for Mrs. Rita Denza at Gallura restaurant in Olbia, which obtained a Michelin star that very year. From there, I got to know all the seafood, oysters, shellfish, in short, all the ingredients, and it was from there that I got the idea of opening a restaurant in Capo Comino with an oyster bar as its main core. That's why it's called Moletto Ostricheria Grill. In 2004, I opened a place that still had the feel of an oyster bar, and two years later, I opened the restaurant. I began with a 160-Euro grill bought at the mall: it was the only money I had with me. Initially, I'd serve raw food, such as carpaccio. Tuna carpaccio with fennel and pecorino Sardo cheese is a menu item that has been available since 2006. I've always gotten my seafood from a trusted fisherman who catches it in the bay (interview of 20 October 2022).

The chef and restaurant promote local food because they feel confident about its quality but also because they support the local economy and culture. In doing so, Il Moletto Ostricheria Grill annually renews its ties with the local community, fishermen and consumers, promoting and advertising, besides seafood, also lo-

cally-grown products. The items on the menu reflect these connections. Among other dishes available, the “All Day Dining” option includes Siniscolese pompia oysters, revolving around a typical citrus fruit from Siniscola; a “Puddu” cold-cuts platter with meat from Oliena, where the emphasis is on a specific producer and place; and the cheese “L'armentizia” from the eponymous dairy establishment in Sanicola. Appetizers include potato and Santa Lucia cuttlefish cappuccino, with fish caught at the neighboring fishing village, or the raw shrimp caught in La Caletta, another seaside hamlet. The main courses include: fresh oregano octopus soup from La Caletta; Olbia mussel soup with bread croutons; and mixed bean soup and Siniscola pecorino cheese; the fried *paranza* from Capo Comino; turbot filet with Olbia mussel sauce; but also tuna dishes like tuna carpaccio with fennel and Siniscola pecorino cheese or “Puddu” pork bacon tuna with bell pepper salad. Even cocktails are locally inspired: the mirtle-based Lansky and the pompia-based Thiniscole. Based on the food it serves, Moletto belongs to a specific category of restaurants with clear ties to the territory where they are located and to a distinct culture, but it does not shy away from having a more globalized and even exotic dimension as it offers sushi aperitifs or sush-mix and sashimi-mix dishes. At Moletto's typical and exotic aspects are not conflicting but rather complementary instances.

As a result, the restaurateur sells an experience that goes beyond creating flavor and plating food. Ingredients are transformed into flavorful dishes to satisfy senses and establish a continuity between producers, chef, and diners. The dishes are described, and their quality and local origins are praised; they are displayed and even publicized to attract customers' attention, but are always paired

³ Here I am reporting what the manager told me: «During the pandemic and even in 2022 we didn't open for the usual 5-6 months because the wage bill had become unsustainable. If you keep the restaurant open until October you lose money, while in winter we don't open because there is no tourism. Moletto could operate in the winter as well, but the winter clientele doesn't exist» (Stefano Gatto, interview of 20 October 2022).

with the spectacular setting in which they are served: the food taken per se, “even if outstanding, cannot provide recommendation enough to dine at a particular restaurant” (Finkelstein 1989, p. 55).

As Stefano Gatto argues:

People come to Moletto for the food and the place, looking for something a little different. Moletto dining is truly an experience. The location is beautiful and relaxing. The sunsets are spectacular there: there is no light from the nearby villages, so you can enjoy the fascinating sky. The dunes, the sand, the islet, the nearby lighthouse, the extremely long beaches, and the crystal clear sea. The food and the place are the highlights. You eat well there. I travel a lot, even abroad, I teach courses, and the food served at Moletto can only be found in high-end restaurants. Its cuisine is simple but flavorful. The fish is not treated in any way, and the ingredients are exceptional. Organic ingredients and an essential menu. The location contributes for at least half of the overall experience. The dishes that keep customers coming back are the tuna carpaccio with fennel and pecorino cheese and the super-popular seafood *fregula*, but our customers’ favorite, which they immediately associate with Moletto, is the raw catch of the day and the pane Guttiau fried shrimp. We also have a small selection of meat dishes (Interview of 20 October 2022).

Many patrons of Il Moletto Ostricheria Grill share the same thoughts. “Beautiful location”, “unique view”, “wonderful location,” “super atmosphere,” “breathtaking view,” “spectacular panorama”. But “I only go there for the sunset,” “they are blessed with a beautiful view,” and “only the location is worth a visit” – are some of the comments on TripAdvisor that highlight how the place is central to the experience of diners at Moletto. The ratings expressed on the well-known review website reflect the views of the people I had the opportunity to interview⁴. This is what a regular patron of both the bar and the restaurant told me: “I usually spend the month of August in Cape Comino and frequently go to Moletto in the afternoon on my way back from the beach for

a drink, or in the evening with my husband for dinner. It’s a peaceful and relaxing spot by the sea; the food is good, the fish is fresh, and there’s a spectacular view and an unforgettable sunset” (F. G., Nuoro, interview of 22 October 2022). And also: “I don’t go to Moletto very often because it’s a bit pricey, but it’s still a regular stop every summer. Having a glass of wine by the sea at sunset and eating seafood dishes that I wouldn’t eat in my everyday life remains an annual summer fixture” (L. M., Sassari, interview of 22 October 2022). And again: ““I always go to Moletto, even in the winter when I fly back to Sardinia and the place is closed. I’ve never eaten at the restaurant simply because it hasn’t happened; I always hit the bar for drinks but the main reason I go is obviously the location” (G. G., Turin, interview of 23 October 2022).

The restaurant, then, is satisfying on many levels, as it offers the “sensory pleasure of eating, the aesthetic delights of gastronomy, the novelty of inhabiting different locales and the social satisfaction of watching others and being watched by them in return” (Finkelstein 1989, pp. 106-107). Moletto has a diverse gastronomical offering targeting different customers: morning and afternoon beachgoers; patrons looking for light dinner/drinks by the sea who can choose a simple aperitif accompanied with oysters, sushi, or fried shrimps; gourmards who are served with sophisticated and elaborate dishes prepared with locally-sourced ingredients. The ambience possesses a romantic charm, and patrons who frequent this restaurant are most definitely seeking an intimate, seductive moment. As one expects the restaurant to fulfill a desire, food alone cannot meet such an expectation for experience and emotions. The spectacular quality of the location thus enters the diners’ daily lives, and they can then fulfill their desire in that very restaurant.

4 «While it has disrupted the discourse of food criticism by allowing anyone to have a say on a hotel or restaurant», TripAdvisor «can also be understood as a technological reinstatement of some of the “collectivist” and “bottom-up” trends that have long been present in this type of discourse» (Marrone 2014c, p. 48).

By evoking a soft, romantic atmosphere, the décor also contributes to arousing emotions. The wooden structure enclosed by large windows stands out in Moletto's indoor hall, interplaying with the white of the chairs, tables, and table linens to create an understated, elegant look. The exterior is populated with white tables and sofas that slope down towards the sea and are lit in the evening by spotlights placed along the shoreline and reflecting the light on the water, conjuring up the relaxing, romantic, and enveloping atmosphere characteristic of Moletto. In this sense, the restaurant's "architectural" features define it because they are integrated and communicate a coherent meaning. To some extent, the striking natural scenery that surrounds Moletto shapes its identity, and their mutual relationship is emphasized by the furnishings and distribution of the space, designed specifically to highlight that connection and arouse expectations. As a result, the gastronomic and spatial dimensions intertwine and convey feelings as well as meanings. A well-designed restaurant is one in which "the architecture foreshadows the food, without overpowering it, and, conversely, a well-designed dish is one that integrates well with (and alludes to) the place in which it is served" (Giannitrapani 2014, p. 280).

The ambience and décor are just as important as the dishes that are served, and in this context, advertising also plays

a crucial role. Above all, social media convey an image of Moletto that is enticing and alluring, and once again what stands out are the food and the location⁵. Finkelstein has observed that diners discuss the pleasures of eating out when they find the details of the restaurant location to be pleasant, along with service provided, quality of the décor, restaurant reputation, and atmosphere:

If we can see how the ambience of the restaurant has little to do with the consumption of foods but a great deal to do with the preparation of the diner's mood and his/her subsequent responsiveness to the transactions of dining out, then we can understand how the abstractions of pleasure, entertainment and desire have been merged with material conditions such as the style of the cuisine, its price and the service offered to the diner by waiters and restaurateurs. In the restaurant, one is not only consuming foodstuffs but one is also becoming the consumer *par excellence* (Finkelstein 1989, p. 28).

The pairing food/place, as mentioned, involves all the senses. First and foremost, sight, for the aesthetics of the visual aspects concerning the plating of the dishes, the colors, the architecture and shape of the spaces. Then hearing, for the acoustics of the restaurant: noises from the kitchen or the hall, but also the noise of the diners or the sound of the sea, as in the case study examined in this essay. Smell, taste and touch also transcend the mere materiality of the food in order to stimulate a mentalistic process that grasps, decodes

⁵ Review websites prove to be crucial in this process. A quick visit to the TripAdvisor site has revealed that Moletto received numerous criticisms during the 2022 season, nearly destroying the reputation the restaurant has built up over time. The majority of the negative reviews focus on the service, the food quantity-for-money ratio (and, in some cases, the quality-for-money one), and the outdoor furnishings of the bar. «In this pervasive sanctioning logic, where likes and ratings allow for hurried evaluation of services, products, and people, judgment becomes, in a cyclical movement, a form of manipulation of future experiences (positively evaluating a restaurant means directing a possible patron there). Thus, a process based on the so-called "tyranny of small decisions" takes place, in which a potentially harmless personal opinion, if disseminated, relaunched, shared, and amplified, becomes a powerful system of world hierarchization and an engine of landscape change – in our case, the landscape of foodservice. Influencers' posts guaranteeing the quality of a particular eatery or TripAdvisor rankings can be critical in determining success (and failure) in the world of food consumption» (Giannitrapani 2021, p. 24). When prompted on the matter, chef Stefano Gatto told me: «Considering the cost of the ingredients, staff, and the meticulous work that goes into the dishes, I believe our prices are reasonable. On the other hand, we can definitely improve the service significantly. It's average. I'd give it a 6 out of 10, no more than that» (interview of 20 October 2022). A regular customer added: «Every year, I return to Moletto because the location alone entices me. This summer [2022], I found the prices to be a little high in comparison to the offerings, particularly the wines, and the service to be less atten-

and expresses the context: e. g. the atmosphere created by the food and its local origins, that is, by its being an expression of a place, of that specific place. Restaurants are “highly sensory environments” (Beriss, Sutton 2007b) and with the food served, the service offered, the décor displayed, and the price charged, they can orient ideologies and shape and redefine identities. Restaurants are sensory places because they are places of relaxation, desire, pleasure, and conviviality, and thus perform a role in creating, communicating, and refashioning an ideology (see Counihan 2020, p. 113).

3. CONCLUSIONS

In this essay, Il Moletto Ostricheria Grill has been used as a paradigmatic case study to investigate the importance of the food/place relationship in a patron’s restaurant experience, or, in other words, to examine the role of the location as a primary function of the dining out experience.

A restaurant is, first and foremost, a place. It is not a neutral setting in which the ritualization of the act of eating occurs, but rather one of its critical factors. Dining at a specific location stimulates the patron’s sensitivity by structuring it as an experiential moment – something that transcends the mere being seated in a restaurant and eating certain food. The food and the setting are appreciated for their extra-ordinary quality and ability to disrupt the ordinary flow of daily life occurrences. Of course, one’s personal inclinations to live this type of experience take on a significant role: the intensity and reflectiveness that inform a customer’s relationship with *that* particular experiential moment, in fact, mark the pleasure of dining out, sharing food with the other(s), using a language made of codes and signs that cannot be expressed with words. Dining out is, as Finkelstein pointed out, a social event in which peo-

ple engage to obtain pleasure. Not only that, but having that experience entails

a dual process of reflection (*observing oneself* do something or act in some way) and hedonic learning (savoring emotions, feeling pleasure). It is a phenomenological moment that is first understood (contained and felt) as a pure actual experience, free of purpose: it is savored in and for itself, and has a dual temporal dimension: an absolute present as well as a memorable time (Boutaud 2011, pp. 183-184).

It is no coincidence that many diners take photographs and selfies to preserve the physical memory of the experience that the pairing food/place elicits. In this regard, “the aura of the restaurant becomes integral to the pleasure of dining out. The event comes to be enjoyed as a form of entertainment and a part of the modern spectacle in which social relations are mediated through visual images and imagined atmosphere [...] This is a far remove from the sensations of ingestion” (Finkelstein 1989, p. 2).

But why do some locations draw more attention than others? Fads and trends, fostered by advertisements and social sponsorships are one obvious explanation. Another is the more basic need to meet people and form or renew bonds, to occupy leisure time by seeking the pleasure of dining out in a familiar setting but with its own distinct identity. But eventually you choose a restaurant because you know you can create, renew, and share emotions *there*. The place (or places) where one eats makes present a sense of belonging, which is “reinforced by the act of sharing. These locations are infused with stories and memories of previous visits. Narratives establish habits and preferences while attesting to one’s place in the world. What would the fashion of places allow if not this experience of self-discovery and belonging?” (Franchi 2009, p. 62).

As previously stated, secondary literature has largely ignored these issues.

tive than usual. I’ll return, as I do every year, because the food is good and the location spectacular» (S. G., Florence, interview of October 23, 2022).

Similarly, food guides do not highlight the role of a restaurant's spatial dimension in conveying meaning and communicating specific identities. Mention is made of the ambience, the location, and the visuals but the emphasis is on the menu, the ways of communicating the restaurant or the plating of the food. But "we, as customers, prefigure a certain way of running a restaurant first and foremost through our perception of the environment. It is your first impression of a place that determines whether you will stay or leave" (Giannitrapani 2014, p. 269).

On the other hand, and primarily, the manager or restaurateur builds a certain type of clientele through the restaurant location, and consumers are no longer eaters of food but seekers of an experience, of values, of identity. Restaurants have evolved into identity places, complex devices designed to provide a gastronomic experience. For the long time you are sitting at a table, you are not only savoring good food, but also an atmosphere, and an idea that has been thought in advance and is now presented to you (see Griffero 2016).

In the age of "gastromania" (Marrone 2014a), there is a growing desire to enhance the sensory dimension of eating, which transcends the materiality of food and/or environment, transforming the need to eat into an experiential occasion, defining the way we fantasize about taste. The places associated with food prove to be crucial in such an experience:

on the path from the sensory to the sensible, we can hardly stop at the esthetic experience without noticing its *aesthetic* extension. What enchants us through signs is not solely due to sensory immersion caused by the pressure of the environment (emphatic signs) or the diffuse, multisensory impression (pathic sensations). Enchantment also presupposes a sensitive relationship with the surrounding environment, which can be one of agreement, trust, or connivance: the desire to be entranced is channeled through a relationship of *empathy*. One feels at ease, wants to participate in the gustatory or convivial experience, and thus contributes to its success (Boutaud 2011, p. 188. See Finkelstein 1989).

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