

The Culinary Other: Seeking Exoticism

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A proud parenting moment: my youngest son ordered the roast duck for his birthday dinner at his favorite restaurant. As the honoree, he got the duck head and promptly opened the beak and exclaimed, "Someone took the tongue!" I had to get him a serving of duck tongues from a Chinese deli a week later to make up for his disappointment.

—Letter from Gretchen Kohl, Alameda, California
(*Gourmet*, June 2007, p. 34)

Like authenticity, exoticism is a key element of foodie discourse. As with the case of authenticity, the term "exotic" is not always directly invoked, yet the desire for an exotic food experience underscores many central elements of the American foodscape—the food television shows that take viewers on a culinary adventure using exotic ingredients, the cooking guides that demonstrate how to impress your guests with dishes like grilled halloumi cheese and pork chops with North African spice paste, the food magazine travelogs showcasing unusual foods from remote climes, and the restaurant reviews enticing readers to venture off the beaten culinary path. Even cruise ships are starting to offer more exotic fare. The director of strategic marketing for Radisson Seven Seas explains: "Food is playing a larger part in everybody's life these days, and not just on vacation. . . . They're becoming more adventurous in what they try. You look back 20 years ago, how many sushi places and Thai restaurants were there? Now, they're everywhere. People are more interested in exotic cuisine" (*Globe & Mail*, February 4, 2006, p. T12).

Just as authenticity is not inherent to food but is constructed in the way we evaluate food, exoticism is in the eye of the beholder. If food is exotic

we must ask, exotic to whom? Food experts frame food to highlight certain qualities that produce an evaluation of exoticism relative to the experiences of American foodies. And like the valuation of authenticity, the valuation of exoticism is not unique to food culture, but is part of a larger cultural esteem for exotic experiences. In this chapter, we will explore why the "exotic" is both a valued quality and a controversial concept. After recounting some of these debates, we then describe exoticism in the context of the gourmet foodscape. Most importantly, we ask a critical question of "food adventuring":³⁸ Is the relentless search for exotic new ingredients, new cuisines, and undiscovered foods a positive development? Put differently, is gourmet globe-trotting an extension of culinary colonialism, or does it represent a meaningful attempt to experience cuisines (and people) outside the Western culinary canon?

In this chapter we will argue that the exoticism frame within foodie discourse contains both these impulses: It builds on and reproduces certain neo-colonial inequalities, while at the same time representing a cosmopolitan interest in broadening the culinary canon and forming intercultural connections. Before proceeding with our discussion of ethnicity, it is important to reiterate that the valuation of exoticism and authenticity often occur together, intimately commingling in pages of gourmet cookbooks and magazines. Exotic foods are also often authentic foods, and vice versa. Foodie discourse produces strong messages on the commingling qualities of authenticity and exoticism. Avoid inauthentic Chinese buffets, and instead seek out authentic Salvadorean pupusas eaten in dusty downtown restaurants. Shun Italian chain restaurants (however delicious the fresh hot bread might be), while locally bottled, hand-labeled aged balsamic vinegar from small Italian villages can be bagged and brought home like big-game trophies. Foodie parents are embarrassed by their children's penchant for chicken nuggets and fries, but proudly mention offspring who order duck tongues at a Chinese restaurant.

While the categories of authentic and exotic commingle and are often conflated in popular food writing and academic prose (e.g., Erik Cohen 1988; Heldke 2005), they are not synonymous. We contend that they are worth discussing separately, since they often represent significantly different, distinctive qualities within foods—qualities that are manifest in different combinations, and often in ways that are mutually exclusive. Figure 3.1 provides a set of idealized examples for understanding how we distinguish between authenticity and exoticism. This figure simplifies how foods are categorized in order to highlight the qualities that contribute to authenticity separately from exoticism. For example, a gourmet magazine might distinguish between two exotic ingredients on the basis of authenticity: a mass-produced fish sauce from a

	AUTHENTIC	INAUTHENTIC
EXOTIC	VIETNAMESE FISH SAUCE FROM PHU QUOC	FISH SAUCE MASS-PRODUCED IN CHINA
NON-EXOTIC	HEIRLOOM TOMATO	FAST-FOOD

Figure 3.1 Authenticity and Exoticism

Chinese factory is clearly second-rate, and less authentic when compared to a fish sauce produced in small batches in a specific island in Vietnam (and unavailable in North American stores). Other foods, like heirloom tomatoes, are distinguished on the basis of their authenticity (as simple and linked to a historic tradition), but are not particularly exotic in the sense of being socially remote or norm-breaking—key elements of exoticism explored below. Fast-foods are devalued for being mass produced, ordinary, and placeless, qualities that render them both inauthentic and unexotic.

Our goal here is not to suggest that there are hard and fast categorical distinctions between qualities of authenticity and exoticism, but to argue that they possess different points of emphasis that are worth distinguishing if we wish to understand the complexity of a gourmet foodscape that values certain foods while deprecating others. While the features of exoticism and authenticity certainly co-inhabit the space of the American foodscape, in this chapter we focus on what we mean by exoticism, and flesh out the criteria used to construct food as exotic. This takes us to the heart of debates about what is exotic food in an American foodscape. How are lines of distinction drawn, and how are Euro-American eaters challenged to take up new, exotic dishes outside the culinary mainstream? We argue that, although the foodie's desire for new, novel, and exotic flavors is indeed part of a colonial legacy, it is not only that, and cannot be reduced to a simple instance of culinary colonialism. The desire to eat the exotic Other also represents the hope for cultural exchange, a cosmopolitan broadening of the culinary canon beyond the narrow valuations of nationally based Euro-American cuisine. We discuss both of these competing pulls in turn—the drive for social status that is

tied to neo-colonial impulses to dominate and possess the cultural resources of the exotic Other, and the democratic drive for inclusion through culinary cosmopolitanism—and then move to discuss the search for exoticism in the American foodscape.

Culinary Colonialism?

The foodie's quest for new and exotic foods cannot be fully understood without reference to Said's classic work linking Western culture to the exotic Other, *Orientalism* (1978), a book that remains the most widely cited text within studies of exoticism. In this seminal piece of scholarship, Said explored how exotic images of the Oriental Other were constructed through Western cultural representations involving art and literature. "The Orient," Said writes, "was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (1978: 1). *Orientalism* produced a set of understandings and institutions that not only rendered the East "primitive" and inferior, but also secured the West's position as rational, and superior; as such, Orientalist discourse was, and remains, central to Western imperialism. Within this Orientalist dynamic, the appeal of the exotic derives from an adventurous desire to explore and possess the unknown Other. As Said explains, "The Orient at large . . . vacillates between the West's contempt for what is familiar and its shivers of delight in—or fear of—novelty" (1978: 59).

Since *Orientalism*, Said's work has informed a great deal of post-colonial scholarship on encounters with the Exotic Other.²⁸ In this literature, exoticism is understood as "a politically and sexually charged form of othering" (Longley 2000: 23), in which certain cultures and peoples are objectified as "projections of Western fantasies" (Rousseau and Porter 1990: 7). Work on exoticism has explored the construction of the Other within the context of consumer culture, in which cultural difference is increasingly commodified. In an article entitled "Eating the Other," bell hooks remarks that, within consumer culture, ethnic diversity becomes "spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (1992: 21). In *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, & the Commodification of Difference*, Deborah Root (1996) explores how particular cultures, peoples, and objects are coded as "exotic," and argues that this pattern relates to a Western colonial attitude that reasserts conquest through commodification. Other scholars illustrate how the popularity of "multicultural products" (Huggan 2000: 91), "ethnotourism" (Roberts 2000), and "culinary tourism" (Molz 2007; Long 2004) derive largely

from their exotic appeal. These forms of exoticization extend beyond the aesthetic, as each exercise of "Othering" draws from and reproduces existing power relations. For instance, Roberts shows how "world cinema" is rooted in an "ideology of conspicuous cosmopolitanism" that "puts the world on display for (largely white) middle-class, First-World audiences" (2000: 109). Indeed, exoticization not only produces the Other, but also "sustains the myth of cultural centrality and superiority of the viewer" (Longley 2000: 23).

More specific to the realm of exotic food, Heldke refers to culinary adventuring as a kind of "cultural colonialism" (2003: xv), a subjective form of colonialism that accompanies and legitimizes economic forms of colonialism, while subordinating and appropriating the food cultures and economies of the Global South. While describing herself as a card-carrying member of the food adventuring club, Heldke describes how she became increasingly uncomfortable as she realized that she was "motivated by a deep desire to have contact with, and to somehow own an experience of, an Exotic Other, as a way of making myself more interesting" (2003: xvi). Heldke recognizes that this attitude is problematic, particularly given its reliance on a neo-colonial notion of the Other as a cultural resource always available to be consumed by more powerful members of the geo-political core.⁴⁰ Moreover, culinary exoticism can work to essentialize and stereotype ethnic cultures (e.g., Mexican-Americans) that are expected to present and preserve their cultural heritage for consumption by the dominant culture, often in a context of social and economic inequality where an ethnic community's exotic food is more welcome than members of that ethnic community (Abarca 2004: 8; see also Bentley 1998). Invocations of exoticism can therefore alienate people of color from food spaces as those who find their own food perceived as exotic by food adventurers may find themselves Othered and excluded by its connotations of difference (Harper 2011; Oleschuk 2014).

Even though a Western tourist might be uncomfortable attending the funeral rites or birth ceremonies of ethnic Others, the idea of accessing the Other's culinary traditions often goes unquestioned. Might the assumption of universal accessibility support attitudes of cultural colonialism that prop up and reinforce systems of economic colonialism (Heldke 2003: 48)? Do food adventurers "transform the Other into a resource" by projecting a superficial knowledge of the Other's culture (based purely on food, not politics), while assuming that "we" belong everywhere (Heldke 2003: 48)? These are difficult questions to answer, but the key point is that we need to contextualize the besotted food adventurer's quest for the latest exotic cuisine within a historical pattern of colonial Othering, as well as contemporary neo-colonial realities of economic and cultural inequality. This means realizing that a contemporary food adventurer who wanders around exploring "exotic" cuisines

is in some ways like the explorers and conquistadors who preceded colonialization. This does not mean that every cross-cultural meal is an intentional act of colonization or neo-colonial Othering, but it is to say that the exoticism frame within foodie discourse draws from a historical legacy of colonialism as well as contemporary global inequalities. Put differently, the foodie's search for exotic culinary adventures cannot be viewed in a power vacuum, or solely in terms of an individual's intentions, but must be placed in a larger geo-political context.

Not only can the search for exotic foods be seen as continuous with an Orientalist discourse of Othering, but it also works with the system of status-seeking and distinction described by Bourdieu (explored further in Chapter 5). Finding new exotic cuisines earns foodies a kind of social status—a status that may have been relatively marginal in the past, but which has gained broader currency with the dramatic expansion of gourmet cuisine and food culture (Heldke 2003: xxiii). Narayan (1997: 181) describes how cultural knowledge about ethnic foods "can be used to constitute [a Western eater] as a colonial 'savant,' adding to her worldliness and prestige in much the same manner as 'knowledge' of faraway places she has visited." Status and capital are clearly connected, since seeking distinction through knowledge of exotic foods and cuisines is linked to those with cultural and economic capital. Heldke (2003: xxii) cites a study by the National Restaurant Association on ethnic cuisines, which observes that adventurous "culture-oriented" consumers are the most highly educated and have high incomes and the highest percentage of managerial/professional types in their ranks. Economic capital is required for international travel, and is often required to seek out a dining experience beyond food staples, what Bourdieu termed "foods of necessity" as opposed to luxury foods (1984), even though exotic food may be relatively accessible compared with other elite status symbols. As a food adventurer working within the university system, Heldke writes: "sports cars, gigantic houses, and expensive jewelry are not within our budgets; dinner is" (2003: xxiii). Just as Bourdieu (1984) noted how teachers may seek out exotic "peasant" fare to demonstrate their cultural capital, a newspaper food feature describes a group of "bohemo-nist" bike couriers and pink-collar workers living beyond their means in their pursuit of the best croissants, cheese stores, and single-malt scotch (*Globe and Mail*, May 9, 2007, p. L1). While foodie status symbols might be relatively affordable compared with a Rolls-Royce or a Rolex, the pursuit of exotic foods is a status strategy employed by those with cultural capital—university professors, students, and the legions of arts workers moonlighting as waiters. Cultural capital is required to appreciate foodie discourse and discern which features of exoticism are worth pursuing.

It is also important to note that in global geo-political terms, the seekers of exotic food experiences are still relatively affluent. As residents of the United States, foodies reside in the world economic system's geo-political core—a vantage point that affords them access to commodities from around the world. This vantage point places foodies at the top of commodity chains driven by neo-colonial economic relationships that render marginalized food workers in and from the Global South ineligible to participate in food adventuring in a significant way. This is not to say, though, that there is not important foodie adventuring happening elsewhere in the world. Non-Western global centers in Asia such as Shanghai, Singapore, and Tokyo are well known for their rich foodie culture, where similarly economically and culturally advantaged elites embark on their own forms of adventuring and where cosmopolitan food adventurers from around the world come together to explore something new. In short, while not all food adventurers are North American economic elites, it is virtually impossible for an impoverished and marginalized person to fully participate in foodie culture as a consumer and food adventurer, rather than as a dishwasher in a fashionable restaurant, or a subsistence farmer harvesting cocoa beans for a gourmet chocolate bar.

Culinary Cosmopolitanism?

At the same time as it is essential to recognize the neo-colonial dimensions of the search for the exotic, we question whether culinary adventuring is uniformly malignant and harmful. This question haunted us as we discussed food adventuring with friends, family, and fellow foodies. A recurring narrative emerged in these discussions: Contact with new, "exotic" cuisines was seen to mark a transition from a parochial, Eurocentric lifeworld, to a new kind of cosmopolitan sensibility that affected not just diet, but was part of a critical attitude towards Western culture. In this narrative, learning about and eating exotic new foods represented part of a transition towards cultural cosmopolitanism, understood as a condition of respecting difference, appreciating cultural heterogeneity, and questioning Eurocentrism.

Uma Narayan expresses sympathy for these cosmopolitan culinary narratives; reflecting upon her own caste-based dietary history (defined by vegetarianism and a prohibition on consuming food cooked by non-Brahmins), she expresses a fear of "food parochialism," and suggests that "a willingness to eat the food of Others seems to indicate at least a growing democracy of the palate" (1997: 180). A gustatory appreciation of the foods of groups that are socially distant from ourselves can go hand-in-hand with a broader

acceptance of these groups as fellow citizens and neighbors, even if all we know about them is what they eat. Food-court multiculturalism may be the easiest kind of multiculturalism to achieve, and can certainly disguise xenophobic attitudes towards the producers of new exotic foods. While we must remain wary of romanticized ideas about culinary cosmopolitanism (e.g., privileged foodie as "citizen of the world"), we should not throw the foodie baby out with the proverbial bathwater, and overlook the role food can play as a gateway out of cultural parochialism and a prompt challenging Eurocentric prejudices. Narratives of food democracy and cosmopolitan cultural inclusion have some historical resonance in multicultural contexts. Donna Gabaccia's work (1998) on the history of American foodways, for instance, describes how the American foodscape was built not on a Euro-American monoculture, but on the incorporation of ethnic food traditions from around the world—bagels, pizza, pickles—to construct a uniquely heterogeneous sense of American cuisine.

So how do we reconcile these two impulses, the culinary adventuring that smacks of imperialism, on the one hand, with the more admirable aspiration to escape cultural parochialism and experience culinary diversity, on the other? How can we experience the foods of the Other, while not perpetuating colonial relationships and assumptions? Even if foodies reject the valuation of exotic foods and prioritize non-colonial eating, it is not clear that they (we) can achieve greater social justice through an isolated local diet free from outside influences (Born and Purcell 2006). Historically, foods have been fantastic globe-trotters, implanting themselves in remote locations and making their way into regional and national cuisines—like the tomato's role in Italian cuisine (even though its biological origins are in South America), or the role of "curry" in the English diet (even though no dish named "curry" was eaten at the time of Britain's colonization of India). Culinary isolationism is particularly unrealistic in today's age of global travel, transnational commodity chains, and globally integrated food economies. In conditions of cultural interpenetration and heightened awareness of ecological interdependency, the question of non-colonial eating is not about whether transnational culinary exchanges should take place, and more about how these exchanges can happen through more equitable, less exploitative processes that address political, economic, and cultural privilege.

To re-state the question we posed in the introduction of this chapter: Are culinary adventurers neo-colonial eaters of the Other, or cosmopolitan envoys? We argue that the scholarly debate over how to understand the gourmet's quest for exotic food has been hampered by a search for either/or answers to this question. In keeping with the central argument of this book,

foodie culture is not a simple story of snobbery or cultural liberation, but is fundamentally constituted by the tension between a pull of democratic inclusion, and the desire to erect boundaries of exclusivity, distinction, and social status. Drawing from Ulrich Beck's development of the term "cosmopolitan" (2006), we suggest that culinary cosmopolitanism as it is practiced by American foodies today overlaps with a neo-colonial desire to explore and possess the cultural resources of the Other. Culinary cosmopolitanism pushes foodies beyond the world of nationally bound cuisine, and embraces both the possibility and also the reality that ideas, people, and their cultural artifacts move more fluidly across borders in the globalization era. Beck (2006) usefully distinguishes between philosophical cosmopolitanism (the often unsubstantiated desire to be a "citizen of the world"), and the "really existing" cosmopolitanism taking shape in world risk society. Transnational crises (e.g., avian flu, global warming, global recession) force greater reflexivity about ecological and economic interdependency, and make the development of a cosmopolitan outlook not simply an elite pipe-dream, but a defining feature of the current era (Beck 2006). This is not to deny that "really existing" cosmopolitanism is associated with upper-middle-class and upper-class lifestyles (Hannerz 1996; Lamont 1992: 107), or to obscure the fact that culinary cosmopolitanism occurs in a context of grossly maldistributed power and resources rendering those in the geo-political core of the world system tremendously privileged. However, the point is that globalization processes—globalized risks, global commodity chains, and transnational migration patterns—impact how we think about dinner, and challenge the boundaries of previous dining eras built on nationally based ideals. Despite all of the limitations of cosmopolitan ideals and "we are the world" imagery, "really existing" culinary cosmopolitanism involves the valuation of exotic foods—a tendency that has challenged hierarchies privileging European cuisine, and particularly French food, above all else. A culinary cosmopolitan perspective resides in a context of tremendous inequality, but it may simultaneously facilitate meaningful cultural exchange, and attempt to link food choices to global risks like climate change.

Of course, the complexity of culinary cosmopolitanism is not always transparent to foodie adventurers, but it is an important part of understanding the Euro-American's contradictory and deeply rooted desire to seek out and experience the cuisines of the Exotic Other. Narayan writes: "Seemingly simple acts of eating are flavored with complicated, and sometimes contradictory, cultural meanings. Thinking about food can help to reveal the rich and messy textures of our attempts at self-understanding, as well as our interesting and problematic understandings of our relationship to social Other" (1997: 161).

Operationalizing Exoticism

In short, the search for exotic foods is not only complex, but is also inherently contradictory given this built-in tension between a neo-colonial search for status and distinction in exotic food choices, and a democratic impulse of cultural inclusion and culinary cosmopolitanism. Understanding something of the complex origins of the valuation of culinary exoticism, we can move from a more philosophical terrain to the social scientific, and operationalize the term "exotic" in order to empirically examine exotic foods in the gourmet foodscape. We suggest a twofold characterization that emphasizes how exotic foods are predicated on (1) social distance; and (2) breaking norms.

Although in popular usage exoticism is often equated with "foreign" or "ethnic" foods, this conception of exotic takes a particular reference point for granted. That reference point typically assumes the perspective of a foodie who is American, cosmopolitan, white, and wealthy. While such a reference point is often hidden in foodies' democratic positioning as socially inclusive, our analysis makes this point explicit, and identifies how exotic foods are socially distant, particularly from most of the creators of foodie discourse in the United States. With the central point of production of foodie discourse being food media (i.e., gourmet food magazines and newspaper columns), media primarily produced by and for a white, upper-middle-class audience, foodie discourse generally assumes that eaters have access to considerable economic and cultural capital. The white, upper-middle-class reference point is the basis for demarcating exotic foods as those that are socially distant on the basis of ethnicity, social class, or some combination of these two qualities.⁴¹ Moreover, social distance can have a spatial element, and can either be increased or foreshortened through reference to geography. In this way, the social distance of Australians with European ancestry is much more a function of geographic distance than of ethnicity. A calculus of ethnicity, class, and geographic distance is also used to construe the social distance between working-class Americans and the gourmet food world. For example, working-class African-Americans in New York City and working-class whites in rural Arkansas are socially distant in ways that are different, but which involve the three elements of ethnicity, social class, and geographic distance. So in this first sense of the term, "exotic" refers to foods that are socially distant and considered unusual, novel, and "foreign," assuming that the cultural experience of the affluent Euro-American is the universal reference point.

But is the terrain of "exotic" foods simply about foods that are foreign, or socially distant from the culinary "norm" of relatively affluent, Euro-American food adventurers? A second dimension of exoticism emerged in our

reading of foodie discourse, a dimension that we refer to as “norm-breaking” foods. Exotic foods in this sense are not simply foods that are socially distant from the culinary mainstream, but are foods that present difference as radically different, exciting, and desirable. These foods are not simply rare, or unusual, but they violate norms of the culinary and cultural mainstream. This dimension captures how foodie discourse frames exotic foods as foreign to mainstream taste buds, but also excitingly different, distinct, and even shocking. The need to develop this second category of exoticism is not surprising given the increasing cultural awareness of middle-class American eaters with once-exotic foods like sushi and pad Thai. As such, in a globalized multicultural foodscape, exotic foods are not only foods that are different and foreign, but they are also constructed as foods that are norm-breaking. As a socially constructed category, the precise manifestations of exotic “norm-breaking” are constantly in flux given the dynamic nature of food norms in a globalized foodscape. For example, while it was once considered norm-breaking to eat raw fish, now the mere presence of sashimi on a menu is sometimes enough to warrant the scorn of a food critic. The second dimension of the term “exotic,” then, refers to foods that aren’t simply socially distant on the basis of ethnicity or social class, but are those that manage to shock middle-American, non-foodie sensibilities, breaking food norms that allow the eater to stand aside as unique, special, and distinctly adventuresome.

The two dimensions of exoticism are summarized in Figure 3.2. Understanding these two axes can help us understand how food can be framed

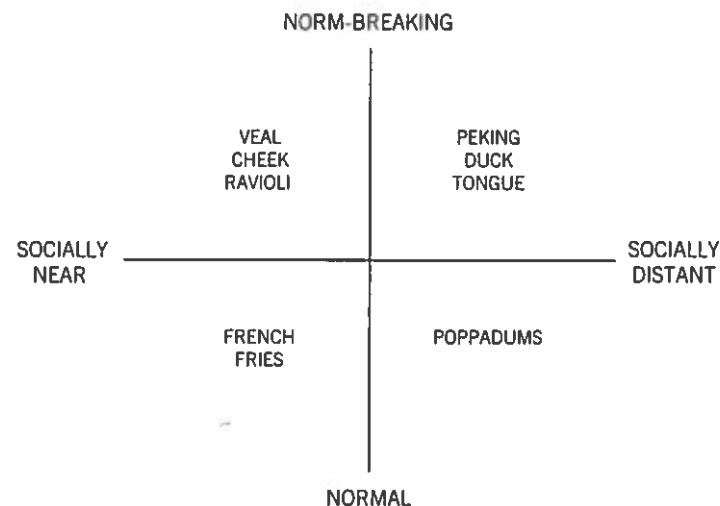


Figure 3.2 Dimensions of Exoticism

along a spectrum of exoticism, from strongly exotic to weakly exotic, though even weakly exotic food can be seen as highly desirable and legitimated as worthy in an omnivorous cultural context. The *x* axis represents foods that can be socially distant or socially proximate—qualities of Otherness that are achieved either through ethnic difference, social class, geographic location, or some combination of these factors. On the *y* axis, we indicate how foods can be seen as relatively normal, versus relatively norm-breaking. Examples of weakly exotic foods are found in the upper-left and lower-right quadrants, where foods are framed as either socially distant or norm-breaking. Strongly exotic foods are found in the upper-right quadrant and are framed as both socially distant and norm-breaking. So while the veal cheek ravioli served in an upscale Manhattan restaurant is exotic enough to be suitable for gourmet consumption, the tongue of a duck cooked Peking-style is more exotic yet. Poppadums are familiar as a starchy snack and break no norms about what counts as food, but their association with a socially distant group makes them exotic enough, and clearly more exotic than a more familiar starchy snack, French fries.⁴² The status system of exoticism we describe suggests that the omnivore will tend to avoid the lower-left quadrant and gravitate toward the other three quadrants.

From Figure 3.2 it is clear that “rarity” is an essential part of the valuation of exoticism, as it is with authenticity. Exotic foods are often rare foods, like a \$100 square watermelon grown in a glass container and flown in from Malaysia. Even if exotic foods themselves are readily available (as is the case with organ meats), they are rare by virtue of the fact that mainstream American eaters infrequently consume them. The argument that aesthetic value depends, at least in part, on rarity has been made by Veblen (1994 [1899]) and is also evident in Bourdieu’s (1993) distinction between fields of mass and restricted production. While Veblen wrote about the role of rarity a hundred years ago (1994 [1899]), what is different today is the onset of omnivorous status systems where rarity or price alone cannot operate as an effective symbol of value. In an omnivorous era, valued exotic foods can be non-rare foods from a socially distant context (e.g., street food in Burma), or can be parts of an animal that are relatively cheap, but distasteful to mainstream eaters. To be clear, what is *complex* about the omnivorous culinary context is that rarity alone is not a sufficient quality to explain how and why certain kinds of authentic or exotic foods are valued. In short, rarity is a necessary but not sufficient condition to understand the legitimation of high-status foods in an omnivorous era, and requires further elaboration, as we have tried to do in these chapters on authenticity and exoticism.⁴³

In the next section we bring this graphical depiction of exoticism to life by looking at how exoticism is articulated in gourmet food discourse. As in the chapter on authenticity, we draw from examples in food writing and our interviews. We will see how foodies deal with geography, social distance, ethnic differences, and norm-breaking to construct an idea of what "exotic" is, and then use that idea to strike a balance between democracy and distinction.

Exoticism as Distance

Most of the foodies we interviewed placed a high value on foods from different countries and non-European ethnicities. As part of life in an era of globalization, many of our foodie respondents had traveled extensively, and reported that, through that travel, they gained an interest in different cuisines. In the words of Timothy Bauer, a 68-year-old from Washington, DC:

I really got interested in just trying all sorts of different food, particularly ethnic foods. I don't know if that derived out of my experience in the Philippines or not but I was really sort of interested in, you know, Laotian food or food from Ecuador, or food from Indonesia, or southern Thai food, I mean all these different sorts of foods other than the sort of standard, sort of European-slash-American food.

Foodie respondents also emphasized their access to many different global cuisines within major U.S. cities. Neil Taverna, a 25-year-old living in Brooklyn, reported that "New York tends to be exotic because you can sort of, you know, can find a group of, you know, immigrants somewhere in the city that have . . . real restaurants they run." The presence of cuisines from multiple cultures was not only noted in major cities, but was also universally valued by the foodies in our sample, even though they did not always use the term "exotic" to describe them. While many respondents disliked formal restaurants, or fashionable restaurants, many spoke positively about "little, ethnic restaurants." Melissa Trent, a 58-year-old attorney, insisted that she was "not into trendy restaurants because they are not always good," but said, "I like the ethnic restaurants. The little, ethnic restaurants . . . the ethnic food is usually the stuff I can't make, or I don't know how to make. So you know, it's just different."

In our examination of food writing we also witnessed how unusual foods from different places around the world were highly valued. We read about delicacies like *mistela negra*, which is new red wine dosed with brandy (though,

we also read, it is not available in the United States) (*Saveur*, March 2004, p. 62), ram horn nut, which also goes by the name of water caltrop (*Gourmet*, January 2004, p. 104), and *anardana*, which is ground sundried pomegranate seed sprinkled into a myriad of rubs and dishes in Pakistan and northern India (*Saveur*, January/February 2013, p. 46). We also learned about unfamiliar dishes such as *O-a-chian*, a Taiwanese dish of oysters with scrambled eggs (*Saveur*, March 2004, p. 37), a Spanish chef's *foie gras* with cotton candy and avocado-tomato sorbet (*Food & Wine*, May 2004, p. 74), and *burekas*, Israeli savory pastries eaten with hard-boiled eggs and hot pepper relish (*Saveur*, Jan/Feb 2013, p. 3). We learned that when visiting Japanese restaurants we should not "play it safe by ordering Japanese standards," and instead move towards more exotic dishes like a Kazu sushi cake that is "quickly and dramatically singed with a blowtorch" (*New York Times*, March 19, 2006, p. 14NJ.21), or *umeboshi*, "the Japanese pickled plums that are brined in red shiso leaves to impart a pinkish tint" and aged over decades (*San Francisco Chronicle*, May 5, 2006, p. E.10).

Foodie discourse contains a fundamental impulse to draw attention to exotic new ingredients and dishes. Most magazine, newspaper, and blog writing features some element of identifying new culinary trends and hot new foods, as well as identifying what foods and cuisines are considered *passé*. Educating readers about the fashion cycles of cuisine—what is the hot new exotic cuisine or ingredient, and what is now pedestrian and *passé*—can be seen as part of the democratizing function of gastronomy in that it publicizes information about what is included within the contemporary repertoire of "good" food. Likewise, many of our interviewees were enthusiastic to discuss foods that they perceived as new and interesting, such as in the following excerpt from our interview with Ted Darby: "I'm supposed to cook a turken tonight. Do you know what a turken is?" (Interviewer: "No.") "Turken is, another name for it is a naked necked chicken. A turken is a breed of chicken, but it tends to be sort of, apparently they're great egg layers and they have a kind of meat that tends to be somewhat tougher than other chickens. And so you have to, they advise you to cook it wet, in some kind of wet cooking method, or very slow, gentle cooking so you don't toughen it up more than necessary." At the same time as foodies publicize information about exciting new foods—like turken—these fashion cycles work to provide a source of status and distinction by alerting foodies to the possibility of foods and ingredients that they can be the first to read about, or, better yet, consume, and a way to distinguish themselves from less knowledgeable eaters.

Of course, not all "new" foods are equally valued by foodies. Exoticism is a key frame for valorizing certain new foods, while rejecting others. We

understand exoticism as existing in both strong and weak forms. The strong forms are attached to foods that are discursively constructed as foods of people who are socially, economically, and geographically most distant from the American foodie. At one end of the spectrum of social distancing and Othering are foods associated with poor, rural people of color in developing countries. In these instances, heightened social distance on the level of class, race, and ethnicity works synergistically with geographic space to construct foods as strongly exotic. These are the foods of Vietnamese fishermen, or the Bedouin of Jordan—groups that are both geographically and socially (ethnically, and in terms of class) extremely far from the lives of the foodies who are the dominant creators of American foodie discourse.

Interestingly, strong exoticism, based on prominent forms of social and geographic distance, is less frequent in foodie discourse than the weak form of exoticism associated with food and people who are only somewhat socially and geographically distant from American foodies. This finding supports Heldke's observation that "we like our exoticism somewhat familiar, recognizable, *controllable*," put into terms that we understand and can relate to (2003: 19). Fairly common in foodie discourse are descriptions or narratives that highlight limited commonalities to shorten the social distance to a foreign setting and present a moderate or weak kind of exoticism or Othering. These exotic foods and cuisines are strange, but can still be understood and enjoyed; they are made familiar and palatable through descriptions that emphasize familiar iconography and recognized food preparation techniques and ingredients. For example, we read about Thai chefs who cook *foie gras* with sweet potatoes for the upper middle class, inserting a familiar foodie ingredient that closes the class gap though not the ethnicity gap. A review of an upscale restaurant in São Paulo, Brazil, moderates the unusualness of the case-study by emphasizing "the area's glamorous surroundings . . . stores like Armani, Versace, Christian Dior, Louis Vuitton," and asserting that "families come to Antiquarius [restaurant] for home-style cooking in an elegant but laid back setting" (*Food & Wine*, June, 2004, p. 46). The food eaten at this restaurant is somewhat unusual, "minced salt cod with julienne potatoes and fried egg sprinkled with pressed hot-pepper oil" (*ibid.*), but not so foreign that it cannot be comprehended. Similarly an Arab fusion restaurant in San Francisco is described with adjectives like "exotic," "eccentric," "wacky," and "odd," and introduced with the injunction to "walk toward the light—the exotic crimson light emanating from Saha's doorway," but ultimately the exotic food is familiar, described as "comfort food with an air of mystery" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, November 10, 2006, p. E.6).

The valuation of weak exoticism was strongly evident in our interviews with foodies. For example, Fiona Callworth, a 54-year-old Boston woman,

spoke positively about an "unusual" meal involving Navajo food served in a hospital cafeteria in Page, Arizona. Kelly Jones, a 41-year-old clergywoman from New York State, articulates a sense of food as weakly exotic in response to a question about how her tastes have changed over time. Her answer contextualizes a breakfast dish in terms of her global travels: "[T]ravels to Italy or going to El Salvador, eating Salvadorian food, that's all expanded my palate. You know, having beans and cream for breakfast is something I love, you know, with a good corn tortilla. It's something that I never would have thought of had I not had the chance to travel in El Salvador." The geographic distance of the food's origins provides some element of exoticism, as does the unique pairing of tortillas, beans, and cream as a breakfast dish, but these are relatively familiar ingredients to most Americans.

Weak exoticism was also very clear in food blogs. Jeanine Donofrio, in her posting for *Love and Lemons*, wrote about travelling to Japan with her husband and hoping they would not encounter a dish that was *too* unusual:

Jack has been requesting udon ever since we got back from Japan (over a year ago), so finally, tonight, udon he got. This is not traditional udon—and that's my disclaimer. I would love to be able to say that we went to Japan and came home able to share something remotely authentic. The truth is that we pointed to things on menus and just hoped that no one would put something in front of me that was still moving. (Jack on the other hand is ok with food that still moves).

(Donofrio 2012a)

Our analysis also suggests that, overall, blogs were more oriented to weak exoticism than other forms of food writing. As a whole, bloggers generally stuck to the Euro-American canon in their posts, drawing on recognizable or familiar forms of exotic difference or using exotic elements to "spice up" their presentation of otherwise whitestream dishes. Such an orientation likely comes from the more populist orientation of blogs themselves. The primary goal of the personalized blogs we analyzed was to present recipes that their readers could reproduce at home, doing so in a way that created shared understandings around the hesitations and challenges of actually doing so day-to-day. Compared with magazine and newspaper writers, bloggers did not so much position themselves as "experts" as they did "your friend who knows a lot about food." With a goal of identifiability, bloggers were therefore unlikely to present dishes that were obviously unpalatable to North American palates or included inaccessible flavors or ingredients. In the quote above, Donofrio draws attention to the power of the exotic frame (and therefore still

accesses some of the symbolic capital attributed to it) through her disclaimer that she would love to be able to have returned from their trip with unique and exciting recipes; however, she also reveals her discomfort with it in her confessed hesitation towards "food that moves." In doing so, Donofrio builds connections to her readers, who likely hold similar hesitations towards exotic dishes, while simultaneously referencing the power of the frame.

Besides geographic distance, another way that exoticism manifests is through an emphasis on social distance. An emphasis on social distance facilitates Othering, and focuses on a lack of knowledge, or through a presentation of "pre-modern peoples." In this vein, we read of "pasta made by women who measure weeks in flour and seasons in egg yolks and every fold and crevice of noodle can seem as eloquent as a sigh" (*Gourmet*, January 2004, p. 46). We are introduced to Mexican cuisine in a special issue on the topic through its connection to pre-modern indigeniety: "For all its complexity, Mexican food is primordial—it speaks on a gut level. It's no wonder: Carried in its DNA are the slow-simmered flavors of the indigenous kitchen, which was little more than a fire pit, earthenware pots, and a clay griddle" (*Saveur*, 2012, p. 18).

While the geographic distance is small compared with overseas travel articles, the socially distant exotic Other clearly persists within the United States in food writing. A restaurant review describes a Japanese restaurant with "mysteriously crunchy raw octopus pickle," but the real story of the meal is the charmingly ethnic, but easily confused, hostess and co-owner:

she answers the telephone, garnishes plates . . . conducts conversations with the employees and works out each table's check. She also delivers those checks in a smiling rapid-fire falsetto: Thank you thank you very much thank you thank you very much, she says, her hands clasped over her tummy, and bowing from the waist. On our second visit, she mistook our table of long-patient and very hungry diners for others who had actually received and eaten their food, so we heard the tune twice. And then, when we finally did leave our table, we heard more singsong, goodbye, goodbye, thank you very much, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, thank you thank you thank you.

(*New York Times*, March 19, 2006, p. 14NJ.21)

A surprising number of travel articles in gourmet magazines frame rural America as Other, constructing foods as exotic based on gaps in cultural knowledge or economic capital, rather than ethnicity. These articles are set in rural areas within the United States, often the rural South, Midwest, or Southwest, away from the major urban culinary centers. Social distance is

maintained by focusing on the food of people who are portrayed as relatively impoverished and/or uneducated, and possessing unusual food norms or a lack of knowledge. Take, for example, an article that describes Arkansas as "a serious pie lode," where the authors, Jane and Michael Stern, meet the owners and patrons of truck stops and diners (*Gourmet*, August 2004, pp. 32, 127). The authors report that upon explaining that they hail from Connecticut, one stranger they encounter reveals that he thinks that Connecticut is in Canada. They "don't bother making the fine point that Canada and Connecticut are different places" because the especially good Arkansan coconut pie has arrived (*Gourmet*, August 2004, p. 127). Worthy food can be discursively constructed through a similar Othering based on class difference but without the rural setting. Harry Quinn, a 43-year-old communications technology worker in the Bay Area, expresses this kind of exoticism when he says, "I'm a huge fan of the old American café, you know, where you want to get a hot turkey sandwich or chicken fried steak. And it could look like a real hole-in-the-wall, you know, but you go in and they've got some world class stuff going on."

As we note above, food's rarity is a central (but not exhaustive) element of the constitution of exoticism in foodie discourse. In this context, rare foods are often sourced from highly specific geographic locations, and are not readily accessible to most U.S. eaters. A focus on exoticism associated with rarity allows a relatively subtle validation of distinction along with cultural and economic capital. Food that is unknown or obscure because it is in scarce supply, or because it is not available to American audiences, is often highly recommended. One author describes eating a cheese called "Flixer, a nutty number made only from the milk of 12 very talented Swiss ewes" (*Food & Wine*, July 2004, p. 171). We are told that "[t]he Palacios brand of Spanish chorizo, made in the Rioja region, is the only authentic Spanish chorizo imported into the United States" (*Saveur*, May 2004, p. 95). Other ingredients that are explicitly mentioned as difficult or even impossible to acquire in the United States include ang-chim crabs (*Saveur*, March 2004, p. 44), and *botifarra negra* (Catalonian blood sausage) (*Saveur*, March 2004, p. 66). Some rare ingredients are not foreign at all, but are highly scarce, such as fresh hearts of peach palm flown to New York from Hawaii (*Gourmet*, November 2004, p. 48).

Within food writing, there is often no need to explicitly state that a certain food is rare and difficult to acquire because it is clear from the context. In travel articles, for instance, food is valorized for being from a very specific place and time, and the readers understand that they must go to the food because the food will not be coming to them through mass distribution channels. The same implicit rarity was evident in restaurant reviews, features on small producers, and articles focusing on family traditions.

The traveling described by our interviewees and within the food writing we read covered the globe. However, the coverage was uneven in so far as there was far more attention paid to foods from the United States primarily, and secondarily from Europe, with less attention to foods from other locations (though this is somewhat less so for blogs than other forms of food writing).⁴⁴ These findings suggest that assumptions about foodies' interest in global cuisine are overstated, even in magazines that consistently carry travel features. The dominant focus for culinary omnivores is strongly situated in locations in advanced industrialized countries, with the discourse focused on travel to or within a developed-world setting. Africa, for instance, almost never appears in foodie discourse. This tendency suggests that culinary cosmopolitanism is not a global democracy where any and all cuisines are deemed interesting, and supports the idea that gourmet food culture remains strongly situated in the North American and European core, with other global food cultures added intermittently in ways that do not fundamentally challenge a Eurocentric culinary canon.

Exciting Food: Food that Breaks Norms

The second dimension of exoticism that emerged in our examination of foodie discourse was a focus on food that is exciting, outrageous, inappropriate, daring, and generally not accepted by mainstream American eaters. Gourmet cuisine has traditionally incorporated norm-breaking foods, such as frog legs and raw oysters, which rest outside the realm of what many middle-class and working-class American eaters would consider appetizing or even edible, at least initially. The inclusion of exotically norm-breaking foods is a strong tendency for gourmet food writers who need to continually identify new dishes for their audiences. This analysis of food's legitimation through norm-breaking helps us to understand a gourmet magazine's editorial comment that "[n]othing is more boring than sashimi. . . . When I'm eating raw fish in a Japanese restaurant, I practically pass out in mid-bite" (*Bon Appétit*, January 2004, p. 36). In the recent past, raw fish was a norm-breaking food for American omnivores. However, since raw fish is the new normal for this group, it can no longer be legitimated on this basis, and new norm-breaking foods (e.g., beef cheeks) must be found. The search for familiarity is subtly mocked, as with a *New York Times* restaurant review that concludes, "What, no chocolate cake? No crème brûlée? No tiramisu? I didn't miss them, although some diners might. But if you're an adventurous eater longing for new and exciting combinations done well, Mosaic may be just what you're

looking for" (February 5, 2006, p. 14LI.12). A similar disdain for the familiar and popular styles of Mexican-American food is expressed in another *New York Times* restaurant review:

As with many Mexican-themed places, there are combination plates. Most are more of the same, with too much rice and beans alongside too much of the main dishes: burrito and taco, fajitas, taco salad and quesadilla, black-bean burrito and cheese-stuffed tortilla. Then there's the nacho supremo, which builds a tower of corn tortilla, refried beans, meat or vegetables, Monterey Jack cheese and sauce. We skipped them, in favor of the more specific, more exotic categories.

(*New York Times*, March 5, 2006, p. 14NJ.12)

Like the preference for ingredients from socially distant sources, norm-breaking food provides a relatively subtle way for food writing to confer distinction and status through the quest for exoticism. Such exciting exotic food may violate norms of purity versus impurity, or food versus non-food, such as "[a Corsican cheese selection which includes] chèvre 'avec habitants'—a cheese so ripe that little, maggot-type worms had taken up residence inside" (*Gourmet*, August 2004, p. 93). (The maggots are removed before the cheese is eaten.) We see valorization of norm-breaking food in a profile of Monterey, Mexico, featuring "fritada de cabrito (cabrito [goat] stewed in its blood), machitos (roasted sausages of cabrito heart, liver, and tripe), and cabecita (whole baby goat's head). I had already ordered goat's head once, and that seemed sufficient. But I ate everything else" (*Saveur*, June/July 2004, p. 47).⁴⁵ Additionally, the valorization of exotic food commonly references spice. Departing from the typically underseasoned standard of American "meat and potatoes" food culture, references to heat, particularly, heat garnered from non-North American sources such as hot sauce stand out as excitingly exotic. Phi Tran's narrative about Chinese Szechuan spices in the blog *Princess Tofu* evokes such excitement:

When I was in China, I ate the spiciest deep fried quail eggs in human history—they were boiled then strung onto skewers that were dropped into a cauldron of fire and brimstone seasoned with Szechuan peppers. It made a fire breathing dragon of my ears, but I loved it.

(Tran 2013)

Norm-breaking exotic food is not only eaten outside the United States. Among groups of people and immigrant communities who are socially and/

Melissa Trent, a 58-year-old lawyer in Los Angeles, responded to the question of whether she was interested in exotic food in this way: "[I]t doesn't really do it for me. Like, I mean, I've eaten lardo and I've eaten brains, and I've eaten weird stuff, but it's not . . . I like more mainstream food."

We argue that exoticism is an important strategy for validating foods in an omnivorous culinary discourse. The search for socially and geographically distant and norm-breaking foods allows foodies to signal distinction without offending democratic sensibilities through overt snobbery. Exoticism suggests a potentially radical democratization of gourmet culture through openness to non-European culinary traditions, yet our reading of foodie discourse suggests that the relationship of the exotic frame to ideologies of democracy and distinction is both complex and contradictory.

On the one hand, democratic ideologies are clearly manifest in the omnivore's increasing openness to new foods and cuisines, particularly from non-European immigrant communities. As Gabaccia suggests, America's multi-ethnic foodways "suggest tolerance and curiosity," along with "a willingness to digest, and to make [multi-ethnic dishes] part of one's individual identity" (1998: 9). In addition, openness to exotic norm-breaking foods, like offal, could be seen as establishing a kind of cosmopolitan culinary solidarity with cooks worldwide who cannot afford to waste the multiple, edible parts of an animal.

On the other hand, valuing foods for their foreignness and unusualness inherently establishes standards for distinction. As with the framing of authenticity, the framing of exoticism presents a dialectical tension between democratic ideology and an ideology of distinction. Omnivorous food culture's concern with exoticism explicitly widens the scope of worthy foods, but exoticism also maintains an implicit focus on foods that can require considerable economic and cultural capital to obtain. The rarity and obscurity of many exotic foods leave them relatively inaccessible to most Americans.

The broadening of the repertoire of worthy foods is concomitant with the demarcation of other food preferences as banal, undistinguished, or unsophisticated. In the case of the exotic frame, this situates foodies firmly at the colonial center where they hold the power to determine what is interesting, unusual, and exciting this season, and create criteria for what is validated as gourmet fashions change.⁴⁷ Western colonialism has traditionally rested upon the idea that the ethnic Other "is not a part of human culture in the full sense, but is a resource I may mine, harvest, develop, exploit or otherwise utilize" (Heldke 2003: 46–47), and this ideal is confirmed in the selective mining, and rejection, of certain ethnic foods as interesting and unusual one moment, and over-exposed the next. As *Gourmet* magazine declares in its listing of "What's

Now, What's Next," the white rice feeding more than a billion Chinese people is now considered *passé*, while Chinese black rice is deemed interesting, unusual, and "stunning" (*Gourmet*, January 2004, p. 26). The same issue declares that the country of Nepal is horribly "Now," while Bhutan is considered the "Next" sexy culinary hotspot (*Gourmet*, January 2004, p. 29).

While the search for exotic foods offers the potential for cosmopolitan understandings of social inequality and political marginalization, it is not always clear that culinary pursuits facilitate these understandings. Looking at gourmet travel writing, which is a common type of gourmet food writing that connects foods to socially distant people and places, we find reasons for skepticism. Travel articles revel in the exotic geographic settings and extreme social distance, providing a wealth of details about foreign people and places. These articles are narratives that tell a story about the role of food in people's lives that deviate significantly from an accounting of the food alone. Although we read about many details of foreign people and places, we almost never learn about the serious social problems that exist in many of these exotic locations. As a result, gourmet food travel writing provides what Heldke (2003: 58) describes as:

a superficial image of a culture, an image that treats that culture as if it were designed for my use and pleasure. This way of eating is harmful both to colonizer and colonized, for it reifies and reduces colonized people, substitutes for authentic relations to food the exotic quick fix and normalized colonialism, encouraging us to condone it in its other, more destructive economic and political forms.

These tensions also raise questions about the impact of these frames on those outside of the presumed Euro-American reference point. How do people of color or those with connections to food cultures deemed "authentically exotic" by this discourse relate to its framing—do they resonate with diverse groups of people? If so, what foods do they consider socially distant, norm-breaking, rustic, or authentic? What restrictions or opportunities does the discourse provide them when their own cuisines are marked as interestingly exotic or genuinely authentic? Such questions are fodder for future research, but initial investigation into this area suggests that the frames do resonate with people of color yet offer contradictory potentials, on the one hand, for cross-cultural understanding and, on the other, for exclusion based on the concepts' connections to cultural misappropriation, essentialization, and Othering (Oleschuk 2014).

Our finding of the different emphasis on norm-breaking exoticism between food journalists and our interviewees allows us to draw some

inferences about the dynamics of the American gastronomic field. Bourdieu's (1993) analysis of cultural fields demonstrates that any given cultural field encompasses people (cultural producers and audiences) with varying amounts of both economic capital and symbolic capital (prestige within the field). The most prestige within a field accrues to those who position themselves at the avant-garde of cultural production as well as of cultural consumption. If we assume that gourmet food writers, as the experts in the field with cultural authority and institutional legitimacy, hold the more highly valued symbolic capital, then the comparison with foodies seems to indicate that norm-breaking exoticism is a dominant form of symbolic capital in gourmet food. In other words, shocking or norm-breaking food is avant-garde within the culinary field. Just as symbolist poetry is more esoteric and difficult than romance novels within the literary field, within the gourmet field eating offal is more esoteric and difficult than eating fast-food. Preferring strongly exotic food appears to be unnecessary within the gourmet field for foodies. However, for the experts who need to maintain their cultural legitimacy and leading positions in the field, a preference for strongly exotic foods is highly valued.

To support this idea, we can point to the fact that foods that are at one time strongly exotic, such as sushi in the United States, can become only weakly exotic over time, and will thereby not serve as well for distinction. Those who position themselves as the avant-garde, therefore, will have to emphasize the most strongly exotic foods to maintain their position. These foods (e.g., *tartare de cheval*—raw horse meat) are typically "difficult" and esoteric in the sense that they present a problem for the average American eater to enjoy because they violate norms concerning the nature of food, particularly as it relates to the consumption of specific animals and specific animal parts. This nonetheless does offer those with connections to strongly exotic food cultures (largely people of color and those otherwise marginalized by the neo-colonialist tendencies of the discourse) easy access to the symbolic capital afforded by knowledge of more extreme forms of exotic difference (Oleschuk 2014).

In sum, our reading of foodie discourse suggests that, while the exotic frame can be part of a democratic ideology of cosmopolitan openness and equality to multiple ethnic cuisines, it also draws from post-colonial ideologies of status and distinction that pass exclusionary, and arbitrary, judgments on entire nations and populations; at the same time they perpetuate harmful stereotypes of naïve, unknowledgeable Others. Nonetheless, the possibility for culinary cosmopolitanism cannot be completely discounted within foodie culture. Food adventurer and writer Jeffrey Alford, for instance, critiques

fellow cookbook author Angela Murrills for her lack of reflexivity and class privilege in a book interweaving food writing with a narrative about the search for the perfect vacation home in the South of France (Alford 2004). In Alford's words:

In *Hot Sun Cool Shadow*, this house-buying story is like icing on a cake, only in this case I'd prefer my cake without icing. Given the fact that less than 5 per cent of the world's population will in a lifetime have a chance to fly in an airplane, the trials and tribulations of purchasing a second house in a country 6,000 miles away . . . is a story that is hardly compelling. Shouldn't publishers have motives other than selling the highest numbers of books to readers with the highest average incomes?

(2004: D7)

Alford's own food writing is heavily guided by a cosmopolitan ideology that pays particular tribute to the culinary traditions of Asian countries (Alford and Duguid 1998, 2000), and provides readers not just with recipes of the socially distant Other, but also with a relatively nuanced cultural picture of the peoples and cultures behind the foods. Still, Alford appears surprised by a ubiquitous element of culinary discourse—its consistent tendency to present elites as the legitimate arbiters of good taste in an omnivorous era, even when foods are pulled from the cookbooks of socially distant, exotic working people. Our reading of gourmet food writing suggests that gourmet publishers are not simply aspiring to sell cookbooks to high-income elites—although clearly that may be one goal, they would prefer to sell as many cookbooks as possible. Instead, they are using a narrative that is consistent with the culinary discourse we identify: one that relies on social elites in the geo-political core to define the importance of authenticity and exoticism in an omnivorous cultural terrain.