

# **New Dining Rules: An investigation into Supper Clubs as an indicator of our postmodernist consumer tendencies.**

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## **Introduction**

*“There is a new generation of culinarians, actively questioning the establishment, questioning it by acting, cooking, dining outside the bureaucratically controlled mainstream. We all love restaurants – the glamour, the high ceilings and soft music but for some reason a great number of folks have decided to take a different path to feed people and take their money, they don’t have licenses, they don’t have sought after corner locations, they don’t rely on PR firms or foot traffic – this growing cadre of gastronomes set their tables in forgotten warehouses, on great rock promontories, in cramped apartments, in suburban garages – they cook and they charge and their stories and their food make for one amazing unwinding story...”* Heberoy (2008) as cited in Tinderbox (2008).

According to an NPD Group Report the number of visits to upscale restaurants have been scaling downward over the last number of years. Overall, the segment’s sales were down an estimated 12% in 2009 (Tlapa et al., 2010). According to a Mintel report (2009), this occurrence can be mainly attributed to the recession, with many consumers tending to downscale on their restaurant choice and eat out less.

However, Steinberger (2009) believes, as devastating as the economic downturn is, there is a far bigger threat to French fine dining, that of rising indifference of the French public, especially youths, to classic French cuisine. Beauge (2011) as cited in Gopnik (2011, p.41), concludes that the problem is attributable to the restaurant culture “*We no longer have a crisis in French food. Now we have a crisis of the French restaurant*”.

Steinberger (2009) also states that the Michelin Star system has become outdated and financially crippling. It is therefore no coincidence that a counter-system has emerged, *Le Fooding*, as a challenger to the Michelin Guide. Le Fooding, a movement which is opposed to the rules of traditional dining was set up in 2000 by two French journalists exasperated by the conservatism and conformity of French food culture. The movement is also responsible for organizing mass picnics, whereby Michelin chefs are invited away from the confines of restaurants to cook in more casual, high-spirited settings (Gopnik, 2011 and O’Loughlin, 2011).

The movement away from fine dining has led to a surge in more underground, transient dining experiences, such as Supper Club Dining, Pop Up Restaurants and upscaled street food. In the UK alone, over 100 Supper Clubs exist under the radar today, according to both March (2011) and Bell (2009). Furthermore, a celebration of street food culture has seen the launch of The Vendy Awards in New York, The British Street Food Awards in the UK and The Dublin Street Food Awards in Ireland. Resnick (2011), Low (2011) and Dublinstreetfood (2011).

These new concepts, according to Euromonitor (2009), are due to a rise in consumer demand for more varied and high quality mobile foodservices. Coincidentally it was Mennell (1996) who has predicted the decline in ostentation and superfluity in eating and this is evident in the consumer’s movement towards more casual dining forms. Likewise, Urry (2002) believes there is a growth of post-Fordist consumerism as a reaction by consumers to being seen as part of a ‘mass’. He believes it is paramount for producers to be more focused on these consumers, especially in the case of service industries.

## **A New Dining Concept – The underground restaurant**

One example of innovation in 21<sup>st</sup> century dining and a backlash against the current restaurant culture is the large number of underground dining entities which have started to surface. The underground dining scene has become quite popular during the last number of years, particularly in major cities such as London and New York. The concept has many different guises such as ‘Pop-up Restaurant’, ‘Secret Restaurant’, ‘Supper Club’ ‘Guerilla Dining’, ‘Paid Dinner Parties’ and ‘Speakeasies’.

DeFao (2006), Karp (2006), Kingston (2006) and Mishan (2008).

If we take the case of the ‘supper club’ it is best described by Dubecki (2007, p.2) in its most literal sense as an ‘unlicensed, illegal and transient entity’. Williams (2009, p.10) conjures up a more considered distinction of the term. She explains that supper clubs are “*a cross between a restaurant and a dinner party, like a restaurant, in the sense that you pay, like a dinner party, in the sense that you are in someone’s house, with a regular someone cooking*”. Erney (2008) also agrees that the term can be defined as a type of paid dinner party. What differentiates it from a restaurant, she concludes, is that unlike at a restaurant, you do not know the person sitting next to you.

Although the term ‘pop up restaurant’ is used intermittently with the term ‘supper club’, a pop-up restaurant tends to lend itself more to an event that has more commercial appeal. One defining difference, claims Dicum (2010), is that most pop up restaurants, unlike supper clubs, are completely legal. Rodgers (2011) concurs with this explanation and argues that pop-up restaurants are usually run by a qualified chef rather than a home cook.

## **History of the Supper Club**

The roots of this recent phenomenon were believed to have taken place during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; in particular, during the prohibition era in America. Roadhouses became commonplace in an attempt to cater for travelling gangsters who were transporting Canadian-label contraband across the border (Bredahl, 2011).

It wasn't until after the end of prohibition that supper clubs gained a foothold. Many roadhouses became legalised and the supper club became a more refined affair. Bredahl (2011, p.4) describes the traditional supper club of the 1930's/40's, in Wisconsin, as an evening of *'linen table serve, liquors, entertainment, and dancing – a destination for a night out'*. Bredahl's description of the clubs makes it clear that the focus of the evening was not purely about the culinary delights on offer but that the entertainment and social aspect the clubs provided was of equal importance.

Not only were underground dining establishments popular in America at the time but it is also known that they also were in existence, to a lesser extent, in London. According to The University of East Anglia (2010) 'The Half Hundred Club' was founded during the 1930's by a group of likeminded individuals with the purpose of combining good food with good company. As Hayward (2010) explains, members of the club were keen to break rules and would occasionally experiment, having their meals in strange places such as London Zoo, a Chinese restaurant and at the cinema. It was usually the case that members would take turns at hosting dinners, under a strict budget, to which each member was expected to pay 10 shillings towards.

Similarly, many other clubs existed in other countries during the later period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Known as *Si Fang Cai* in Hong Kong, these Supper Clubs were a very traditional type of home restaurant whereby secret recipes were handed down through generations and served up to private parties on an adhoc basis (China – Cultural.com, 2010). In Cuba, however, the Clubs were much more commonplace. *Paladars*, according to Mishan (2008) became a popular alternative to state-run eateries. Private restaurants, although illegal, operated successfully. However, due to the multitude of illegal restaurants operating on the island, the Government decided to legalise the restaurants in 1993. The hidden restaurant industry is also deeply rooted in Latin America history, explains Romme (2007). *Puertas Cerradas* operate throughout Argentina, the oldest of which, *Mis Raices*, which operates in Buenos Aires. Juanita Posternak has been serving up in her large dining room that seats up to 40 people for the last 23 years. Likewise, the scene has remained strong in Paris. Jim Haynes's Parisian apartment has accommodated over 100,000 diners over the past 30 years (March, 2011).

### **The Dublin Underground Restaurant Scene**

Although the scene, as explained above, was well established in other cities, the underground dining scene did not really emerge in Dublin until early 2011. Lilly Higgins, sister of the comedienne Maeve Higgins, was one of the pioneers of the trend. She began promoting her first supper club event on her food blog back in November 2010. Her inspiration for doing so developed as a result of attending one of Kirsten Rodgers events in London earlier that year. Higgins (2011) as cited in Hennessey (2011) said on return from her visit to the London supper club, she felt compelled to set up her own club, realising that the concept would also work well in Ireland. She also noted that it allowed her to connect more with her blogging audience, in allowing them to taste the recipes she had been posting on her blog site.

Not only did supper clubs begin to surface in Dublin around this time but one of the most well known pop-up restaurants, Craickbird opened up its doors in February 2011. Joe Macken, proprietor of the popular fast food restaurant Jo Burger set up the new casual chicken eatery in an unused premises in Temple Bar, Dublin, on a shoestring budget of 15,000 Euro. The diner, explains Slattery (2011), operated for a 12 week period only. Macken (2011) as cited in The Journal.ie (2011) explained that he came up the concept as a result of financial difficulties he had at the time and a feeling that he needed to create something different and fresh, something he felt needed in Dublin at the time. Macken also latched onto social media as a means for promoting his new restaurant concept. Customers, in order to reserve tables and receive a free meal on their first visit, were required to tweet their booking request on-line.

The restaurant concept was a highly successful concept and many other pop-up and supper clubs followed suit. The Dublin Supper Club, the brainchild of Sandy Sabek and John Wyer, began in March of that same year (Boland, 2009). The couple began operating a monthly fine dining pop-up event in a variety of different venues across Dublin. Faoi Thalamh, a similar concept developed by head chef of Thornton's Dublin, also started in June 2011. Bell (2011), however, as cited in Hospitality Ireland (2011, p. 77), argued that his concept differed from the Craickbird style of pop-up dining in that he was trying to create more of a quality driven concept. *"It's very much an underground concept not as common as the pop-up restaurant and of a higher standard"*. Bell also uses social media in order to create a micro social network to inform people about events in place of traditional advertising methods. Furthermore, the ethos of Bell's concept is clearly steeped in exclusivity. As his website unashamedly declares *"our events will be hosted on the grapevine so hope you hear about it before you heard about it"* (faoi thalamh.ie, 2011 as cited in Mullally ,2012).

## **Fine Dining - The end is nigh?**

In today's world, the restaurant takes many forms which are tailored for individual preferences from restaurants serving haute cuisine to gastro pubs to fast food restaurants (Mestag and Glorieux, 2009).

Lane (2011) outlines that the high end restaurant segment has been long shaped by the cultural hegemony of French haute cuisine and in particular the Michelin system. A star is usually received in accordance with standardised criteria across national borders, which is based on the advice of trained inspectors.

The Michelin system today has been dogged by criticism from many food writers and restaurateurs. As Naylor (2011, p. 10) outlines, many critics believe that 'Michelin's white, middle-aged, middle class male inspectors' are out of touch with today's cuisine and modern gastronomic culture. Many chefs, including Yves Camdeborde, believe that the level of luxury and intensive labour required in obtaining a Michelin accolade to be economically unsustainable for most chefs and too expensive for most diners. Naylor (2011).

In addition, Leong (2009, p. 24) cites the feelings expressed by many experts that the recession has accelerated a revolt against the 'stuffy, rigid nature of fancy dining'. Many experts warn, that in order to survive, many high-end eateries need to adapt and to change with the times. For example, Daniel Bouloud, who owns the Michelin 3 star restaurant 'Daniel' in Manhattan has adapted successfully to the new trend towards casual dining by opening up 'DBGD', a casual bar and café located in the Bowery area of New York City.

It does seem, however, that the Michelin organisation has not been adverse to such criticism and many changes have taken place of late, according to Lane (2011, p.697) to address its image of a 'highly ridged French-centric' institution. In 2003, Michelin began awarding stars to pubs to reflect its support for a more relaxed dining style. Restaurants rooted in other culinary traditions were also acknowledged in order to embrace a more divergent culinary culture. The former editor of the Michelin guide, Derek Bulmer (2011), as cited in The Metro (2011, p. 19), explained that the guide has changed to reflect the demand for more casual dining experiences "*There has been a move towards informality and flexibility in dining for some time. People don't necessarily want the very formal experience any more and the guide has changed to reflect that*".

It is true to say that the recent Michelin star award received by Australian chef Skye Gyngell at her garden centre café is illustrative of these changes. Gyngell admits, however, that she was shocked to receive the award and confessed that her restaurant still had "*dirt floors, a mishmash of glasses, wobbly tables and the service that is pretty haphazard at times. I was not expecting a Michelin star*". However, Gyngell has since left the café and removed the star from her website as she felt she could not meet the expectations of new diners at the café who were expecting a more formal and traditional Michelin star experience "*People have certain expectations of a Michelin restaurant but we don't have cloths on the tables and our service isn't very formal*". Gyngell (2012, p. 23) as cited in The Telegraph (2012).

Overall, Michelin's response to its critics, believes Meades (2012), is nothing more than tokenistic in nature. Many great chefs of this generation, he argues, have been consistently unacknowledged by Michelin, such as that of Yves Camdeborde's *Le Comptoir de l'Odeon* restaurant in Paris which Meades believes provides wonderful cooking but in rudimentary surroundings at reasonable prices.



These sentiments are strongly supported by Finkelstein (1998, p. 204) who argues that dining out has become a highly regulated affair, one that provides a well-formulated orderly manner of acting where individuals have become programmed to act a certain way and become absorbed by routines and habits. *“Restaurants are organisations which encourage certain styles of interaction that render it a mannered act”*. Restaurants are fast becoming symptomatic of the way in which modern life is now controlling sensibilities and feelings of individuals, with regular codes of convention. This overly mannered life, she concludes, leads to a level of passivity by individuals and a reduction in the level of actual individual choice. It does appear that the attitudes expressed by Camdeborde and Meades are indicative of a reaction to the conventions set down by the established restaurant culture, as outlined here by Finkelstein (1998).

### **The Postmodern Diner?**

Jacobs and Scholliers (2003, p. 332) believe however that many challenges to the status quo are taking place and they speak of a *“plot between chefs, eaters and writers of today and their non-stop search for distinction, innovation and novelty”*.

This is no more evident than in the rise of the supper club trend. In his investigation into the supper club trend in London, Hayward (2010) found that most people were attracted to the events as they enjoyed the communal element that they provided and found it to be a great way of meeting new people.

Furthermore, another factor that appealed to guests was that most of the events tend to have an underground feel and as such were not heavily branded or marketed, which many people found refreshing. On speaking with Susie Fibbs who is currently involved in the running of an underground restaurant, Hayward (2010) discovered that the 'not knowing what you will get' factor is what appeals to people the most and the level of excitement you get from trying something new. As Hayward's report discovered, it was mainly due to the recession that the trend has accelerated. As one guest noted, recessions and revolutions have always tended to trigger a change in society, one where more people are willing to take risks. Supper clubs, he believed, were a clear example of this.

Mishan (2008) believes that the movement of underground restaurant dining such as supper club and pop-up events is similar to the rise of punk and indie rock which emerged as a response to the homogenisation of popular music in the 1980's. It is therefore not surprising that many of the very first supper clubs that have emerged at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, were founded by people with similar ideologies, as a response to the corporatisation of the restaurant culture.

It is therefore not surprising to discover that two of the very first supper clubs to emerge in London a few years ago, were founded by two very such people. Rodgers (2011) explains that she wanted to provide simple, well cooked meals, at a reasonable price but also with an element of punk rebellion. Rodgers also admits that her motivation for the club stemmed from her involvement in political and anti-G8 movements. Likewise, the second secret restaurant to appear in London at that time was founded by Horton Jupiter, a punk musician who was looking to provide an experience, very dissimilar to that of mainstream restaurants (March, 2011). As one supper club owner, Hedendal (2008) as cited in Kennedy (2008, p. 8) rationalises "*Supper clubs are alternatives to the restaurant industry and its ultra-capitalist, ultra-exploitative, ultra-wasteful trappings*". It is also worth noting, outlines Williams (2009), that it is the belief that the whole concept of the supper club only works because of the anarchistic atmosphere created.

## **Postmodernism and 21<sup>st</sup> century Dining**

The term postmodernism has been described by Lyon (2000) as an idea and concept formed in the mind of both intellectuals and the media in reference to changes which have occurred in society towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, both Storey (2006) and Featherstone (2007) believe that the beginnings of postmodernism developed much earlier, during the 1950's and 1960's, as a revolt against the high culture associated with Modernism. Nevertheless, it wasn't until the early 80's that the concept became an area of academic study and was used to define an era beyond modernity.

Modernity has been described as a movement, which occurred during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when science and technology became one of the principal drivers of an industrialised society. It is also associated with the rise of more centralised power structures (such as Governments) and the emergence of a middle class, as opposed to only peasant and upper classes which existed during the Traditionalist era (McGregor, 2003).

Postmodernism, on the other hand, is indicative of a particular mood which questions the values and principles characteristic of this modernist mind set (McGregor, 2003 and Featherstone, 2007). Amongst some of the central features associated with postmodernism are the collapse of hierarchical structures, rejection of grand narratives and a blurring of boundaries between high and low cultures. Furthermore, Brown (1995) suggests that a sense of playfulness, irony and eclecticism are all representative of postmodern behaviours.

Although there still exists much controversy regarding what can be considered 'postmodern' or 'modern' or even whether we in fact live in a postmodern age, postmodernity has been associated with many realms of our culture today such as in art, architecture, literature and film. Evidence of postmodernism behavior is particularly evident in the art world, especially in the case of Andy Warhol, who, in his depiction of the Campbell soup cans, suggests an ironical play on our consumerist culture. Warhol, in his anti-museum and anti-academy viewpoint, depicts this everyday commodity; the soup can, as a work of art, thus blurring the boundaries of what is considered art and not art. (Cowen, 2002).

The cultural shift that has occurred within consumerism today has also greatly influenced food choices of many consumers. Not only has postmodernity become apparent in the world of fashion, pop culture and architecture but it has also now become evident in the world of food. According to Linehan (2008) and Stewart (2011) food has now become the new fashion. As Stewart (2011, p.2) explains '*just as the label fashionista evokes an entire lifestyle, so, too, does the term foodie*'. Linehan (2008) concurs with this statement, noting that the perception of food as being fashionable is more of an emotional issue that has little to do with the just the food itself. Food today has become the latest status symbol, whereby people not only define themselves by the car they drive and clothes they wear but by what they eat and more specifically, where they choose to eat.

The Hartman Group (2007) has noted that dining out, particularly fine dining, has evolved in the 21<sup>st</sup> century into a much more eclectic and postmodernist food experience. It argues that there is a climate of opinion amongst many consumers today who are looking to get much more involved in more compelling food experiences. This is only possible, it believes, by reimagining the traditional fine dining concept.

Although modernism was associated with specialization and the separation of production and consumption, post modernist employees today are also seen to be partial consumers and are looking to 'consume' in their work roles. Many employees are now searching out more varied and creative work experiences. (Manolis et al., 2001). This is especially true in the case of chefs who are getting involved in many new dining concepts in an attempt to free themselves from the repetitive, specialised nature of production line cooking (Jayne, 2008).

Consequently, customers also experience more involvement in their role in these new dining concepts. No longer are they just mere recipients of finished products but have a more active role, either by acting as amateur cooks and hosting their own dining events or by exercising their choice to dine at an establishment which is outside of the realm of the mainstream restaurant scene (The Hartman Group, 2007 and Strand, 2010).

### **The role of social media and postmodernist 21<sup>st</sup> dining experiences.**

This exclusivity and the element of secrecy surrounding pop-up events like Bell's Faoi Thalamh, argues Williams (2009), are the driving force of underground dining. Generally, diners who have been invited to the event, are only informed by e-mail of the location on the day prior to the experience. Any promotion of supper clubs, outlines The Guardian (2011) is solely operated on-line. The majority of supper clubs in operation, in fact, act in tandem with the creation of the blog site. Such is the case with Kirsten Rodgers who created her blog (The English can cook) as a means of recording her underground restaurant events.

Although Mac Con Iomaire (2006) believes trends in food tend to take longer to develop than other industries, such as fashion, Rodgers (2011) argues that with the aid of new media such as Twitter, Facebook and Blogging, trends have now been accelerated. Social networking has been paramount to the speed of success of underground dining.

Consequently, it is also true that social media is also a necessary form of communication as traditional advertising methods are impossible due to the illegality factor effecting most clubs. Williams (2009) and Bell (2009) both agree that supper club owners are not only using social media in an attempt to maintain the cool factor associated with the underground scene but are also looking to keep their exposure low to reduce the risk of being shut down by the state authorities.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that postmodernism has re-shaped the way in which the art world and various forms of popular culture are perceived. The world of gastronomy and food consumption, it now seems, is experiencing its own postmodernist transformation.

As history has shown, changes in society are usually as a consequence of inter alia economic instability. The underground dining phenomenon is a perfect example of people, caught up in a recession, rebelling against elitist dining forms. The trend has been further accelerated by the influence of counterculture groups and the power of social media.

Dining out in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is changing at a dramatic pace. No longer are people willing to accept high prices and formal dining structures but instead are choosing to frequent establishments that provide value for money in more relaxed and casual settings. A new tribe of food enthusiasts is proving that good food can be appreciated outside of the realms of the established high - brow culture.

As is the case with any social revolution, subcultures emerge, who, as a response to the macro changes in their environment, create their own brand of culture. This explains why, although underground dining restaurants have existed in many countries since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is only now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that the trend has exploded. Many urban cities such as New York, Paris and London have adopted the trend. These sub-cultures have responded to the changing economic and social climate around them by creating their own underground dining entities. While Dublin has been slow to adopt the trend, 2011 showed signs of the supper club phenomenon gaining traction with the advent of Faoi Thalamh and The Dublin Supper Club Project.

Although the trend in Ireland has yet to reach its peak it is unlikely that it have a long term trajectory on the Irish food scene. As many subcultural trends inevitably infiltrate the mainstream culture, it is highly probable that the supper club trend will suffer the same faith. Although it is hoped that the trend will retain its authenticity and sense of innovation, the likelihood is that the trend will follow a similar path as it has in other overseas cities.

The supper club trend has been overshadowed recently in cities like London and New York as many of the founding members believe that it has been sabotaged by mainstream culture and reality television.

What has proved interesting is the fact that the trend has now been superseded by a newer trend; street food, a situation where talented chefs are taking to the streets serving up their own style of fine dining from street trucks. It appears that although the original supper club trend is losing its appeal, it has not become completely dormant but instead it has evolved into a different form. Chefs and cooks are no longer cooking high end cuisine in secret venues but instead are taking their foods to the streets. The transient nature of these trends along with the never ending search for innovation is characteristic of classic postmodernist behaviour.

Some evidence has shown that there are signs that the postmodern food revolution is beginning to infiltrate the mainstream restaurant culture. More and more restaurants are offering up alternatives to the traditional a la carte menu or formal dining structure. Food writers such as McKenna (2012) and a new generation of chefs such as John Wyr and Sandy Sabek, warn that in order for restaurateurs to survive, they must forgo any notions they had of the traditional dining formula and instead embrace innovation and risk. In true postmodernist form, the restaurant industry has become consumer driven and as such the restaurant industry must respond appropriately. More so, it is the case that consumers, in an increasingly globalised and homogenous society, are showing clear signs of a yearning for more unique and personalised leisure dining experiences.



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