

## **“Eating the Other”: the “Red Indian” Motif and Eating in Rome**

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Food court cultures in malls tend to be homogenous. In both the North and the South, McDonalds, Wimpy Bars, steakhouses, Kentucky Fried Chicken and various other food outlets dominate mall spaces in ways that make one forget which city one is in: the same food brand names, items and symbolism can be found in mall food courts in Kampala, Cape Town, New York, Atlanta, Dusseldorf, Bangalore, Gaborone, Johannesburg or Rome, while the malls themselves are even more terrifyingly uniform. Malls function in our political economy in very much the same way that big dams – as Arundhati Roy says – have been institutionalized as indices of global modernity. But while the mall culture in the North has started to shrink (in the same way that big dams, as Roy argues, have begun to disappear), mall cultures in the South steadily expand. Governments, in collusion with national and global capital continue to milk the resources and consumer potential of the South to create ever-increasingly large malls with their attendant food courts and mall food cultures.

One aspect of mall food culture that is of special interest to us both is the prominence of the “wild west” motif in restaurants and food outlets, especially through the stereotyping of Native Americans. This is starkly evident in the case of the Spur, the South African franchise whose brand image draws heavily on the imagery of the Wild West in fast food outlets and low-end restaurants in the US. The symbolic marking of these public eating sites establishes a connection between eating on one hand, and cultural appropriation, the imagining of extended frontiers, and fantasies of violent colonial conquest on the other. In the Spur, for example eating is often synonymous with the act of cultural misrepresentation, appropriation and satiation.

As a well-known South African steakhouse franchise, the Spur draws on globalized stereotypes for its advertising and décor. Its promotion of “authenticity” includes clichéd cultural artifacts, the logo of a Native American chief, and Native American tribe names to identify individual restaurants. In different ways, we have both observed the crude appropriation of Native

American-ness, what certain critical race and postcolonial critics have called cultural appropriation or “eating the other”. While these critics have used the phrase as a metaphor, it is alarming how “eating the other” functions both symbolically and literally in the marketing and consumption of food in relation to the Spur.

In Rome, we found that both the Del West Steak House and The Wild West draw on this Wild West theme, with the interiors of both leaning towards a violent “cow-boy –encountering-Indians-and-vast-expanses-of-land” culture. To us, the Italian based outlets displayed especially disturbing symbols of violence: from dead animals, to skeletons, bow and arrows, chains, ropes, and guns engraved on the walls. Yet the images below reveal strong similarities between the symbolism in Spurs in South Africa and the imagery in outlets in Rome.



Spur, South Africa



Tarvena Del West Steak House, Italy



The Wild West Steak House, Italy

Michael Taylor remarks on the stereotyping of Native Americans in the North American context, where the “manipulated body of the Indian mascot reinforces stereotypes grounded in historical experiences based on power” (2015:119)<sup>1</sup>. Some of the imagery above confirms Taylor’s allusions to the glorification and romanticizing of trauma and torture: handcuffs, barbed wire, rope, and

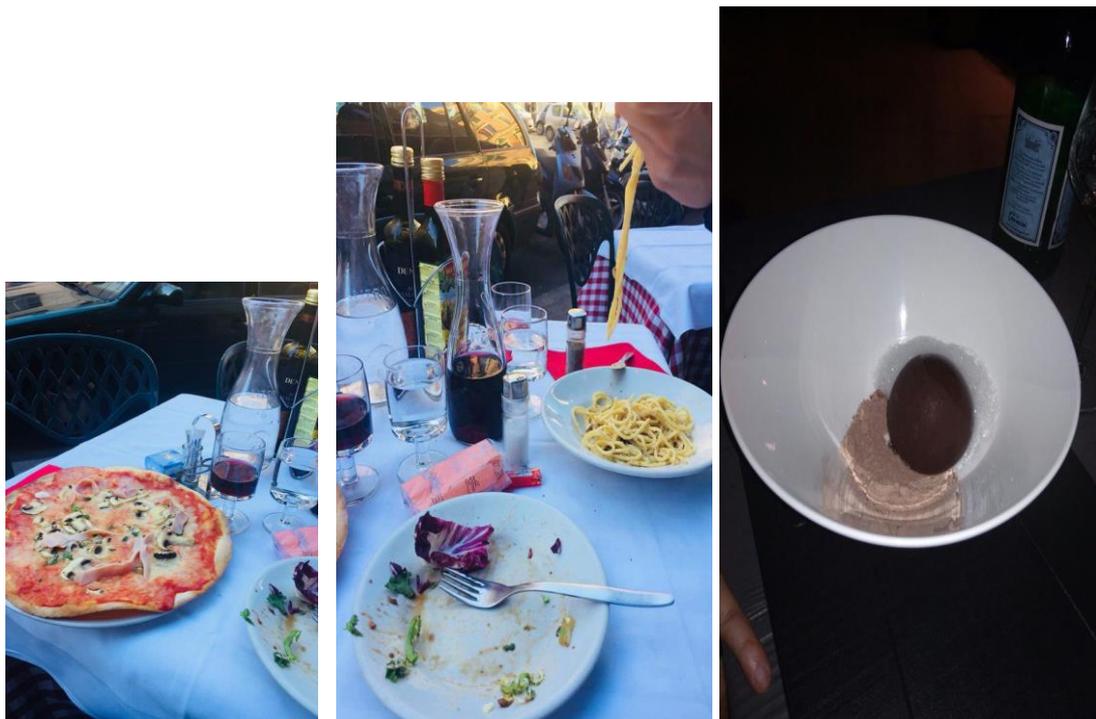
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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, M. (2015). Indian-styled mascots, masculinity, and the manipulated Indian body: Chief Illiniwek and the embodiment of tradition. *Ethnohistory*, 62(1), 119-143.

skeletons are fetishized as sources of some imagined source of gratification and satiation.

Thembelihle, ever eager to discover traces of Spur imagery and culture around the world, found intriguing examples in a country which, paradoxically prides itself on its long tradition of national cuisine that seems totally unlike the cuisine marketed in wild-west food branding. One such restaurant was situated between the Via Vito Volterra area of Rome and the Termini station; not far from where we were staying. The second, almost a replication of the South African Spur steak houses, was found at the Euroma shopping centre in the Viale dell'Oceano Pacifico area.

Generally, brand images of “typical” Italian cuisine convey moods ranging from gustatory serenity to pleasure. The images below convey this:



Pasta, bread and bolognese seem to have very little connection to bleeding steaks or pseudo -Mexican tortillas. But in Rome, at least one fast food outlet in one of the biggest malls, Euroma, most definitely makes the connection. Here you can enjoy the usual homogenized food such as steaks, chips, burgers, nachos or choose various incarnations of Italian pastas. This is typical of the way that globalized food court outlets combine the “universalism” of “wild west”

foods with contextually specific and “nationally” inflected cuisine such as pap with your steak at certain steakhouses in South Africa

On the day we visited, the mall was packed with Italian families doing what global consumers have been persuaded to do on Saturday mornings around the world, which has turned into buying unnecessary and overpriced commodities, and eat unnecessary and overpriced foods. Before the arrival of our meal, Desiree had two tasteless cappuccinos, while Thembi wandered about photographing the décor.



We found this decor far more horrendous than the Spur’s, with images of appropriation and conquest featuring even more prominently than is the case with most local Spurs. Brutalized images of “red Indians” on wanted posters adorned the walls, while an actual set of handcuffs offset the fantasy of capture and conquest. Around this bizarre setting, mothers, fathers, grandfathers, grandmothers and children enthusiastically consumed their order of the day.

One reason why we found this setting so shocking is of course because it is de-familiarized. We have become quite passé about the brutalized images of

native American-ness in South African Spur because we have grown up with these images as part of our ideas about everyday public eating.

Travelling inevitably involves repositioning oneself being a bit different, seeing the world differently and of course seeing different things. Seeing Italians in Rome participate in the fantasy of colonial conquest through eating ways, to say the least, an eye-opener into the fantasies that inevitably accompany everyday eating in public spaces.