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Modern Meals and Mythology: The Los Angeles Culinary Field

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in History

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Acknowledgments

When exploring a place as vast and complicated as Los Angeles, it is easy to get lost. Luckily, I was not alone in this journey. Firstly, I must thank my advisor, Samuel Yamashita, who over the past four years has consistently encouraged me to pursue my passions and pushed me to become a better writer and historian. I also thank the Pomona College history faculty, who broadened my intellectual horizons and provided me with insight I never could have achieved alone. Most importantly, I thank my parents, who ever since I was little, instilled into me the thrill of a great meal. Indeed, without their adventurous palates and great taste, this thesis would not exist.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Food and our relationship with it has had numerous implications throughout history. Over time, humans have consumed food not only as sustenance, but also as ritual and as a marker of status and social hierarchy. Though food and the dissemination of culinary practices have greatly diversified and expanded in the past century, food and the culinary methods required to make it remain relevant to our understanding of contemporary society, as popular culinary practices and trends reveal our preferences, beliefs, ideals, and aspirations. While there are numerous ways to analyze the cultural impact of food in the current era, this work focuses on food of Los Angeles's leading chef-auteurs who, through their cuisine, restaurants, and interactions with their audience, enforce ideology in the metropolitan area. My thesis centers on the questions: Can we discern a specific Los Angeles ideology and culinary discourse by examining the city's prominent restaurants and chefs? And if so, how does this Los Angeles culinary field reflect or alter the beliefs and priorities of the local population? Finally, how does the Los Angeles culinary field and its discourse change under stressful, uncertain circumstances such as a global pandemic, and what does this say about its future?

Interestingly, despite its ubiquity in everyday life and its symbolic and practical importance, food is often overlooked as a mode to analyze cultural, discursive, and ideological shifts, especially in our current historical period. Furthermore, the ideological and cultural implications of fine dining are especially overlooked in the modern day, as it becomes increasingly difficult to analyze the culinary trends of expanding, globalized cities such as Los Angeles. However, even in a city as culturally and ethnically diverse as Los Angeles, popular culinary practices still indicate residents' beliefs and aspirations, as

well as a greater ideology in the area itself. With my thesis, I highlight how recent culinary movements and trends reflect both long-term and temporary changes in a city's residents' beliefs, ideals and behavior, while also indicating greater ideological changes within a society. Though there have been several historical and anthropological studies regarding the effects of society on food culture and vice-versa, these works often focus on a specific ethnic subculture or ethnic regional cuisine. In contrast, my topic focuses on a regional cuisine. My study focuses on Los Angeles as a site of ideological and discursive production, but is not bounded by specific ethnic enclaves or other traditional parameters such as gender relations or explicit social stratification. Rather, I explore the mixing, sharing and incorporation of several global culinary traditions to create entirely new cuisines and a culinary discourse that is specific to the Los Angeles region. Of course, this topic has been studied before—after all, all culinary traditions originate from the integration and overlapping of numerous culinary practices. However, there is a dearth of scholarly works from the contemporary period I intend to study, which is developing as we speak. Furthermore, few food studies scholars utilize location in the way I do, as I use a specific city, Los Angeles, rather than a greater region to discern specific culinary tradition and discourse.

Through my research, I reveal how a specific city such as Los Angeles can create a distinctive culinary discourse that both informs and is informed by the city's local communities and diverse inhabitants. While it has been shown that people's perspectives, opinions and beliefs inform their community's cuisine, I argue that in the contemporary era, the inverse also occurs. From my research, I have found that a city's food can change consumers' perspective on their society, their community, and their role within their city,

and that the changing nature of a city's cuisine can inform how residents should similarly change their behavior to align with the consumable goods and experiences they enjoy. Ultimately, the goal of this thesis is to help readers reconsider how the restaurant experience and the food eaten at such establishments symbolize far more than a pleasurable experience. Indeed, the chefs, consumers, and writers connected to food production, food media, and the culinary restaurant world not only create delicious food, but also subtly reflect and shape the ethos of the environments they are situated in. I hope that from this work, we can consider the social, discursive, and communal impact of the food we consume, becoming more informed eaters in the process.

Literature Review: Food in the Contemporary Metropolis

Though universal to human life, food and our relationship to it make it far more than sustenance for the body. In fact, food defines us as individuals as well as community members, and allows us to question the implications of historical influencers such as past colonial legacies as well as acknowledge the increasing globalization of our world. Today, food takes on many forms, from home cooking to fast food drive-throughs to critically-acclaimed restaurants, and in many ways, food has become a large definer for several contemporary metropolitan cities. Though food and its numerous variations can have several connotations, I first want to contextualize the food I am studying within the greater cross-cultural foods that have emerged in America through the ethnic migrations over time. In his essay, *Migration, Transnational Cuisines, and Invisible Ethnicities*, Krishnendu Ray argues that “taste transactions” that occur among neighbors, coworkers, friends, greater neighborhoods and communities, all serve to accentuate differences and

consciousness about them. Indeed, the friction between current immigrants and older cohorts that creates moments of contestation and desperate attempts to bind communities produces what we call American foods.¹ In essence, American food is created out of the tensions between immigrant cuisine as well as the attempts to amalgamate contrasting flavors, culinary practices, and conflicting social relations to reach greater appeal in a multicultural and multiethnic country. One could even argue that these myriad cuisines found in the United States are the source of American cuisine, allowing for infinite variations and the constant proliferation of unique culinary styles and tastes. While this argument applies to all ethnically diverse environments, Ray's concept is especially applicable to Los Angeles, a city known for its ethnic diversity. Indeed, though none of the chefs or restaurants I analyze explicitly highlight the strain between immigrant cuisine and older American culinary traditions, all of the cuisines made by these auteur chefs interact with this tension, often bringing their immigrant identity into their auteur work and flourishing in these intersections. Furthermore, through the dissemination and consumption of their food, prominent chef-auteurs enable "taste transactions" between themselves and their customers, highlighting their own culinary voice by accentuating the differences in their food and bringing about a preference towards these new culinary experiences and flavors. Thus, through Ray's theory, we are able to situate Los Angeles chef-auteurs, whose food often emerges from the tensions between immigrant and non-immigrant cuisine and is then popularized through the "taste transactions" that occur between themselves and their customers.

¹ Ray, Krishnendu, "Migration, Transnational Cuisines, and Invisible Ethnicities," in *Food in Time and Place: The American Historical Association Companion to Food History*, ed. Paul Freedman, Chaplin Joyce E., and Albala Ken (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2014), 209-30, 211.

Because of the inherent tensions and contradictions found in multicultural cuisine, chefs in the contemporary era gain the ability to transmit societal values, beliefs, and ideologies through their food, often through the metropolitan restaurant. However, even the notion of eating out has its own implications, as historian Paul Freedman claims, “Dining out is linked to the growth of the city, the expansion and display of wealth as well as culture, the creation of new gendered spaces, and the everyday implications of colonial empires.”² Thus, before exploring the discourse and beliefs disseminated within the restaurant, the restaurant itself must be acknowledged as a signifier of western modernity, wealth and privilege, and historically, the prioritization of colonial legacy, thus initially skewing the internal restaurant discourse in favor of European ideals. Recently, these inherent European-focused ideals have been put into question, especially by non-white restauranteurs and chef-auteurs, but the notion of the restaurant as an example of modernity remains. While my work focuses less on the colonial implications of the restaurant establishment, the restaurant remains an imperative setting that symbolizes not only the location of culinary consumption, but also celebrates metropolis and the proliferation of the superior culture that is associated with urbanity. In this way, the symbolism of restaurants is relevant to my argument, as through their restaurant space, location, and aesthetic, chefs venerate Los Angeles as an exceptional site for creativity, elevating their own culinary identity through the utilization of the restaurant space and format.

² Freedman, Paul, “Restaurants,” in *Food in Time and Place: The American Historical Association Companion to Food History*, 253-75, 254.

Perhaps more importantly, restaurants within society function as both a mode of escapism while still remaining deeply rooted to reality, allowing for chefs to create fantasy-adjacent experiences that easily disseminate a greater culinary ethos. Freedman describes the novelty of the modern restaurant: “People decide to go to a restaurant in expectation of a certain kind of cuisine, a set of choices, and in hopes of a particular sort of diversion.”³ Indeed, the format of a restaurant provides a sense of agency, liberation, and fantasy for the customer, as they are given numerous options to choose for their meal, and the sensory experience of consuming the food itself has the ability to transport one’s imagination to an infinite number of fantastical, often nonexistent locales. Freedman’s identification of fantasy in the restaurant experience is especially relevant to the discussion surrounding Los Angeles restaurants; considering that restaurants in Los Angeles share the same space as the entertainment industry, Los Angeles establishments greatly invest in the aesthetic and sensory experience of their space in order to both entice their customers and to provide the Hollywood-tinted fantasy inherently generated by the Southern Californian space. Indeed, restaurants such as République, which is located in the fabulously redecorated house of Charlie Chaplin, rely heavily on their restaurant space to transport their customers to a fantasy locale that is simultaneously reminiscent of France and old-time Hollywood, thus effectively selling an optimistic, dream-based ideology in the process. Furthermore, this notion of fantasy through dining out still applies to other restaurants studied in my thesis. For example, while Chris Yenbamroong’s Night + Market Song’s aesthetic and eating experience would not be described as a fairytale or Hollywood fantasy, his restaurant’s appearance and dining

³ Ibid, 254.

experience still allow room for imagination, as the restaurant and its food reflect Yenbamroong's vision of a Thai strip club and thus temporarily transport customers to this fantasy location while eating. Through the process of eating out and enjoying the dining space, restaurants in Los Angeles not only effectively provide their customers with a pleasant, fantastical culinary experience, but also bolster the romantic myths surrounding the city, as they offer an optimistic, creative, easily consumable version of Los Angeles through their cuisine and dining experiences.

However, while the preparation of food can evoke whimsical or utopian sentiment, contemporary restaurants are also deeply rooted to the realities of food production, as popular restaurants in metropolitan areas now often include the origins of their products on their menus or highlight the farms and producers who created such products. Though this attachment to the realities of food production appears to contradict a restaurant's efforts to provide an escapist dining experience, the intersection between these two factors arguably helps to positively advertise and circulate specific ideologies and beliefs, redefining the notion of "taste" in the process. Amy Trubek claims that the notion of taste "involves a connection between sensory tastes, moral values, and an ethic... These consumers see food purchasing decisions as 'voting with your fork,' staking claims by shifting the marketplace in the direction of nonmarket principles that can help promote and preserve cultural and agricultural diversity."⁴ While some contemporary restaurants do not explicitly promote moral values through the promotion of agricultural food production, other prominent restaurants openly embrace the moral

⁴ Trubek, Amy B., "Revolt against Homogeneity," in *Food in Time and Place: The American Historical Association Companion to Food History*, 303-21, 315-316.

values embedded within ethical food production. For example, Jessica Koslow's Sqirl thoroughly embraces the moral values implied through the local produce procured for the restaurant's house made jam, baked goods and breakfast foods. By promoting the ethical superiority of such products, Koslow, and by extension, her restaurant, suggest that a preference for locally sourced, ethically-made produce not only creates a delicious products, but also indicates superior cultural "taste" in food. However, while it is true that chefs can promote specific moral "tastes" through their restaurants, the dissemination of "taste" within a specific community is ultimately defined by consumers; when customers frequent a specific restaurant, their consumption and later broadcasting of their experience allows for not only the proliferation of the restaurant's food, but also the beliefs and practices implied within the restaurant's aesthetic and ethos. Indeed, a community-wide "taste" for specific foods, products or beliefs only emerges through local propagators, which include food writers, media outlets, and most importantly, the average customer, and does not exist without these connections.

Pablo Parasecoli agrees with Trubek, highlighting how, "Eating and cooking, seemingly trivial and familiar acts, offer an apt environment for the embodiment and the actualization of values, attitudes, and behaviors that reflect widely accepted and culturally sanctioned templates. In the body, ideology achieves material existence."⁵ Keeping this in mind, I would argue that because they maintain both a sense of idealized fantasy and myth as well as an actualization of grounded beliefs, restaurants are able to create new ideologies that incorporate aspects of fantasy alongside values and priorities

⁵ Parasecoli, Fabio, "Food and Popular Culture," in *Food in Time and Place: The American Historical Association Companion to Food History*, 322-39, 331.

rooted in real society. Most of the restaurants I later discuss affirm Parasecoli's statement, as they create a space where communal ideology can be affirmed and disseminated. Arguably, Jessica Koslow's restaurant *Sqirl* best embodies this paradigm, as her restaurant's homemade jam, simplistic but unrestrained toast, and ingredient-focused dishes propagate a Los Angeles mythos centered on sunny optimism while also emphasizing the producers and farmers who provide the ingredients necessary to create her dishes.⁶ Moreover, while eating and cooking often actualize widely accepted values and ideologies, food can also affirm newly developed or previously unorthodox beliefs, as contemporary multi-ethnic restaurants successfully challenge previous culinary norms and affirm their own perspective within both a local and global culinary field. This affirmation of previously uncommon values and beliefs can be seen most easily in the rise of highly acclaimed ethnic and reasonably-priced restaurants, such as Băco Mercat and Night + Market Song, both of which challenge traditional culinary genres with their multiethnic cuisine and trendy dining experiences. While the rise of ethnic and non-expensive restaurants "is linked to the decline of formality and the proliferating of consumer niches," their proliferation also suggests an increase in consumer accessibility, leading to a more rapid dissemination of previously undervalued culinary practices and beliefs and culminating in the prioritization and critical elevation of inexpensive, non-European cuisine within metropolitan discourse.⁷ Ultimately, restaurants in the contemporary era, especially in metropolitan cities such as Los Angeles, incorporate notions of fantasy with societal reality to create and broadcast a set of ideals to their

⁶ "Sqirl Menu," Sqirl, 2011, accessed September 13, 2020. <https://sqirlla.com/menu/>.

⁷ Freedman, Paul "Restaurants," 253-75, 265.

consumers. If these restaurants are successful, consumers then transmit these restaurants' ideology throughout the community, thus creating a culinary discourse that is specific to the region.

Before exploring the creation of culinary discourse within Los Angeles, the historical codification of cuisine and its subsequent changes must be acknowledged. While the cuisine currently found in metropolitan cities such as Los Angeles is rooted in multiple culinary practices and multi-ethnic, globalized traditions, the framework and rudimentary qualities of contemporary cuisine and its discourse must be considered within the historical French model. As Priscilla Ferguson states in her article *The French Invention of Modern Cuisine*, "French cuisine also acted as a culinary conscience, rooted in a firm sense of what is right and what is wrong, what is proper and what is not, what is in good taste and what is not."⁸ Though French cuisine is no longer considered the epitome of culinary superiority, the concept of the culinary conscience along with the sense of good taste and "what is right and what is wrong" remains applicable to contemporary cuisine, as chefs unknowingly use this French culinary conscience and the tenets of French nouvelle cuisine as a base framework for their work.⁹ Indeed, every chef analyzed within my work adheres to the majority of French nouvelle cuisine's characteristics, regardless of their food or restaurant format.

⁸ Ferguson, Priscilla, "The French Invention of Modern Cuisine," in *Food in Time and Place: The American Historical Association Companion to Food History*, 233-52, 234.

⁹ Some defining characteristics of French Nouvelle cuisine are: A rejection of excessive complication in cooking, the reduction of cooking times for most foods in order to preserve natural flavors, the use of the freshest ingredients possible, shorter menus, the discontinuance of strong marinades for meat and game, the replacement of heavy sauces with lighter seasonings such as herbs, lemon juice, and butter, the elevation of regional dishes, the encouragement of new techniques, and the enhanced voice of the chef, who is encouraged to invent and create new flavor combinations and pairings.

Furthermore, the coding of elite French cuisine remains within contemporary culinary discourse, as nouvelle cuisine's focus on simple but high-quality ingredients, restaurants' place in society and, most importantly, the elevation of chefs as artists, persists today. According to Ferguson, the notion of restaurants as a source of ideological, political and creative movements began with the construction of French cuisine, as meals began to be understood as a social phenomenon worth energy, time, and thought. Likewise, the cooks making this nouvelle cuisine began to be considered as creative professionals that deserved respect and recognition.¹⁰ Freedman affirms Ferguson's argument and elaborates on the implications of French nouvelle cuisine's qualities, stating, "At the same time they were undermining tradition and exalting the chef as creative visionary. No longer the acolyte of culinary tradition, the chef was on the way to becoming an artist—quirky, original, demanding and less and less tied to recognizable and conservative standards."¹¹ This aspect of the French nouvelle code persists within contemporary cuisine, as the chef-turned artist remains one of the key players in the current culinary discourse. The emergence of the chef-auteur is hugely important in my analysis, as I argue that the popularization of the chef-auteur completely changed culinary discourse by not only encouraging chef's creativity, but also enabling chefs to have a voice within their cuisine and to display their individualism. Moreover, the nouvelle movement allowed for the diffusion of chefs' creative voices, as their work was considered elite, and therefore noteworthy. Thus, because of the nouvelle movement's focus on the work and voice of the chef-auteur, chefs are now able to not

¹⁰ Ferguson, Priscilla, "The French Invention of Modern Cuisine," 247.

¹¹ Freedman, Paul "Restaurants," 268.

only gain recognition and acclaim for their work, but also effectively publicize their personal culinary practices, ideals and beliefs to the greater public.

However, though the French culinary mentality functions as the standard foundation for culinary excellence, numerous renowned chefs in Los Angeles have gained popularity and culinary acclaim by subverting this traditional French culinary code—as I will later discuss, chefs such as Chris Yenbamroong do not necessarily cook exactly according to the French notion of “what is right and what is wrong,” as he does not prioritize using the freshest ingredients nor preserving the natural flavor of said ingredients, and often uses adulterated ingredients such as MSG in his dishes. However, his culinary work adheres to the French model in other ways; his menu is on the shorter side and his cuisine is defined by his auteur voice, which embraces unorthodox flavor combinations and nontraditional (non-Thai) cooking techniques. Therefore, while the legacy of the French culinary conscience persists in contemporary culinary discourse, prominent chefs do not necessarily wholly adhere to its rules, and in fact often subvert the French model with personal success.

Finally, the *nouvelle cuisine* movement also popularized the practice of talking about food in detail, leading to the creation of a culinary discourse. That is, as Ferguson states, “the many and varied discussions and discourses to which the preparation and consumption of food gave rise. From procedures and techniques for achieving culinary excellence to declarations of belief in that excellence, food talk, most notably in its written form, spread the word and the work of French cuisine.”¹² Indeed, later chapters of

¹² Ferguson, Priscilla, “The French Invention of Modern Cuisine,” 242.

my work will solely rely on what Ferguson describes as “food talk,” as reviews and descriptions of restaurants and their food function as substantial primary sources in my work and form a fundamental part of what I define as “Los Angeles culinary discourse.” Of course, there are several flaws with this mode of culinary communication—historically, these writings rarely record oral culinary traditions, which have been transmitted for thousands of years through women, and food writings can still exclude numerous culinary practices and cuisines that do not fit within the ideals of French cuisine, dubbing them non-elite or inferior. The legacy of “food talk” and the tastes it perpetuates remain in modern rating systems, including the Michelin guide, whose “form of rating creates or ruins reputations of restaurants, cities, and regions,” and is biased towards specific credentials, cuisines, and culinary formats.¹³ Though later analysis within my work will be more nuanced and analytical than reviews such as those found in the Michelin guide, the menus and local restaurant reviews I utilize still remain in conversation with restaurant rankings and French “tastes,” ultimately making the legacy of the French nouvelle movement inescapable when discussing modern cuisine. However, while written works about current restaurants and establishments such as the Michelin guide can discount certain perspectives, this argument has become less relevant in recent years, as the food writers at prominent news outlets as well as food-ranking establishments have prioritized highlighting “food talk” that includes dining locales that were formerly considered non-elite or inferior, such as food truck establishments and food stalls, as well as cuisine made by non-white, non-male chefs. Furthermore, my own

¹³ Scholliers, Peter, “Post-1945 Global Food Developments,” in *Food in Time and Place: The American Historical Association Companion to Food History*, 340-64, 358.

work also highlights how recent culinary discourse openly venerates the voices of chefs and cuisines that were formerly excluded from French culinary “food talk,” revealing a fundamental shift in the former culinary discourse. Because of this clear shift away from the traditional French “food talk,” I am more accepting of the current method of culinary discursive dissemination, which most frequently occurs through popular news outlets and social media.

Finally, before I discuss recent developments surrounding the Los Angeles culinary discourse, I must address the question: Why Los Angeles? That is, what is so distinct about the Los Angeles culinary field that makes it worthy of further exploration? To answer this question, I look to Mike Davis’s *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, which historically and anthropologically explores the competing ideologies found in Los Angeles over the past century. In his analysis, Davis provides insight into the city, as he highlights the inherent contradictions found in Los Angeles and its imagined and actualized history. Davis argues that despite its sunbaked, culturally infertile landscape, Los Angeles trades through the “Culture Industry” by importing the world’s most talented writers, filmmakers, artists and visionaries in lieu of homegrown genius. Because of this, Los Angeles lacks genuine originality, instead co-opting other creative identities and cultures to formulate its culture.¹⁴ While it is true that Los Angeles lacks the typical cultural cohesion of other cities such as New York, Paris, or Tokyo, as it is incredibly generationally and ethnically diverse, I would argue that the process of co-opting and adapting other cultures to fit the Los Angeles region *creates* an identity in and

¹⁴ Davis, Mike, “City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles,” (Newed. London: Verso, 2006), 17.

of itself, as creative minds from myriad locations not only bring their genius, but also collaborate to create something new and specific to Los Angeles. Indeed, while much of the Los Angeles identity derives itself from non-local creators, this does not mean that the city (or its cuisine) lacks originality. Rather, these foreign individuals incorporate their personal identity with local experiences to generate a communal identity distinct to the city. And while Davis is not referring to chefs or local Los Angeles cuisine in his work, my counterargument still applies, as chefs, regardless of their place of origin, develop their artistry and identity alongside local ingredients and experiences to generate a regional cuisine and ideology original to Los Angeles.

While Davis argues that the proliferation of the Los Angeles “Culture Industry” is exclusively upheld by talented, often elite foreign artists who work in the entertainment industry, I suggest that one can also view the Los Angeles “Culture Industry” through the intersection of wealthy, entertainment-driven culture and local community demographics—according to the United States Census Bureau, 48 percent of people in Los Angeles are Hispanic or Latino, while Asian Americans and African Americans respectively make up 11 and 9 percent of the population.¹⁵ Thus, because of the sheer size and diversity of the metropolis, the “Culture Industry” cannot be solely maintained by influencers in the entertainment industry. Instead, I argue that as the reality of working class Los Angeles individuals brushes against the glitz and showy artifice of the entertainment industry, the Los Angeles mythos transforms and is then quickly disseminated on a more human, accessible level. And though this newly formed Los

¹⁵ “United States Census Bureau Quickfacts: Los Angeles city, California,” United States Census Bureau, US Department of Commerce, 2019, accessed November 28, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/losangelescitycalifornia/RHI425219#RHI425219>.

Angeles discourse originates in imported cultures and tastes, it quickly becomes a reality as it is copied, imitated and enforced by powerful cultural symbols, such as the restaurant. Again, though Davis's work does not touch upon the cultural role of the metropolitan restaurant, the development of a tweaked "Culture Industry" can clearly be seen through the culinary discourse in numerous Los Angeles restaurants—the menu at République, a critically-renowned restaurant that I analyze later, includes a Honduran or El Salvadorian *pupusa* alongside Korean kimchi fried rice and a French Croque Madame, all of which use ingredients from local Californian farms.¹⁶ Though these individual dishes do not necessarily originate in Los Angeles, their grouping together is distinctly Los Angeles in nature, as these seemingly dissimilar meals coexist alongside each other without hesitation, and become widely celebrated for their creativity and ingenuity. Thus, while it may be true that Los Angeles's "Culture Industry" is founded upon imported cultures and identities, the creations that emerge from the interactions between these unique cultures are entirely and distinctly Los Angeles in taste and voice.

Davis also suggests that compared to other culturally significant cities, Los Angeles "polarizes debate," as the city embodies fierce ideological struggles over its own identity as a location.¹⁷ Davis argues that this is because of Los Angeles's success through private enterprise and capitalist endeavors, including the entertainment industry, which has envisioned Los Angeles in numerous ways throughout history. While Davis highlights the film noir era portrayal of Los Angeles as an emotionally corrupt locale in his work, he fails to address how Los Angeles has become increasingly glorified and

¹⁶ "Café | Bakery | Restaurant | République." République, accessed November 28, 2020, <https://republiquela.com/>.

¹⁷ Davis, "City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles," 20.

beloved for this very same film iconography in recent decades. Though Davis's book was written in 2006, the glorification of Los Angeles through popular culture remains through films such as *La La Land* (2016) and, inversely, *Blade Runner* (1982). Davis continues with his notion of a fractured Los Angeles by turning his attention to the city's freeways which, since their construction in the 1950s, unfairly service the city's populace and historically underserve minority communities such as the primarily Hispanic Boyle Heights neighborhood. Thus, considering Los Angeles infrastructural geography alongside its cinematic fantasyland iconography, Davis comes to the conclusion that Los Angeles is not well *planned* or *designed*, but instead is infinitely envisioned, and it is this envisioning process that sustains the identity of the city.¹⁸ Indeed, the fractured nature of Los Angeles can be seen in the practicalities of its culinary field—the eight restaurants I feature in my work are all based in Los Angeles, but none exist in a “central” location, mainly because Los Angeles does not have a de facto center of the city. However, while the fractured nature of the city and its infinite interpretations are portrayed negatively by Davis, I believe that in the case of the Los Angeles culinary sphere, this fluidity in identity allows for more culinary diversity and strengthens the voices of individual chef-auteurs, as they are not beholden to a uniform, unyielding vision of Los Angeles. Regardless of their restaurant's placement in the city, each chef-auteur pitches their vision of Los Angeles through their cuisine and restaurant, whether that is a hyper-focus on local ingredients and pure flavors, or a blending and reverence for multiethnic cuisine. Their success is based on their culinary merit and creativity, rather than their ability to conform to a culturally homogeneous metropolis. However, though each restaurant

¹⁸ Ibid, 23.

conveys a distinct vision of Los Angeles cuisine, a greater vision of the culinary field ultimately emerges; all of the restaurants I analyze revere the chef as artist, or the chef-auteur, and their individualistic, creative endeavors bolster the image of Los Angeles as a place of dreams and creative hopes. While this envisioning of Los Angeles through creative culinary artistry exists and is maintained by popular restaurants, this image also demands change and improvement. As I will discuss later, when the dreams and visions of Los Angeles are confronted with the pressures of reality, the over idealized, envisioned mythos of Los Angeles quickly disintegrates, where it is then transformed into a revised ethos driven by both the practical and creative necessities of the greater Los Angeles community.

Methodology

To conduct this research, I utilized journalist archives from the past decade, including articles from the Los Angeles Times and Los Angeles Daily News, magazines such as LA Weekly and LA Magazine, and websites such as Eater LA, Time Out Los Angeles, The Thrillist, and The Infatuation. Considering that there are numerous chefs and restaurants in Los Angeles, I focused on a handful which have previously been established. These chefs and restaurants were chosen due to their popularity, critical acclaim, as well as their focus on the chef's creative role within the restaurant. For my second and third chapters, the chefs I chose are: Josef Centeno of Orsa and Winston and Bäco Mercat, celebrity-chef Ludo Lefebvre, who owns Petit Trois and Trois Mec, Ori Menashe and Genevieve Gergis, the owners of Bestia, Walter and Margarita Manzke of République, Jessica Koslow, the renowned jam maker and owner of Sqirl, and Chris

Yenbamroong, the owner of Night + Market Song.¹⁹ To analyze these chefs and restaurants, I examined the chefs' and restaurants' websites, restaurant location, décor, price point, descriptions of menu items, and overarching narratives enforced by the restaurant's chef-owners. Other sources pertaining to specific restaurants include the introductions to cookbooks written by their chef-owners, specifically Josef Centeno and Margarita Manzke. For my latter two chapters, which focus on the Los Angeles culinary field during the COVID-19 pandemic, I considered the culinary offerings on delivery services such as Caviar, Doordash, and Tock to Go to analyze how restaurants' products changed in recent times. I also focused heavily on the photos and personal statements found on chefs' and restaurants' social media accounts, which highlight several of the discursive changes that were catalyzed by the pandemic. Along with the previous chefs mentioned above, I also focus on several up-and-coming chefs: Susan Yoon, Pert Em, Mikey David, Jihee Kim, Brandon Gray, and Sasha Piligian, who respectively have made themselves known through their online pop-up establishments and distinctive cuisine. From these sources, I discerned overall trends and similar language examining how restaurant narratives created by both chefs and food journalism have been constructed and subsequently changed in recent years to appeal to specific (or non-specific) clientele.

Map of Thesis

Moving forward, my thesis consists of three more chapters, as well as a conclusion. Chapter two addresses the existence of what I call the Los Angeles culinary

¹⁹ As of Summer 2020, Trois Mec and Bäco Mercat have permanently closed.

field and its most essential qualities. Examining eight acclaimed Los Angeles restaurants, their cuisine, and critical response, we are able to discern that the Los Angeles culinary field is defined by the notion of the chef-auteur, or in other words, the chef-owner, who controls the majority of his or her dining establishments with subjectivity and individuality, leading to a personal culinary style. While this emphasis on a personal culinary style makes each chef-auteur and restaurant unique, underlying similarities are also revealed, specifically a “taste” for artistry, creativity and individualism, affirming the fantastical mythology of Los Angeles and its sunny ethos in the process. Additionally, the Los Angeles culinary field encourages chefs’ focus on locavorism and the utilization of hyper-specific cooking techniques, as well as an aversion to conventionality and traditional fine-dining experiences.

While my second chapter establishes the existence of the Los Angeles culinary field, chapter three follows the significant discursive changes within the culinary field during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, from March to August 2020. Following the same eight restaurants from the previous chapter, I examined the culinary and ideological changes that occurred with the Los Angeles culinary field during a time of crisis. With three subsections, which respectively focus on cuisine, community engagement, and the redefining of the culinary field, a fundamental shift within the city’s culinary field can be discerned. During the pandemic, chefs turned away from their previous method of highlighting sensational, individualistic cuisine, and instead produced food meant to ease anxious customers during an uncertain time. Additionally, instead of enforcing the optimistic, fantastical character of the city, Los Angeles restaurants during the pandemic focused on the harsh reality of both the restaurant industry and the city’s

struggling residents. Concentrating on vulnerable Los Angeles residents and the greater Los Angeles community, chef-auteurs and their restaurants shifted the discourse found in the city's culinary field, as they moved towards community support and the highlighting of smaller culinary endeavors in lieu of personal expression and acclaim.

Chapter four focuses on the time period of November 2020 to March 2021, highlighting the possible future of the Los Angeles culinary field through three up-and-coming local chefs: Jihee Kim, Brandon Gray, and Sasha Piligan, who, in the midst of a pandemic, have managed to make a name for themselves through their distinctive pop-up establishments. The popularity of their distinctive offerings despite the somewhat unconventional pop-up format highlights several new aspects of the Los Angeles culinary field, including the extensive utilization of social media and technology to forge and support the local community, as well as the ability to challenge ingrained notions of culinary authority to create a more inclusive culinary environment. However, while the format and mindset behind upcoming chefs and their pop-up establishments reveal a new envisioning of the Los Angeles culinary field, the hunger for the voice of the chef-auteur remains as does the desire for originality and creative expression.

Chapter II: Modern Meals and Mythology

“Dreams are serious business in La La Land...this is a city where fantastical thoughts are encouraged; a place gleefully wrapped in endless layers of modern legend and mythology. Every year countless small-town dreamers pour onto its streets, itching to share their tales with LA and the world...The end result is an electrifying whirlpool of creativity: edgy art spaces, cult-status rock venues, acclaimed concert halls and thought-provoking stages, all fueling a city addicted to the weird, the wonderful and the downright scandalous.” –Lonely Planet Travel Guide

Introduction

Home to nearly four million individuals as well as the glamorous Hollywood film and television industry, Los Angeles and its identity are constantly changing, as people from various backgrounds flock to the city to pursue their dreams and attempt to define the city on their terms. With its dominant media presence, the image of Los Angeles has grown to mythic proportions, as travel guides and Hollywood films depict the city as a place where nobodies can become famous and anyone, regardless of their beliefs, gender or ethnicity can succeed in their wildest creative aspirations. And though the reality of Los Angeles is far more complex, the imagining of the city persists at every level of Los Angeles culture and society—we see the city constantly defined and redefined through popular television series and films, lesser known novels and journalism, as well as through microcosmic neighborhood outreach and the encouragement of ethnic community identity. We also see the envisioning of Los Angeles in the city’s vibrant restaurants, some of which are the best, most interesting and most accessible in the country. Considering the city’s culinary excellence as well as its image as a fantastical, mythical place, I wondered: Can we see this fantastical, artistic image of Los Angeles

articulated in the city's food? And if so, does this notion of Los Angeles help to create a Los Angeles culinary field?

Analyzing eight restaurants as well as their owners, menus, critics' reviews and self-representations, one finds that there is a distinctive Los Angeles culinary field. This Los Angeles culinary field is primarily defined by Media Studies-based auteur theory, or in this case, the auteur-chef. Within auteur theory, the director as auteur applies a highly centralized and subjective control to many parts of a larger creative work, much as chefs do in their restaurants. Through this control, these chefs become the creators of their restaurants and food, leading to a recognizable culinary style. All of the restaurants I analyze in this article exemplify the auteur theory; these restaurants' chefs stress their creative self-expression in their restaurants, and ultimately, their individuality as creators becomes the main appeal of their establishments. Through this process, the defining trait of the Los Angeles culinary field becomes the culinary auteur and his or her creative style. By elevating the chef-auteur within the Los Angeles culinary field, Los Angeles restaurants and their consumers reveal their "taste" for artistry, creativity, and individualism. Furthermore, the Los Angeles culinary field also affirms chefs' obsessive focus on locavorism and specific cooking techniques, while also revealing a "distaste" for conformity and traditional fine-dining experiences.

Before effectively confirming the existence of the Los Angeles culinary field, one must choose specific restaurants to analyze. The eight restaurants I have chosen for this study—Orsa and Winston, Bāco Mercat, Bestia, République, Trois Mec, Petit Trois, Sqirl, and Night + Market Song—are all different, and provide insight into the many ways in which the Los Angeles culinary field disseminates and presents itself within the

city. Established in 2011 and 2014 respectively, Bāco Mercat and Orsa and Winston are owned by Josef Centeno. Growing up in San Antonio, Texas, in a family of grocers and butchers, Centeno comes from a family of Mexican, Spanish, Irish, French, English, German and Polish descent.²⁰ His multiethnic background provides insight into his multiethnic cuisines at both restaurants, as he utilizes global techniques and ingredients to formulate his specific style. Owned by couple Ori Menashe and Genevieve Gergis and opening in 2012, the appropriately named Bestia (meaning beast in Italian) specializes in Italian food.²¹ However, Menashe’s experience growing up in Israel has had lasting influences on the food offered at Bestia, as many dishes include Middle Eastern ingredients or are Middle Eastern-inspired. Before opening République in 2013, Walter and Margarita Manzke established themselves at numerous restaurants—Walter had worked at well-known restaurants such as Patina and Church and State, and had opened numerous restaurants in Carmel, California. Margarita Manzke received degrees from Le Cordon Bleu London and the Culinary Institute of America, and has worked at numerous renowned restaurants including Patina, Spago, Melisse, and Bastide Restaurant.²² Celebrity chef and owner of Trois Mec and Petit Trois (established 2013 and 2014 respectively) Ludo Lefebvre trained in France for twelve years under Alain Passard, Marc Meaneau, Pierre Gagnaire, and Guy Martin before coming to Los Angeles, where he worked at L’Orangerie and Bastide.²³ His French training is evident in both of his restaurants, with Petit Trois specializing in French bistro fare. In contrast to Lefebvre’s

²⁰ Centeno, Josef, and Betty Hallock, Introduction. In *Bāco: Vivid Recipes from the Heart of Los Angeles*. (San Francisco, California: Chronicle Books, 2017).

²¹ “Bestia Los Angeles,” Bestia, bestiala.com/.

²² “Café | Bakery | Restaurant | République,” République, republiquela.com/.

²³ “Press | Ludo Lefebvre,” Ludo Lefebvre, accessed December 9, 2019, www.ludolefebvre.com/about/.

extensive training, Jessica Koslow, the owner of Sqirl (the name combines the phrase ‘squirrel away’ with the word ‘girl), began her culinary career much later.²⁴ After working as a television producer in New York, Koslow moved to Los Angeles, working in the entertainment industry by day and at The Village Bakery, a local Atwater café, at night.²⁵ Meanwhile, she refined her skills in jam-making, which would soon become the foundation of her restaurant in 2011. Finally, born and raised in Los Angeles and lacking formal culinary training, Kris Yenbamroong grew up in his family-owned Thai restaurant, Talesai. After attending New York University’s film school and working for a few years in fashion photography, Yenbamroong took over Talesai and evolved the restaurant into the more adventurous and casual Night + Market.²⁶ His second restaurant, Night + Market Song, is his most popular location, and is the restaurant featured in this study.

Clearly, these chefs and their restaurants are unique and distinct—each chef has a different background and approach to their cuisine, and each restaurant varies wildly in tone, cuisine, location, price point, size and aesthetic. However, despite these differences, one still finds that all eight restaurants’ chefs affirm the notion of an auteur-centered Los Angeles culinary field through their restaurant locations and aesthetics, as these chefs emphasize a strong sense of place and forego rules and conventional expectations to maintain his or her artistry.

²⁴ Bittman, Mark, “Breakfast Gets New Life at Jessica Koslow’s Sqirl,” *The New York Times*, April 15, 2015, accessed April 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/magazine/breakfast-gets-new-life-at-jessica-koslows-sqirl.html>.

²⁵ “Rising Star Chef Jessica Koslow of Sqirl – Biography,” *Starchefs.com*, May 2014, accessed April 9, 2020, www.starchefs.com/cook/chefs/bio/jessica-koslow.

²⁶ “NIGHT + MARKET,” *NIGHT+MARKET*, accessed April 9, 2020, www.nightmarketsong.com/welcome.

Restaurants

Located within a block from each other, Josef Centeno's Băco Mercat and Orsa and Winston are situated in the heart of downtown Los Angeles and the old bank district, where foot traffic is heavy and the streets are rarely still.²⁷ However, it is important to note that downtown Los Angeles is ultimately defined by working class men and women, immigrant enclaves, urban, industrial office spaces and high-rises, and its proximity to the impoverished. Indeed, despite the pricey food offered at both restaurants, the lovingly dubbed Centenoplex restaurants are just a few blocks away from the tent-filled Skid Row. By placing his expensive restaurants in the multi-ethnic, economically and culturally diverse downtown Los Angeles, Centeno affirms the importance of Los Angeles as a place of diversity and nonconformity. Because of his location, he is (theoretically) able to successfully offer his upscale, artistic cuisine to anyone who travels through the downtown area. Though the style and aesthetics are different, the interior designs of Băco Mercat and Orsa and Winston similarly affirm the Los Angeles culinary field. While not inexpensive, Băco Mercat is less expensive than Orsa and Winston. At Băco Mercat, "Tables are covered in brown paper. The seating is mostly vintage wooden chairs with seats that lean back slightly and are actually quite comfortable."²⁸ Instead of including uniform décor or overhead stage lighting, the restaurant takes a more casual, unpretentious approach, making it more culturally accessible and pleasantly mismatched,

²⁷ Centeno, *Baco - Vivid Recipes from the Heart of Los Angeles*.

²⁸ Virbila, S. Irene, "The Review: Băco Mercat Makes It Easy to Get Carried Away," Los Angeles Times, February 9, 2012, accessed April 7, 2020, www.latimes.com/food/la-xpm-2012-feb-09-la-fo-0209-review-20120209-story.html.

much like Los Angeles itself. By using “brown paper” and “vintage wooden chairs,” Bāco Mercat refuses to follow the typical expectations placed upon a restaurant of its caliber, as it instead appeals to the casual nature of the eclectic downtown area. Likewise, Orsa and Winston similarly refuses to conform to the aesthetic expectations placed upon high-end restaurants. Lacking the characteristic white tablecloths and stuffiness of a high-end restaurant, Orsa and Winston’s dining room “is plain. It's quite pleasing, with a view of the twinkling lights of Fourth Street, but unadorned apart from an artsy swish of paint on the wall and two large light fixtures over the chef's counter.”²⁹ Though the restaurant is more serious than Bāco Mercat, Orsa and Winston’s décor still maintains its simplicity and urban aesthetic through its unpretentious dining room and uncluttered walls.

Furthermore, by keeping the dining room visually simple, the restaurant can easily highlight the “view of the twinkling lights of Fourth Street,” reaffirming the importance of downtown Los Angeles as a place for artists, creators, and urban dreamers. With their humble aesthetic choices and its deliberate placement in downtown Los Angeles, Orsa and Winston and Bāco Mercat affirm the Los Angeles culinary field, as the restaurants emphasize the importance of their location and use their décor (or lack of) to embrace the creative diversity of the neighborhood.

Like the Centenoplex restaurants, the high-end Bestia is also located in downtown Los Angeles. However, unlike the former two restaurants, Bestia is in the quiet Los Angeles warehouse district and is far removed from any foot traffic or places of interest. When reviewing the restaurant upon its opening, renowned Los Angeles food writer

²⁹ Rodell, Beshia, “Orsa & Winston Review: Josef Centeno Reinvents Fine Dining,” LA Weekly, November 21, 2013, accessed April 9, 2020, www.laweekly.com/orsa-winston-review-josef-centeno-reinvents-fine-dining/.

Jonathan Gold quipped that Bestia was in a “neighborhood of converted warehouses east of downtown, close to the train yards by the river, on a dead-end block that used to be famous for its concentration of artists.”³⁰ From the street, the restaurant has a ragged, corrugated tin façade, bearing the restaurant’s name in bold white strokes of paint. Essentially, the restaurant looks like an old warehouse, lacking in aesthetic appeal and in a desolate, unorthodox location. Instead of softening the restaurant’s rough exterior, Bestia’s massive interior heightens and respects the rough, ultra-mechanized visuals, as “The aggressive aesthetic of meat-obsessed chef culture is on full display, with chandeliers made of meat hooks and cleavers-as-decoration hung in the recesses of iron-bearing posts,”³¹ and the dining room is “all bare rafters, stripped brick and dim Edison bulbs; a huge open kitchen; and a din like a roomful of roaring lawn mowers.”³² By choosing to house their restaurant in a desolate warehouse district, Ori Menashe and Genevieve Gergis reveal their disregard for the typical expectations surrounding high-end cuisine. Furthermore, their choice to emphasize the industrial aesthetic with “meat hood and cleaver” chandeliers, “bare rafters, stripped brick,” and “Edison bulbs” reveals their appreciation for the downtown area and the harsh freedom it provides for its creators—because of their vast space, Bestia is able to highlight its “meat-obsessed chef culture” in its sharp, hard-edged aesthetics as well as through its brash, unapologetic cuisine. Featuring the downtown-specific industrial aesthetic, Bestia affirms the Los Angeles

³⁰ Gold, Jonathan, “Review: The Just-Right Cooking at Bestia,” Los Angeles Times, January 12, 2013, accessed April 9, 2020, www.latimes.com/food/la-xpm-2013-jan-12-la-fo-gold-20130112-story.html.

³¹ Rodell, Basha. “Bestia Does It Best,” LA Weekly, January 3, 2013, accessed April 9, 2020, www.laweekly.com/bestia-does-it-best/.

³² Gold, Jonathan. “Review: The Just-Right Cooking at Bestia.”

culinary field, as it defies traditional models of fine dining to instead embrace its rougher location and focus purely on its cuisine.

République is located on South La Brea Avenue, on the edge of the upscale neighborhood of Hancock Park and near the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the La Brea Tar Pits, and the high-end Grove shopping center. Compared to the Centenoplex and Bestia, République's soaring space is luxurious and filled with a fantastical beauty that only comes with privilege. Indeed, the restaurant is expensive (a Maine lobster omelet is offered at brunch for \$25).³³ Initially, considering its high-end location and beautiful aesthetics, République does not seem to affirm the same Los Angeles culinary field as the previous three restaurants. However, République does so in other ways, as it maintains an incredibly strong sense of place and history through its dining style and its ties to their building. République is located in a building built in 1929—Besha Rodell of *LA Weekly* writes, "The building breathes stories of Hollywood legends and culinary royalty, beginning in 1929 with Charlie Chaplin, who built it. It's most famous as the longtime home of Campanile, which was founded by then-married Mark Peel and Nancy Silverton, and stood as one of L.A.'s most important restaurants before closing in October 2012 after 23 years."³⁴ Instead of masking the building's historical baggage, République embraces the space—on their website, they relate their restaurant to the Hollywood entertainment industry as well as the Los Angeles food scene, describing the building's significance as both Charlie Chaplain's home and the location of the renowned

³³ "Café | Bakery | Restaurant | République," République, republiquela.com/.

³⁴ Rodell, Besha, "République Review: French Food Worthy of a Glorious Space," *LA Weekly*, February 20, 2014, accessed April 9, 2020, www.laweekly.com/rpublique-review-french-food-worthy-of-a-glorious-space/.

Californian-cuisine restaurant Campanile.³⁵ Rodell’s comment highlights République’s place within the Los Angeles culinary field—by incorporating the “Hollywood legends and culinary royalty” into their restaurant’s biography and history, République wholly situates itself in a fantastical, mythical Los Angeles narrative, arguing that the restaurant could only exist within the Los Angeles space. République further cements its place within the Los Angeles culinary field through its refusal to conform to a traditional service menu. In order to accommodate more people and to highlight the creative skills of pastry chef Margarita Manzke, the restaurant offers “options tailored for various needs of their community—quick counter dining during the day, for example, and more formal meals in the evening.”³⁶ By serving food all day with different service styles and price ranges, République forgoes the traditional rules surrounding fine dining, making the restaurant financially accessible to customers as well as highlighting the artistry of Margarita Manzke. With its reverence for its space as well as its unorthodox and varied dining styles, République affirms the Los Angeles culinary field and helps to elevate its auteurs.

Surrounded by carnicerías and located on a tiny corner in Silverlake, Jessica Koslow’s Sqirl affirms the Los Angeles culinary field with its simple, unadorned aesthetics and its dedication to breakfast-based dining, regardless of the time of day. With its reasonably priced rice bowls and toast, Sqirl is very accessible to its community, and is not financially pretentious. Food journalist Mark Bittman describes Sqirl as a “cute,

³⁵“Café | Bakery | Restaurant | République,” République, republiquela.com/.

³⁶ Addison, Bill, “Review: République Is the All-Day Restaurant That Los Angeles Needed,” Eater, October 31, 2016, accessed April 2, 2020, www.eater.com/2014/4/15/6241559/republique-review-los-angeles.

shabby, hip little storefront.”³⁷ Additionally, arguing that the restaurant embodies both the positive and negative aspects of the Silverlake neighborhood, Jonathan Gold writes that he ate his toast “in full earshot of the auto body shop up the street and the *banda* music pounding from the passing cars. It didn’t just reflect a Silver Lake afternoon; it was a Silver Lake afternoon.”³⁸ Sqirl makes no effort to conceal its neighborhood—the restaurant’s rickety backyard tables overflow onto the sidewalk, and the interior is cramped and loud. Though the space appears “shabby” and its location is noisy, Sqirl embraces its environment, highlighting the restaurant’s refusal to conform to traditional expectations surrounding a simple café. Instead of creating a more typical café experience, Sqirl embodies the Silverlake neighborhood, even with its gritty qualities. By doing so, Sqirl affirms its sense of place as a Silverlake eatery. Sqirl also emphasizes its place within the Los Angeles culinary field through its dining style—despite remaining open until 4:00 p.m., the restaurant primarily serves breakfast foods such as toast, pancakes, rice bowls, and hashes. By only serving breakfast (with the occasional lunch sandwich), Sqirl is better able to highlight the skills of its owner, Jessica Koslow, who specializes in jams, sauces, and breakfast foods. Refusing to follow typical café dining practices, Sqirl spotlights its chef’s skills and culinary artistry. With its celebration of the Silverlake neighborhood as well as its focus on its chefs’ culinary creativity, Sqirl confirms the Los Angeles culinary field and its focus on place and nonconformity.

Chris Yenbamroong’s Night + Market Song similarly focuses on and affirms the nonconforming persona of the Silverlake neighborhood through its location, size, and

³⁷ Bittman, Mark, “Breakfast Gets New Life at Jessica Koslow's Sqirl.”

³⁸ Gold, Jonathan, “Review: Sqirl Sticks to the Very Basics,” Los Angeles Times, December 15, 2012, accessed April 8, 2020, www.latimes.com/food/la-xpm-2012-dec-15-la-fo-gold-20121215-story.html.

décor. Located on the very busy Sunset Boulevard and painted pastel pink on the outside, Night + Market Song demands to be noticed even within the trendy, artistic Silverlake neighborhood. Despite its small size, Night + Market Song makes a statement with its unconventional interior. Gold describes how Night + Market Song “may be the sparest restaurant in a neighborhood not known for luxury: an entry hall lined with chairs...and a long, bare room, painted Mets orange, with a Cindy Crawford poster on the wall. The place looks like the rec room in a Downey apartment complex, needing only a half-broken pingpong table to complete its verisimilitude. There is a Michael Jackson shrine in the men’s room and a parade banner in the hall. This is Thai restaurant as experimental theater.”³⁹ Instead of appealing to the standard aesthetics of American Thai restaurants, Night + Market Song reflects Yenbamroong’s personality and his laid-back vision of the restaurant. Evoking a Thai strip club aesthetic with its “Mets orange” walls, half-nude Cindy Crawford poster, and “parade banner,” Night + Market Song reveals both its sense of ironic humor and a sense of genuine artistry. Truly, the aesthetic choices of Night + Market Song are ridiculous, and could be interpreted as either an artificial performance act or Yenbamroong’s sincere artistic vision. Regardless, Night + Market Song’s visuals, tied with its location within Silverlake, strongly indicate the work of a performative auteur who views his restaurant more as “experimental theater” than a typical dining experience, as the restaurant refuses to conform to customers’ usual expectations regarding Thai restaurants. By reflecting Yenbamroong’s personality and personal desires instead of appealing to customers’ expectations, Night + Market Song highlights the auteur perspective found within the Los Angeles culinary field.

³⁹ Addison, Bill, “Review: Republique Is the All-Day Restaurant That Los Angeles Needed.”

Though Trois Mec and its sister restaurant, Petit Trois, are the most traditionally haute of the restaurants in this study, both restaurants still manage to affirm the Los Angeles culinary field through their deliberate location within a strip mall and their intentional lack of signage. Prior to its closure in 2020, Trois Mec was undeniably a high-end restaurant—its tasting menu was \$110 per person, there was a \$50 corkage fee, and very little food accommodations were made for customers because the restaurant would rather showcase the culinary artistry of Ludo Lefebvre than appeal to specific dietary needs.⁴⁰ Though less costly and creatively driven than Trois Mec, Petit Trois is still undeniably expensive. Furthermore, with its focus on traditional French bistro food, Petit Trois more closely replicates traditional French food. With its placement on Highland Avenue in Hancock Park, Trois Mec and Petit Trois could easily conform to the traditional, conservative affluence that surrounds the restaurants. However, it is hugely important to acknowledge the physical location of the two restaurants, as they are located in a run-down strip mall across the street from a gas station. Trois Mec does not even have a sign, instead “occupy[ing] a repurposed Raffallo’s Pizza in a worn media district mini-mall, and the pizza parlor’s signs have been left intact in the parking lot and over the entrance.”⁴¹ Indeed, Trois Mec is hard to find, as its placement within the strip mall and lack of signage hides it from the outside world. Though Petit Trois currently has an accurate sign, upon its opening, the restaurant appeared to be a mini-mall Thai restaurant.⁴² Thus, though they offer expensive, haute cuisine, Petit Trois and Trois Mec

⁴⁰ “Trois Mec,” Trois Mec, accessed November 30, 2019, www.troismec.com/.

⁴¹ Gold, Jonathan, “Review: Trois Mec Is a Coveted Ticket to Cutting Edge,” Los Angeles Times, June 14, 2013, accessed December 3, 2019, www.latimes.com/food/la-fo-gold-20130615-story.html.

⁴² Gold, Jonathan, “Petit Trois Is a Bistro Done Lefebvre's Way,” Los Angeles Times, October 3, 2014, accessed December 3, 2019, www.latimes.com/food/la-fo-gold-petit-trois-20141004-story.html.

externally reflect a more typical Los Angeles sight—that of the common strip mall. By placing the restaurants in such an ordinary, unsophisticated setting, Ludo Lefebvre and his partners contradict typical fine-dining aesthetics and suggest that their restaurants are more culturally accessible, trendy, and resonant. Through their reverence towards the strip mall and their refusal to conform to traditional haute cuisine aesthetics, Trois Mec and Petit Trois highlight their respect for the strip mall as a fundamental Los Angeles feature, indicating their place within the Los Angeles culinary field.

Cuisine

Though each of these restaurants vary in cuisine and genre, the work of the auteur is evident in every restaurant through their chefs' menus and food, thus indicating the existence of the Los Angeles culinary field. These chefs affirm the Los Angeles culinary field by disregarding culinary genres or conventions, obsessing over specific foods or cooking techniques, and conveying the numerous ingredients and culinary opportunities unique to Los Angeles. Through these three specific culinary trends, the foods presented below indicate both their chefs' "taste" for culinary creativity and individualism as well as their viewers' "taste" for artistry and the work of the auteur.

Among the eight menus analyzed in this section, there are numerous examples of auteur-chefs choosing to disregard rules, genre and convention in order to highlight their own creative voice. Though the food at Bäco Mercat was vaguely Mediterranean, the dishes offered were clearly works of Josef Centeno, as they incorporated aspects of Mexican, European, and Asian cuisine as well as feature his own culinary inventions. The Bäco itself is Centeno's creation—it vaguely resembles a taco, or possibly a flatbread

sandwich, and according to Jonathan Gold, “It may taste a little like a falafel, or a crisp shrimp *bánh mì*, or possibly a chicken salad sandwich by way of Algeria.”⁴³ Indeed, the most popular Bacos offered were “The O.G” with “pork belly, beef tongue, smoked aioli, romesco,” “The Toron,” with “oxtail hash, cheddar tater, horseradish-yogurt,” and “El Pesco,” with “crispy fried shrimp, sriracha, chive dressing.”⁴⁴ Clearly, with Mediterranean “yogurt” and “romesco” alongside Asian “sriracha,” Mexican “pork belly, beef tongue” and European “cheddar tater,” a Baco can incorporate practically any regional ingredient and still remain true to its creation. By including ingredients from numerous cuisines (all of which are popular in Southern California), the Baco highlights its ability to both transcend typical food genres and feature the creative voice of the chef. Centeno continues to feature himself as an auteur at Orsa and Winston, where he serves unconventional dishes such as “satsuki rice porridge” with “uni cream, Hokkaido scallop, parmesan.”⁴⁵ Traditionally, a dish such as rice porridge would be seen as quaint, as it is historically a peasant food or a dish eaten during an illness. However, by serving it with luxury items such as “uni” and “Hokkaido scallop,” Centeno challenges rice porridge’s humble connotation, choosing instead to highlight the excellence of his version. By refusing to comply with a dishes’ typical associations, Centeno reveals his influence as an auteur, as he is able to ignore typical culinary traditions and elevate a simple dish with wild success. With dishes such as the Baco and the satsuki rice porridge, Baco Mercat

⁴³ Gold, Jonathan, “Jonathan Gold Reviews Baco Mercat,” LA Weekly, February 9, 2012, accessed April 4, 2020, www.laweekly.com/jonathan-gold-reviews-baco-merc/.

⁴⁴ “Baco Mercat,” Baco Mercat, accessed April 4, 2020, www.bacomercat.com/.

⁴⁵ “Orsa and Winston,” Orsa and Winston, accessed April 4, 2020, <http://www.orsaandwinston.com>

and Orsa and Winston highlight their cuisine's place within the Los Angeles culinary field, as they dismiss culinary rules and genre to highlight the work of Josef Centeno.

Like the Centenoplex, Sqirl and République also dismiss culinary traditions and genre, confirming their place within the Los Angeles culinary field. However, Sqirl and République choose to violate typical genres and many restaurant eating norms in order to accommodate both their customers' and their owners' specific desires. Practically everything on the Sqirl menu can be modified, including their two most famous dishes, the "Sorrel Rice Bowl" and the "Ricotta Toast." The "Sorrel Bowl" can include avocado, kale, house bacon, or sausage if desired, and can be made vegan or without the rice. The "Ricotta Toast" can be made with or without ricotta, with one or more types of jam, with hazelnut and almond butter, and is also offered on seeded country bread or a baguette.⁴⁶ By allowing their dishes to be endlessly modified, Sqirl not only caters to their health-crazed audience but also features the many signature flavors and ingredients that Koslow creates in-house. Indeed, through these multiple variations of the same dish, Sqirl can highlight Koslow's bread baking skills and her proficiency in jam making and meat preservation. Through this dismissal of a typical menu style, Sqirl both appeals to its audience and emphasizes the signature foods of its auteur chef.

République similarly rejects culinary genre and traditions through its cuisine. Although the establishment is categorized as a French restaurant, the brunch menu includes dishes such as, "Shakshuka," "Pupusa," "Chorizo Sopas," "Fried Chicken and Waffle," "Kimchi Fried Rice," and a "Cuban Sandwich," all of which are decidedly not

⁴⁶ "Sqirl," Sqirl, 2011, accessed April 5, 2020, sqirlla.com/.

French.⁴⁷ By offering all of these multiethnic, non-French dishes, République rejects the French label, choosing instead to serve a myriad of different cuisines both to please their customers and to indicate their chef's skills in creating food from practically any region. République's dinner menu also reveals the restaurant's dismissal of conventional restaurant eating practices in favor of simply eating what tastes good. Despite its price (\$13), one of the most popular dishes at République is their Pan Drippings, which is "basically bread and gravy, and the best thing you'll have this (or any) week."⁴⁸ By offering this dish on their menu, the Manzkes indicate their disregard for traditional dining practices—indeed, having a peripheral side dish be the most popular item on one's menu is uncommon. Moreover, a typical customer would not be willing to pay \$13 for a half-loaf of bread and the communal drippings from the bottom of a pan. However, despite these initial qualms, diners at République readily consume it. Therefore, the existence and popularity of République's pan drippings not only suggests the affirmation of the Los Angeles culinary field, but also indicates customers' "taste" and willingness to consume extraneous, unconventional, but delicious food.

Though Trois Mec and Night + Market Song are incredibly different restaurants, their respective cuisines reflect a similar sense of individualism that differs wildly from that of Sqirl and République. The food at Trois Mec and Night + Market Song respectively reflects the personal interests and desires of their chefs, regardless of how these dishes will be received by their audience. While Trois Mec's menu constantly changed, the sample menu at Trois Mec included dishes such as, "Oyster in Sea Water

⁴⁷ "Café | Bakery | Restaurant | République," République, republiquela.com/.

⁴⁸ Rodell, Beshia, "République Review: French Food Worthy of a Glorious Space."

Jelly, Watercress,” “Grilled Wood-Fired Chestnut veloute, bay leaf whipped cream,” and “Uni Crème Brûlée, Coffee Beans, Dates.”⁴⁹ Regardless of Trois Mec’s sophisticated clientele, very few customers would have previously tried “Sea Water Jelly,” a sweet crème brûlée with uni, or a grilled “velouté,” which is technically a sauce. From these three unique dishes on Trois Mec’s tasting menu, one is able to see that Ludo Lefebvre was not trying to conform to any specific cuisine, cooking technique or style of cooking—rather, his food came across as experimental and artistic, without much consideration to how it would be received by customers. Thus, through his artistic approach to his dishes and his dismissal of outside perspective and opinion on his food, Lefebvre revealed his position as a culinary auteur in the Los Angeles culinary field, as he indicates his “taste” for creativity and artistry over mass appeal.

The food offered at Night + Market Song similarly indicates the work of the auteur, as Kris Yenbamroong’s food frequently does not fit into the typical image of Thai cuisine, and his featured cuisine often exists only to please Yenbamroong. When it existed on his menu, the notorious pork blood and MSG soup garnered a significant amount of press—when asked about why he offered the unpopular dish on his menu, Yenbamroong stated, “I only want to do stuff that I care about or that’s relevant to me, or that stimulates me in some way.”⁵⁰ To Yenbamroong, it did not matter if people enjoyed eating his blood soup—he continued to serve it because he, as the creative force and the auteur, cared deeply about its presence on the menu. With his disregard to audience

⁴⁹ “Trois Mec,” Trois Mec, www.troismec.com/.

⁵⁰ Canavan, Hillary Dixler, “How Night + Market’s Kris Yenbamroong Will Make Asian Fusion Cool Again,” Eater, June 24, 2016, accessed April 9, 2020, www.eater.com/2016/6/24/12015662/night-market-venice-kris-yenbamroong-interview.

response, Yenbamroong reveals his role as the auteur, as he believes that the most important aspect of his restaurant is to remain authentic and “relevant” to himself. Night + Market Song’s famous fried chicken sandwich is also a clear example of an auteur’s work. Though it contains Thai elements such as “papaya slaw” and “cilantro,” the dish is not Thai—the chicken sandwich is an American creation. Night + Market Song does not attempt to deny this—their sandwich also comes with “home-made ranch dressing” and “tomato,” the former not resembling traditional Thai food in any way.⁵¹ By offering dishes that exist outside of typical Thai cuisine, Night + Market Song supports the artistry of Yenbamroong, affirming the belief that he should continue to pursue dishes that exist outside of the traditional Thai culinary lexicon. Moreover, though the dish does not conform to the traditional image of Thai food, it remains one of the most popular dishes on the restaurant’s menu. Therefore, by ordering the pseudo-Thai sandwich, Night + Market Song customers reveal their “taste” and preference towards auteur-based cuisine. With his nonchalance towards customer’s expectations and preferences and his determination to fulfill his creative vision, Yenbamroong embodies the beliefs found in Los Angeles culinary field, as he functions as an auteur with Night + Market Song as his stage.

The food offered at many of these restaurants also showcases the culinary obsessions of many of these auteurs, reaffirming the trademark signs of their work as well as indicating the locavoric and home-grown aspects of the Los Angeles culinary field. At Bestia, Ori Menashe makes a concerted effort to use as many parts of the animal as possible—in an interview with Antoinette Bruno of *starchefs.com*, Menashe claims,

⁵¹ “NIGHT + MARKET,” NIGHT+MARKET, www.nightmarketsong.com/welcome.

“We don't waste anything at Bestia...We buy whole animals instead of parts and find a use for everything.”⁵² Indeed, this determination to use as many parts of an animal is apparent in the dishes served at Bestia. Popular dishes such as “Pan-Roasted Chicken Gizzards” and “Slow Roasted Lamb Neck” suggest Ori Menashe’s obsession with offcuts and indicate his trademark theme as an auteur.⁵³ Moreover, Bestia is also known for its house-cured salumi and cured meats, further cementing his culinary style as a meat-based chef. Though Sqirl’s Jessica Koslow also cures her meats in-house, her style as an auteur comes across primarily through her homemade jams, sauces, and nut butters. The aforementioned “Sorrel Rice Bowl” includes homemade sorrel pesto and homemade lacto-fermented hot sauce, and can also include house-cured bacon, sausage, or chicken sausage if desired. Sqirl’s famed “Ricotta Toast” is the clearest example of Koslow’s obsession over homemade ingredients and her work as an auteur. Out of the three elements of the dish—the brioche, the ricotta, and the jam, which comes in many flavors—the ricotta and jam are made in-house and are made with extensive care.⁵⁴ Through her trademark jams, ricotta, and the multiple homemade sauces and meats, Jessica Koslow reaffirms her role as an auteur. République primarily highlights the work of its auteur, Margarita Manzke, through its dozens of pastries and sweet dishes. In her cookbook, Manzke clarifies, “The ingredients we use make the biggest difference between what’s in our cases and what’s in the cases at other bakeries. We use the best butter, flour, and fruit we can find. For the croissants, we use French laminating butter.

⁵² Bruno, Antoinette, “Interview with Los Angeles Rising Star Chef Ori Menashe of Bestia,” StarChefs, May 2014, accessed April 9, 2020, www.starchefs.com/cook/interview/2014/rising-stars/Los-Angeles/Ori-Menashe%20.

⁵³ “Bestia Los Angeles,” Bestia, bestiala.com/.

⁵⁴ “Sqirl,” Sqirl, sqirlla.com/.

And we use butter from Vermont for the brioche.”⁵⁵ Through her explanation of the special butter, flour and fruit used in her pastries, Manzke conveys her obsession with making the best pastries, going so far as to use different butters for each of her baked goods. Furthermore, by highlighting the importance and the specific work that goes into her baked goods, Manzke reveals that her signature as an auteur is her pastries, and much of the success of République comes from her work as a pastry chef. By associating their restaurants with their trademark styles, foods, and obsessions, Los Angeles chefs assert themselves as auteurs within the Los Angeles culinary field.

Responses

While the location, ambiance, and chef-driven cuisines of these eight restaurants point to the Los Angeles culinary field’s presence, the existence of the culinary field can only be confirmed by audience response. Critics’ reviews of these eight restaurants affirm the emergence of the new Los Angeles culinary field, as journalists such as Jonathan Gold, Bill Addison, and Besha Rodell highlight the work of the Los Angeles chef-auteur, emphasizing the singularity of Los Angeles as an imaginative, opportunistic place for creative thinkers.

When reviewing Centeno’s Băco Mercat and Orsa and Winston, critics discerned the same sense of culinary creativity and genre-transgression that defines Centeno as an auteur, as they comment on his multicultural cuisine and sense of identity within downtown Los Angeles. When reviewing Orsa and Winston, Jonathan Gold comments,

⁵⁵ Manzke, Margarita, and Betty Hallock, Introduction. In *Baking at République: Masterful Techniques and Recipes*. (Berkeley, California: Lorena Jones Books, April 2, 2019).

“Josef Centeno may be the prime mover behind what we’ve come to think of as modern Los Angeles cooking; the small plates, multicultural influences, modest prices and exquisitely sourced produce.”⁵⁶ By using Centeno’s work as the prime example of modern Los Angeles cooking, Gold conveys how the Los Angeles culinary field is defined by multiethnic cuisine, financial accessibility, a reliance on local ingredients, and an acceptance of creativity. In other words, if Josef Centeno embodies modern Los Angeles cooking through his “multicultural” culinary influences, “modest prices” and a sense of locavorism, then the Los Angeles culinary field must have these qualities as well. Indeed, Gold concludes his Orsa and Winston review with the declarative statement, “It tastes like Italy, Japan and Spain. It tastes like Los Angeles.”⁵⁷ Thus, Josef Centeno’s work as an auteur not only conveys his individuality and culinary creativity, but also creates a “taste” of Los Angeles that includes a preference for artistry, a use of local ingredients and cultural accessibility. Reviews for Băco Mercat similarly confirm Centeno’s work as an multicultural, rule-breaking auteur. Gold’s review states, “the menu here reads almost like a graduate exam in culinary poststructuralism, mixing flavors from Italy, France and western China, Georgia (U.S.) and Georgia (Eastern Europe), Tuscany and Peru.”⁵⁸ By comparing Băco Mercat to a study in poststructuralism, Gold reveals how Centeno absorbs the culinary conventions surrounding him and then forgoes their traditional baggage in order to create his own unique cuisine. By combining disparate ingredients from across the globe without regard for their traditional culinary conventions, Centeno helps form his signature as an auteur within the Los Angeles

⁵⁶ Gold, Jonathan, “Review: Orsa & Winston Is Centeno’s Rightful Place.” *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 2014, accessed April 4, 2020, www.latimes.com/food/la-fo-gold-20140308-story.html.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Gold, Jonathan, “Jonathan Gold Reviews Baco Mercat.”

culinary field. Furthermore, Gold's praise for Centeno's post-structuralist artistry reveals the preferred "taste" of Centeno's audience, as they appreciate his work as an culinary auteur and accept him as an integral player in the Los Angeles culinary field.

Trois Mec and Petit Trois's portrayal of themselves through media similarly focus on the performative work of their auteur, Ludo Lefebvre. Though Petit Trois's website provided little insight on how they represent their establishment, Trois Mec's frequently asked questions page better characterized the restaurant's atmosphere and personality. Answering the question, "What does Trois Mec mean?," the website answered, "Trois Mec means 'three guys.' It's French slang for three friends. Three homies. Yes, we know we spelled it wrong. We did it on purpose."⁵⁹ This intentional misspelling of Trois Mec's own name reveals not only the restaurant's playfulness but also its willingness to violate conventional rules and norms to best showcase their creativity. Furthermore, when asked if there is a dress code, Trois Mec's website clarified, "There is no dress code. Feel free to come as you are."⁶⁰ Thus, despite the very expensive, high-end meal that customers received at the restaurant, customers were able to "come as [they] are," thus breaking the conventional dress code maintained by many high-end restaurants and allowing customers to express themselves without constraint. With their creative misspelling of their own name as well as their lack of customer dress code, Trois Mec suggested that in their restaurant, there was freedom for both their guests and their chef to do what they desire, even if it broke the customs of traditional fine dining. Indeed, the most recent *Los Angeles Times* review for Trois Mec prior to its closure affirms the genre-dismissive

⁵⁹ "Trois Mec." Trois Mec, www.troismec.com/.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

cooking of Ludo Lefebvre, with Patricia Escarcega stating, “It’s the creative, meticulous cooking at Trois Mec, not a stately dining room or wine cellar, that makes you long for regular ringside seats at the restaurant.”⁶¹ Highlighting Ludo Lefebvre’s “creative, meticulous cooking” over any other aspect of the restaurant, Escarcega reveals the Los Angeles audience’s “taste” for culinary originality as well as the creative nature of the auteur. Even at Petit Trois, which offers considerably more traditional French food and “Ordinariness is more or less the point,” the creative desires of Lefebvre are of paramount importance—upon Petit Trois’s opening, Gold remarked, “Lefebvre may not have figured out what we want in a bistro yet, but he has figured out what **he** wants in a bistro, and in the end, that may be more important” (my emphasis added).⁶² Thus, though it serves classical French food, Petit Trois’s classical nature is what Lefebvre “wants in a bistro,” as opposed to what his audience wants in a French restaurant. However, though Lefebvre seems to not care about catering to his audience, Gold’s final comment of “[Lefebvre’s culinary desires] may be more important” reveals that Lefebvre’s audience does not mind, as they care more about consuming his food than fulfilling their own specific desires. Thus, by highlighting Lefebvre’s auteur voice above all else at his restaurants, critics exhibit the importance of the auteur in the Los Angeles culinary field, as they convey their “taste” for creativity and original cooking above all else.

Both Night + Market Song’s website and critics’ reviews of the restaurant indicate the ingenuity and unapologetic nature of the establishment, affirming the same auteur

⁶¹ Addison, Bill, and Patricia I. Escárcega, “The Official List of L.A.’s 101 Best Restaurants,” Los Angeles Times, December 9, 2019, accessed April 9, 2020, www.latimes.com/projects/101-best-la-restaurants-2019/.

⁶² Gold, Jonathan, “Petit Trois Is a Bistro Done Lefebvre’s Way.”

vision that is conveyed through the restaurant's cuisine and décor. Night + Market Song's website centers on its owner, Kris Yenbamroong, and his interpretation of the restaurant. Yenbamroong conveys his unabashed opinions regarding food and eating, stating, "I think the idea that you're supposed to feel guilty eating something because it might not be cool is nonsensical and elitist. I stand behind all the things that bring me joy. Fusion is one of them."⁶³ By highlighting this specific quote, Night + Market Song reveals its unabashed nature as an establishment, and how, like Yenbamroong himself, it cares little about outside judgement or scrutiny—the restaurant's primary goal is to convey Yenbamroong's joy surrounding his version of Thai food, regardless of how strange it is. Indeed, Yenbamroong's brazen vision of the restaurant has brought the establishment huge success, as customers and critics alike have readily embraced Yenbamroong's artistry and authenticity to himself. Bessa Rodell claims that Night + Market Song's food is "unapologetically and aggressively Thai: spicy, pungent and unyieldingly complex...It is this way because Yenbamroong wants it this way. It's **his** statement, **his** pop art, **his** weird nerdy brilliant irony-twisted soul in restaurant form" (my emphasis added).⁶⁴ Rodell easily admires Yenbamroong's unexpected boldness in his cuisine, and with her emphasis on "**his** statement, **his** pop art, **his** weird nerdy brilliant irony-twisted soul," clearly attributes the restaurant's success to Yenbamroong's strange auteur vision. The restaurant's website similarly acknowledges the importance of Yenbamroong's artistry and its success with its audience, claiming, "The Nam Khao Tod (crispy rice salad) and Fried Chicken Sandwich are two of the most popular dishes and they couldn't be further

⁶³ "NIGHT + MARKET," NIGHT+MARKET, www.nightmarketsong.com/welcome.

⁶⁴ Rodell, Bessa, "Night + Market Song Review: Kris Yenbamroong Creates a Restaurant as Pop Art," LA Weekly, December 4, 2014, accessed April 9, 2020, www.laweekly.com/night-market-song-review-kris-yenbamroong-creates-a-restaurant-as-pop-art/.

apart in origin, yet somehow they both feel at home on a NIGHT + MARKET menu—a phenomenon that makes NIGHT + MARKET a true LA restaurant.”⁶⁵ Customers’ embracing of these two Yenbamroong specialties conveys their “taste” for the creative auteur. More importantly though, by claiming that the popularity of these two pseudo-Thai dishes makes Night + Market “a true LA restaurant,” Night + Market Song suggests that Los Angeles restaurants are defined by creativity, originality, and the work of the auteur, affirming that the role of the artist is paramount within the Los Angeles culinary field. With its praise of Yenbamroong’s culinary vision, both Night + Market Song’s website and critics convey the role of the auteur in the Los Angeles culinary field.

Critics’ remarks about Bestia confirm the same bold, borderline aggressive aesthetic of the restaurant as well as Ori Menashe’s trademark obsession with bold flavors and meat-based products. Rodell acknowledges Menashe’s meat-focused signature, stating, “Instead of beef tartare, there's beef-heart tartare; rather than the trendy but now widely accepted sautéed chicken livers, there are chicken gizzards. They're served with beets for a Halloween-worthy effect, a plate smeared with vegetable blood under a jumble of chicken guts — spongy, delicious chicken guts.”⁶⁶ Rodell’s imagery of gory, “Halloween-worthy” chicken gizzards clearly demonstrates her admiration towards Menashe’s bold, animalistic cooking style. Furthermore, through her hard, violent diction, Rodell recognizes and appreciates Menashe’s obsession with off-cuts, thus revealing her admiration for his unique culinary style. Rodell’s comments, paired with Bestia’s hard-edged, industrial aesthetic suggest that Bestia’s self-depiction as a

⁶⁵ “NIGHT + MARKET,” NIGHT+MARKET, www.nightmarketsong.com/welcome.

⁶⁶ Rodell, Bessa, “Bestia Does It Best.”

bold, aggressive restaurant is noticed and admired by its customers. Indeed, Rodell's comments express how Bestia's audience appreciates the restaurant's and Menashe's bold, "cheffy" extremes. By admiring Menashe's fascination with meat products and gory foods, Rodell confirms that customers' interpretation of Bestia aligns with Bestia's portrayal of itself, as both revere the work of the auteur within the Los Angeles culinary field and admire the chef's unflinching culinary vision.

Unlike critics' reviews of the previous restaurants, République's website and its reviews affirm the Los Angeles culinary field through their focus on the Hollywood legacy. Corresponding to République's website, which reveres and embraces the Hollywood legacies embodied in their building, Rodell claims, "République is already an incredibly compelling restaurant. It does its vast ancestry, from Charlie Chaplin to Marco Pierre White to the obvious legacy left by Campanile, quite proud."⁶⁷ Again, République's image of itself as a reverent, historical space is affirmed by both critics and its audience, suggesting the restaurant has successfully created an image of itself as a fantastical, historical Los Angeles locale. Though I have previously highlighted how the Los Angeles culinary field is defined by the culinary auteur, reviews of République provide another dimension, as its reviews affirm the existence of not only the chef-auteur, but the dreams and fantasies that surround the creative Los Angeles industry in general. Essentially, by highlighting République's stunning, Hollywood-centric building, reviewers reveal how Los Angeles is a specifically unique location for both culinary and non-culinary creativity. Rodell's comment and République's self-promotion express the importance of Los Angeles itself, as République's historical building evokes a fantastical

⁶⁷ Rodell, Beshia, "République Review: French Food Worthy of a Glorious Space."

space that recalls Hollywood and the dreams, creativity and happiness that are associated with it. By emphasizing its Hollywood-centric space, both République and its customers communicate the importance of Los Angeles as a creative space and affirm the specificity of the Los Angeles culinary field.

Similar to République, reviews for Sqirl conjure the romanticized Los Angeles narrative, expressing the importance of the Los Angeles fantasy within the city's culinary field. However, reviews of Sqirl also highlight the auteur touch of Jessica Koslow, whose obsession with pure flavors and the preserving process shines in her restaurant. When describing the creative work of Koslow, Gold claims, "She captures the flavor of a season and a place in a jar. Her cafe exists to reanimate the flavors she preserves, to display them as they ought to be displayed."⁶⁸ Gold's earnest language addresses Koslow's genuine obsession with jam, for despite the minimalist dishes offered at the restaurant, Gold argues that her flavors encompass much larger sentiments, such as "the flavor of a season and a place." In this sense, Gold's comment suggests that Koslow's artistry showcases the beauty of existing within the city of Los Angeles, thus highlighting not only her auteur signature, but also implying a respect for its location within the city. Indeed, Sqirl's appeal relies heavily on the stereotypical image of Los Angeles. As Bill Addison observes, "More than any other contemporary L.A. restaurant, Sqirl taps into the city's sunny, feel-good ethos, and celebrates the mythology of California as a place where the bounty is always great and the food is both wholesome and delicious. When you stand in line at Sqirl, you are often shoulder to shoulder with people from all over the world who have come to experience that version of California, fellow dreamers of the golden

⁶⁸ Gold, Jonathan, "Review: Sqirl Sticks to the Very Basics."

dream.”⁶⁹ Addison’s reverent comment reveals the importance of the “mythology of California” within the Los Angeles culinary field. Though Sqirl customers travel to the restaurant to eat Koslow’s spectacular preserves and “wholesome” dishes, Addison argues that the main appeal of Sqirl is the California ethos it provides. At Sqirl, eaters are able to indulge a somewhat naïve image of California, becoming “dreamers of the golden dream,” even if only temporary. Through his emphasis on the wondrous California mythology, Addison articulates the massive importance of the imagined Los Angeles dream within the Los Angeles culinary field, as customers go to Sqirl to affirm their “taste,” for a fantastical, idealized version of the city of Los Angeles.

Conclusion

Through chef-driven narratives, menus, and critics’ responses, one clearly finds that not only does the Los Angeles culinary field exist, but that it is defined by the chef-auteur and their creative endeavors. These chefs define the Los Angeles culinary food in myriad ways. Firstly, chef-auteurs’ restaurants define the Los Angeles culinary field through their location and their style. Whether it is in a renovated downtown warehouse, an obscure strip mall, or Charlie Chaplain’s former home, Los Angeles chefs utilize their restaurant space to elevate the unknown and embrace his or her creative ability and individualism. Furthermore, with their disregard for the traditional service menu, chef-owners such as those at Sqirl and République not only make their restaurants more financially accessible to customers, but also highlight the creativity and skills of their

⁶⁹ Addison, Bill, and Patricia I. Escárcega, “The Official List of L.A.’s 101 Best Restaurants.”

auteur chefs. The auteur chef-owners of these eight restaurants continue to affirm the Los Angeles culinary field through with dishes such as “the Toron Băco,” “the Sorrel Rice Bowl,” and a Thai fried chicken sandwich, which disregard culinary genres and conventions in favor of creativity and individualism. Within Los Angeles cuisine itself, other indicators of the culinary field include chefs’ obsession over specific foods and cooking techniques, such as Ori Menashe’s obsession with off-cuts, as well as highlighting the ingredients and culinary interactions unique to Los Angeles that allow for new foods and dishes, such as Josef Centeno’s “satsuki rice porridge” with parmesan and uni cream. The Los Angeles culinary field is finally established and proliferated by audience response, as journalists such as Jonathan Gold, Bill Addison, and Besha Rodell embolden the creative endeavors and individuality of the Los Angeles chef-auteur with their astute reviews of Los Angeles restaurants. Through their reviews, these critics convey how the Los Angeles culinary field is defined by multiethnic cuisine, a reliance on local ingredients, and a celebration of individual creativity. However, it is also important to consider critics’ reverence for Los Angeles itself, as journalists such as Rodell and Addison emphasize the extraordinary California mythology through their reviews of République and Sqirl respectively. Through their articulation of the fantastical Hollywood narrative and the imagined Los Angeles dream within their reviews, Rodell and Addison highlight the significance of the California mythos, as they reveal the importance of the creative Los Angeles identity and their preference for an idealized version of the city.

In the next chapter, my continued exploration into the Los Angeles culinary field will problematize the established Hollywood-centric California mythos within the city’s

culinary field. After all, there are numerous identities and realities within Los Angeles culinary discourse, many which are not represented by the sunny Los Angeles mythology I have outlined above. However, the existence of the creative, diverse, unique Los Angeles culinary field is also important to acknowledge. For this chapter, I choose not to ignore the flaws of the Los Angeles culinary ideology but celebrate it regardless, as it has generated remarkable chefs and delicious, accessible, interesting food that has defined contemporary California regional cuisine for the past decade.

Chapter III: Creation and Community in Crisis

Introduction

Previously, I uncovered the existence of the Los Angeles culinary field, which was defined by the chef-auteur and their creative proclivities. Through chefs' restaurant locations, food obsessions, culinary ingenuity, and their affirmation and dissemination by well-known food critics, Los Angeles chefs elevated the beauty and creativity of their work, helping to construct and then propagate a narrative of the good life in Los Angeles. While this California-centric ethos complements the Los Angeles image generated by the entertainment and tourism industry and was easily maintained and readily consumed by the city's visitors and residents alike, this fantasy quickly disintegrated in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the difficult circumstances created by pandemic undermined the culinary field's sunny, individualistic ethos and revealed the precarious reality of restaurants and chefs.

Despite the threat COVID-19 posed to the United States prior to March 2020, the entire country was still shocked and blindsided by the implications of a deadly virus and a global pandemic. As of April 2021, more than 31 million American individuals have gotten the virus and more than 500,000 Americans have died.⁷⁰ Initially, without a clear understanding of how COVID-19 spread amongst people, numerous local government across the nation ordered Americans to stay at home through mandatory restrictions. On March 19, 2020, Los Angeles county officials announced orders to restrict public

⁷⁰ "Covid in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count," The New York Times, The New York Times, March 3, 2020, accessed April 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/coronavirus-us-cases.html>.

movement, requiring indoor malls, shopping centers, nonessential retail businesses and restaurants to temporarily close.⁷¹ However, by March 18, 2020, numerous Los Angeles restaurants, including Bāco Mercat, Orsa and Winston, Petit Trois, Trois Mec, République, Bestia, Sqirl, and Night + Market Song had already closed their doors temporarily, with most also halting takeout out of fear of spreading the virus through prepared food or human contact.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the precarious financial position that restaurants inhabit, as restaurants struggled to survive with no incoming revenue from mid-March to mid-April, and continue to struggle under ever-changing restrictions and customer needs and expectations. As of August 2020, restaurants were only allowed to serve customers outdoors, with reduced seating such that tables were at least six feet apart.⁷² These restrictions, along with customer's hesitation to eat out for fear of contracting COVID-19, led to significantly reduced revenue for dine-in restaurants and the permanent closure of several beloved and previously thriving establishments. According to Eater LA, upwards of sixty restaurants of note have closed in the Los Angeles area since March 2020, ranging from Auburn and Bon Temps (which opened in 2019) to perennial fine dining staples such as Lucques, Patina Restaurant, and Michelin-starred Trois Mec.⁷³ In August 2020, Centeno's revolutionary Bāco Mercat closed its

⁷¹ Chacko, Diya, "Coronavirus Today: California Cracks Down," Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Times, March 19, 2020, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/science/newsletter/2020-03-19/newsom-order-california-stay-home-coronavirus-today>.

⁷² Elliott, Farley, "LA Releases Guidelines For Restaurants Once Dining Rooms Are Allowed to Reopen," Eater LA, Eater LA, May 27, 2020, accessed June 4, 2020, <http://la.eater.com/2020/5/27/21272141/los-angeles-restaurantreopening-guidelines-health-safety-covid-coronavirus>.

⁷³ Elliott, Farley, and Matthew Kang, "A Running List of LA Restaurants That Have Closed During the COVID-19 Pandemic," Eater LA, Eater LA, May 8, 2020, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://la.eater.com/2020/5/8/21252137/los-angeles-la-restaurant-bar-permanently-closed-coronavirus-crisispandemic>.

doors permanently, days after his Michelin-starred establishment Orsa and Winston was named Restaurant of the Year by Los Angeles Times.⁷⁴ Amacita, Centeno's youngest restaurant, followed soon after and closed on August 14.⁷⁵ With restricted seating, reduced revenue, and customers' heightened fear of the unknown, even renowned and acclaimed restaurants in Los Angeles during the pandemic were forced to adapt and alter their image, identities, and culinary presentation to survive.

In this chapter, I examine the culinary and ideological changes that occurred within the Los Angeles culinary field during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, from March 19 to August 31, 2020. Analyzing restaurant websites, Instagram pages, chef-auteur's social media posts, and Los Angeles-specific food journalism, we can discern a fundamental shift in the Los Angeles culinary field. Instead of highlighting sensational, individualistic cuisine as they did before, noteworthy restaurants in Los Angeles changed their cuisine, producing food meant to soothe fearful, anxious customers. Furthermore, instead of promoting the concept of an ever-optimistic, fantastical location and city, Los Angeles restaurants during the pandemic focused on the reality of Los Angeles and its struggling residents. By directing their efforts towards restaurants and vulnerable Los Angeles residents, chef-auteurs and their restaurants altered the discourse in the Los Angeles culinary field, moving towards community outreach and support in lieu of personal praise and individualistic expression.

⁷⁴ Snyder, Garrett, "Josef Centeno's Downtown Restaurant Bāco Mercat Has Closed Permanently," Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Times, August 1, 2020, accessed August 2, 2020, www.latimes.com/food/story/2020-08-01/baco-mercat-closed.

⁷⁵ Elliott, Farley, "Culver City Tex-Mex Specialist Amacita to Close 'For the Foreseeable Future'," Eater LA, Eater LA, August 14, 2020, accessed August 20 2020, <https://la.eater.com/2020/8/14/21369060/amacita-culver-cityclosed-josef-centeno-tex-mex-queso-downtown-pandemic-coronavirus-news>.

Cuisine

The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a year-long period of great uncertainty and fear, as it led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and forced families and individuals to sequester themselves at home for months at a time. Realizing their customers' need for comfort and a sense of security during such difficult times, restaurants changed their cuisine and their attitude towards consumption significantly during the early months of the pandemic. Instead of asserting the optimistic, idealistic, fantastical sentiments previously found in the Los Angeles culinary discourse, acclaimed restaurants, now hyperaware of their own precarious position and financial insecurity, aimed to attract customers that desired a sense of safety with comforting tastes and approachable dishes. Though the "distaste" for upscale, refined dining was occurring within the Los Angeles culinary field before the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic only hastened restaurants' return to simpler homestyle or casual meals. This trend can be seen to some extent in all the restaurants analyzed in the previous chapter, thus confirming the existence of this discursive shift.

Unsurprisingly, Sqirl's transition from dine-in to takeout was the most seamless, as the restaurant's offerings, though inventive and distinctive, are inherently rooted in American staples such as jams and sauces, and thus the restaurant did not stray far from its roots when catering to a quarantined audience. Furthermore, the genre of food that Sqirl serves had increased in popularity during the pandemic, as more Americans familiarized themselves with products such as homemade bread and baked goods during their extended stay at home, and therefore Sqirl did not have to reframe their cuisine to

appeal to their audience. The restaurant still offered its usual artisanal comfort food, including their signature “Sorrel Rice Bowl” and “Ricotta Toast,” along with new additions such as “Vegan Almond Chive Cream Cheese,” “Squirly Tzatziki” with labne, crème fraiche and lacto-fermented hot sauce, Herbed Green Tahini Dip, Spinach Feta Dip, artisanal “Sour Fruit Strips,” and “Vegan Cashew Pimento Cheese,” all of which were made for casual consumption at home.⁷⁶

With their available outdoor seating, Bestia and République remained open for in-person dining.^{77,78} However, while both restaurants offered much, if not all of their original menu for dine-in customers, they either modified or reduced their takeout menus to accommodate a smaller kitchen and the changing tastes of their customers. République has consistently changed their menu throughout the pandemic. In March and April 2020, their takeout menu was limited, and offered simple items such as corn soup, potato gratin, macaroni and cheese, and tomato soup.⁷⁹ The featuring of these unassuming dishes during the initial Californian shutdown suggests customers’ tastes during financially and emotionally stressful times; in times of crisis and panic, individuals were less likely to consume adventurous or completely innovative food. However, as the pandemic endured and Los Angeles residents grew weary of the city’s enforced restrictions, République greatly expanded their menu, creating an online shop specifically for their baked goods, while also offering set dinner menus as well as numerous a la carte options. Neither their

⁷⁶ “SQIRL: Online Menu,” Toast, 2020, accessed July 10 2020, www.toasttab.com/sqirl/v3#!/.

⁷⁷ As of November 26, 2020, the city of Los Angeles shut down indoor dining, only reopening on March 16, 2021.

⁷⁸ While both Bestia and République have remained open for dine-in since July 1 and June 11 2020 respectively, from November 22, 2020 to January 29, 2021, outdoor dining was temporarily prohibited.

⁷⁹ “République - Los Angeles, CA | Tock,” République, 2020, accessed May 10, 2020, www.exploretock.com/republiquela.

baked goods nor their a la carte items had changed since before the pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, the restaurant offered standard pastries such as croissants and chocolate chip cookies alongside their renowned baguettes and innovative goods such as Coconut Ube Mini Loaf, Dulce de Leche Condensed Milk Pound Cake, Matcha Raspberry Bostock, and Mango Passion-Fruit Cream Pie.⁸⁰ Their a la carte options were similarly unique to the République kitchen and have not changed since the beginning of the pandemic, including their popular Kimchi Fried Rice, Shakshouka, and Pupusa.⁸¹ République's return to their usual fare after a brief period of culinary severity reveals the rapidly changing mentality of their customers. Despite the restrictions generated by the COVID-19 crisis, République's customers still wanted to consume innovative, original food, and therefore, the restaurant continued to produce the majority of their former offerings.

Bestia's return to their usual a la carte menu was not as immediate as République's, though as of August, they had begun to offer more comforting homestyle dishes alongside their well-known dishes. Alongside favorites such as their pan-roasted Chicken Gizzards and Roasted Bone Marrow, Bestia's online to-go menu highlighted humbler ingredients: Butterbean Puree with rosemary-porcini XO, marjoram blossom and grilled bread, Green Garbanzo Agnolotti with prosciutto cotto, sage, grana Padano, and a Cake of the Week, whose flavors changed on a weekly basis.⁸² Bestia's pizza offerings also became more traditional—unlike before, when the restaurant advertised pizza with

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² "Bestia - Los Angeles, CA | Tock," Tock to Go, 2020, accessed May 15, 2020, www.exploretock.com/bestia/.

toppings such as ‘nduja, clams, guanciale and capers, Bestia now offers the traditional Margharita, a Burrata Pizza with castelvetrano olives, oregano, and fermented chilies, a Mortadella and Sage Pizza, and an “Umami” Pizza, which includes savory ingredients such as tomato, salami, fermented chili, anchovy, and grana Padano.⁸³ Though Bestia continued to make most of their usual menu, significant changes were made to make their food more comforting and humble to appeal to audiences’ preference for more traditional tastes. Furthermore, the recent additions and ingredients used in these offerings suggest an economical element to Bestia’s cuisine, as ingredients such as butterbeans and garbanzos are comparatively inexpensive to buy and easy to prepare, making them cost-effective products to use in financially difficult times. However, these humbler dishes still highlight the ingenuity of Bestia’s chefs—the Butterbean Puree appetizer includes an Italian-inspired XO sauce, which originates in Chinese cuisine, and the “Umami” pizza is unique to Bestia, as the dish utilized traditional but umami-heavy ingredients to create an entirely new pizza. Thus, while Bestia retained much of its original menu to cater to customers, their new offerings remain more cost-effective and accommodate customers’ desire for humble, comforting food while still highlighting the desire for culinary creativity that is found throughout their cuisine.

Over the months, Petit Trois accommodated their customers’ new preferences with several additions to their menu. Petit Trois’s menu has always been rather limited, and due to their small kitchen size, their menu further reduced and constantly shifted throughout the course of the pandemic. Moreover, the restaurant’s pandemic offerings were far more simple and American in style than French, suggesting customers’ desire

⁸³ Ibid.

for comforting, well-known flavors. For those that preferred their usual French-influenced items, Petit Trois still offered popular dishes such as their Confit Fried Chicken Leg, Big Mec, and Omelette. However, though their new additions routinely changed with the seasons and the severity of the COVID-19 lockdown, they were always simple in style and preparation and evoked a sense of comfort. In the early stages of the lockdown, Petit Trois sold to-go soups such as Creamy Tomato, Broccoli Cheddar, Cauliflower, Vegan Coconut Lentil, and Chicken Soup, all of which are not French in taste or style.⁸⁴ For holidays and special events such as Fourth of July and Memorial day, the restaurant offered to-go kits included Bratwurst, Meatballs, Apple Pie, Biscuits, and Veggie Burgers.⁸⁵ Evidently, in light of the harsh restrictions placed upon restaurants during the early stages of the pandemic, Petit Trois chose to make food that would be consumed at home and would be reminiscent of what customers would normally eat or make during special occasions, regardless of its lack of connection to the distinctly French cuisine typically offered. As the summer progressed and restrictions were loosened, Petit Trois's menu continued to offer items whose tastes reflected a return to non-elite cuisine, such as an American-style Chinese Chicken Salad, Gazpacho, a Chicken Salad Sandwich, and a "French Pizza," which is a baguette topped with tomato sauce and emmental cheese and then broiled.⁸⁶ While Chinese Chicken Salad and Gazpacho are clearly additions meant to appeal to customers who desire a more typical American cuisine, the preparation of Petit Trois's Chicken Salad Sandwich and existence

⁸⁴"Petit Trois Delivery in Los Angeles - Delivery Menu – DoorDash," DoorDash, DoorDash Food Delivery, 2020, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.doordash.com/store/petit-trois-los-angeles-921794/en-CA>.

⁸⁵ petittroisla, "Photo of burger kit, roti, apple tart kit," *Instagram*, 18 April 2020, accessed May 7, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B_IVPkgJ2L7/

⁸⁶ "Petit Trois - Highland Pickup and Delivery Near You," Caviar, 2020, accessed May 5, 2020, www.trycaviar.com/m/petit-trois--highland-19760.

of the “French Pizza” indicate the restaurant’s ingenuity and playfully creative nature. While Chicken Salad Sandwich is a standard dish and well-understood by American consumers, Petit Trois reinterpreted it by adding boursin pepper cheese and chives and putting it inside a baguette, placing it within the French style Petit Trois is known for. Much like their renowned Big Mec burger, the “French Pizza” is a playful interpretation of a non-French culinary tradition, albeit with less respect given to the original dish. By substituting a baguette for pizza crust and topping it with emmental cheese, Petit Trois’s chefs make it a dish specific to their restaurant. With their new additions to their menu, Petit Trois highlighted their audience’s preferences for unadventurous, comforting food, while also revealing the creative solutions produced within these constraints, as the restaurant’s chefs worked to convey their culinary innovation despite changing tastes and limited menus.

Unlike its sister restaurant, Trois Mec did not adapt its menu or its dining style to accommodate the Los Angeles city restrictions. This is most likely because the identity of Trois Mec relied on its fine dining structure and its emphasis on auteur-driven food—Trois Mec’s tasting menu always included nonconforming dishes such as, “Dried seafood waffle, Vietnamese vinaigrette” and “Sweet peas, spot prawn, charcoal mayonnaise, rhubarb, [and] matcha powder,” which were not only expensive, but also inherently experimental and artistic, without much consideration for its reception by customers.⁸⁷ Indeed, Trois Mec’s high price point, intimate dining room, and prioritization of culinary artistry over customer accommodation were unsuited to the uncertainties brought by

⁸⁷ “Trois Mec - Copy of Menu,” Trois Mec, 2020, accessed November 5, 2020, <https://www.troismec.com/menu-1>.

COVID-19. Simply put, Trois Mec’s indifference towards mass appeal and its strict identity as an experimental, high-end restaurant rendered it unsustainable during the COVID-19 pandemic, as consumers were unable to safely eat in its dining room and the restaurant chose not to convert their meals to takeout variations due to their creative integrity. Its temporary closure on March 18 later became permanent, with its owner Ludo Lefebvre announcing the news in late July.⁸⁸ Perhaps more than any other restaurant analyzed in this work, Trois Mec’s closure highlights the shifting “tastes” of Los Angeles consumers, as Lefebvre’s high-end, ultra-sophisticated fare was no longer feasible within the constraints of COVID-19 health restrictions, and did not appeal to customers desiring comforting or unadventurous cuisine. The closure of Trois Mec signals a considerable shift within the Los Angeles culinary field discourse, as the previously renowned establishment became removed and irrelevant to the desires and needs of restricted restaurants and customers, and thus, ceased to exist within the Los Angeles restaurant scene.

However, the closure of Trois Mec did not mark the end to Ludo Lefebvre’s creative endeavors—in mid-September, Lefebvre and his business partners transformed the previous Trois Mec space into Ludobab, a Parisian-style kebab takeout restaurant.⁸⁹ In practically all ways, Ludobab’s cuisine, culinary style and format are the antithesis of Trois Mec’s high-end genre-less cuisine. Instead of serving formal, expensive food, Ludobab offers Middle Eastern kebabs with French flavors, such as *vadouvan* (a French

⁸⁸ Lefebvre, Ludo, “Photo of Trois Mec Exterior,” *Instagram*, July 25, 2020, accessed August 3, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDEyWRspBtX/>.

⁸⁹ Kang, Matthew, “Ludo Lefebvre Turns Trois Mec Into a Wood-Grilled Parisian Kebabs Takeout Spot,” *Eater LA*, *Eater LA*, September 15, 2020, accessed September 16, 2020, <https://la.eater.com/2020/9/15/21438769/ludobab-ludo-lefebvre-parisian-kebab-trois-mec-los-angeles>.

derivate of Indian curry) lamb skewers, herbs de Provence and Dijon mustard marinated chicken skewers, and grilled ratatouille skewers.⁹⁰ Furthermore, unlike Trois Mec, which only offered a dine-in experience, Ludobab's food caters to customer's needs; Ludobab operates solely as a takeout restaurant with both delivery and pickup options, serving their meals in paper containers through Doordash and Caviar. Considering the contrast between Ludobab and Trois Mec's food and dining style, one can clearly see the changes occurring within the Los Angeles culinary discourse due to the repercussions of COVID-19. Ludobab's emergence following the closure of Trois Mec emphasizes the shift in Los Angeles culinary discourse away from expensive, supposedly "refined" fine-dining, as restaurants instead prioritize casual and accessible food for the COVID-19-era customer.

Josef Centeno's restaurants significantly altered their menus to appeal to their customers' new preferences. Prior to its permanent closure, Băco Mercat only offered two types of their titular Băco as well as a three-course set menu. However, their new additions were far more standard fare; they included goods such as Frozen Cookie dough, Vegetable Lasagna, Eggplant "Parmesan," and flatbread-style Cocas with traditional smoked tomato, basil, and mozzarella toppings.⁹¹ Orsa and Winston's usual Japanese-inspired tasting menu was (and is) still available, albeit abbreviated to a three-course meal. However, other new additions include a "Quarter Pounder Sando with Cheese" with cabbage and pickles, a "Tsukune Chicken Sando with Cheddar," Crudités with carrot-ginger mayonnaise, a Grain Bowl with black and brown rice, shoyu egg, market vegetables, and yuzu-oregano dressing, and *aonori* sea salt potato chips, which are

⁹⁰ "Ludobab," Ludobab, 2020, accessed September 16, 2020, <https://www.ludobab.com/>.

⁹¹ "BĂCO TO-GO & GENERAL STORE," Băco Mercat, 2020, accessed June 10, 2020, www.bacomercat.com/general-store.

completely different from the food previously offered before the pandemic.⁹² Though Josef's Centeno's restaurants clearly altered their menu to appeal to customers' desire for comforting, well-understood dishes, Băco Mercat and Orsa and Winston's food still revealed their chefs' desire and need for creativity. For example, the Eggplant entrée offered at Băco Mercat was reminiscent of an Eggplant Parmesan, but instead of traditional Italian flavors, the dish was prepared with "tomato fenugreek sauce, harissa, and mozzarella," evoking a Mediterranean or Middle Eastern palate.⁹³ Orsa and Winston's new takeout options were standard fare for American consumers, but were influenced by Japanese flavors and ingredients, suggesting a strong level of creativity despite the practical restraints of a takeout menu. Unlike standard patty melts or sandwiches, their sandwiches took the form of a Japanese sando, which uses pale milk bread and often contains a fried cutlet of pork, chicken, or beef. While Japanese-style sandwiches that use milk bread have become increasingly trendy since 2019, Centeno's utilization of milk bread to make American-based dishes highlights his innovation regardless, as no other recently opened katsu sando restaurants in the city offer such fare. Potato chips are ubiquitous in American life, but with the addition of *aonori* sea salt, the snack becomes more distinctive and inspired. Though Centeno's restaurants changed their menu significantly to accommodate customer's desire for safe, comforting food, the restaurants' choice of ingredients and flavors still reveals a need for the individualism and culinary invention that is inherent within the works of a chef-auteur.

⁹² "O&W TO-GO & GENERAL STORE," Orsa & Winston, 2020, accessed June 11, 2020, www.orsaandwinston.com/general-store.

⁹³ "BĂCO TO-GO & GENERAL STORE," www.bacomercat.com/general-store.

Night + Market Song's menu evolved throughout the course of the pandemic, as they expanded their original menu to include items that are more portable and cater to the nostalgic tastes of their consumers. Because Night + Market Song has no available outdoor seating, the restaurant focused on refining their takeout menu to best appeal to their quarantined patrons. Along with most of their usual fare, including their famous Fried Chicken Sandwich and Pad Thai, Night + Market Song also added items that reveal chef Yenbamroong's culinary creativity, albeit through the confines of takeout meals. Night + Market Song's new Gai Tod Naeng Noi is essentially the interior of their Fried Chicken Sandwich, as the dish consists of fried chicken with ranch dressing and roasted chilis, shallots, garlic and fish sauce. Other new additions include a Chopped Salad, Pastrami Pad Kee Mao, which consists of rice noodles, bell pepper, basil, Thai chili, young peppercorn, and pastrami, *Mentaiko* Noodles, Orange Chicken, and Roti with milk.⁹⁴ In contrast to items served before the pandemic, the Chopped Salad, *Mentaiko* Noodles, Orange Chicken and Roti are considerably less adventurous and more well known to their average customers. Chopped Salad and Orange Chicken are consumed throughout the United States, Japanese-inspired *Mentaiko* Noodles, while not familiar to all customers, can be easily understood as a simply flavored, creamy noodle dish, and Roti is an unassuming bread that even picky eaters would enjoy. While it seems that these more standard additions undermine the creative strengths of chef Yenbamroong, the technique and ingredients within each individual dish support the notion of culinary invention and creation. Unlike a typical Chopped Salad, Night + Market Song's version

⁹⁴ "Night + Market Song Delivery Near You | Caviar," Caviar, 2020, accessed June 28, 2020, www.trycaviar.com/m/night--market-song-8381.

includes bok choy, larb herbs, peanut brittle, spicy Thai vinaigrette, ranch, and crispy shallots, all of which are unheard of in a traditional Chopped Salad. While the Orange Chicken has the same fried exterior and sticky glaze associated with its fast-food equivalent, the addition of citrus zest, fish sauce, green onion, and roasted chili elevates it and makes it unique to Night + Market. Lastly, Yenbamroong's Pastrami Pad Kee Mao embodies the culinary vision of Night + Market Song; though Pad Kee Mao is a staple dish in Thai cuisine, the addition of Pastrami makes it decidedly different and specific to the restaurant. Though Night + Market Song softened their menu to appeal to a more culinarily conservative audience, the restaurant still maintains their culinary creativity and ingenuity with reinventions of American favorites and the addition of unexpected ingredients to Thai staples.

Community Engagement

While the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the precarious financial position of restaurants, it also revealed the larger societal inequalities within the United States, resulting in issues such as massive job loss and overwhelmed and underfunded medical facilities. Even with the difficult financial and health constraints threatening Los Angeles restaurants, chef-auteurs universally took action to support those in need of assistance or aid. This universal push for community engagement and action indicates a shift in discourse within the restaurant industry, as chef-auteurs made concerted efforts to contribute to the community to the best of their ability. Considering the actions completed under this new culinary discourse surrounding community support and activism, the role of the restaurant began to shift. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic,

restaurants no longer only championed the creative vision or the individualism of the auteur—by focusing on the struggling Los Angeles community, restaurants began to champion the voices of the struggling and oppressed, revealing the imperativeness of community support regardless of one’s own individuality or personal situation.

Of all the chef-auteurs analyzed in this work, no chef was as vocal about community action and activism as Josef Centeno. Utilizing Instagram as his primary platform, Centeno continuously displayed his efforts to actively help the community at large during the COVID-19 pandemic. As early as mid-March, Centeno began offering his takeout menu, with all food proceeds going to his staff “so that [they] can keep as many chefs and managers employed as possible at this time.” Furthermore, along with takeout, Centeno offered a daily complimentary or donation-only soup, which would be given upon request to those out of work.⁹⁵ When food proceeds became insufficient, Centeno sold his own hand-dyed sweatshirts, hats, tote bags, and signed cookbooks to cover staff salaries and sick pay for hourly workers.⁹⁶ Ultimately, when these efforts also did not cover the costs to pay his staff’s healthcare, Centeno finally created a Go Fund Me page, stating on his Instagram, “We’ve prioritized healthcare...because it’s more important than ever right now.”⁹⁷ Compared to other chef-owners, Josef Centeno clearly prioritized his staff over the survival of his restaurants or his creative vision. Refusing to ask customers for donations until all options were exhausted, Centeno highlighted his leadership and sense of responsibility towards his workers, and demonstrated his focus on

⁹⁵ Centeno, Josef. “Photo of Bäco Mercat menu,” *Instagram*, 17 March 2020, accessed June 20, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B91v-6UB_zg/.

⁹⁶ Centeno, Josef. “Photo of hand-dyed sweatshirts,” *Instagram*, 18 March 2020, accessed June 20, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B94_UHrh02/.

⁹⁷ Centeno, Josef. “Photo of hand-dyed sweatshirts,” *Instagram*, 26 March 2020, accessed June 20, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-NMOvKD49R/>.

community support and action. Moreover, by offering free food to those who needed it with no further questioning or quid pro quo, Centeno exhibited his belief in helping those in need, even if it is at his own expense. Centeno furthered his aid in the community in late March. In an Instagram post featuring a tray of Japanese Curry Enchiladas, Centeno described his new work, as he cooked alone in his restaurant's kitchen to provide food for the overworked Cedars-Sinai Staff. In his post's description, Centeno urged other chef-owners to do the same, writing "If other chef-owners want to do the same...I will have contacts at hospitals all over Los Angeles who need meals for staff...You can DM me and I'll connect you."⁹⁸ Centeno's call out to his peers indicates a significant amount of leadership—instead of emphasizing and glorifying his own charitable deeds on social media, he instead used the platform to push other chefs to take similar action and help community members in need. Saying he will respond to private messages in order to connect chefs with those in need, Centeno's urgings come across as personal, genuine and legitimate, as he clearly wants to support his community members who are in precarious or dangerous situations. While Josef Centeno's response to the threatening, concerning circumstances brought by COVID-19 can be interpreted as solely personal, Centeno also carries significant influence as a prominent Los Angeles chef and restaurateur, as his community outreach was featured in newspapers such as the Los Angeles Times and his rhetoric was emulated by fellow Los Angeles chefs, helping to create a new COVID-19 restaurant discourse.⁹⁹ Josef Centeno's response to the COVID-

⁹⁸ Centeno, Josef, "Photo of hand-dyed sweatshirts," *Instagram*, 18 March 2020.

⁹⁹ Kwan Peterson, Lucas, "We Checked in with 15 Chefs and Restaurant Owners around L.A. Here's What They Told Us:," *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, April 9, 2020, accessed May 10, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/food/story/2020-04-09/chef-restaurant-quarantine-compilation-video-bestia-guisados>.

19 pandemic highlights the community-focused discourse that rapidly developed in the Los Angeles culinary field, as chefs such as Centeno prioritized helping those in need and supporting the community over previously emphasized individual expression or success.

Other chefs similarly prioritized their staff and the health and safety of the community at large. In March, Night + Market Song's Kris Yenbamroong asked for donations for his staff, posting on Instagram, "we are asking for your help. If what we do has touched you in some way...please consider chipping in a few bucks. It will provide much needed immediate relief and will go 100% directly to the staff at all 3 NIGHT+MARKET restaurants."¹⁰⁰ Compared to Centeno, Yenbamroong's response to the pandemic seems muted, as he only asked for community aid as opposed to supporting his staff independently. However, many restaurants did not even ask for aid for their staff, and instead urged their customers to buy takeout food or simply support the restaurant at large. Instead of posting an aesthetic-pleasing image of the restaurant or an artistic photo of the food served at Night + Market, the Instagram post features a low-quality image of his staff posing for a group photo.¹⁰¹ With the Night + Market staff huddled together, with some staffers smiling at the camera and others looking at each other, the photo highlights the candid nature of the moment and suggests the humanity of the people that work at beloved restaurants such as Night + Market. By featuring this photo of his restaurant staff, Yenbamroong reframed Night + Market through the lens of its workers, suggesting that instead of functioning as an individualistic, creative establishment, Night + Market is successful because of its dedicated staff. Highlighting

¹⁰⁰ ntmrkt. "Image of Night + Market Staff," *Instagram*, 20 March 2020, accessed 10 June 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B99IHHqh3F8/>.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

his workers, Yenbamroong focused his attention on the struggling Los Angeles individual, specifically the lives of ordinary restaurant workers, suggesting that currently, it is more important to champion the voices of everyday staff over creative vision or the individualism of the chef-auteur.

Bestia's Ori Menashe and Genevieve Gergis also attempted to support their staff and the greater community through their food. Similar to Centeno's restaurants, Bestia offered takeout family-style menus "to continue providing health insurance benefits for [their] entire staff."¹⁰² Menashe and Gergis have further emphasized the importance of community aid through their newly-founded charity, Feed Love LA. In both a statement on Instagram and on their website, Bestia states that through Feed Love LA, "We will be providing fresh grocery and pantry items to those who are at risk for becoming food insecure within our restaurants. Our goal is to extend our reach further into the community as soon as we are able."¹⁰³ Though more self-congratulatory in tone than Centeno's efforts to support the community, Bestia's work through Feed Love LA indicates their concerted effort to help out-of-work restaurant staff across the city. Furthermore, by heavily featuring their charity, Bestia emphasizes the new community-focused restaurant discourse, as their advertising of community work urges other restaurants to take action and support laid-off restaurant workers. Genevieve Gergis and Ori Menashe's relief efforts were similarly publicized by the Los Angeles Times alongside Josef Centeno.¹⁰⁴ Through this publication, the Los Angeles Times helped to

¹⁰² bestiadtla. "Text post," *Instagram*, 23 March 2020, accessed June 10, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-Gh7vCBarK/>.

¹⁰³ bestiadtla."Text post," *Instagram*, 4 April 2020, accessed June 10, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-IVy7RB4Ao/>.

¹⁰⁴ Kwan Peterson, Lucas, "We Checked in with 15 Chefs and Restaurant Owners around L.A. Here's What They Told Us:."

circulate and reaffirm the chef-driven, community-focused Los Angeles culinary discourse throughout the greater Los Angeles area. Bestia’s community engagement was further emphasized with their “First Responder Treats” offered on their to-go menu. Starting in early April, Bestia offered these \$3 items, stating that the money “will be used to buy the product necessary to make treats, which will be personally delivered by Genevieve to those on the front line of this pandemic. Donating to this fund allows you to send your thanks to those who are fighting to save lives, while still remaining safe and healthy at home.”¹⁰⁵ While not as extensive as Centeno’s efforts to help hospital staff, Bestia’s provisions for first responders clearly convey Menashe and Gergis’s efforts to thank and care for healthcare workers who are risking their lives to save others. Though Bestia’s community work supports those in need at the financial expense of the customer, the restaurant still maintains the community-focused discourse through their “First Responder Treats”¹⁰⁶ and Feed Love LA Program, as they aim to help both the restaurant community and the Los Angeles healthcare community.

Compared to previous restaurants discussed, République’s approach to action and aid was rather subdued, as they did not emphasize community engagement as strongly as their peers. In contrast to Josef Centeno, Ori Menashe and Genevieve Gergis, who actively supported both the restaurant and healthcare community through food donations, and Kris Yenbamroong, who asked his followers to help support his restaurant staff, République’s owners donated “Easter baskets” of food to over two hundred of their furloughed employees across their three restaurants as a show of gratitude to their out-of-

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ These “First Responder Treats” were offered until September 2020, and thus are not available anymore.

work staff.¹⁰⁷ République also made efforts to support local farmers by selling Farmers' Market Produce Boxes from places such as Thao Farms and County Line Harvest.¹⁰⁸ By acknowledging the products created by local farmers, République highlighted the larger supply chain for Los Angeles restaurants, showing gratitude to local produce farmers for their products that are foundational to the dishes produced in its kitchen. République's show of gratitude to local farmers both reveals the communal effort that previously went unnoticed from the customer's perspective and helps to override the individualistic set of beliefs previously enforced in the Los Angeles culinary field, allowing for a more communal perspective to take its place. However, République's Farmers' Market offerings to furloughed staff, while a kind gesture, ultimately pale in comparison to the actions done by previously discussed chef-auteurs and restaurants, as the actions seem unimpactful and come across as merely an effort to maintain a positive image for their restaurant.

From March to July 2020, Sqirl's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was publicized extensively. Compared to her peers, Jessica Koslow explicitly conveyed how her restaurant contributed to the community via Sqirl's Instagram and her own twitter account. However, the benevolence of Koslow's community outreach during these months were put under scrutiny, as allegations regarding the mistreatment of her workers as well as the inadequate packaging and storing of her food impacted her image as a chef and a restaurateur. With the support of programs such as the Lee Initiative, Maker's

¹⁰⁷ Republicuela, "Photo of Walter and Margharita Manzke," *Instagram*, 9 April 2020, accessed June 12, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/B-xaSVUDz_5/.

¹⁰⁸ Republicuela, "Photo of vegetable box," *Instagram*, 3 April 2020, accessed June 12, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-imw3ODqXH/>.

Mark, and Busy Philipps, Sqirl transformed into a “relief kitchen,” with the restaurant offering “free meals and essential goods for out-of-work restaurant workers.”¹⁰⁹ Starting on April 4th and continuing until the end of May, Sqirl’s “Family Meal” offered thousands of free two-person meals and essential items to out-of-work hospitality professionals.¹¹⁰ Similar to Bestia’s Feed Love LA charity, Sqirl’s relief kitchen program showcased the restaurant’s effort to support unemployed individuals in the Los Angeles restaurant community. Sqirl’s “Family Meal” and community engagement was heavily publicized through the restaurant’s Instagram and Twitter accounts, as well as through Koslow’s appearance on celebrity-chef David Chang’s podcast, enforcing and broadly disseminating the new community-oriented restaurant discourse throughout Los Angeles and further.¹¹¹ According to Sqirl’s Instagram, the restaurant had “served over 10,000 meals” by May 15, an impressive feat for any restaurant and an obvious sign of community aid during such a difficult time for minimum-wage restaurant workers.¹¹² Though the restaurant did not make a public statement regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, Sqirl continued to show support for struggling community members outside of the restaurant industry by including links to nationwide charities, free legal aid for those who have been arrested during protests, and mutual aid funds in their Instagram page’s description.¹¹³ Furthermore, when they initially reopened on June 13, Sqirl stated that twenty-five percent of their proceeds would go to Criticalresistance, a national

¹⁰⁹ Sqirlla, “Text post,” *Instagram*, 3 April 2020, accessed June 12, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-iMmu5H926/>.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ “Too Small To Fail, Vol. 3: Jessica Koslow | The Dave Chang Show,” *The Dave Chang Show*, 20 April 2020, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/12Xl1JLEtCSe6XwVK4qKjY>.

¹¹² Sqirlla, “Illustration of the Lee Initiative.” *Instagram*, 15 May 2020, accessed June 14, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAN0EUOnz36/>.

¹¹³ “Sqirl (@Sqirlla) | Instagram,” *Instagram*, accessed June 13, 2020, www.instagram.com/sqirlla/.

grassroots organization working to abolish the prison industrial complex.¹¹⁴ Through Sqirl's high-profile image in tandem with their explicit efforts to aid those in need during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Jessica Koslow seemingly helped to enforce and affirm the new community-focused Los Angeles culinary discourse throughout the greater Los Angeles area.

By advocating for restaurant workers, first responders, disadvantaged members of the Los Angeles community, and underrepresented food suppliers, restaurants across Los Angeles highlighted the need for community action during the spring and summer of 2020. Though instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic, these restaurants' actions fundamentally changed the discourse previously established within the Los Angeles culinary field. Instead of solely prioritizing the artistry and individualism of the chef-auteur, restaurants now focus on the harsh realities of the restaurant business, and, by extension, life itself, as they attempt to keep their establishments financially afloat and provide for their staff, while also focusing on supporting the struggling local community during a national crisis.

Redefining the Culinary Field

While the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic helped to create a new Los Angeles culinary discourse defined by restaurants' community support and aid, it has also highlighted long-lasting worker disparities within the restaurant industry, often around the topic of race and equitable treatment. Amongst the eight restaurants analyzed within

¹¹⁴ Sqirlla. "Illustration for Sqirl," *Instagram*, 13 June 2020, accessed June 13 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBYfBYJHK-r/>.

this work, no restaurant exemplifies the disparities and controversies unearthed by the pandemic as well as Sqirl Restaurant. As I previously discussed, Sqirl's community outreach efforts during the COVID-19 restaurant crisis affirmed the community-oriented Los Angeles culinary discourse. However, Sqirl's image was also affected by COVID-19 in negative ways. Considering her extensive aid given to out-of-work restaurant employees, support for unemployed community members, open encouragement of protesters, and financial support for prison reform organizations, Koslow seemed to embody the new Los Angeles culinary discourse, which prioritizes the voices and needs of the community over the desires of the creative individual. However, Koslow's community outreach and support must also be contextualized within allegations that occurred in July 2020, which included serving moldy jam to customers, forcing employees to work in an uninspected, unsafe kitchen, and claims that she discredited several of her employees of color by taking ownership of their recipes.

Ironically, Koslow's fall from grace was just as heavily featured as her efforts to support and aid the struggling Los Angeles community. On July 12, a shocking image of a moldy tub of Sqirl jam circulated throughout national news outlets, followed by numerous allegations surrounding her mistreatment of non-white employees. Consequently, Koslow and her actions were universally condemned by the restaurant's avid followers. In her piece for EaterLA, staff writer Jaya Saxena argues, "While the jam is certainly the visual shocker, many of the other allegations against Sqirl and Koslow are about presenting an aura of progressiveness while treating employees of color

unfairly.”¹¹⁵ For instance, Javier Ramos, the former chef de cuisine at Sqirl, claimed that Koslow took credit for his work, and that he did not get recognition or payment for the recipes that he contributed to her cookbook. Chef Ria Dolly Barbosa similarly commented that Koslow “took credit for the first two years I was her chef there.”¹¹⁶ Indeed, Sqirl’s “aura of progressiveness” has been ruined by these recent accusations, as the restaurant’s supportive actions for the struggling Los Angeles community were then perceived as insincere and self-congratulatory. Indeed, the blatant selling of unsafe food products and mistreatment of chefs of color is the antithesis of Sqirl’s projected image as a wholesome, fantastical, egalitarian restaurant, suggesting that this previous characterization of the restaurant is in fact, wholly manufactured and ultimately disingenuous. Regardless of Koslow’s support for political movements, unemployed individuals and restaurant workers, this revelation regarding Sqirl’s false persona seriously undermined her progressive actions, and unfortunately, suggests that the fantastical, idealized version of the city of Los Angeles that the restaurant maintains is fundamentally flawed and lacking in substance.

Sqirl’s racial and culinary misconduct indicates some of the previously hidden issues found in successful, “progressive” restaurants in the Los Angeles area. Furthermore, Jessica Koslow’s mistreatment of her workers as well as her unsanitary cooking practices raise questions regarding a chef’s responsibility towards their workers and their creative expression. In light of the radical changes brought about or revealed by

¹¹⁵ Saxena, Jaya, “Why the Internet Is Blowing Up About LA’s Most Infamous Jam Maker,” Eater, Eater, July 13, 2020, accessed July 13, 2020, <https://www.eater.com/2020/7/13/21322462/sqirl-jam-mold-moldgate-jessica-koslow>

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

the COVID-19 crisis, restaurants are now confronted with new ethical and creative concerns: Do successful chef-driven restaurants have a responsibility to support others in their struggles for expression, creative or otherwise? And do these chefs, who are often viewed as the champions of individualistic, artistic Los Angeles sense of “taste,” erase the food narratives of marginalized minorities, or do they intentionally affirm these minority food narratives?

Certainly, Koslow’s efforts to support restaurant workers and her “Family Meal” program can be interpreted as her sense of responsibility towards the underserved workers who create the foundations of the restaurant industry. However, Koslow’s community emphasis can easily be questioned upon her allegations regarding food safety and recipe fraud, as these accusations revealed how Koslow has not supported her chefs in their creative endeavors, and has, in fact, erased their work and creations to further her own success. Recontextualizing Sqirl’s menu through this lens, the use of certain ingredients becomes problematic—perhaps the insertion of ingredients such as tofu, halloumi and tahini is meant to appeal to recent culinary trends amongst young, primarily white individuals.¹¹⁷ However, the incorporation of these ingredients without providing or even suggesting their regional context begins the process of appropriation, especially when Koslow, a white woman, has allegedly discredited her non-white workers in the creation of these Californian-style dishes. Furthermore, it is hugely important to acknowledge that Sqirl’s individualistic, Los Angeles-centric ideology can also be interpreted as an exclusively white ethos, as the restaurant caters to young white individuals and popular culinary trends with appropriated minority culinary traditions and

¹¹⁷ “Sqirl Menu,” Sqirl, 2011.

ingredients. Reexamining her cuisine and workspace conduct, Jessica Koslow, who previously championed the Los Angeles culinary field and sense of popular “taste,” has transformed into a culinary appropriator, as she actively erased the food narratives of her marginalized workers to sustain herself and her own image.

While the COVID-19 crisis revealed how certain chef-auteurs erase the creative work of their marginalized workers, the pandemic also allowed for the proliferation of newer chef-auteurs. Under pressure to make ends meet after losing catering gigs and getting laid off from their restaurant jobs, these previously marginalized or unknown chefs have been creating their own cuisine in shared kitchen spaces or in the confines of their home, gaining traction through non-traditional restaurant platforms such as Instagram and personal websites. Many of these chefs hail from acclaimed restaurants such as Rustic Canyon, Providence, Trois Mec, and the Centenoplex. However, instead of recreating or mimicking the food offered at their workplace, these chefs are practicing their own culinary traditions, making what appeals to them as opposed to offering safer fare.

One of the chefs to have emerged during the pandemic is Susan Yoon, the current chef de cuisine at Orsa and Winston. Upon getting furloughed at Orsa in March, Susan Yoon started her own small business. However, instead of offering fare similar to the Italian-Japanese found at Orsa and Winston, Yoon sold her interpretations of *dosirak*, a Korean lunchbox-type meal, to her Instagram followers and friends on a first-serve basis. Changing based on the ingredients available, Yoon’s meals highlighted the versatility of Korean cuisine; her *dosirak* were elaborate, including dishes like soy-pickled egg, scallop *jeon* (a pancake-like affair), and *myulchi bokkeum* (stir-fried anchovies), as well as rice,

noodles, and cucumber kimchi.¹¹⁸ Yoon’s venture into sumptuous Korean cuisine stands in stark contrast to the more traditional comfort food being offered at already popular restaurants and further highlights the more conservative nature of established chef-auteurs, who, already having gained recognition and success in their restaurants, would rather curb their culinary creativity in favor of appealing to a larger, more cautious audience. Considering that chefs like Yoon have not yet achieved recognition for their work before the COVID-19 pandemic, it is impressive and important to note that Yoon took a risk in offering less traditional Korean food in favor of showcasing her own culinary traditions as well as the extent of her creative culinary ability.

Other former Centeno staff members have also gained traction for their culinary work, such as former Bar Amá general manager Pert Em and sommelier Mikey David, who co-run Khemla, a pop-up that offers Em’s Cambodian cuisine. Em’s menu has included Cambodian staples such as crispy *banh xeo*, a type of stuffed rice pancake, seafood *lort cha* (stir-fried rice and tapioca noodles), and *salaw machu*, a sour soup with fish, shrimp, tamarind, pineapple and basil. Em has also featured Cambodian-inspired dishes, including mushroom larb, chicken wings with lemongrass, garlic and ginger, and durian-banana bread with dark chocolate.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, Khemla’s menu is far less expensive than similarly impressive culinary options—her menus typically offer three dishes for \$30, making her food more accessible to larger amounts of individuals.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Addison, Bill, “Tasting the Future of L.A. Dining via Takeout,” Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Times, July 18, 2020, accessed August 4, 2020. www.latimes.com/food/newsletter/2020-07-18/takeout-los-angeles-jihce-kim-perilla-tasting-notes .

¹¹⁹ Addison, Bill, “Seven Must-Try Takeout Upstarts Claim Their Place in L.A.’s Dining Universe,” Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Times, July 10, 2020, accessed August 4, 2020, www.latimes.com/food/story/2020-07-10/seven-amazing-takeout-startups-los-angeles-dining-universe.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

Considering that Cambodian cuisine is underrepresented in the mainstream Los Angeles culinary conversation, it is noteworthy that Em's menu is not excessively pricey, as more Angelenos are able to access, learn, and enjoy her cuisine because of the lower price point. Indeed, it is particularly interesting to examine the emerging cuisine and business models of chefs such as Susan Yoon and Pert Em, for without the restrictions typically imposed by typical restaurant business models and obligations, more chef-auteurs are able to emerge within the Los Angeles culinary field and inject new perspectives and insights into the city's culinary discourse. Indeed, one could even argue that the Los Angeles ideology of creativity, individualism, and emphasis on self-expression is no longer solely informed by famous chefs such as Josef Centeno, Ludo Lefebvre and Jessica Koslow. Instead, the evolving Los Angeles creative ideology can also be found in these new chefs, whose cuisine, offered through new platforms such as Instagram and more financially accessible to all Angelenos, better represents the needs and identity of working class, primarily non-white Los Angeles residents.

Conclusion

Brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the summer of 2020 marked major change within the Los Angeles culinary field and its discourse, along with the overall ideology found within the city of Los Angeles. Safety restrictions to restaurant dining rooms and food preparation along with consumer's conservative spending brought about the closure of numerous acclaimed, influential restaurants such as Trois Mec and Băco Mercat, while other popular restaurants adapted to the ever-changing safety precautions and tastes of customers by reverting to simpler, comforting or homestyle takeout food.

With thousands of citizens out of work and with front-line healthcare workers putting themselves at risk to save the lives of COVID-19 patients, the Los Angeles culinary field discourse shifted away from individualism and self-expression and moved towards community outreach and support, as dozens of restaurants started relief programs for unemployed residents and first-responder aid to help those working on the front lines. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the institutional problems within the Los Angeles culinary discourse and ideology, as the appropriation of minority chef's recipes and culinary traditions were revealed to be the backbone of influential restaurants' white-centric ethos and discourse, suggesting that the Los Angeles discourse and ideology I previously examined is in fact, dominated by and made for privileged, wealthy, primarily white individuals. However, the restrictions caused by COVID-19 have also redefined this idealistic, creatively-driven Los Angeles ideology in positive ways, as new chefs, with their innovative meals and non-white culinary traditions, offer a refined version of the former Los Angeles culinary discourse and ideology that is more inclusive, accessible and culturally diverse than its predecessors. These changes in discourse are recent, and are still subject to change. However, the practical and ideological changes brought about by COVID-19 will most definitely be long-lasting, as the Los Angeles restaurant industry adapts and struggles and the greater Los Angeles mythos slowly transforms to reflect a greater majority of Los Angeles residents.

Chapter IV: A Silver Lining

Introduction

In this work, I have tracked how the Los Angeles culinary field has changed over the past two years. Before March 2020, the field was primarily driven by well-known chefs, their restaurants, and their innovative, auteur-oriented cuisine, which projected an ethos of individuality, artistry, and creative possibility. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Los Angeles culinary field has morphed and adapted in ways that were previously unforeseeable. Accelerated by the constraints and financial stress brought about by the pandemic, chefs in Los Angeles were forced to change their menus, cuisine format and style, and guiding ethos, as the world around them posed new challenges to what was previously taken for granted. Responding to these new constraints created by the pandemic, the Los Angeles culinary discourse has since expanded: since March 2020, the discourse has changed, as chefs initially relied on traditional, well-understood cuisines (albeit with a sense of self-awareness and creative inspiration) and nostalgic, comforting flavors to accommodate the desires of the anxious communities they served. Most remarkably, the COVID-19 crisis exposed and exacerbated inequalities within both the Los Angeles restaurant industry and the communities they serve, leading to important shifts in the city's culinary field and its discourse. Compared to before, where chefs and food writers primarily highlighted restaurants and cuisine through the lens of the chef-auteur, chefs and food writers during the COVID-19 era instead focus on food within the context of community and collaborative work, emphasizing the voices of overlooked groups such as line cooks and minimum-wage restaurant employees, as well as

historically marginalized members of local communities, such as women and people of color.

As we slowly emerge from the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the future of chefs, cuisine, and restaurants within Los Angeles can be reimagined. In this final chapter, I ask: What will chefs be like in this post-COVID era? What will their posture be within these new contexts? And finally, what will their establishments look like? Analyzing chefs, their restaurants' social media outlets, as well as articles from prominent Los Angeles news outlets, I see a subtle but intriguing transformation within the Los Angeles culinary field. Expanding upon the surge of community engagement in the early months of the pandemic, chefs have prioritized engagement with their community on a more personal level through independent pop-up projects and community aid. From this shift in focus, the Los Angeles culinary field conveys a more united image of the Los Angeles community, as emerging chefs increase their collaborative efforts with fellow chefs to generate diverse, distinct food, while also having the unique, though unprofitable, opportunity to experiment with their own culinary voice and engage with their customers through pop-up establishments. Thanks to these distinct developments, the Los Angeles culinary field has grown beyond its initial definition to highlight the voices of lesser known chef-auteurs and overlooked community members.

Perhaps the most interesting development within the Los Angeles culinary field during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the emergence of numerous restaurant pop-ups. Run by furloughed or unemployed chefs, these distinct pseudo-restaurants feature the cuisines of these upcoming chef-auteurs, many of whom previously worked in the

kitchens of elite restaurants such as Bar Amá (Josef Centeno’s Tex-Mex restaurant), Sqirl, and Santa Monica’s Rustic Canyon. While smaller and often fleeting, these restaurant pop-ups reveal a silver lining during the extremely difficult circumstances created by the pandemic. Caught in this strange time period, unknown chefs are able to experiment with both their cuisine and their relationship with their audience, crafting their own voice as well as reflecting the growing tastes within the Los Angeles community. Indeed, the sheer number of these miniature restaurants highlights how the foods and flavors previously included within the Los Angeles culinary field were, in fact, only a mere fraction of the tastes actually present within the city. Furthermore, their popularity throughout the pandemic signifies a constant within the Los Angeles culinary field: despite the anxiety and insecurities brought about by the pandemic, Los Angeles eaters still long for new tastes and originality. However, unlike before, when culinary creativity originated in the minds of renowned chef-auteurs, culinary ingenuity now also resides with unknown chefs without a permanent storefront or establishment, thus challenging the ingrained notions of culinary authority and making for a more inclusive gastronomic environment. And though none of these pop-ups are necessarily permanent, they offer a new imagining of the Los Angeles culinary field—one that is more personal, community-oriented, inclusive, and open to collaboration and change.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the *dosirak* meals of Susan Yoon and Phert Em and Mikey David’s Cambodian fare at Khemla, both of which are part of the greater COVID-19 pop-up movement.¹²¹ However, these individuals are not the only chefs

¹²¹ Though David co-runs Khemla with Em, he does not contribute to the cuisine offered at the pop-up. Rather, he supplies wine pairings to go alongside her food.

exploring this new mode of dining. Alongside Yoon, Em, and David are even more chefs hailing from the kitchens of renowned chef-owners who are just beginning to have their food known and identified as their own creative work under their own establishments, albeit without a guarantee of permanence. However, while numerous chefs have appeared with their own pop-up concepts over the past year, I have chosen to analyze three of the most prominent emerging chef-auteurs: Jihee Kim, Brandon Gray, and Sasha Piligian, who have respectively had the most heavily publicized and critically acclaimed pop-ups in the past year. Analyzing their pop-up process, we are able to discern how chefs in this new era continue to creatively incorporate their identity into their cuisine, while also emphasizing their collaborative practices and efforts to aid the community.

Jihee Kim

Having worked at San Francisco's Gary Danko and Santa Monica's Rustic Canyon, Kim had some experience in the pop-up world before the pandemic, offering Korean-Mexican-Californian cuisine at her collaborative series Dandi before its final service in early March (pre-pandemic) 2020. Rather than taking a break from work after the closure of her first pop-up experiment, Kim decided to open her new online storefront in May 2020—however, instead of making high-end, sit-down cuisine, Perilla's offerings were specifically tailored for the COVID-19 culinary era. Noting the practical restraints created by pandemic safety protocols and social distancing, Kim's work at Perilla focuses solely on the art of portable, versatile *banchan*, or the sequence of small dishes that accompany Korean meals. Cuisine aside, the realities of Kim's storefront similarly indicate the practical changes necessary during the COVID-19 era. Perilla's Square-

powered website allows customers to pick up their orders from Thursday through Saturday. However, because the weekly offerings “go live” every Sunday and change on a daily basis, customers must swiftly choose their order before items sell out or become unavailable.¹²² Furthermore, even with the understanding that Perilla is a pop-up and inherently does not have a permanent storefront, Perilla’s temporary pick-up location has changed numerous times over the past year. Thus, though customers currently pick up Perilla’s offerings at Button Mash, an Asian fusion restaurant in Echo Park, the restaurant’s character exists entirely online. Indeed, no décor or ornamentation within Button Mash or Tilda (a wine bar and former Perilla pickup location) indicate Kim’s culinary presence. While the lack of a literal storefront removes the crutch of restaurant ambience or aesthetics, Kim compensates with her online presence: *banchan* are photographed within their clear-packaged containers, and with its stark white background (Kim personally photographs the food with her phone against a white marble counter), the vibrant food pops as if it is reaching out of a blank void, demanding to be noticed.¹²³ With images of the neatly packaged, brightly-colored *banchan*, Kim highlights her culinary aesthetic, as her food comes across as clean, simple, and vibrant, thus outwardly contradicting common beliefs surrounding Korean flavors, which are often seen as rich, heavy, and heavily sauced or seasoned. Through her online presence and her interpretation of the pop-up format, Jihee Kim highlights both the flexibility necessary to navigate the practicalities of managing a pop-up establishment while also expressing her desire to contradict customer’s ingrained notions about Korean food.

¹²² Square is an online platform which allows users to build their businesses online by helping them build websites and process credit cards with minimal complications.

¹²³ Kim, Jihee, “Perilla LA,” Perilla, Square, 2020, accessed April 4, 2021, <https://perilla-la.square.site/>.

While most eaters imagine *banchan* as simply the kimchi-based supplement to larger meals of Korean barbeque or *galbijim*, under Kim’s skilled hands, *banchan* quickly becomes a celebration of flavors and textures, revealing not only her identity as a Korean auteur-chef, but also her determination to expand our understanding of Korean food. Bill Addison exalts Kim’s offerings at Perilla, describing, “summer squash ignited with garlic-chile oil and charred okra steeped in soy and vinegar yield to fermented cucumber with pear and gingered yams sparked with orange peel... chicken marinated in *doenjang* (fermented soybean paste), say, or thinly sliced beef soaking up gently spicy *gochujang*.”¹²⁴ Instead of relying on customers’ traditional perception of Korean side dishes and their flavors, Kim chooses to explore lesser known interpretations of *banchan* by highlighting local produce such as “summer squash” and “charred okra” from the local farmers’ market, as well as contradicting the vegetarian perception of the meal through her carnivorous options.¹²⁵ Indeed, one could argue that with her distinct, diverse *banchan*, Kim offers a new variation on Los Angeles Korean food, expanding many people’s knowledge of *banchan* and expanding their ‘taste’ for Korean fare, a cuisine that is often perceived as low-brow or unsophisticated. Kim’s *banchan* are not only delicate, sophisticated, and distinctly her own, but are also well-suited to COVID-19 takeout practicalities. Often served at room temperature or slightly chilled, Kim’s fare makes for great takeout, as they can be consumed at any temperature, with any meal, and at any

¹²⁴ Addison, Bill, and Patricia I. Escarcega, “The 101: These L.A. Takeout Pop-Ups Are Meeting the Moment and Forging a Future,” *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 2020, accessed March 20, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/food/story/2020-12-08/101-best-la-restaurants-2020-pop-ups-list>.

¹²⁵ Kim buys her local produce from Thao Family Farms, which is located in Fresno, California. Many prominent restaurants in the Los Angeles metropolitan area buy from them, including République, Bestia, and Petit Trois.

time. Furthermore, each offering is relatively inexpensive—the most expensive dish, a thick *gimbap* (a round, sushi-like affair), is twelve dollars, with the average *banchan* being about five dollars on Perilla’s online website.¹²⁶ Because of its low price, Kim’s *banchan* is financially accessible, theoretically allowing for more eaters to experience and enjoy her cuisine without a sense of elitism or unapproachability. Thus, Jihee Kim’s distinct *banchan* at her COVID-19-appropriate establishment highlights the increasing inclusivity of the Los Angeles culinary field, as Kim expands the field by disseminating her own creative voice through her inexpensive, accessible offerings.

While Kim’s creative presence and cuisine develops the Los Angeles culinary field, she also affirms the altered Los Angeles culinary field through her collaborative efforts with culinary peers, including Sasha Piligian of May Provisions, Adam Contrera of Radburg, and Balo Orozco and Jacqui Harning of Sunset Culture.¹²⁷ Using Silverlake’s Café Tropical as a kitchen space, Kim and her peers collaborated to both support each other and the community through their donations to No Us Without You, an organization that emerged during the pandemic to provide emergency relief, including food, hygiene products, and other essential goods and services for undocumented restaurant workers, who make up an estimated 10% of the industry workforce but are ineligible for unemployment benefits.¹²⁸ Kim also collaborated with chefs such as Susan Yoon, Chase

¹²⁶ Kim, Jihee, “Perilla – Gimbap,” PERILLA, 2021, accessed March 21, 2021, <https://www.perillala.com/banchan/p/beets-sykly>.

¹²⁷ The works of Sasha Piligian are explored further in this chapter. Adam Contrera developed the burger-centric Radburg in 2019, and has shifted locations over the years, including Sqirl (Contrera formerly worked at Sqirl) and Melody Wine Bar, an establishment located across the street from Sqirl. Balo Orozco and Jacqui Harning formally worked at Onda, a collaborative restaurant between Jessica Koslow and Mexico City Chef Gabriela Camara, before its closure in April 2020. Their new gig, Sunset Culture, offers kombucha, preserves, and sauces made from local farmers market produce, and is an entirely online operation.

¹²⁸ Founded by Aaron Melendrez, Othón Nolasco and Damian Diaz, No Us Without You has been extensively lauded by food writers such as Bill Addison of the Los Angeles Times, further highlighting

Valencia of Lasa LA, and food writer Betty Hallock to mobilize the Asian American community during the Black Lives Matter movement, serving Asian-themed plate lunches to support the Okra Project, a collective that provides resources and meals to Black transgender people, as well as Lunch on Me, a nonprofit organization that provides food for homeless individuals.^{129,130} While Kim’s collaborative efforts are somewhat less than some of her pop-up peers, her willingness and excited engagement with other chefs to aid emerging COVID-era nonprofits and help vulnerable, historically underserved communities speaks to the tweaked Los Angeles culinary discourse, which increasingly emphasizes the connections between chefs, food, and the communities they serve.

Brandon Gray

Another exciting player within the COVID-19 pop-up movement is chef Brandon Gray, a native Angeleno whose talent had gone largely unnoticed despite his impressive resume, which includes experience at Trois Mec as well as Michael Cimarusti’s Michelin-starred establishment Providence. In the spring of 2020, while running the kitchen for Royce Burke’s Secret Lasagna, a takeout restaurant in West Hollywood, Gray was asked to make an impromptu pizza for chef, author and radio host Evan Kleiman, who hosts the show “Good Food” on KCRW-FM. After mentioning the quality of his pizza on her show, Gray decided to conceive Brandoni Pepperoni, an irreverent pop-up

how community aid and outreach has become an increasingly prominent feature within the Los Angeles culinary discourse in the past year.

¹²⁹ _perilla.la, “Photo of graphic art advertising ‘Plate Lunch for Power,’ an Asian American fundraiser for Black lives,” *Instagram*, 21 July 2020, accessed April 4, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CC6I4dCDfRL/>.

¹³⁰ While a food writer and frequent collaborator of numerous Los Angeles chefs, Betty Hallock is also Josef Centeno’s partner.

that specializes in his own signature pizzas as well as appropriate sides.¹³¹ In the past nine months, Gray's initial pop-up has significantly increased in popularity through word of mouth and reviews by food writers such as Los Angeles Times' Bill Addison and Eater's Matthew Kang, who lauded his impressive pies and unique spin on the well-understood fare. His pizza has been so popular that Gray is considering opening a permanent storefront in 2021, suggesting the actual viability of the pop-up process in this new era of eating.

The personalized nature of Brandoni Pepperoni continues with the pop-up's format, which enables Gray to intimately connect with his customers, though at the expense of his own time and energy. Firstly, unlike other pop-ups, which utilize vacant restaurant space or rent a temporary location, Brandoni Pepperoni pizzas are made at Brandon Gray's house—when picking up their orders, customers must drive to the back alley of his apartment, where Gray will deliver the requested order.¹³² While this process is unorthodox and can be considered unprofessional, the casual nature of Gray's ordering and pickup system allows for a more personal experience with his pop-up's customers, helping to forge a sense of community and familiarity that is elusive in a typical restaurant format. Gray continues to interact with the local community through his pop-up's ordering system. Unlike traditional brick and mortar establishments, which use larger delivery and takeout apps, Brandon Gray operates his pizza pop-up using a free phone number he got from Google Voice. He personally responds to the majority of the

¹³¹ Addison, Bill and Patricia Escarcega, "The 101: These L.A. Takeout Pop-Ups Are Meeting the Moment and Forging a Future."

¹³² Inamine, Elyse, "Everything About Brandoni Pepperoni's Pizzas Scream Los Angeles," Bon Appetit, Conde Nast, March 26, 2020, accessed April 6, 2021, <https://www.bonappetit.com/story/brandoni-pepperoni-pizza-los-angeles>.

messages, enabling conversations between the customer and himself and allowing for personal adjustments, such as parbaking an ordered pizza to later be finished in one's home oven. Furthermore, instead of accepting credit cards, Gray only accepts payment through Venmo, Zelle, Cash App, and hard cash, making it feel more like a casual affair than a traditional restaurant.^{133,134}

While Gray expresses the difficulty of the pop-up format, as it takes a significant amount of time to respond to the majority of the messages he receives and can quickly lead to chaos during the ordering process, the casual format of Brandoni Pepperoni has its advantages. The pop-up's non-traditional method of production and distribution helps to create a sense of both mystery and intimacy, as customers are eager to acquire the pseudo-secret, deeply personal food offered by these new, trendy chefs. Furthermore, because of the limited supply and ordering platform, Gray is able to connect more closely with his customers, as they contact him directly and he develops a rapport with his customers. Through his deeply personal cuisine and nonconventional communication methods, Brandon Gray and his pop-up demonstrate both the consistencies and changes within the Los Angeles culinary discourse, as his work exemplifies the elevation of the auteur-chef while also revealing how this reverence is not limited by traditional notions of culinary authority. Instead, local Los Angeles eaters are willing to extend their praise to upcoming chefs who are often adapting their work to best reflect their culinary voice, making the Los Angeles culinary field more inclusive, inventive, and spontaneous.

¹³³ Gray, Brandon, "Iykyk | Brandoni Pepperoni," iykyk Kitchens, 2020, <https://iykykkitchens.com/aa74b16dd5c74a469bfb123cc0485117>.

¹³⁴ Depending on the method of payment, Gray often does not charge the customer until much later, trusting that they will follow through with their payment.

Furthermore, through his small-batch, text and phone-based ordering format, Gray is better equipped to connect with his customers, helping to create an increasingly connected, community-oriented ethos within the Los Angeles culinary field.

One could argue that Brandon Gray's pizza pop-up is successful merely due to the high quality of his pizza. While we cannot deny the allure of "tangy dough stretched to crackery thinness...and sweet, dense sauce made from Bianco DiNapoli tomatoes and produce from the Santa Monica Farmers Market," Gray's pizza is even more compelling because of the identity he weaves into his culinary works. Through his inventions, Brandon Gray voices his identity as both an African-American individual and a chef trained in a Michelin-starred restaurant, incorporating both to create decadent offerings that feel far more human, down-to-earth, and wholly representative of the individuals that populate and partake in the Los Angeles culinary discourse.¹³⁵ In this way, Gray and his culinary approach embody the concept of the chef-auteur that is foundational to the Los Angeles culinary field, and despite not being a chef of prominence or fame, his growing popularity is a testament to the compelling, enduring nature of the Los Angeles chef-auteur.

Though some of the pizzas offered at Brandoni Pepperoni are standard fare, such as the "Brandoni" or "Poetic Justice," which are pepperoni and margherita pizzas respectively, other pizzas reveal Gray's background and identity: with a combination of shrimp, chicken, sausage, pickled okra and roasted peppers, the "Nothin but a G Thang" pizza evokes a Louisiana-style gumbo and highlights African-American cuisine, albeit in

¹³⁵ Addison, Bill, "Seven Must-Try Takeout Upstarts Claim Their Place in L.A.'s Dining Universe."

a different format.¹³⁶ Gray continues to inject his African-American-Los Angeles identity into his cuisine through his most frequently photographed work, the “Windsor Hills” pie, which consists of arugula pesto, Romano beans, smoked cheese, squash, and calabrese acquired from the Santa Monica Farmers’ Market.¹³⁷ Describing the process of making this offering, Gray describes,

This pizza represents different parts along my life journey. I grew up in the Jungles/Baldwin Hills area most my adolescent life and went to Windsor Hills Elementary right up the hill on La Brea. I was always told “Black Excellence” resided in those hills and that depicted “Black Wealth”/our version of Beverly Hills. Working in some of the best fine dining institutions across the globe, there was always one dish that stood out to me. Chef Michel Bras created “Gargouillou” an elaborate salad recreated and interpreted by many chefs. I wanted to merge childhood dreams, and my 17 year culinary background in pizza format. This pizza was an ode to “WINDSOR HILLS” It’s not just pizza with me. It’s the story behind each element.¹³⁸

Thus, the “Windsor Hills” pizza is not simply a fanciful creation of Gray’s mind but also a physical representation of his own personal growth as both a Black man and a chef in Los Angeles. By naming the offering “Windsor Hills,” Gray exemplifies how his work represents the culmination of “Black Excellence,” as it embodies the aspirational connotation of the neighborhood he admired as a young child. Furthermore, by utilizing the same flavors as a “Gargouillou” salad from his time with Chef Michel Bras, a leading French chef, Gray pays homage to his work under elite dining institutions and famous chefs, thus merging his own personal history as a minority individual with his extensive experience as a skilled chef. Through his pizza, customers are not only able to

¹³⁶ Gray, Brandon, “Menu 1 - Brandoni Pepperoni,” Brandoni Pepperoni, July 2020, accessed March 22, 2021, <https://www.brandoni-pepperoni.com/menu-original>.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ la_brandoni_pepperoni, “Photo of Windsor Hills Pizza,” *Instagram*, 11 December 2020, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIrPfRrhvDv/>.

experience a physically satisfying meal, but also consider Gray's identity as a chef, a Black man and a Los Angeles local. In this way, Gray's pizza profoundly embodies his personal identity, making his work a true mark of a chef-auteur, regardless of his previous lack of critical recognition or fame. Furthermore, Gray's sudden popularity during such a difficult time in the restaurant world highlights Los Angeles eaters' enduring preference for not only delicious food, but personal food that conveys the chef's identity and place within the city, regardless of their background or format.

Sasha Piligian

One of the most memorable newcomers to the Los Angeles culinary world is Sasha Piligian, a former pastry chef at Sqirl. Her "micro bakery," aptly named May Provisions (she began offering her cakes in May 2020) offers cakes, pies, and assorted pastries made in Piligian's own home. While Piligian's culinary offerings are not necessarily tied to her ethnic or racial identity (Piligian is Armenian, but does not acknowledge her ethnicity in her work), her pastries still reveal her identity as a chef, as she highlights her voice through her ultra-creative flavor pairings and adventurous yet accessible confections. Rotating and adapting her offerings based on customer preferences and ingredient availability, Piligian's cakes quickly gained popularity online, with visuals and flavor combinations that enticed eaters' imagination. Bill Addison praises Piligian's work, describing how "bright hibiscus-lime curd and fig-leaf buttercream with a haunting nuttiness lift up Meyer lemon-olive oil cake; sesame caramel

and salted chocolate date buttercream intensify a chocolate-rye cake.”¹³⁹ Alongside her cakes, Piligian also bakes unique pies such as a chocolate chess pie with salty chocolate shortbread and chicory merengue, an apple and ginger pie with “too much crumble,” and her own interpretation on *nazook*, a rolled Armenian pastry that she cleverly fills with strawberry jam or covers in chocolate malt crumble in lieu of the pastry’s typical walnut filling.^{140,141,142} Whimsical yet audacious, Piligian’s pastries highlight her culinary ingenuity and resourcefulness not unlike the celebrated chefs we have previously discussed. Much like the food offered at her former employer, Piligian’s culinary identity is revealed through her attention to pure ingredients and unique but vibrant flavor combinations, as she makes an effort to respect the ingredients while also creating new variations of well-known dishes. While lemon-olive oil cakes and chocolate chess pies can be easily conjured within customers’ minds, the addition of elements such as “bright hibiscus-lime curd,” “fig-leaf buttercream,” “salted chocolate date buttercream,” “chicory merengue,” as well as a new fillings for traditional Armenian *nazook* make these pastries new, enticing, and hyper-specific to Piligian’s style of cooking and culinary identity. Furthermore, the popularity of her goods (half of her online store is frequently sold out) reveals ultimate consistencies within the Los Angeles culinary field—while the early throes of the pandemic initially produced a preference for less ambitious cuisine, as time progressed, Los Angeles customers quickly returned to their desire for culinary creativity

¹³⁹ Addison, Bill and Patricia Escarcega, “The 101: These L.A. Takeout Pop-Ups Are Meeting the Moment and Forging a Future.”

¹⁴⁰ Sashimi l (Sasha Piligian), *Instagram*, 2020, accessed March 25, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHio0bzDuYj/>.

¹⁴¹ Sashimi l (Sasha Piligian), “Photo of apple and young ginger pie,” *Instagram*, 19 November 2020, accessed March 25, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHx8a2wjCmB/>.

¹⁴² Addison, Bill and Patricia Escarcega, “The 101: These L.A. Takeout Pop-Ups Are Meeting the Moment and Forging a Future.”

and unique tastes, leading to the popularity of temporary establishments such as May Provisions. Thus, through Sasha Piligian's unique and beautiful cakes and their popularity, we are not only able to see the emergence of new chefs and creative voices within the Los Angeles culinary field, but are also able to reaffirm the field's foundational preference for ingenuity and a 'taste' for culinary artistry.

While Piligian's bakery setup initially sounds typical, her establishment, like most pop-ups in this era, is fundamentally different because of the restraints created by COVID-19. May Provisions functions primarily online, specifically on Piligian's personal Instagram (curiously titled "sashimi1"). Upon opening her "cottage bakery," Piligian took orders through direct messages on the online app; her customers ordered cakes in a conversational manner, often trusting her to conjure something special without specific knowledge of what was to come. Eventually, when orders became too extensive to keep up with, Piligian opted to not use common delivery and takeout platforms such as Grubhub, Caviar, or Doordash, which are overly expensive and take significant cuts from an establishment's profits.¹⁴³ Instead, she uses Minimart, a much smaller platform for independent food businesses to showcase menus, take orders and communicate with customers.¹⁴⁴ Finally, by using Venmo, a common mobile payment service similar to PayPal, and doing her own deliveries, Piligian attempts to keep her expenses down while making a limited amount of goods.

¹⁴³ While Piligian did not use these food delivery and ordering platforms, I must acknowledge that these sites only allow restaurants with storefronts to utilize their websites. Because Piligian cooks from her own kitchen, her establishment does not qualify to use these sites.

¹⁴⁴ Wilson, Emily, "In the Pop-up Community, Every Day Is a Scramble for Chefs. Sometimes, Tech Is the Answer," Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Times, February 19, 2021, accessed March 23, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/food/story/2021-02-19/pop-up-restaurants-bakeries-chefs-adjust-business-tech>.

Though Piligan’s approach to May Provisions stemmed from necessity, her website’s format, conversations with customers, personal deliveries and use of Venmo have a distinct benefit: May Provision’s online format allows for a level of engagement uncommon in the traditional restaurant format, as she is able to converse with her customers in a more intimate, personal manner, helping to forge a closer, if smaller, community that allows for individual voices to be heard. Piligian offers her opinion on this recent online trend, saying, “I think [the pop-up boom] has been a really great way for a lot more voices to be heard in the city. I love that I can buy bread from Hannah [Ziskin] or my friend Rose Wilde or from Bub and Grandma’s [bakery]. I like more variety and being able to support more people.”^{145,146} Piligian’s comment exemplifies the communal, collaborative mentality gaining prominence within the Los Angeles culinary field, as instead of competing or antagonizing her baking peers, she elevates her peers’ work and openly supports their similar business efforts. Furthermore, Piligian’s support extends past her encouragement of her culinary peers and her intimacy with customers, as she supports local Southern Californian businesses through the ingredients she uses and financially through proceeds aimed at community organizations. For example, the whole grain flour she uses in her baked goods comes from local mills such as Tehachapi Grain Project and Grist and Toll, which are located in Tehachapi and Pasadena respectively, with the former aiming to “preserve and grow heritage organic grains which are naturally

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Hannah Ziskin runs the cottage bakery House of Gluten, located in DTLA Row. Rose Wilde runs Red Bread bakery. Bub and Grandma’s is a wholesale bakery that supplies bread to a significant portion of Los Angeles restaurants.

drought tolerant and low in gluten.”^{147,148} Using these small farmers’ and mills’ goods, Piligian not only financially supports grassroots businesses and local farmers, but also reveals the connections between local business and the environment; by highlighting the non-GMO, environmentally friendly flour used in her baked goods, Piligian conveys her progressive and aware attitude towards food, as she connects our food’s relationship with its ingredients as well as the importance of using environmentally safe, local materials when cooking. Piligian continues to engage with the local community by collaborating with chefs such as the aforementioned Jihee Kim, Natasha Pickowicz, and Rose Wilde, highlighting the increasingly cooperative nature of the Los Angeles culinary field during the pandemic. Furthermore, with both her collaborations and independent work, Piligian has continuously made efforts to financially support the vulnerable people in her community; despite her own financial constraints as a micro-baker, she has continuously donated a significant portion of her proceeds to nonprofit organizations, including local programs such as No Us Without You and Farm2PeopleLA, as well as national institutions such as the Loveland Foundation and Bakers Against Racism.¹⁴⁹ Through her community engagement, support of local business and nonprofit organizations, and intimate relationship with her customers and peers, Piligian’s work offers a fresh perspective to the Los Angeles culinary field, as she stresses her relationship with her

¹⁴⁷ “Grist and Toll,” gristandtoll, 2020, accessed March 23, 2021, <https://www.gristandtoll.com/about-us/>.

¹⁴⁸ “Tehachapi Grain Project,” Tehachapi Heritage Grain Project, 2019, accessed March 23, 2021, <https://www.tehachapigrainproject.org/>.

¹⁴⁹ Farm2PeopleLA is an organization that secures harvests and jobs for farmers and provides organic local produce to underserved communities in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area. The Loveland Foundation is a national organization that attempts to bring opportunity and healing to communities of color, specifically Black women and girls, through fellowships, residency programs, listening tours, and therapy. Bakers Against Racism is unofficially the world’s largest bake sale, raising money to combat systemic and structural racism in the United States through the selling of baked goods.

ingredients, local businesses, community and colleagues through her micro bakery and its personalized cuisine.

Conclusion

Versatile, adaptable, and intrinsically rooted to the space, people and stories that helped create it, the astonishing food created in these modern day pop-ups are clearly the result of the constraints created by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, when we think about pop-ups within the greater context of Los Angeles cuisine, we can imagine this new trend of fleeting pop-ups as a unique, but ultimately familiar answer to Los Angeles culinary traditions, rather than a complete deviation. Indeed, the rapid turnover of pop-ups and smaller culinary establishments encourages the Los Angeles culinary field's preference for creativity and innovative tastes, as the velocity of new cuisines, flavors, and culinary expressions has only increased since March 2020. These pop-ups also echo decades-old street vendors and taco stalls, as they uphold the tradition of situational improvisation and individual creativity, albeit in a newer, more challenging context. However, the most significant supposition to take away from the 2020 pop-up movement is that the Los Angeles culinary discourse is still defined by a hunger for new 'tastes,' creative expression, and the work of the chef-auteur. What makes this movement markedly different from our other interpretations of the Los Angeles culinary field is its emphasis on less prominent chef-auteurs and their efforts towards human connection, community aid, and culinary collaboration, all to support each other and each other's voices during a nearly impossible year. And while future of the Los Angeles culinary field has yet to become clear, I would like to hope that customers, chefs, and Los Angeles

locals will not forget how good food connects us to each other and our own selves, during both the best and worst of times.

Concluding Thoughts

Home to nearly four million people and filled with dozens of neighborhoods, ethnic enclaves and diverse voices and experiences, Los Angeles is a city that eludes simple classification. While films, social media, and other forms of popular culture portray Los Angeles as a glamorous, optimistic, fantastical space, the city's reality resists such simplicity, especially when one considers the practicalities of residents' everyday life and experiences. Though scholars traditionally analyze Los Angeles culture through media such as film and television, the Los Angeles ethos is also revealed and transmitted by other types of cultural expression, including food and the restaurant-going experience. Considering Los Angeles's diverse, exciting, and critically acclaimed restaurant scene, I began to question how Los Angeles chefs, through their cuisine and other creative expressions, help to create and sustain a greater city-wide ideology, both in times of stability and crisis.¹⁵⁰ With this concept in mind, I began my research asking: Can we discern a specific Los Angeles ideology and culinary discourse by examining the city's prominent restaurants and chefs? If so, how does this Los Angeles culinary field reflect or alter the beliefs and priorities of the local population? Finally, how does the Los Angeles culinary field and its discourse change under stressful, uncertain circumstances such as a global pandemic, and what does this say about its future?

¹⁵⁰ Addison, Bill, "Decade in dining: How Los Angeles became America's best and most exciting food city," *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, January 3, 2020, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/food/story/2020-01-03/los-angeles-decade-in-dining-bill-addison>.

Beginning my research in 2019 and culminating in spring 2021, I analyzed eight restaurants, thirteen chefs, and five pop-up restaurants, and found that a greater Los Angeles culinary ideology not only exists, but that it manifests itself through a specific Los Angeles culinary discourse, which is defined by chef-auteurs, their cuisines and restaurants, and their relationship with the community. By utilizing the Media Studies-based auteur theory, which in this case is defined by the chef's application of a centralized and subjective control over their food and establishments, we witness how chefs become the creators of their restaurants and food, leading to a signature culinary style. This signature culinary style is then affirmed by the consumers of chefs' cuisine, who help to disseminate not only chefs' food, but also their beliefs, ideas, and attitudes to produce the Los Angeles culinary field. However, while all of the chef-auteurs I studied stress their own creative self-expression through their food and culinary establishments, some underlying similarities also exist, helping to create a cohesive discourse. Interestingly, through their restaurants, cuisine, and other forms of self-expression, Los Angeles chefs and consumers reveal their "taste" for artistry, creativity, and individualism, as well as an obsessive focus on locavorism and specific cooking techniques, while also indicating a "distaste" for conformity and traditional fine-dining experiences. These preferences define the Los Angeles culinary field discourse, and are indicated in numerous ways, including within the restaurant setting itself.

While Orsa and Winston, Bäco Mercat, Bestia, République, Trois Mec, Petit Trois, Sqirl, and Night + Market Song all differ in aesthetics, location, and dining experience, they still highlight the many ways in which the Los Angeles culinary field disseminates and presents itself. Orsa and Winston, Bäco Mercat, and Bestia emphasize

the importance of the city of Los Angeles through their emphasis on their location, as they make their customers highly aware of their space through a lack of white tablecloths and sparse furnishings and décor. République and Night + Market Song also highlight the importance of Los Angeles, albeit by encouraging the fantastical nature of their restaurant spaces, which, like an immersive film, enable customers to imagine themselves in a romantic, foreign, and exciting space. By existing and embracing their location within a strip mall, a common Los Angeles sight, Petit Trois and Trois Mec indicate the singular importance of Los Angeles while also making their food more accessible and unstuffy, dissolving some notions of culinary elitism. Finally, Sqirl stresses its location in Silverlake through its stark exterior and completely outdoor seating, which allows for customers to focus on its simple breakfast food in lieu of other distractions. With their emphasis on location and space, these eight restaurants indicate the importance of Los Angeles as a place of veneration and creative expression, as these chef-auteurs envision the city as their canvas for individual artistry.

Los Angeles chef-auteurs continue to affirm the Los Angeles culinary field through their “taste” for culinary creativity and individualism, as they disregard culinary conventions, obsess over specific foods or cooking techniques, and highlight the ingredients and culinary opportunities unique to Los Angeles. At both Bäco Mercat and Orsa and Winston, Josef Centeno displays his culinary artistry by cooking numerous global cuisines alongside his own inventions to create new dishes. Dishes such as the Bäco at Bäco Mercat and the “Satsuki Rice Porridge” at Orsa and Winston highlight how Centeno features his auteur voice, as he frequently transcends typical food genres by including ingredients from numerous cuisines and challenging certain connotations

surrounding typically low-brow food. Jessica Koslow of Sqirl and Walt and Margarita Manzke of République choose to violate traditional culinary genres and eating norms to accommodate both their customers' wants and their own specific creative desires. At Sqirl, dishes such as the "Sorrel Rice Bowl" and the "Ricotta Toast" can be endlessly modified to the customer's liking, allowing for Koslow's skills as a jam maker to shine. Furthermore, by only offering breakfast foods regardless of the time of day, Sqirl appeals to its audience's desires and better highlights the signature foods of its chef-auteur. Though categorized as a French restaurant, République's offerings include numerous non-French items such as "Shakshuka," "Pupusa," and "Kimchi Fried Rice," and thus the restaurant's cuisine resists typical categorization to both please customers and to indicate their chef's skills in creating all types of cuisine. With experimental offerings and dishes that exist outside of French or Thai cuisine, Trois Mec and Night + Market song respectively reflect the personal interests and ambitions of their chefs. With a rotating, ambitious tasting menu and creations such as "Uni Crème Brûlée, Coffee Beans, and Dates," Ludo Lefebvre's food at Trois Mec was experimental and artistic, and did not aim to appeal to customers—through this artistic approach and his dismissal of outside opinion, Lefebvre revealed his position as an chef-auteur in the Los Angeles culinary field, indicating his "taste" for creativity and artistry over general appeal. Chris Yenbamroong of Night + Market Song similarly revealed his "taste" for auteur-based cuisine through dishes such as his hugely popular fried chicken sandwich, as he approaches Thai food with irreverence for culinary tradition and a determination to fulfill his vision. Finally, the Los Angeles culinary field is defined by chefs' obsession with specific foods and cooking practices—Ori Menashe of Bestia highlights his obsession

with meat and its many uses through his house-cured charcuterie and offcut-focused dishes, Koslow indicates her fascination with preservatives and pantry staples through her jams and sauces, and Margarita Manzke reveals her passion for signature pastries, which are made with specific, often seasonal items to ensure quality. Through their preference for culinary creativity, individualism, and obsession over culinary ingredients and practices, Los Angeles chef-auteurs inform the city's established culinary discourse, which is then affirmed by critics and avid customers.

However, while the Los Angeles culinary field is defined by the factors I described above, I found that the culinary field is subject to change, especially during times of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed restaurants' precarious financial position, as chef-auteurs struggled to keep their establishments open with significantly reduced revenue and everchanging restrictions. Numerous restaurants in Los Angeles closed, including Băco Mercat and Trois Mec, illustrating how no restaurant was guaranteed to survive during such an uncertain time. As practical changes occurred within restaurants to accommodate the changing wants and needs of customers, ideological and discursive shifts also ensued, as chefs moved away from highlighting sensational, individualistic cuisine, and instead produced food meant to soothe fearful, anxious customers. Furthermore, chefs during the COVID-19 era began to promote the voices of the struggling and oppressed, revealing the symbiotic relationship between restaurants and their communities and the importance of community engagement within the Los Angeles culinary field.

The pandemic hastened restaurants' turn to casual meals, as chefs sought to ease their anxious customers during such a difficult time. While some restaurants, such as

Sqirl, transitioned more seamlessly into the takeout model than others, all of the restaurants I analyzed changed their menus to accommodate their customers' desires, indicating a shift in taste in the Los Angeles culinary field. République changed their menu throughout the pandemic, with offerings ranging from soups and kid-friendly foods to an expansion of their pre-pandemic menu, suggesting that even when unable to eat at the restaurant, customers still wanted to consume the innovative food previously offered. Alongside their popular gizzards and bone marrow offerings, Bestia also provided more homestyle dishes during the pandemic, including butterbean purees, a cake of the week, and traditional pizzas, indicating how the restaurant's food had changed to be humble and comforting for customers, but not at the expense of culinary creativity. Petit Trois, Night + Market Song, and the Centenoplex restaurants all accommodated customers' new preferences with several new additions to their menu. Petit Trois's additions included comforting soups, apple pies, and a Chinese chicken salad alongside their standard fare. Night + Market Song similarly adapted their menu to appeal to wary customers, offering new dishes such as Orange chicken, *mentaiko* noodles, and a Thai chopped salad. Prior to its closure, Băco Mercat made frozen cookie dough, vegetable lasagna, and eggplant "parmesan" (with Greek and Middle Eastern flavors) alongside their previous dishes, while Orsa and Winston, along with a rotational three-course menu, offered Japanese-inspired patty melts and *aonori* salt chips. With these additions, Petit Trois, Night + Market Song, Băco Mercat, and Orsa and Winston recognized their audience's new preference for unadventurous, comforting food, while also attempting to retain their chefs' culinary voice, albeit in a more restrained fashion. Finally, Trois Mec's replacement with Ludobab, a Parisian kebob takeout joint, indicates the changing tastes

found in the Los Angeles culinary field; with its casual offerings meant for eating at home, the restaurant is the antithesis of Trois Mec, suggesting that the formal, upscale experience offered at the former restaurant is no longer preferred or desired.

Along with this practical shift within the Los Angeles culinary field, the Los Angeles culinary discourse expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic, as chef-auteurs shifted away from solely championing their creative vision and individualism to include the struggling Los Angeles community, revealing the need to support and engage with silenced or disadvantaged community members. Throughout the pandemic, chef-auteurs engaged with their communities in a variety of ways. République's Walter and Margarita Manze supported local farmers by selling and advertising their goods in their storefront, and provided food for their restaurant workers during their furlough. Using social media platforms such as Instagram, chefs such as Josef Centeno, Genevieve Gergis, Ori Menashe, and Chris Yenbamroong reached out to their audiences of both peers and customers to support their staff and the greater community, often at the expense of their restaurants. To support his staff, Centeno sold his hand-dyed clothes to cover staff salaries and sick pay for hourly workers. Bestia owners Genevieve Gergis and Ori Menashe offered family meals to continue providing health insurance benefits for their entire staff. When restaurant revenue continued to drop, Centeno and Yenbamroong started Go Fund Me pages to continue providing health insurance and support their staff. Centeno continued to support the community by offering free food to those who asked and provided meals for overworked healthcare workers at Cedar Sinai Los Angeles. Similarly, Bestia offered a \$3 "staff treat" on their dinner menu, which went towards making baked goods that Genevieve Gergis personally delivered to hospital workers.

Community engagement also occurred on a larger level. Through their charity Feed Love LA, Gergis and Menashe provided fresh groceries and pantry items to at risk restaurant workers. Meanwhile, Jessica Koslow transformed the Sqirl kitchen into a relief kitchen during the spring months of 2020, offering free meals and essential goods for unemployed restaurant workers. Koslow continued to demonstrate community action—on Sqirl’s Instagram, she advertised numerous nationwide charities, including criticalresistance, an organization working to abolish the prison system. From these numerous actions, I discerned that the Los Angeles culinary discourse shifted away from emphasizing individualism and creative vision, as chef-auteurs made various efforts to support at risk restaurant workers, healthcare workers, and the greater Los Angeles community during a time of crisis.

However, along with these numerous actions to aid those struggling, the former idealized discourse found in the Los Angeles culinary field came under scrutiny in July 2020, as Koslow’s community outreach was tainted by allegations, including serving moldy jam to customers, forcing employees to work in unsafe environments, and discrediting several chefs of color by taking ownership of their recipes. This news, coupled with its extensive publicization, not only harmed Sqirl’s reputation as a wholesome, fantastical, egalitarian restaurant, but also suggested that the sunny ethos that Sqirl and similar restaurants conveyed is manufactured and disingenuous. Ultimately, Koslow’s cuisine and workspace conduct suggests that she has become a culinary appropriator, as she frequently erased the food narratives of her workers to sustain her own image as a chef-auteur.

Though the COVID-19 restaurant crisis revealed the ethical flaws found in the culinary field's chef-auteurs, the pandemic also allowed for the development of newer chef-auteurs and their cuisines. Through their innovative, personal food, chefs such as Susan Yoon and Phert Em tweaked the Los Angeles culinary field during the pandemic, as they offered new visions of Los Angeles identity through their takeout offerings. With her variations on *dosirak*, a Korean lunchbox-type meal that she grew up eating, Yoon's offerings contrasted greatly with the comforting food offered at acclaimed restaurants, highlighting both the more conservative nature of established chefs and her own ingenuity as an emerging chef-auteur. Pert Em, who makes Cambodian-inspired dishes at her pop-up Khemla, similarly broke ground within the Los Angeles culinary field, as she offers a new perspective through her take on the comparatively underrepresented cuisine and deliberately makes it more accessible through her food's lower price point.

The Los Angeles culinary field continued to diversify during 2020 with the proliferation of pop-up restaurants, run by chefs such as Jihee Kim, Brandon Gray, and Sasha Piligian. The popularity of their pop-ups, despite their primarily online existence and lack of traditional storefront, highlights how culinary ingenuity can exist in unknown chefs without traditional establishments, thus challenging the ingrained culinary authority and making for a more inclusive gastronomic environment. Through these pop-ups, upcoming chef-auteurs offer a more personal, community-oriented, and inclusive vision of the Los Angeles culinary field.

Evidently, pop-up chefs such as Jihee Kim, Brandon Gray, and Sasha Piligian respectively convey an expansion of the Los Angeles culinary field through their diverse cuisine. Kim's *banchan* confronts stereotypical notions of Korean food, as her offerings

are seasonal, fresh, delicate and sophisticated. Furthermore, with its clean packaging and low price point, Kim's food is well-suited to COVID-era dining, as it is economical, transportable, and versatile. Though pizza is a well-understand and frequently consumed food, Gray's offerings at his pizza pop-up stand out because of the narrative and personal identity he incorporates into his food. By creating pizzas based on his identity as a Black man and a chef trained in a Michelin-starred restaurant, Gray embodies the concept of the chef-auteur that is foundational to the Los Angeles culinary field. Despite Sasha Piligian not explicitly connecting her ethnicity to her food, her work reveals her identity as a chef, as she highlights her voice through her attention to pure, local ingredients and her unique but vibrant flavor combinations for her confections. Considering the practical constraints and financial stress created by COVID-19, the popularity of these three unique, ambitious chefs reveal both the expansion of the Los Angeles culinary field to include new voices, but also the field's enduring preference for culinary artistry, often through personal connection and a strong sense of place and culinary identity.

The chef-owners of pop-up restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic also reveal a discursive shift within the Los Angeles culinary field, as the smaller business model increased their community outreach efforts and personal engagement with customers, allowing for closer, deeper connections and making the culinary field more intimate, personal and genuine in the process. With online platforms such as Square, Minimart, and Google Voice, Kim, Piligian and Gray were able to personally oversee their operations, allowing for conversations with customers about individual preferences and customizations and helping to form a small but strong relationship between the chef and the consumer. The extensive community engagement and collaboration demonstrated

by these pop-up chefs also indicate perhaps a more permanent discursive shift within the Los Angeles culinary field, as Piligan and Kim collaborated (both respectively and together) to not only publicize their own culinary work, but also raise money for local organizations. Raising money for charities such as the Okra Project, No Us Without You, Farm2People LA, and Bakers Against Racism, Piligan and Kim emphasized the increasingly cooperative nature of Los Angeles chefs during the pandemic, offering a fresh perspective on the Los Angeles culinary field by stressing chefs' relationship with their peers, local businesses, and greater community.

In the past two years, the Los Angeles culinary field and its discourse has changed in many ways, as it has expanded to not only include renowned chefs and their culinary visions, but also newer chefs and the local community. However, while following these changes that occurred through a handful of restaurants reveals important discursive shifts within Los Angeles, the larger significance of my research lies within the existence of the culinary field itself, as I found that not only does a distinct Los Angeles culinary field exist, but that its defining qualities can be tracked through culinary trends and a shared discourse conveyed by chef-auteurs. From this research, I found that communal ideologies and larger beliefs are frequently disseminated by acclaimed chefs, primarily through the deeply personal food they make and their establishment's aesthetics and character. Through their chef-owners, food, and setting, popular culinary establishments inform people's perspectives, beliefs and outlooks, as they instruct customers not only on what to eat, but also what emotions, identities, and biographic experiences they should absorb while eating this food. However, the qualities found in the Los Angeles culinary field are also informed by customers, who consistently affirm chefs' strong sense of

individualism, identity, creativity, while also increasingly encouraging a large amount of community engagement. Because of these interactions between creators and consumers, the Los Angeles culinary field is ultimately defined by connection, both creatively and communally, and is thus subject to change depending on the needs and wants of society. However, the “taste” for delicious, personal, and creative food remains constant within the culinary field, making the Los Angeles culinary field distinct.

While I problematized the Hollywood-centric California mythos within the Los Angeles culinary field, a continued deconstruction can be achieved through further studies. After all, there are thousands of restaurants that have yet to be analyzed. Furthermore, numerous subcultures and identities exist within Los Angeles, each with their own chefs, cuisines and restaurants that I have not discussed in this thesis. Additional exploration into the Los Angeles culinary field could test the universality of my established Los Angeles culinary discourse, as minority and immigrant enclaves could present different iterations of the city’s discourse. When considering a city as vast and diverse as Los Angeles, numerous sub-discourses may also be distinguished along gender or ethnic lines, income levels or immigrant experiences. While this avenue of exploration would most definitely be insightful, this proposal would become rather large, and thus I suggest to target unexplored aspects of the culinary field through the categories previously suggested. Another way to target specific culinary experiences in Los Angeles is to study the popular restaurants and chefs in a particular neighborhood or community, determining the similarities between their discourse and the discourse found in the broader Los Angeles culinary field. Clearly, the avenues for further exploration are

numerous, and the Los Angeles culinary field discourse only stands to benefit from its diversification and growth.

This study could also be expanded with time. As we look to a safer post-pandemic future, the temporary shifts in the Los Angeles culinary discourse I have established could either fade away or become permanent fixtures. I hope that the heightened emphasis on community support, inclusivity, collaboration, and deeply personal cuisine will remain, as the rapid emergence of unknown chefs has invigorated and benefitted the culinary field. However, these changes occurred because of the COVID-19 crisis; once restaurants are able to conventionally operate again, offerings such as Piligian's cakes and Kim's *banchan* may no longer have a niche to comfortably reside in, leading to the end of these culinary voices as well as the voices of other upcoming chefs. Indeed, the pop-up trend in Los Angeles can easily be seen as ill-fitting outside of the COVID-era food scene, which inherently diminished the importance of the restaurant-dining experience and made pop-ups a more exciting and viable option. However, the ideological and discursive impact of the pandemic is likely to be long-lasting, as both chefs and customers will recall both the practical and mental changes that occurred during the pandemic for years to come. When recalling the ideological and discursive shifts that occurred due to the pandemic, I hope that both we as customers and chefs as creators will encourage and support the voices of lesser-known creators, who, if given the chance, could change the culinary food through their groundbreaking cuisine and innovative flavors. Though I cannot fully predict the future of the Los Angeles culinary field, I hope that we will emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic with a newfound appreciation for our community, the workers who make and serve our food, and the

culinary possibilities available to us if we support the endeavors and voices of those previously overlooked.

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