

The Importance of Being Taste Dealers in the Contemporary Food Economy

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It was during an interview - conducted for my doctoral research about gourmet food trucks and hipster bars in Milan - that one operator told me that he defined himself as a 'taste dealer', referring to both the 'trader' and 'pusher' meaning of dealer. In a sort of academic epiphany, I realised I was being offered the concept I was looking for to properly frame independent, neo-artisanal retailers in the complex field of taste production and consumption. In this blog, I discuss neo-artisanal retailers, arguing that they are pivotal actors to understanding the contemporary food economy because they translate a collective 'hipster aesthetic regime' to individual customers.

In *Der Moderne Kapitalismus* Werner Sombart (1928) - analysing the history of the European economy from the Middle Ages onwards - distinguished between an artisanal and a capitalistic system of market exchange: When capitalism developed to maturity, the artisanal economy previously dominant became obsolete. The relegation of the crafts to a marginal role of survival can be considered a standard feature of capitalism, at least in its industrial configuration. The professional figure of the artisan fell away.

However, more recently, a shift in the taste of the middle classes living in the post-Fordist societies has meant a weakening of the boundaries between 'highbrow' and 'working-class taste', with a more omnivorous kind of consumption (Johnston & Baumann, 2015). The problematisation of standardised goods is linked to the contemporary flourishing of artisanal enterprises. Albeit encompassing firms from any sector related to manufacturing and production, the spectacular rise of the so-called 'neo-craft industries' (Land, 2018) seems incredibly intense in the food and beverage sector: from craft beer to distilled gin, from coffee roasters to natural winemakers, from gourmet food trucks to local, typical food.

Performing ethnographic research in four different neo-artisanal occupational fields – mixologists, gin distillers, butchers and barbers – Ocejo argues that these jobs acquire cultural and social meaning as the 'cutting edge of the post-industrial city's cultural cornucopia' (Ocejo, 2017: xix).

Indeed, independent artisanal retailers are neither tastemakers nor passive transmitters of taste. They do not belong to the latter category because, guided by the goal to produce authentic and unique products, they perform intense cultural and symbolic work and assemble ingredients - as well as associated different tastes - in creative ways. They cannot be considered tastemakers *per se* because their agency is not finalised nor capable of generating 'novel taste'. They are dealers of taste (Gerosa, 2020) because they assemble elements in order to reproduce a defined taste, desired by them and the customers they serve altogether, with a limited degree of variation.

With the act of taste dealing, they translate and manipulate a specific aesthetic regime of consumption to customers. With 'aesthetic regime of consumption' we refer to the term firstly conceptualised by Bourdieu (1984) to indicate a collective interpretative framework, embodied in individuals but existing independently from them, that organises and orchestrates consumption patterns through the distinction of the legitimate from the illegitimate.

The figure of the independent retailer and the artisan, for a long time overlooked by social research, is of clear sociological and analytical relevance. They are the economic and cultural agents that accommodate and tighten the link between customers and aesthetic regimes, through the assemblage of a taste embodied in the material vector of the food or drink item. At the same time, they themselves live under the influence of the aesthetic regime that they seek to manipulate. Thus, the study of their subjectivities and practises can shed light on the features characterising the consumption patterns dominating the food and beverage economy in contemporary societies.

Hearing their accounts and the explanations of their choices, it becomes clear that artisanal production results from a conscious revolt against the 'industrial'. They may enter the food and beverage sector for the low level of capital and proficiency requested, compared to other entrepreneurial businesses, but they decide to become 'artisans of food' (or drinks) based on an oppositional value choice (against the mass produced and the standardised). Asked about their more traditional counterparts, they commonly declare to 'have nothing against' traditional food trucks or bars but to recognise that even if they are the same economic activity (street food sellers and bartenders) they play in different fields, addressing different customers. Industrial food has its own aesthetic regime that today may be in crisis but which dominated the taste of families during the Fordist economy. Studying the taste dealing of neo-craft retailers allows us to sketch the fundamental features of what can be conceptualised as a 'hipster aesthetic regime'.

To assemble a taste capable of satisfying the will of revolt against industrial products, taste dealers promote 'progressive nostalgia', as Gandini names it in his forthcoming book (Gandini, 2020). They foster the experience of more fair, ethical and tasty food practices, in explicit alternative to the noxious externalities of industrial food; the promotion of this alternative agenda relies on the assemblage of the commodity and the design of the place. The food item is crafted according to the general values of local provenance, typicality, genuineness and fidelity to tradition and the personal goals of the dealer, commonly the valorisation of local cuisine, an ingredient or a principle. The place needs to embody the mission declared by the owner and stand out as possessing a unique style and soul. Altogether, the ultimate goal of the commodity assemblage and the place design is to provide an 'authentic experience', the core value of the hipster aesthetic regime.

Of course, authenticity has a normative dimension, and taste dealers voluntarily engage with the category when pursuing ethical and cultural goals. This way, no matter how the individual struggles (and the alternative agenda of taste dealers may be successful at the micro-level) they risk remaining broadly irrelevant, or even worse, functional to large companies at a macro-level. The second order of problems needs to take into consideration the elephant in the room of the hipster aesthetic regime: class. The hipster economy is typically composed by middle-class micro-entrepreneurs serving food to middle-class customers. Thus, the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate taste operated by the aesthetic regime reproduces a depiction of middle-class taste as cool and progressive and working-class taste as vulgar and ignorant. Furthermore, to recover typical foods, traditional recipes and craftsmanship from the pre-industrial society means appropriating popular culture and agricultural knowledge to match the middle-class demand for 'refined' taste. The high costs related to this process make the food inaccessible for working-class people who paradoxically are the very heirs and custodians of that culture.

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