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**International Palate:
A Multi-Sensory Experience as a Food Critic**

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- a. How were you addressed when you entered the restaurant? Did you need to make reservations? How long was the wait before you were seated?

Tropical Grill is a West African restaurant located in Queens, New York that illustrates the different attributes of African culture well. Typically on weekdays between 11 a.m. and 11 p.m. the restaurant takes on more of an elegant approach. However on weekends it morphs into a social nightspot until 4 a.m. Upon initially walking into the restaurant I was shocked to find only three other customers sitting down inside. Granted, it was a Monday, but it was only around nine o'clock at night and this establishment had a four and half out of five star rating online. There was also no host present anywhere in sight so after about a minute of just standing by the door I decided to pick up a menu and sit at the bar. The aroma of the restaurant smelled of garlic and other strong spices that I was not familiar with. After about three minutes the hostess appeared from the kitchen and quickly skipped over to me, said "Hi" and stared into my eyes obviously waiting for me to place my order. "I am not ready as of yet," I replied, to which she nodded in headed over to the door where a new customer stood.

- b. What cultural differences did you notice? Using your five senses of taste, touch, sight, smell & sound describe some of the cultural differences that you are not accustomed to in comparison to All-American restaurants or restaurant chains. For example, one can describe but not limited to the sights in the restaurant decor, odors from unusual foods, and sounds from music. One should use all five senses in this cultural experience.

While looking at the menu I was accompanied by sounds of Dancehall, Afrobeats and *Soca* music. Nigerian flags were placed sporadically throughout the restaurant and over my head hung a sign that read "Tropical Grill" in red, black, yellow and green crystal embroidery, which I

know to be Pan-African colors. The red symbolizes the blood that unites all people of Black African ancestry and that was shed for liberation (Shelby, 2003). Black represents the black people whose existence is confirmed by the flag's existence; and power (Shelby, 2003, p.679). Green represents the abundance of wealth of Africa (Shelby, 2003). The yellow signifies the eternal sun of the land. As stated previously, the aroma of the setting smelt heavy of spices.

- c. Look at the menu. What are the types of food they offer? What are some unusual items? Do they describe the ingredients in the food? List various good items from the menu. What menu items did you order? Is there more than one language used to describe the items on the menu?

Fortunately the ingredients in most of the dishes on the menu were described because 90 percent of the foods were written in *Hausa*, a common language spoken in Nigeria. Appetizers consisted of dishes like *Obalende Suya*, which was described as a Nigerian beef kebab with African Spices, and Spicy Goat Meat (Tropical Grill Menu, 2020). Pepper Snail was another unusual dish that immediately caught my attention. It was described as exotic and seasonal, and marinated and sauteed in pepper, onions and garlic sauce (Tropical Grill Menu, 2020). Goat Pepper soup and Fish Pepper soup, which contained a whole tilapia in a spicy and herb broth, also graced the menu under "Hearty and exotic African soups" (Tropical Grill Menu, 2020). The section "African Speciality Sauce and Soup" had a various amount of sauces such as *Edikaikon*, which was interpreted as African mixed leaves and spinach with meat or fish; *Ogbono*, which are aromatic nuts in a spinach sauce; and *Egusi*, an African pistachio (Tropical Grill Menu, 2020). "Country Delights" were listed as *Asaro*, a yam pottage, with numerous choices of fish, mixed meats and gizzards (Tropical Grill Menu, 2020), which to quote the hostess "Help soak up the

flavors.” Mixed meat is specified as a combination of tripe, cow foot and goat on the menu (Tropical Grill Menu, 2020). I noticed that fish, such as sauteed snapper and fried or steamed tilapia, was used in many of the dishes.

I decided to order *Eja-Kika*, which was described on the menu as an African smoked fish in a brown sauce; it came with a side of *jollof* rice (Tropical Grill Menu, 2020). I also asked to try *Puff-Puff*, an African fried dumpling (Tropical Grill Menu, 2020), because I was already accustomed to Jamaican fried dumpling and wanted to compare the two palates. To drink I decided not to go with anything too out of the ordinary and stuck with a traditional margarita.

- d. Is there a traditional salad offered? If not, describe what is offered. What types of breads are offered (flat, pita, tortilla chips)? What types of desserts (cheesecake, fortune cookie, coffee)? What are they like?

No traditional salad was offered, in replacement, *Amala* Steamed Dry *Cassava* Flour, Fried Plantains and *Eba* Steamed *Cassava* Grain was offered instead. *Puff-puff* was the only type of bread offered, which because of its slightly sweet taste is also referred to as a dessert. Other desserts they had included red velvet cake, carrot cake and *Shuku Shuku*, a Nigerian coconut ball.

- e. What types of beverages are offered? Do they have an alcohol menu? What is not typically offered in an American chain restaurant?

Beverages served were pretty much traditional to those of America. Listed on the menu were Pepsi, Diet Pepsi, Orange Soda, Sprite, Ginger-Ale, Cranberry Juice, Fruit Punch, Orange Juice, Pineapple Juice, Apple Juice and bottled water (Tropical Grill Menu, 2020). Unfamiliar to most American chain restaurants however, Bitter Lemon, Malta and Palm Juice were also listed

as beverage drinks. Upon further research I found out that Malta is a lightly carbonated malt beverage that is brewed from barley, hops, and water (“Our History”, 2006). Palm juice is a sweet sap made from the fruit of palm trees. Bitter Lemon is just a lemon flavored soft drink. Also included in the menu were an assemblage of beers such as Heineken, Budweiser and Corona. Although they did not have an alcohol menu, you are welcomed to order any alcoholic beverage that you desire.

- f. How is the food reflective of the cultural geography and economic geography? Describe approximately where in the world and from which country is this culture’s food best known?

Culture is heavily influenced by religion, ethnicity, region, gender and social class (Adomaitis, 2020). The correlation between region and food has been an important factor for why we eat the things that we do for over hundreds of years. Typically, regions with hot climates eat very spicy foods because spicier foods raise the body temperature and cause perspiration (“Food and Geography”, n.d.). Ultimately, this helps cool down the body so that those intense high temperatures become more bearable. Individuals in colder climates are known to eat more carb filled dishes, like pasta, because the fibers demand for more energy to break them down, causing the body’s hard work to keep the individual warm. Africa, due to its geographical region, is known as one of the world’s hottest continents because of its high radiation intensity. This has had a major impact on traditional African cuisine.

Africa is multicultural meaning it comprises several cultures within the country’s borders (Adomaitis, 2020). This was apparent through the restaurant's additions of French fries, chicken

wings and chicken fingers on the menu. As mentioned earlier African cuisines are known to include a lot of spices. Many spices are grown in Africa, hence why they are used heavily in African foods. Spices and herbs used in the continent range from the familiar American ones like, bay leaves, cinnamon, cumin, ginger, and sesame seeds (“Exploring African Foods and Spices”, 2020), to more less commonly known such as cardamom, Berbere Spice, Alligator Pepper, African Negro Pepper and African Blue Basil. Africa borders the southern half of the Mediterranean Sea (“African Geography”, 2020), this is why lean proteins like fish and legumes are commonly used in the African diet. Unprocessed grains like nuts or the *Egusi* on the menu is also common near the Meditterean area. The Atlantic Ocean being to the west of the continent and the Indian Ocean being at the Southeast also contributes to why fish is frequently used in African food dishes.

g. Describe the dress? What are the employees, such as the hostesses or wait staff wearing?

The dress of the restaurant, which is defined by Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) as an assemblage of modifications and/or supplements to the body, was quite incoherent. The hostess wore a chiffon dark gray blazer and matching skirt. The hem carried to her knees and she wore no stockings. Her shirt was black and gold, with a cowl neck, and gold sequins appeared throughout her neckline. She wore several gold bangles on both arms. Whenever she walked I could hear her without seeing her. Her hair was cut into a buzz cut style but was bleached platinum blonde. This made her black drawn on eyebrows and orange lipstick pop dramatically. She smelled of spices and food. The bartender wore a long sleeved, horizontally striped peach, heather gray and white knit dress that came to her ankles. Her platform sandals were black and

open toed so her chipped red toe polish became really noticeable. Her earrings were made of wood and in the shape of the continent of Africa. She too had colored in her eyebrows with a black pencil, however no other makeup was noticeable. She smelled soapy, similar to White Musk perfume. The few customers, including myself, were very casually dressed in comparison. Majority wore jeans and a t-shirt. One group of women, who came in around the time I was about to leave, were more formally dressed as well. They each wore heels and dresses. I wore a navy blue Adidas tracksuit and white Air Force 1s.

- h. Rate your experience as a food critic. Ratings should be dependent on taste, service, decor, cleanliness, authenticity, quality and price and should range from A-F. Explain why you chose this rating. Be thorough and detailed in your explanations.

Overall I would rate my experience at Tropical Grill a C rating. It was definitely a new cultural experience. The food was tasty, very well seasoned and flavorful. The portions were gigantic but correspondent with the hefty \$75 check I paid for my meal, including tip. The *jollof* rice and *puff-puff* were definitely my favorite dishes. Although spicy, the rice had a delicate texture and was filling. The *puff-puff* contained the perfect amount of sweetness, but the salt throughout was also recognized which balanced it out. Unfortunately the *Eja-Kika* was very rough and steamed too long for my personal taste. However the red and green peppers and other seasonings helped flavor it well. Taste of the food gets a B rating. The atmospherics of the restaurant were amazing. The lighting was subtle and warmly illuminated the restaurant area but the bar had consistent green, red and blue strobes of light. The music was rhythmic and fun. The decor made me feel quite at home and welcome. These aspects get an A rating. The service on

the other hand was bad, for lack of a better word. I would rate the service a D rating. There was only one hostess and although there were not that many guests to tend to, she was also responsible for answering the phone and doing to go orders, which decreased her availability to restaurant guests. Questions that I started to ask her about the menu were constantly interrupted with her running to answer the phone or greet a person picking up an order at the door, which is why I found myself googling items that were in *Hausa* but were not described on the menu. If it was not for the bartender I am not even sure if I would have been able to place an order. I would rate authenticity an A rating because it was obvious that they served real African food made by African people. Cleanliness of the restaurant gets a B rating because although it was ultimately clean, there were some leftover food crumbs near where I sat.

- i. What did you learn from this experience that you could contribute to a multicultural experience discussion in a class discussion?

Through this experience I learned how much cultural and economic geography affects food. Before this assignment and class lecture I never thought about why sushi is popular in Japan and pizza is popular in Italy. International culture and human behaviors all come down to the influence of the region, which is why every culture, even similar ones, are so different. I am happy I got the chance to experience a different cultural dynamic than my own and will now continue to do so more frequently.



(2020). Tropical Grill [Menu-front]. Queens, NY.



(2020). Tropical Grill [Menu-back]. Queens, NY.

(They had no take out menus at the time of my visit.)



Eja-Kika.



Jollof rice and plantains.

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