

International Palette:
A Multi-Sensory Experience as a Food Critique
MUSARAT MERCHANT
 Assignment #1 (worth 150 points)

1. Visit an authentic ethnic restaurant of predominately of one ethnic taste (i.e. Taco Bell & Olive Garden does NOT count as ethnic restaurants).

Me and my classmates Faha Ghauri and Daisy went to this authentic Indian restaurant named **“The Gully NYC” – The Urban Desi Eatery**, which is located at 2545 Steinway St, Astoria, NY 11103 in the heart of Queens!

The Gully NYC is known for serving authentic Indian street cuisine hence the name “Gully” which is Hindi for “a street”. Besides their food, they are known for their outstanding ethnic Indian décor which gives you the vibe of sitting and dining in one of the famous streets for fast food in India.

2. Answer the following question in a two-to-four (2-3) page typed report using your **five senses: taste, sound, sight, touch, & smell**.

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

As we walked in a waiter in an all-black uniform – a black polo T-shirt with the restaurant’s name embroidered in bright yellow color thread, plus wearing a name badge, which he paired with a pair of black jeans and sneakers approached us and directed us an empty spot to eat. No, we did not need to make any reservations because of the way the seating in the restaurant is structured. There were long wooden tables and benches just the way there would be in any corner of an Indian food stall at the corner of the street. So, there was no wait for the seating as you can sit on any spot on the bench and share the table with other people to get the street “Gully” experience!

- b. What are the cultural differences 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 restaurant or restaurant chains. For example, one can describe but not limited to the sights in the restaurant décor, odors from unusual foods, and sounds from music. One should use all five-senses in this cultural experience.

Before we dive into the cultural differences I noticed, I would like to present the definition of the word “**dress**”. The word “dress includes a long list of possible direct modifications of the body that include our five senses. These are taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing” (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1995). The cultural differences that I noticed are as follows:

I will begin with the **sight**, which has to do with the décor. As I entered I saw dim accent lighted area with ceilings filled up with poster collages from classic Bollywood movies, there were long benches for seating because they expect everyone to sit together unlike sitting on separate tables as we see in most All – American restaurant chains. Walls filled with graffiti in different all Indian languages and paintings of legendary Bollywood artists like the Amitabh Bachchan known as “Big B” and Bhanurekha Ganesan known as “Rekha” as her official actor name. Those movie posters and portraits of Bollywood actors give an outstanding vintage Bollywood cinematic experience to the guest in the restaurant. You must be thinking how the movie posters tie into a street setting right? Well, the reason why they have posters all over the ceiling and walls is because for over years, this goes back to the time when billboards weren’t that big and every house in India didn’t have a color TV in their houses, these posters were the key way to advertise the launch/ release of a new movie and these posters were posted in busy streets of India so that the passerby’s can be the target audience and potential audiences of these movies in cinemas. One of the very interesting things about the décor was that to give it an actual Indian street vibe they made use of a prop of a kind of vehicle found Indian streets only called by the name an *auto – rickshaw*. So, in a nutshell based on what I saw, the décor of the restaurant gives a true vibe of sitting and dining in an Indian street.



Figure 1: Here you can see the auto rickshaw, I am sitting on the driver’s seat. There is graffiti in Punjabi and Hindi language and a big tree in the back which is holding a typical 5 bulb chandelier.



Figure 2: Here me and my classmate Faha Ghauri are sitting on the passenger’s seat. Typically, an auto – rickshaw has a roof also but here it is different because they want to give it an urban look and use it as a photobooth prop. This is located inside the restaurant just a few steps away from the cash register.

For the **smell**, I remember inhaling the pleasant aroma of the blend of rich Indian spices, dairy, and of course the how can I forget that strong scent of cardamom because it was the main ingredient of one of their beverages which was on every table known as the *Masala Chai* (spiced tea) so it made sense that its scent dominated over all the other scents. Cardamom's smell added a very fresh, energetic and dynamic vibe to the street like setting of the Gully NYC.

For the **taste**, the taste of the wood was as rich as it I was expecting. I have lived in India for about thirteen years of my life, so I very well know the taste of the real Indian street food. Honestly, I was not expecting it to be great because in these five years of me living in New York City, I have been to so many places searching for the taste of home and I never found anything close to it. But what I really liked about the food at the Gully NYC is that this food that they

make here remind me of home. I remember sipping their *Masala Chai* and as I took my very first sip, before the tea touched my lip, the whiff of cardamom and spices used to make that chai entered my nose, I close my eyes and took a sip and in that moment as I am tasting the tea simultaneously, it felt like I was teleported to the place where I lived in India, Mumbai. I think taste has to do a lot with our memory because as I took that sip, I imagined myself sitting at the Nariman Point, in Mumbai, facing the seaside and watching the Queens Necklace reflect in that sea water, calm ocean breeze and big water droplets of water from the waves as they hit the shore touching my face. That sip, those rich flavors took me back to the time when I was young, full of hopes and dreams to come to NYC one day and be able to visit all the other famous cities in the world. Then as I gulp that sip, happily, I opened my eyes because I know that I am sitting in NYC today and my childhood dream is almost fulfilled!



Figure 3: *Masala Chai / Spice Tea* served in “cutting chai” glasses. “Cutting Chai” refers to the Indian street slang for “half cup of chai/ tea” it is just a measurement of the tea served in the streets of India.

For the **touch**, I noticed that they mainly use two materials for everything from seating to their tabletop décor, they were using stainless steel and wood for all of it. I remember sitting on a steel bench and wooden table. The durability of both materials is ideal for any street food stall. These materials showcase the rough and tough side of a street. I liked how they served us food in all stainless-steel utensils because that's the way food is served in a typical Indian household. Growing up, as a kid I remember eating food in steel utensils and so when the waiter served us water in a steel cup it reminded me of home again. I believe that the water served in the steel utensils feels cooler in the sense of touch as compared to an All -American restaurant we see the use of glasses. Also, the food served in steel utensils tend to stay warm for a longer time as compared to the melamine or china tabletop.

Lastly, for the **hearing**, I remember them playing latest Bollywood (Indian) hip hop songs with extra bass! They were playing the music so loud that I could barely hear what my friend on the other side of the table was saying. I believe they kept the music loud on purpose to show the cause and effect by that I mean, normally in the streets of India there are cars passing by which play loud music and also the streets are busy with the traffic noises and horns blowing at all times. This loud voice is what makes the Indian people habitual of speaking loudly on the phone or even in person. As everyone begins to speak loudly in the restaurant because of the high music volume (the cause), it creates the effect of indistinct chatter that one can normally hear in the busy streets / gullies of India. So, the reason they kept the music on a high volume was so that the guests at the restaurant speak loudly as they would normally in a busy Indian street which contributes to the overall atmosphere of The Gully NYC.

Based on my understanding of visual merchandising, I feel that the Gully, NYC successfully checks all boxes in the area of having exceptional *atmospherics* for an Indian street themed eatery as the term “atmospherics” is “coined by retailers to describe the elements (lighting effects, sound levels, aromas, etc.) that appeal to our five senses and contribute to the overall environment of a store” (Bell, Ternus 2012). The ambient lighting, loud music, aroma of rich Indian spices, etc. that I experienced at the Gully NYC contribute to the overall busy Indian street vibe of the restaurant.

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



Figure 4: Menu of the Gully NYC.

Their menu includes rolls, famous Indian street appetizers like *Fuska* or *Pani Puri*, *Jhal Muri* or *Bhel Puri*, *Guac Dahi Puri*, other than that they also had *chaats*. In main course they had *Pav Bhaji* which is very famous in Juhu Chowpatty, Mumbai. They had their own specialties like the *Chicken Tikka Mac & Cheese*, *Chicken Soup*, *Lamb Chop*, *Masala (Spice) Chicken Sandwich*, *Lamb Burger* and *platters*. For beverages they had the usual types of coffee, types of tea, like *Green tea* and *Kashmiri tea* and their famous one being the *Masala Chai* which I mentioned earlier also. And they had sodas and flavored *lassi* (yogurt drink) for cold beverages.

The main ingredients would definitely be rich Indian spices like turmeric, cardamoms, bay leaves, mint leaves, cloves, ginger and garlic, red chili, coriander, black pepper cinnamon and asafetida. The unusual items that I found in the menu was definitely their specialty *Chicken Tikka Mac & Cheese* and *Guac Dahi Puri*. What is unusual about these is that *Chicken Tikka* and



Figure 5: Guac Dahi Puri (appetizer) and Chicken Tikka Mac & Cheese (main course).

Dahi Puri are classic desi foods and here we see it with an urban twist as these Indian favorites are blended with American favorites like Mac & Cheese and Guacamole. It looked very unusual and interesting to us, so we ordered these two.

Guac Dahi Puri was a plate full of seven crispy puffed puris stuffed with mint yogurt, guacamole, tamarind chutney and aloo sev/ fine potato crisps. *Chicken Tikka Mac & Cheese* was undoubtedly, the best item on their menu in my opinion as it was made up of succulent tikka morsels and elbow macaroni in their super rich and creamy three cheese sauce.

Other than these I ordered a *Chicken Tikka Biryani* as a take out, I drank a mango lassi, I liked how they garnished the mango lassi with a whipped cream and served it in a tiny mason jar, it looked really cute and it tasted just like the fresh alphonso mangoes straight brought from Ratnagiri, India. The languages they used on the menu were Hindi, English and Bengali.

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

No, they do not offer any traditional salad. I remember trying to order their *Masala Chai*, but then the waiter said to us that, “Don’t worry Mam, it’s on us!” so I am counting it as a complementary beverage that was offered to us. The bread they use is called the *Pav* or *Naan Bread*. They offered *Butter Naan*, *Garlic Naan*, *Chili Naan* and *Onion Kulcha*. Their desserts include *Kulfi Falooda* in Malai, Mango Almond, Pistachio and Coconut flavors. *Kulfi* is an Indian version of popsicle. Other than that, they had Ras Malai and Gulab Jamuns which are the two classic Indian desserts. They had a new type of Rasmali called, *Rashmalai Tres Leche*.

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

They strictly do not serve alcohol as it is a Certified Halal Restaurant. They sold sodas like Limca and Thumps Up which are only sold in India and not here in the United States so frequently even though Coca Cola is the parent company for both of those soda flavors. Mango



Figure 7: Mango Lassi and Strawberry Lassi topped with fresh whipped cream

Lassi, Strawberry Lassi, Masala Chai and Kashmiri Chai. Typically in an American chain restaurant we do not get to see Lassi at all, but we do see chai on the menu of Starbucks and Dunkin Donuts.

f. How is the food reflective of the cultural geography and the economic geography? (i.e. spices are abundant in India which is rich in spices & fish (sushi) is popular in Japan & it is part of the G8). Describe approximately where in the world (continent & location) and from country this culture's food is best known.

The food is reflective of the cultural geography and the economic geography of the Indian subcontinent due to the use of amazing variety of spices used to flavor all these items on the menu we can tell that it shows that India is the leading producer and exporter of all kinds of spices in the world. This food is from the southern portion of the continent of Asia. The food is from India, but even Pakistani and Bengali people love to go and visit the Gully.

g. Describe the dress? (Dress is inclusive of all five senses – you smell perfume, hear jewelry, see make-up, etc....) What are the employees, such as hostesses or wait staff wearing?

Refer to answer 2.a and 2.b

h. Rate your experience as a food critic (as in the *LA Times* or *Houston Chronicle*). Ratings should be dependent on taste, service, décor, cleanliness, authenticity, quality and price and should range from A-F (“A” being the best). Explain why you chose this rating. Be thorough and detailed in your explanations.

Their taste was phenomenal! Service was very quick, we did not have to wait at all, the staff was also very cooperative and well mannered. The décor was spectacular, it really did an outstanding job in paying a tribute to *the desi* “traditional” culture. The quality of the food was rich and was worth the money! Also, I was expecting this place to be a bit pricy as I did hear a large roar of promotions from everyone since September 2019 of this restaurant on my Instagram. But I was shocked to see the inexpensive prices on the menu. The restaurant was

clean and tidy. Based on all of these important factors, as a food critic, I have decided to give this restaurant an “A” because it truly deserves it for giving its guests such a rich Indian street experience.

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

From this experience I can tell the class about how the food is served differently in Indian houses normally in steel pots and plates, how there is a blend of urban and desi (traditional) mouth watering dishes. I can talk about the setting of the restaurant, the lively and energetic mood it sets for its guests. Their service for amazing, they really treated us well, and this is very common to see in an Indian restaurant as the Indian saying goes, “*Athiti devo bhava!*” meaning, “*The Guests are next to the Gods*” and I believe this is why they were very nice and polite to us even though toward the end I lost my receipt and the waiter went back and printed me another one when I told him that I needed it for the project. Other than that, he gave use free chai, so it really shows Indian hospitality as whenever someone goes to visit someone in India, *Chai* is the first thing offered to the guests. I loved how truly it reflected the Indian culture and how it was all worth the money!

References

Bell, J. A., & Ternus, K. (2012). *Silent selling*. New York, NY: Fairchild Publications.

Roach-Higgins, M. E., & Eicher, J. B. (1995). *Dress and identity*. New York: Fairchild Publ.