



Interviewee: William Grimes
Title: A foodie valentine to NYC restaurants
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About this transcript

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Introduction

All of us, tourists and denizens alike, associate New York City with good restaurants. Yet restaurant culture here is only about 150 years old.

In this episode of Bookpod, William Grimes talks about *Appetite City*, the book he wrote to chronicle New York's culinary history from the days of the Dutch to the current mélange of ethnic eateries.

Presentation

The history of New York's restaurants, you can divide them into these big stripes of history.

I think when you start out at the time when the Erie Canal is opening and Delmonico's is just opening its doors, what you have is these old English-style chop houses. You have almost cafeteria-style places -- the schilling plate places, they used to call them. It was just kind of a set menu of a slab of meat and some -- kind of the meat and two



vege of its day. And it was just thrown at you in rough and ready fashion.

So, out of this grew the first little tentative attempts at having genuine restaurants with menus and table service and waiters – restaurants, as we understand them. You could pick and choose when you wanted to eat, which you couldn't in the hotels. They were serving meals at set times.

Very quickly this advanced to a much more sophisticated restaurant culture, as early as the 1840s or the 1850s. So you had grand hotel restaurants, but you also had competitive and exciting individually owned restaurants and the first stirrings of a great tradition in New York – ethnic restaurants. And what we think of as ethnic changed a lot over time, depending on the pattern of immigration. Early on exotic ethnic dining might have been German or Italian. Italian, which we think of as almost the default cuisine, certainly not a strange exotic cuisine, was for many, many decades as exotic as Tunisian food would be to us today or Malaysian.

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By the turn of the century, New York was a much, much larger city, and the dining scene had proliferated to embrace all of the modern kinds of restaurants that we think of. The oyster cellars and oyster houses, which are



very, very old, had come along and become ubiquitous throughout the city because the oyster beds were still holding up, although it was farmed oysters.

So, from downtown in the Fulton Market all the way to midtown, you had oyster cellars and oyster restaurants, both large and small, cheap and grand.

And you also had constellation neighborhoods where you had theaters and restaurants in synergistic relationships, and nowhere more so than in Times Square, which got going at 1904 when the subway reached Forty-Second Street. And you had a new kind of restaurant there called the lobster palace, which is a kind of a flashy, splashy Las Vegas kind of restaurant serving a lot of diners. Very high-quality kitchens though. I mean, we don't think of Times Square today as being a great dining destination, but at the turn of this last century, it definitely was. There were very high-end restaurants, huge, large, bustling. They attracted the stars. They attracted visitors from out of town who wanted to see the stars, high rollers who wanted to spend huge amounts of money in the dining room on lobster and champagne. That's why they were called lobster palaces.

And in the years leading up to Prohibition, this was the really exciting dining neighborhood in New York, in Times Square. It had supplanted these more traditional, staid upper crust restaurants like Sherry's and Delmonico's.



You have a long dark period when Prohibition comes in, because you cannot really make money on a restaurant if you don't have liquor service. That's where the big profit is, and you don't have that profit anymore legally under Prohibition.

You did have these very mass styles of dining that had grown up that were very exciting to people who were from Europe who didn't have this: The Automat, which was a great New York institution.

And kind of precursor to the Automat, starting in the late nineteenth century, were these very humble lunch rooms that served what we might think of as diner fare, kind of straight-ahead American food. But they cleaned up the surroundings of these old hole-in-the-wall kind of places and franchised and created chains out of places called Dennett's and Childs, which were spic 'n span with a lot of tile on the walls, and good straight-ahead wholesome American food served without frills – and often served by women, which was originally a novelty but then became standard for dining out at these lower-priced sorts of places.

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The World's Fair to me is the turning point, the 1939 World's Fair, because it marked the end of this austerity period of Prohibition and Depression. It wasn't organized



to be exciting restaurants, but it turned out it had a lot of exciting restaurants, particularly the French restaurant, which stayed on after the Fair closed. It became *Le Pavillon*. And that ushered in a sort of a deluxe period in New York dining of exciting foreign restaurants.

And the restaurant scene in New York revived and became exciting in a way that it hadn't been since the First World War really.

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Out of this period comes a very exciting man by the name of Joe Baum, who was the fine dining czar of a company called Restaurant Associates. He started out by creating a fabulous restaurant at Newark Airport, which sounds impossible, but he really did it. He made it a destination restaurant – the Newarker.

And he went on to create the modern restaurant, which sounds like hyperbole, but if it's exaggeration, it's only a little bit. He was one of the first people to think of restaurants the way we think of them today, which is kind of total aesthetic experience. Everything was planned down to the smallest detail, sort of the weight of the cutlery and what it looked like, the plates, the lettering on the menu. All of this was sort of put at the service of one grand idea, and he exercised this.



I mean, one of his restaurants still stands. One of the great ones in New York is the Four Seasons.

You know, we are so excited about Alice Waters' ideas about fresh local food, and that was one of the founding principles of the Four Seasons restaurant, as the name might suggest to you. Seasonality, freshness and excitement about what farmers could grow in the United States. And this is something, we're still living through that. We're working through that idea.

Now, I have to say there was a period there, I think in the 'seventies, when New York was doing so poorly economically and its image was bad, that it was a lull period, even a dead period.

At the same time, a lot of ferment was going on in California. And that came back to us as trends so often do. They often start on the West Coast and go east. But in the 'seventies, I would say there were great culinary ideas, but they were all happening in California. But we reaped the benefit as a lot of these Californians came over and planted their flag in New York.

And in the late 'seventies and particularly in the 'eighties, you see the rise of New American cuisine, and a really full-fledged food scene of the kind that we're still living in, with a lot of mass food journalism, and intense



interest on the part of this new population called yuppies in the finer things in life.

And chefs were being trained in a different way. Nouvelle cuisine had turned the heads of French chefs around 360 degrees and they were being trained in a way they never had been before, being sent to hotels in Asia, not for the purpose of picking up new ideas, but if you send a smart, classically trained French chef to Bangkok, someone like Jean-Georges Vongerichten, he's going to look around him and sniff and taste and develop all sorts of new ideas.

So, suddenly you have this cuisine called fusion, and you have a globalized sense of what restaurant dining is and what the dishes can be and what the ingredients can be.

And that's where we are today.

Valedictory

William Grimes is the author of several other books about food. He is also the obit writer at *The New York Times*.

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

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