



Andrew P. Haley. *Turning the Tables: Restaurants and the Rise of the American Middle Class, 1880-1920.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. xiv + 356 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3474-9.



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Middle-Class Influences on Public Dining

In *Turning the Tables* Andrew P. Haley attempts to place the growing urban middle class in a position of power in regards to restaurant culture. Haley demonstrates that between 1880 and 1920, changes occurred in both service and food offerings, with middle-class patrons demanding restaurants that appealed to their own tastes. In eight topical chapters ranging from the specificities of French dining to cosmopolitan food and service, Haley provides a wealth of examples indicating middle-class influence. Through their dislike of existing options such as working-class food carts and upper-class French restaurants, middle class diners opened the way for a middle ground of culinary culture. Among the strengths of this book is the use of restaurant industry sources to show the dramatic growth of eateries which appealed to middle-class diners.

The transformation in restaurant culture was fueled, according to Haley, by the existing tensions between the upper- and middle-class diner. These tensions are particularly obvious in the urban French restaurants frequented by the wealthy. The book provides glances into

these privileged spaces and gives examples of how prices, menu language, and expected behavior catered to the upper-class members of society. The requirements of French dining leave little doubt that many middle-class diners felt excluded. What is less successfully demonstrated is how other class tensions played a role in the middle-class dislike of French eateries. For example, Haley provides an entire chapter about the practice of tipping to explain that this practice in elite restaurants made middle-class people feel uncomfortable. What seems to be evident, however, is that the knowledge and skill of the French restaurant wait staff made middle-class diners self-conscious and that they resented having to tip these workers for simply doing their job. As one diner claimed, "The waiters hold too much over my head" (p. 178). Examples such as this point less to middle-class resentment of the elite and more to the desire of middle-class patrons to distinguish themselves from working-class waiters. Haley credits the middle-class desire for English menus and simpler service to their issues with the nuances of upper-class dining; however, what also

becomes clear is that by making food, menus, and service more accessible, middle-class diners elevated themselves above the staff serving their meals—an important distinction that Haley does not bring out clearly enough.

Turning the Tables provides numerous examples showing how the middle class came to dominate urban eateries. Haley's evidence clearly indicates a rapidly expanding restaurant industry. There is also ample evidence that many of these new locales served food that middle-class patrons enjoyed at prices they were willing to pay. Through his exploration of "cosmopolitanism" Haley shows that middle-class diners grew more willing to try ethnic foods and that publications provided the knowledge which allowed them to engage in "culinary adventurism" (p. 103). Generous portions and affordable pricing with an "à la carte" menu appear to have provided the key to the middle class dining out. The success of this type of restaurant gives credence to the argument that the middle class eventually dominated public eating in the United States.

However, there is less evidence about whether this middle-class surge in restaurant dining was the primary factor in changing upper-class eating. Although the middle class may have felt "contempt" for the extravagances of the rich, "these feelings did not destroy upper-class dining" (p. 6). The closing of Delmonico's and the inclusion of English on French restaurant menus (even at the St. Regis) are not enough to support the claim that the middle class dictated upper-class dining habits. Haley attempts to show that middle-class influence was a force so strong that elite French dining had to adapt to their desires or disappear. There are few upper-class voices in this book, and little aside from circumstantial evidence to indicate that the upper classes altered their own dining styles because of the pressures of the growing mid-

dle class. Deli counters which opened in these bastions of wealth indicate change, but the well-documented elements of American nationalism, nutrition science, and prohibition surely played significant roles in changing elite eating culture. However, they are only given passing credence. The book is on stronger ground when explaining what middle-class diners wanted from their restaurants and how these elements became pervasive aspects of American dining.

Scholars of food, culture, and the middle class will find this book useful. It is also interesting for what it does not include—namely information about working-class employees in this growing restaurant industry (and the class tensions which may have affected the treatment of those workers by middle-class patrons) and the motivations and identities of the entrepreneurs who opened places catering to middle-class diners. Readers interested in data of this type can catch a glimpse of Chinese eatery laborers in Andrew Coe's recent *Chop Suey* (2009). Haley's vast resources may provide starting points for new research in the class dynamics of "à la carte" restaurants. Although the book does not dethrone Harvey Levenstein's *Revolution at the Table* (2003) by claiming that middle-class identity emerges directly from changes made in public dining, it does provide an additional facet to the growing scholarship on middle-class food culture. That contribution is a valuable one, but Levenstein's evidence about the role of household technology, the diminishing availability of household servants, and the belief in nutritional science among the middle class cannot be dismissed. While *Turning the Tables* does not necessarily prove that the middle class drove elite eating to extinction, it offers diverse sources and avenues for future exploration while establishing the prominence of middle-class dining culture in urban America.

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