

Urban Borderlands Oral History Project
Tufts University, Department of Anthropology
In collaboration with The Welcome Project

**Customer Bases in Immigrant-Owned Restaurant Businesses in
Somerville: Implications for Community Relations and Networks of
Connectivity in Somerville, MA**

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Prologue

When I signed myself up for Urban Borderlands last spring, I knew little about the class, save for the fact that it involved conducting fieldwork in the Somerville community with immigrant-run food businesses. I was so enthralled by this idea that I signed up without a second thought, and didn't stop to consider what actually might be required, work-wise, on my end as a researcher, until I met with Profesor Pacini in order to get my "instructor's approval". She explained about the amount of outside time commitment and proactiveness that students would need to commit to in order to complete the requirements of the class. I nodded eagerly, and expressed my enthusiasm for the topic of the course and how it carried personal significance to me, which I will explain shortly.

Still, even then, I had no idea what it actually *felt* like to have to actually do fieldwork – as an anthropology major, I've read countless ethnographies in my academic courses. Yet reading is no substitute for experience, and I was unprepared for the awkwardness that hit me the first time I gave my Urban Bordelrands "sales pitch", as I began to call it. I struggled to rattle off, all in one breath, a horrible run-on sentence, which was probably something to the extent of: "Hi- I'm- Rebecca- I- go- to- Tufts- I'm- in- this- Anthropology- class- called- Urban- Borderlands- involving- oral- history- and- we're- talking- to- local- restaurant- owners- about –their- experiences- of –being- an –immigrant- in- the- Somerville- Community- and- working- with –The- Welcome- Project- we –hope- to- highlight –some- of- the- cultures- and- food- of- these- restaurants- and- maybe- write- a- blog- so- if- you're- willing- I- would- talk- to –you- for –thirty- minutes –and- then- use- our- conversation- to- write- my –final- report- please- talk- to- me?!"

As a once very shy person, I have a bit of a hang-up about having to ask people for favors, or feeling like I'm inconveniencing people by asking for something. Thus, having to ask busy restaurant owners for their time was definitively outside my comfort zone. I am grateful to the course for making me address and confront these feelings head on, and for the opportunity to recognize that sometimes depending on the incredible generosity of individuals is a component of research, and how new knowledge is gained and shared. Sometimes, you just have to do a little pestering.

I owe my own privilege to be at Tufts to immigrant ingenuity in the food business—My mother immigrated from Hong Kong with her parents and 3 siblings at a young age in 1963, when her parents were able to move with the help of a wealthy sponsor family living in Houston, Texas, of all places. My grandparents, both naturally-gifted and creative cooks, worked as cooks and housekeepers for this family for the next twenty years. Through this occupation and the generosity of their employers, they were able to send their four children to school. Though they also were on the receiving end of quite a bit of racial prejudices, thanks to being Chinese immigrants living in a 1960's southern state, my grandparents' cooking also became popular amongst intrigued neighbors. In particular, the Chinese items, which were new, exciting, and couldn't be found in many other places in Houston at the time.

Thus, the exciting of food sharing and significance is one of great importance to me, and I was thrilled to have the opportunity to explore it through an anthropological research lens. I'm from San Francisco, California, also a place of great diversity and large numbers of immigrant- run restaurants. And as an enthusiastic cook myself, I couldn't have asked for a project that was more relevant to my own interests.

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Introduction

As an eager diner who enjoys the culture of food and food sharing, I was excited for the opportunity that I was presented with in Urban Borderlands to explore the immigrant restaurant scene in Somerville. Somerville, as a small city of a 4-square mile area and population of 75, 754 (source: US census 2010), possesses a remarkably varied immigrant population. Of the 27.8% of the population that is foreign-born (source: US census 2010), multiple ethnic groups are present in substantial, and very visible proportions; a drive down Broadway in East Somerville, for example will present an onlooker with a diverse blend of commercial and restaurant business owned by immigrants of different backgrounds: Within a few blocks one will encounter Brazilian barbecue, taquerias, Ethiopian dining and an Italian restaurant. Somerville is home to substantial immigrants populations from Brazil, Haiti, El Salvador, among others.

With a desire to expose my taste buds to as many different cuisines as I can get my hands on, I've eaten at many immigrant-owned food businesses over the years, both around Tufts, on my travels, and in my hometown, San Francisco, a mecca for ethnic food and food culture itself. The process of seeking a new taste is often a scavenger hunt, combining word-of-mouth references, internet research, and simple exploration when I notice a place to try. I was interested in pursuing how this network of connections and exploration exists in the Somerville area, and leads curious diners to local businesses. How is a pool of “regulars” formed? – ie, those customers that eat at a restaurant frequently and consistently, and have perhaps formed some sort of relationship to the

owners because of this. Do all of these restaurants possesses such a customer group? Furthermore, I wanted to explore how connections to an ethnic cohort can draw diners to a business, based on the sense of familiarity and commonalities that are created when people are brought together by a common cuisine. When given the opportunity to explore the diverse and dynamic food scene in Somerville, I was drawn to the idea of the different layers connectivity that serve to link restaurants to their community and vice versa: How do the various connections that a food business may have to the Somerville community shape business? How does connection to an ethnic cohort create a relationship between customers and restaurants? How does the concentrated, dynamic, and multiethnic demographic of Somerville influence these connections that sustain business?

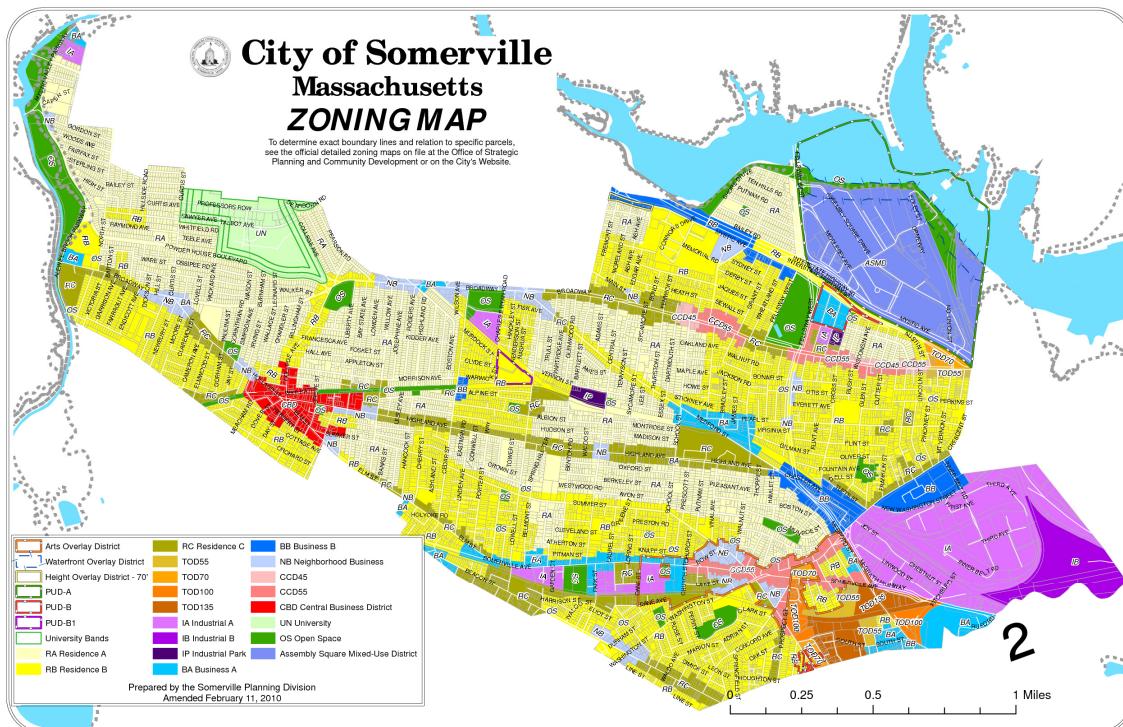
Methodology

Data collection occurred in the form of structured interviews with the owners of various Somerville restaurants –I chose restaurants of differing location, cuisine, price-point and length of time open to offer different experiences of connectedness in Somerville. Open ended questions were asked about the type of customers that frequented the restaurant, the customers that the restaurant owners would like to target to develop business, their experience in working with the city in setting up a business, and their view on the changing food scene in Somerville today, amongst others. I had a master list of questions that I adjusted slightly for each restaurant, and developed as I began to identify common themes in my earlier interviews.

My primary data sources were four interviews I conducted with owners or long-standing employees of the four following Somerville restaurants: Ebi Sushi Bar, the upcoming Casa B restaurant, Pão de Açaí & Brazilian Buffet, and Yoshi's restaurant. I had an initial interview at Highland Creole that only lasted seven minutes due to time constraints, but as it contains some pertinent information with regards to my research topic, it will be discussed briefly. I would first dine at the restaurants (or in the case of Pão de Açaí, I shopped in the Market section) to put myself in the role of a customer and observe the atmosphere. Casa B was a slightly different case; the restaurant was not yet open at the time of my interview, but through a separate blog project, I had gotten in touch with the owners, who generously agreed to allow me to interview them for my Urban Borderlands project as well.

The aim of the interviews was to locate the business within the Somerville community through the idea of a customer base. Using the connectedness to a particular customer base or targeted clientele as a starting point, I was able to explore how business owners conceive of their position within the community, and the various networks of connectivity that come into play when evaluating what brings diners into a particular restaurant. Through exploring themes, I hoped to gain insight into where there might be gaps in connectivity that could be improved for future businesses or developments. In addition to the primary source data from my own interviews, I also was lucky to have the transcripts of my peers' interviews to expand my data pool. I also brought in other scholarly sources to provide theoretical framework and relevant articles about the area and census information.

Somerville: Context and Community



Somerville, MA was originally a part of the Charlestown colony, one of the first early settlements in New England. The first white settler of what is now Somerville was John Woolich, in 1630¹. Following the American Revolution, Somerville quickly became established as a place of industry and businesses, the most important of which being the manufacture of bricks. The Middlesex canal passed through the Northern part of Somerville, bringing freight and passengers through the area.

Somerville was officially declared as its own city in 1842 and experienced major industrial development, containing such outlets of production as glassworks, steam

¹ Somerville Planning Department. *Brief History of Somerville: 1600-1942*. By Frederick J. Lund. 1996. Print.

engine, and tinware, amongst many others. “New times demand new manners and new men” was the text of an advertisement of the day, and people flocked to Somerville, causing a surge in population and business.² Industry experienced general growth throughout the 19th century, and as result Somerville became more densely populated. At the height of its brick production, Somerville made over 24 million bricks per year³. Somerville was also an agricultural center, and meatpacking became the city’s next largest industry in the 19th century, with major employer North Meat Packing founded in 1855. By the turn of the 20th century, foreign-born persons represented about 28% of Somerville’s population. At this time, most of this immigrant population in Somerville was largely European, with some immigrants from English-speaking Canada.⁴

Throughout the 20th century, Somerville transitioned from a city that was economically centered on major industry to one that was more focused on a “diverse mix of service sectors”⁵. The immigrant population, too, diversified. The influx of immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa from the mid – late 20th century was due to the retraction of national policies that “privileged European immigrants”⁶ over those from other countries. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 was a turning point in U.S. immigration policy and was chiefly responsible for the great surge of immigration in the late 20th century and furthermore, the diversity within this immigrant pool. The new act was

² City of Somerville. Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development. *Trends in Somerville: Economic Trends Technical Report*. June 2009. Print.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Smith, Anna. "Capital, Comunidad, Y Cultura Understanding the Creation, Growth, and Survival of Somerville's Latino Immigrant-owned Restaurants." Thesis. Tufts University, 2011. Print.

⁵ Op Cit.

⁶ Op Cit.

spurred in part by the liberal ideological climate of the 1960s, the new law once and for all abolished national quotas and substituted hemispheric caps: 170,000 for the Eastern Hemisphere, and 120,000 for the Western, with a limit of 20,000 annually from any nation. These caps seemed to set an annual limit of 290,000 on immigration, but that was an illusion. As had been true of its predecessors since 1921, there were provisions for immigrants whose entry was authorized outside of numerical limits.⁷

It was at this point that Somerville acquired its multi-national immigrant character that we see represented today in population demographics. The 2010 census data breaking Somerville's immigrant population down into nation of origin was not yet available at the time of writing. However, as previously mentioned, nearly a third of the population is foreign-born, and the city is self-defined as possessing an "eclectic mix", as per the City of Somerville website.⁸ In 2006, The Boston Globe declared Somerville a "Model City", and "decidedly cool" due to an "inspiring local government" that was proving to be innovative, accountable, and responsive when it came to the concerns of its citizens and city problems⁹. The small city once disdainfully referred to as "Slummerville" for its abundance of low-income families and housing has clearly

⁷ Daniels, Roger. "The Immigration Act of 1965 Intended and unintended consequences of the 20th Century" in *Historians on America*. U.S. Department of State. www.america.gov. America.gov Archives, 03 Apr. 2008. Web. 19 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.america.gov/st/education/english/2008/April/20080423214226eaifas0.9637982.html>>.

⁸ "About Somerville." Somervillema.gov. Web. 1 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.somervillema.gov/about-somerville>>.

⁹ Keane Jr., Thomas M. "The Model City." Editorial. Boston Globe 14 May 2006. The Boston Globe. Web. 15 Dec. 2011. <<http://bostonglobe.com/>>.

undergone a visible revolution in its image that the greater Boston community has noticed.

What's in a square? Characterizing the neighborhoods of Somerville

The idea of “squares” provides a window into trends that Somerville has experienced - while not all of these so-called squares area truly square in geography, they are characterized by high concentrations of businesses in configurations that generally lend themselves to being more walkable, and encourage visitors to wander around a certain area, visiting shops and restaurants. At only 4.1 square miles, it is easy to explore the city on foot. From strolling around Somerville myself, it is obvious that the ethnically diverse Somerville is just as diverse when it comes to socio-economic status. Food businesses range from trendy organic grocery stores selling cheese at \$25 per pound to a market a few blocks steps away from a market where one can get a substantial amount of lunch food for \$7.

The city of Somerville website describes the squares as being full of “bustling business and entertainment centers”, which “fit every taste and occasion”¹⁰. Are certain “tastes” better serviced by particular squares and neighborhoods? Unpacking the word taste is also interesting; when we look at customers in Somerville, what determines taste? Taste is generally considered as an individual preference, and with the multitude of backgrounds in Somerville, how are different “tastes” reflected in who patronizes what? Are these tastes changing?

¹⁰ Op cit.

One might consider the question of “branding” the various neighborhoods of Somerville. Have certain areas been promoted as a set of identifiable characteristics to better promote business and cater to a particular taste? While I did not explicitly pursue the issue in my own fieldwork, I considered some scholarly writings on the subject to structure my thinking about Somerville’s particular attributes as an urban area. Wherry, in his survey of the Philadelphia Barrio, writes that “The most common attitude toward neighborhood branding is a cynical one. Every city has ethnic enclaves; if an ethnic community does not exist, savvy capitalists will create one”¹¹

Based on two main areas I conducted my research in, I would say that Somerville has not “created” singular ethnic enclaves, as such would be nearly impossible given the fact the Somerville’s ethnic population is not singular nor single source. In 2007 the census reported that 6.1 % of the city’s businesses were owned by blacks, 7.3 % were owned by Asians, and 8.3% were owned by Hispanics.¹² With nearly equal distribution in terms of businesses owned by minority populations, Somerville is, so to speak, diverse within its diversity. Anna Smith, who conducted extensive research in Somerville’s Latino community has a similar view on the topic, saying: “The cost of housing varies across the city which has led to neighborhoods grouped by class, but due to the small size of the city and numerous ethnic groups, exclusive ethnic neighborhoods have not

¹¹ Wherry, Frederick F., and Tony Rocco. *The Philadelphia Barrio: the Arts, Branding, and Neighborhood Transformation*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011. Print.

¹² <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/25/2562535.html>

developed.”¹³ The ethnic characters of certain areas was not created by “savvy capitalists”, as per Wherry, but rather, I would say, emphasized as multiethnic loci that could be used to attract a curious population. In Somerville, the “raw cultural materials at hand”¹⁴ have been utilized to promote an image of colorful culture.

Gentrification and Ethnicity

Gentrification trends in Somerville in recent years have significantly influenced the population demographics of the individuals that will visit or live in Somerville, and thus could be said to effect how local “tastes” may alter. Gentrification is a term coined by Marxist sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964 to describe the process by which lower classes are when displaced upper classes move into their neighborhoods.¹⁵ Today, gentrification typically is brought on when young artists, professionals, and couples move to “declining” urban areas, attracted by cheap rents and perhaps the new flavor of a new neighborhood. The increased interest in these areas eventually leads to increased rents and displacement of the former residents when they can no longer afford the raised rents,

¹³ Page 9, Smith, Anna. "Capital, Comunidad, Y Cultura Understanding the Creation, Growth, and Survival of Somerville's Latino Immigrant-owned Restaurants." Thesis. Tufts University, 2011. Print.

¹⁴ Page 3, Wherry, Frederick F., and Tony Rocco. *The Philadelphia Barrio: the Arts, Branding, and Neighborhood Transformation*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011. Print.

¹⁵ Goldberg, Chrissy, Mariana Mendonca, Melissa Peters, Michelle Sheehan, and Luba Zhaurova. *Small Businesses and Local Food: Challenges and Opportunities for Eastern Somerville*. Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning: Field Projects. Tufts University, May 2007. Web.

and thus changing the character of the neighborhoods to reflect more upper class interests.

With the increasing number of visitors to Somerville in recent years, certain areas of Somerville have started to appeal based on image. One of my main areas of focus was Union Square, an area where visible change has occurred over the past few years, and the community has been changed into a community that attracts artists, musicians young professionals, and foodies seeking an interesting bite of cuisine. Located at the juncture between East Somerville and the city's costlier Western sections, Union Square is a center point of changing population demographics. Historically the city's largest commercial district, Union Square today is full of small businesses that appeal both to the growing young professional population, and to the various backgrounds of Somerville's ethnic population. Despite the onset of more upscale businesses, the multi-national backgrounds of Somerville's residents remain a visible presence in the square. The "cultural production"¹⁶ of these places now becomes a local flavor that a gentrified population can pursue at their leisure.

Walk-by Ethnicity? The appeal of Cultural Tourism in Somerville

For some, ethnic businesses may constitute a cultural link to an ethnic cohort and memory, and for others, the ethnic businesses become sites of "ethnic tourism", as found in the 2007 book *Tourism, Ethnic diversity, and the City* edited by Jan Rath. Rath approaches ethnic tourism as the exploration of a cultural other through passing through

¹⁶ Op cit, 3.

an “exotic” ethnic site in a city, both by tourists external to the city who are visiting the urban area, and residents of the city itself who consume a (frequently) commodified or essentialized version of the culture that is constructed to populations outside of the social networks of the immigrants themselves to provide an experience of a cultural other. Rath sites places like Chinatowns in Amsterdam and San Francisco as examples of sampling a “world in one city”¹⁷ when multiple zoned ethnicities or experiences of a foreign culture are engaged in.

Food is often the first site of cultural ventures outside of one’s own ancestry; it is approachable, sensory, a delicious way in which we can “sample a new ethnicity. While food obviously does not provide a complete cultural education, eating in a restaurant can give insight into the particular practices of food sharing and food culture that may exist in a particular culture, and is a “vestige of cultural origins”¹⁸. In the promotion of local business, Somerville organizations and food businesses have capitalized on the attractiveness of food exploration in various ways – from the recent “East Somerville Foodie crawl”¹⁹ to market tours conducted by the Somerville Arts Council in Union Square, for the express purpose of demystifying the various local ethnic markets that are in the area to curious passerby’s, physically bringing them into the market and illustrating the use of various products that are available in these stores. Interested consumers are

¹⁷ Hall, Michael C. and Rath, Jan. "Tourism, migration, and place advantage in the global cultural economy" *Tourism, Ethnic Diversity, and the City*. Jan Rath, ed. New York, New York: Routledge, 2007.

¹⁸ Halter, Mariyln. *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity*. New York, New York: Schocken Books, 2000.

¹⁹ For a detailed analysis of this event, see the final report of my peer Anna Williams, accessible through Tufts DCA (Digital Collections and Archives)

familiarized with foods through the convenience of an organized event. These customers are generally “American” – my narrators frequently used this term to denote a white, English speaking individual who appears to be born and raised in the United States.

In both the East Somerville Foodie Crawl..add more?

What's in a customer?

Based on the restaurants that I surveyed, I found it logical to think of ethnic-restaurant (re-current) customers as largely generalized into the following two categories: 1) attracted to the food of the restaurant based on shared heritage 2) attracted the food of the restaurant based on the “ethnic niche” of the restaurant. “Ethnic niche” is a term utilized by Bretell and Kristoffer in their study of urban immigrant entrepreneurs: “those that are largely focused on serving a co-immigrant or co-ethnic minority population”.²⁰ With the idea of ethnic tourism, the idea of dining in a restaurant that caters to an ethnic nice is very appealing – it provides an “authentic” experience of another culture that the discerning consumer can appreciate. The foodie population, when it comes to ethnic excursions, seeks out new experiences based on authenticity – and one way to assure the authenticity of a particular culture is if it is dominated by customers of that same host culture.

²⁰ Brettell, Caroline, and Kristoffer Alstatt. "The Agency of Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Biographies of the Self-Employed in Ethnic and Occupational Niches of the Urban Labor Market." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 63.3 (2007): 383-97. JSTOR. Web. 15/Dec. 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20479430>>.

Halter proposes, “Arguably the most attractive option for tourism promotion is to ensure that certain locations or regions have an identifiable Otherness associated with specific immigrant groups....This requires at least a substantial immigrant presence in inner city areas or in large suburban hubs, as well as a “shop-front” immigrant visibility here”²¹ The Union Square area, and even to a degree, the strip of restaurants on Powderhouse circle along which Yoshi’s is located, lend themselves to multi-ethnic expressions of “otherness” which appeal to customers hungry for “ethnic food”. Union Square has seen a large influx of these customers in recent years; as the area gentrifies, foodie customers have eagerly embraced the dining scene there, finding its multi-ethnic character very appealing to their taste preferences. Combined with various more “American” institutions of varying price-points and levels of class connotations, Union Square can certainly be referred to as a mix.

These “ethnic mixes” appeal to a curious diner population, the second category of customer I discussed. The first category of customers I mentioned, those customers who share heritage with the host culture of the restaurant, generally do not live directly around Union Square, as they often pass through it. It has serviced, and still services, an ethnic cohort, though not necessarily a local one. That said, it is key to make the distinction that class is an additional factor in the geographic location of immigrant populations in Somerville – as previously said, neighborhoods are more so determined by class than by singular ethnic enclaves. Thus, as Union Square becomes a more gentrified area with higher prices, those who frequent its businesses are generally of higher economic status.

²¹ Halter, Marilyn. *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity*. New York, New York: Schocken Books, 2000.

Narrators:Jean Falaise, Highland Creole

Highland Creole is located right along the 28, between Prospect Hill and East Somerville. The restaurant was easily recognizable by a large sign with a cheery palm tree painted on it. Location wise, though Highland Creole is easily accessible by the 80 bus line, it is slightly off the beaten path in terms of being near a major business center.

The restaurant is spacious, with two dining rooms and an entry way with a counter, containing a case with bottled drinks and a few desserts, which bridges them. There was a TV playing CNN news mounted in one of the corners, and a large tank of tropical fish. Other than that, the decor was pretty no-frills, though the walls were painted a cheerful cantelope-esque hue. The windows and wall space on one side of the restaurant were home to multiple posters and pamphlets about upcoming events which seemed to cater to the Haitian population. Music festivals, club events, and dance parties were the primary things advertised that I noted. On one of my visits, a man who worked in a local club came in and asked to post flyers for an upcoming event, and he was granted permission to do so by my a server in a matter of seconds.

Jean Falaise is the owner of Highland Creole, and opened the restaurant in June of 1993. He is from outside of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. He says that he chose Somerville to open his restaurant because of the large Haitian population in Somerville versus other Greater Boston areas and that at the time there were not many other Haitian restaurants around. Jean is also the manager of Highland Creole and told me that he participates in

pretty much everything at the restaurant and enjoy the different roles he gets to play on a day-to-day basis.

My interview length was unfortunately about 20 minutes shorter than I would have liked it to be to get the depth of information that is crucial to this project. Due to a later than usual arrival by Jean at the restaurant, and I believe difficulty due to a language barrier in communicating this with his staff when I called, we had considerably less time than I had predicted before the restaurant became busy and Jean needed to return to work. Despite the time crunch, I did get some insight into the customer base of the restaurant and the reputation that Highland Creole has established for itself, which Jean views as crucial to the restaurant's longevity and continued business.

Jean says that the restaurant owes its diversity of customers to the quality of its food – even from the beginning, he says, “a mix” of customers frequented his restaurant because the food was the best around. Jean asserted that the specialty of the restaurant is providing authentic Creole foods, the same that he would “make at home”, to present to a house guest or for a special family event, and that his staff is trained to provide the best food possible. He emphasizes the use of fresh ingredients and his ability to get authentic products from the markets in Somerville to create Creole food that is to his standards and that of his customers.

Jean says that when they were first starting out, the restaurant utilized a lot of tv and radio advertising in addition to flyers to spread the word that they were opening. Since this initial marketing, however, he says that his restaurant receives business by word of mouth, and the reputation it has built as one of the best Haitian restaurants in Massachusetts. He says that people come from “all over” to eat at Highland Creole and

that even a “couple Prime Ministers from Haiti” have dined at the restaurant. He thinks that word of mouth is the best way to gain business.

In response to my question about being involved with any community programs or organizations, Jean said that he is not currently involved because he has been in Somerville a long time and is doing fine existing as he is, an individual restaurant. He says that he occasionally gives assistance and communicates with other Haitian restaurants in Somerville if questions or problems arise. I asked about the potential for competition amongst the other Haitian restaurants and Jean cheerily replied that there was competition, but Highland Creole has clearly been established as the best and currently occupies a “winning” position.

José Garcia, Ebi Sushi Bar: 290 Somerville Ave

José Garcia is the owner of Ebi sushi bar. He is from Puerto Barrios, Guatemala. José moved to the United States in 2000. His brother and sister had immigrated previously, and after visiting them, José says he decided to stay. Ebi sushi opened in May of this past year, following José’s eight years of working in Cambridge in other Japanese restaurants. He worked at Bluefin Sushi in Porter Square for two years, and also at Masa Sushi, a restaurant in the Lesley University building, which he brother owns, for an additional three. He told me that after realizing how much work he was putting into his other jobs, he might as well be able to open up his restaurant, and found the space to lease in Union Square. He lives in Revere. José was initially a bit shy when talking to me, but as our talk progressed, he began to open up a bit more about his recent experience of

starting a business in Somerville, and was a very generous and thoughtful interviewee, particularly in making time to talk to me during his busy week.

Ebi Sushi is located right in the heart of Union Square. The restaurant is fairly large, with a sushi bar and a number of tables. The interior clearly reflects care and attention to the creation of a typical Japanese restaurant ambiance; hanging wicker lanterns are above each table and a number of Japanese prints adorn the walls. The restaurant is spotless, from the tables to the meticulously organized sushi bar. Customers sitting at the sushi bar get to watch José, produce sushi roll after sushi roll, artfully arranging each order on a platter and wiping the plate clean before it is sent out to the waiting customers.



A specials board on the wall displays several traditional Japanese restaurant offerings that guests may be hard-pressed to find anywhere else, such as okonomiyaki, a savory Japanese pancake, and hamachi kama, grilled halibut collar. The restaurant's price range is decidedly mid-range, perhaps a result of the Union Square location, and also the higher cost of sushi-grade fish. Specialty rolls are about \$11, and many of the appetizers

and small plates are about \$10. A full dinner for one containing sushi ranges from about 25-30 dollars, which is consistent with the generally pricier Union Square area.

His brother, who was previously established in the restaurant business, helped him to set up Ebi Sushi when José decided that he wanted to open up his own place. José says that he became interested in sushi the moment he tried it, describing sushi “like art”, and has been enjoying making it for the past seven years. He was motivated to open up his own restaurant after seeing the success of his brother’s business and the amount of work that he was doing at Masa Sushi, one of the restaurants in the Shops at Porter. He thought that with the amount of work he was putting in, including managing and “working fish” 6 days a week, he wanted to have his own restaurant. He was passing by the current Ebi Sushi space, which used to be a Korean restaurant, and decided to pursue opening up his own place in Union Square. He saw the Union Square location as advantageous due to the lack of other sushi restaurants in the area. From working at Bluefin, José knew that a good percentage of his customers were in fact from Somerville, but many of them migrate into Cambridge for Japanese food because there isn’t any immediately available to them in where they live in Somerville.

The process of opening up Ebi Sushi was extremely hard on José; he says that working with the Health Department was an extended, tedious, and stressful process. He thinks that the fact that his restaurant is a sushi bar, and thus serves raw fish, caused a lot of problems, as the department was not particularly familiar with sushi bars as there are not many others in the immediate area. (Due to the fact that there are several other rather long-lived restaurants serving Japanese food in Davis Square area, I wondered if there might be other factors at stake in the Health Department’s reluctance to approve Ebi

Sushi) It took him 5 months to get the restaurant approved and open, at which time he was still paying full rent. José says that the experience made him depressed, as the future of his restaurant was so uncertain and the process was so financially exhausting. He says that there was a lot of work done in the restaurant, from the sushi bar to re-doing the floors, and the city had problems with the work he was doing. José said, “We first “sign[ed] the landlord, contract, and then we you know, we build the bar, renew the place, and then we go to the City Hall, and then, there was a few things they didn’t like, the way we did it. So we have to like change again”.

Aside from the obstacles of initially setting up and opening the restaurant, José says that his reception by the Somerville community was very positive. He says that he likes the people around the area and he has gotten a warm and friendly reception by his customers. The Nibble blog wrote Ebi sushi up within the first month of business and José says that he believed it drew more people in to eat. Many of his previous customers from Bluefin have followed him to Ebi, and he has been getting a lot of diners who work at City Hall, who have been especially generous in wanting to help him out with acquiring his liquor license – José’s current major concern with the development of his restaurant.

Regarding the liquor license, José believes that being able to serve beer and wine would greatly enhance his business in Union Square, particularly given that drinking is such a key part of the experience of “going out” in Union square. He says that getting a liquor license is really the “only thing” that he wants right now to improve his business, and that most of his customers are “happy about the food, they really like everything” but there’s “Just one thing, again, they want to drink. It’s mostly people, they eat here, and

then they go to drink in the bars...”. When parties of large people come in to enjoy a weekend dinner together, José says, they frequently want alcohol to be a part of that, and he says that not being able to provide that aspect is bad for business. He is eagerly awaiting the approval of a liquor license.

Another, but less major problem, for José’s business has been parking and access to the restaurant. José is optimistic about the Greenline potentially coming to Somerville, and believes that that will draw in more customers from Boston proper, rather than those who are immediately local. José notes that this is eagerly anticipated by many of the business owners in Union Square and that it might create a more Davis Square-type area—a hub of popular restaurants and cafés, specialty shops, and general social interaction, all made easily accessible by a T stop. He expresses a concern with limited parking, saying that there is an auto body service a coupe of blocks away that will allow 6 or 7 cars to park there but most people do not know about it and José cannot encourage large numbers of people to utilize the space.

José describes the majority of his customers as “older”, and says that he would like to reach student populations, for he feels there is a great market there, especially given the implications for word –of-mouth advertising. He fears that his location is too far removed from the usual stomping grounds of Tufts, MIT, and Harvard students, though he will occasionally get a few visitors.

Alberto Cabré and Angelina Jockovich, Casa B restaurant – 253 Washington St.

“Describe the restaurant? It is Spanish Caribbean, the food, it’s modern, the space is going to try to accommodate the modern reinterpretation of a traditional pastime” –

Chef Alberto



Alberto Cabré and Angelina are the owners, managers, and architectural masterminds behind Casa B. Alberto is also the executive chef. The husband and wife team have been together for 15 years, married for 13. Their family lives in Somerville, close to Union Square, and their daughters go to public school in Somerville as well. Alberto is originally from Suan Juan, Puerto Rico, and moved to the United States in 1994 for his education; he went to MIT for his degree in architecture. Angelina is from Barranquilla, on the Atlantic Coast of Colombia, and moved to the United States in 1994, and got her degree from Boston College (BC). Alberto says that he always “had the

passion for food” but “never saw it as a career”. He found himself with a choice though, he could either go for a PhD in architecture or go to culinary school, so in 2000 he made the choice, and enrolled in culinary school to become a professional chef. Since that time, he has worked in “something related to foods”. They opened a catering business after Alberto became a chef, and he catered mostly weekend events through their friends, also in Somerville.

Two years ago, they started to “push” for their dream of opening up their own restaurant, and started a test kitchen. They saw it as the “new thing that was coming up” and just found themselves “coming back to Union Square” when it came to choosing a location for their restaurant. Casa B was still under heavy construction when I interviewed Alberto and Angelina, and we conducted our interview at a nearby café. Thus, Alberto and Angelina explained their vision of the restaurant to me, in very precise terms. Casa B space is located in Union Square, next to The Independent. The storefront looks deceptively small, but the restaurant is actually two floors, with separate dining rooms that each have a slightly different purpose and feel. The upstairs is more like a typical *tasca*, a bar space where you can grab a nibble of some *tapas* with your friends, in a “cozy environment”, says Angelina. The downstairs is more of a special occasion space where both larger plates and *tapas* – the formal dinner menu only runs Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Casa B has a full bar.



photocredit: <http://www.facebook.com/CasaBRestaurant>

The couple completely remodeled the space, creating an upscale environment with “a welcoming, contemporary architecture with clean lines” that is “something new for the square”. In terms of atmosphere, Angelina articulated that she has always wanted to “to sort of bring like the Caribbean ocean here, it’s gonna be heard, so we’re trying to mimic the feeling we get from it, like the um, the calmness of the white sand, the calmness of the blue sea, with the colors and things like that.” They refer to the cuisine of the restaurant as “Spanish Caribbean”, meaning the Caribbean countries that have been influenced by Spain. They hope to bring a “little piece of Latin America” to Union Square in refined and modernized dishes that still carry the familiar textures and flavors of traditional Caribbean dishes, but that push culinary boundaries and provide people with “something new”. Albeto said that he wants to “bring the food and culture of the Caribbean to a new level...to a level that people feel proud of it. And people feel that...we have our culinary cuisine, [at] as high standards other cuisines of the world”



photo credit: <http://www.casabrestaurant.com/bienvenidos.html>

I asked how their reception was by the community and how they had utilized the various organizations and resources in the area. Angelina and Alberto only had positive things to say, and explained that they planned meticulously, establishing contact with Union Square Main Streets before they even signed the lease and went into the process of acquiring a liquor license expecting the worse, created a case for themselves, and “presented a very strong project”. They were aware that it would take months to be approved by the state, and thus were prepared for the wait. Angelina said that their training as architects was to an enormous advantage, using the metaphor of looking for every possible leak that could occur in a building to how they went about the process of starting their restaurant and imagining every possible problem that could happen and how to prevent it.

This interview with Casa B was a revelatory experience for me on a number of planes. Firstly, it demonstrated how being socially connected could aid businesses owners – and particularly business owners that were interested in “developing” the square in a more upscale and trendy direction. Secondly, it brought up a class element. There is a natural tendency to assume that immigrants, and particularly those in the restaurant businesses, are poor and underprivileged. Both Alberto and Angelina are immigrants, but as one can assume from their education at elite universities and finances that would be required to start such a venture as Casa B, of a fairly high socioeconomic class.

They both also read and write English fluently, at a social and academic level, as evidenced by their undergraduate education. Their “start up story” represents that of a professional immigrant, which is interesting to consider in light of the Union Square brand. Union Square is becoming recognized as a destination for young professionals, seeking trendy dining and a dose of culture. Casa B perfectly fits this niche, and appeals to this set of diners. As Alberto said, it pushes food in a new direction that is representative of its owners, thus providing an attractive backstory that contributes to the experience of dining at the restaurant. Alberto and Angelina’s passion for the restaurant and what they have developed is obvious, and even a little contagious; just hearing them describe the design of the place and how it reflected their love of the Caribbean made me curious to see it myself.

Francisco Silva, Pão de Açúcar & Brazilian Buffet

I spoke with Francisco, who is the owner of Pão de Açúcar & Brazilian Buffet in Union Square. He is from Minas Gerais, Brazil, and moved to the United States 10 years ago to “get a better future for [his] family”, as he told me. Pão de Açúcar & Brazilian Buffer has been open for 7 years, but Francisco took over as the head of the market 2 years ago. He lives in Medford.

The market is in close proximity to a number of other popular Union Square businesses such as Reliable Market and The Independent, contributing to the multicultural and multi-price range demographic of the area. At first glance, Pão de Açúcar appears to be primarily a grocery store, stocking all kinds of dry and canned goods that the local Brazilian population stocks up on, in addition to a fair amount of fresh produce, dairy products, and refrigerated drinks. A section of the store is devoted to a Brazilian buffet and tables for customers to sit and enjoy their meals. As is common practice, the buffet food is sold by the pound, and customers come in to either grab a quick bite in house at one of the tables, or can take food to go. Pão de Açúcar also offers some traditional baked goods such as pão de queijo and sweets in a case next to the buffet. A large array of Brazilian toiletry products are also sold in the store, such as shampoo, perfume, and lotion, as well as a large selection of Brazilian DVD's.



Pão de Açúcar also makes keys, and customers will see a large machine near the entrance as they come in. In the glass case beneath the register, there are a number of cell phones, and as Francisco told me, Pão de Açúcar actually makes cell phone plans for customers as well. Numerous posters are tacked up in the entranceway advertising for various events, primarily written in Portuguese and for the Brazilian community, such as festivals and singing competitions. Francisco says that this is one of the store's major forms of advertising - Pão de Açúcar sponsors various community events, and their logo can be found on the posters that are distributed throughout the city. Francisco also says that the store has advertisements on the radio and TV.



Francisco said that about 85% of his customers are Brazilian, and the rest are “Spanish and American”. Related to this demographic, he says the majority of his products, are, fittingly Brazilian, though he has some “Spanish” products as well. People frequently stop by the store on their way home from work, and the number of buses that run through Union Square makes this possible, and many of them live in the immediate area. He says that the appeal of “finding new products” draw new customers in, and that he gets a fair amount of students, based on the proximity of schools to Union Square. “New people”, according to Francisco are always coming in.

I asked if he’s noticed his customers or business changing in response to the shifts in the Union Square area, and he says that he “saw change every year. I found new people. Francisco notes that the residents who live around Union Square is always changing, and he thinks it is a “good neighborhood”. I asked if he thinks more people are coming to visit Union Square, and he said that on the weekends people like to come.

Francisco told me that 10 years ago, Pão de Açúcar was the first market in the area for Brazilian customers – It was specifically a Portugese market, but the common language drew the Brazilian population in. In terms of shifting population demographics in Somerville, Francisco says that the Brazilian population used to be centered in Somerville but they are now going “everywhere”, today they are concentrated in Everett. He says that business was better 5 years ago, but isn’t bad these days. The store is on the Arts Council’s market tours, and Francisco says this has a positive impact on his business because they bring so many potential customers in at once.

Francisco had to go attend to some store business in the middle of our interview, and unfortunately I was not able to ask him all the questions on my list and cover as much material in the interview as I would have liked.

Pablo Vasquez, Yoshi's Restaurant – 132 College Ave



Pablo Vasquez is a cook at Yoshi's restaurant. He has worked at Yoshi's since the year the restaurant opened in 2003. He is from near Acapulco, Mexico. Pablo looks to be in his mid-thirties. He came to the United States in 2001, and first worked various jobs in New York, mostly in the restaurant business. His brother, who has previously immigrated, saw the job opening at Yoshi's and encouraged Pablo to come to Somerville. He started out doing general prep work in the kitchen, but has since worked his way up through observing the other chefs, and took over one of the cooking positions when one

of the chefs left. He also works a second job at Buk Kyung, a Korean restaurant, in Union Square. He lives in Somerville.

Yoshi's is right off of the powderhouse circle rotary, minutes away from Davis Square and a mere block away from the lower end of Tufts Campus. It is part of a strip of stores that includes Tu y Yo, East Asia, and a Tedeshi Market. The restaurant is described as Japanese and Korean on the menu, though the awning on the restaurant door only says Japanese food. The restaurant features a full sushi bar in addition to various typical Japanese appetizers and hot dishes such as Udon noodles. Several traditional Korean dishes, reflecting the owner's Korean heritage are also offered, such as bibimbop.

Pablo says that sushi is the main attraction of the restaurant, and that the restaurant focuses on quality and providing fresh fish to keep customers coming back. Also he notes that the restaurant does a lot of delivery, which the Tufts students like when it's cold because it means they don't have to walk down. Pablo says that the restaurant also gets a lot of foot traffic from people who are in the area. He says that most people from the area know about the restaurant, which helps with word of mouth advertising and leads to people bringing their friends in because most people who eat at the restaurant react very positively to the food. He says that the customers are mostly "American" and that the restaurant does not service a big Japanese or Korean population.



There was a definite language barrier between Pablo and I during this interview. Thus I do not believe that as much was learned or communicated during this interview as could have been if I been able to bring a Spanish translator or speak Spanish myself. That said, I did learn a few things about having a business that were unique to Yoshi's location and position in the community. Being an established restaurant in a high-traffic area, most people, as Pablo said, just "know about the restaurant". Within a student population like Tufts, it seems, at least, at this point in Yoshi's business, that word of mouth advertising and passing knowledge of the restaurant along to others serves as the best form of advertising. Yoshi's caters and gives an extra incentive to this Tufts population to dine there with the 10% Tufts discount. Thus, Yoshi's is in the consciousness of the local population, and this serves to bring it consistent business. Presumably, the past owner also had a relationship to Tufts with catering, as evidenced by the sushi classes Pablo referenced the old owner used to host at Tufts every September.



Yoshi's also reflects an immigrant-run restaurant that serves the home cuisine of the owners (well, a portion of it, as the original owners were Korean and the restaurant is

now primarily sushi), but does not service an ethnic cohort. While it is impossible to say exactly why this is, my guess would be that it's by virtue of its location; as it services Tufts students and is close to Davis Square, which is not an ethnically-diverse place. Furthermore, sushi, in general, is a widely liked and relatively well-known food amongst the larger population. The menu of Yoshi's is also quite explanatory in its descriptions and thus would inform those to whom sushi is not necessarily a food of their heritage.

Analysis

Surveying three restaurants in Union Square with different times was an informative experience in terms of illuminating regional trends in population and taste. Firstly, I heard about the experiences of a recently opened restaurant, Ebi Sushi, which opened in May of this past year. Secondly, Casa B, which at the time of interview, was not yet opened; the restaurant officially opened its doors December 15th. Thirdly, I had Pão de Açúcar, which has been in the area for 6 years. What I heard from the owners did mirror the visible demographic shifts that have ushered in a young professional and artist population.

Casa B perhaps represents the direction in which Union Square is going. Alberto Cabré, the chef and co-owner told me, “the first thing that comes to places that are going to develop is the restaurants..,,And I think that bringing a little bit more of high as Journeyman did last year, I think that we’re bringing more of a destination place for restaurants, and the crowd that is coming to this area is looking for that. Is looking for change with a quality food, a quality place that can go into and have fun.” Casa B reflects a restaurant that was created with the help of much social capital, and a developed

concept that the owners carefully planned and located in their particular location to appeal to customer tastes. They encourage “everyone” to try the restaurant, and are particularly excited about finding “Latin” customers and showing them how familiar Latin flavors are modernized and elevated in their cuisine. This “everyone”, however, necessitates a class cohort to afford the prices of the upscale restaurant. Thus, in Casa B’s case, the customer base automatically becomes narrowed by socio-economic status. “Consideration has also been given to the importance of class resources, education, and money that can be mustered (Light 1984). Indeed, Yoon (1991) has suggested that while ethnic resources are important at the initial stage of business development, at a more advanced stage, class resources become more significant”²². This idea in Brettel and Kristoff is highly applicable to Casa B. Casa B certainly produces an ethnic type of food (perhaps ethnically influenced is more appropriate here) that will appeal to a Latin palate, but, as previously stated, the determining factor of their clientele will essentially be class, regardless of ethnicity – to dine at Casa B, customers have to be able to first and foremost afford it.

From talking to José at Ebi sushi, I began to see the importance of feeling a niche based on one’s local surroundings. Ebi Sushi is the only Japanese / Sushi restaurant in Union Square, and in the international dining scene that is Union Square, fills in a gap that diners have flocked to. Ebi has a loyal following of customers on yelp, who post pictures of favorite dishes and offer positive reviews to anyone who happens to be browsing. Yelp has enormous influence in shaping diner decisions- many, in fact,

²² P. 384, Brettell, Caroline, and Kristoffer Alstatt. "The Agency of Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Biographies of the Self-Employed in Ethnic and Occupational Niches of the Urban Labor Market." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 63.3 (2007): 383-97. JSTOR. Web. 15/ Dec. 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20479430>>.

bemoan how the value of trained palate of a restaurant critic has become overshadowed by the opinions of the masses online, who could be anyone with internet access and a keyboard. This is not a form of advertising that José generates for himself, but one that is customer generated.

Another major point that was brought up José was the importance of having a liquor license in order to provide another positive element in the experience of his customers. He said, “they want to drink. Yeah. It's mostly people, they, eat here and then they, they go drink to the bars, everything.” As José observes, drinking is a part of the Union Square culture, and in order to appeal to the type of customers he sees at the restaurant, he wants to be able to provide alcohol. He thinks that when he gets his liquor license (he has been approved by the city government, and now needs to be cleared by the state) his business will be greatly helped.

Pão de Açúcar primarily serves a Brazilian ethnic cohort, as Francisco says, 85%, who find familiarity and perhaps a sense of home in its variety of Brazilian products, but also services a population of interested non – Brazilians who are in the area for, perhaps, the cultural diversity of Union Square itself, and looking to try something “different”. New clientele comes to him from both the organized market tours which are a conscious effort to harness curiosity about exploring ethnic foods, and those curious passer-by’s who wander in. Both of these non-ethnic customer categories are influenced by the fact that Union Square is increasingly a destination spot that is known for its multi-ethnic character. While Francisco says he “notices change all the time” in his customers, the primary source of his business does come from the familiarity that the ethnic cohort finds in the heritage-specific products.

The fact that Pão de Açúcar offers other services besides food indicates the importance of a language connection with a customer population – setting up a cell phone service in a foreign language is a nearly impossible task. Pão de Açúcar utilizes the resource of a shared language cohort to cater to its customers. Furthermore, Pão de Açúcar maintains connections to the Brazilian community, even though Francisco told me that the majority of the Brazilian population is now concentrated in Everett. His primary form of advertising are the posters posted in his store, and all over the Somerville and Everett communities, for Brazilian events that Pão de Açúcar sponsors. He says that a lot of these events, such as singing competitions and festivals, largely take place in Everett. Thus, Pão de Açúcar maintains definite connections to an ethnic cohort even as it migrates slightly out of Somerville, and through a means of advertising that is specific to the community. The posters, logically, are in Portuguese, and so only those who speak Portuguese will pursue the events. They are also only posted in places in which they will attract interest, ie, primarily those frequented by Brazilians.

I saw a similar form of strong ethnic cohort connection at Highland Creole. Highland Creole, too, had various posters for events that would appeal to the Haitian community, and a clientele that was largely Haitian, though there was certainly customer diversity. Community social events, can thus be said to maintain connections to an ethnic cohort, and ensure a presence within it.

Reputation and knowledge of business, is, according to nearly all of my narrators, the most reliable way to assure continued business. I found this in Yoshi's, and Highland Creole, two long-lived institutions that appear to be around to stay. Pablo says that Yoshi's does not do much formal advertising currently, but rather relies on word of

mouth, particularly amongst students at Tufts, who are one of their primary sources of business. He also says that people simply “know we’re here”. Yoshi’s, as an establishment, is in the consumer conscious, perhaps owing to its longevity and appeal of being a distinctive type of cuisine – again, we find the idea of filling a “niche” in a multicultural collection of restaurants. Jean, the owner of Highland Creole, which is nearly twenty years old, said that they worked very hard to publicize the opening of the restaurant, but at this point their reputation and food speaks for itself and is communicated by word of mouth.

Conclusions

I would have loved to survey more restaurants, but given the several restaurants that I was able to, I found out that having services that appeal to the customers who frequent your business is key. I saw this in the key and cell phone services at Pão de Açúcar, with delivery at Yoshi’s, and José’s perceived need of a liquor license. This seems like an obvious conclusion, but it underscores the importance of the restaurant’s ability to gauge the likes and needs of their community, and create a successful business based off of how they cultivate appeal to their target population, or perhaps, unconsciously do so. In Somerville, a city that is home to such a varied population and that has undergone such recent change with regards to demographic shifts and gentrification trends, this is not a simple nor straightforward matter. Furthermore, the idea of “filling a nice” in an area is

also key – how the restaurant complement or fill in gaps based on the scene that is created by other surrounding businesses.

Finally, conversation and “buzz” amongst the customers, ethnic cohorts and foodies alike itself was a unifying thread in the success of restaurants. “Word of mouth” advertising was often found to be the most effective, once an initial crowd of customers has been established. Thus, the ability to be able to draw customers in at the time of opening becomes vital, and, as stated directly above, requires an acute knowledge of one’s community.

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