

'Authenticity' in Mexican restaurants depends on views of managers and patrons

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Stephen Christ believes that Mexican-American restaurants, while claiming authenticity, may be leading to the assimilation of Mexican culture into the American lifestyle, which could have implications for future immigration policy changes. Credit: Stephen Christ

Food, from its production to its consumption, is a strong cultural symbol and often is a direct expression of group identity. According to a study published by Stephen Christ, a University of Missouri sociologist, food also can mark the boundaries of culture, tradition and authenticity.

Whether or not a Mexican restaurant is considered "authentic" is completely subjective; yet, Christ believes that authentic Mexican restaurants, while symbolizing boundaries between private cultural and ethnic customs, also function as sites for public display of ethnic and cultural identities. He adds that Mexican-American restaurants, while claiming authenticity, may be leading to the assimilation of Mexican culture into the American lifestyle, which could have implications for future immigration policy changes.

"The power to define something as authentic rests not with the restaurant owner but rather in the hands of mostly white, American consumers who have had little experience or knowledge of Mexican food or traditional styles of preparation," Christ said. "The owner of a Mexican restaurant may claim to have the most authentic facility because his chef is from Mexico or he has more employees from Mexico than any of his competitors. But for the consumer, the most important consideration is 'how much does this food fit my expectation of what Mexican food is based on growing up and having taco day at high school or eating at fast-food taco restaurants?'"

In his study, Christ aimed to understand how owners, servers and patrons of Mexican restaurants construct, preserve and police the boundaries of authenticity in their everyday interactions at work. Data for this project were gathered using three methods: observing workers and patrons at Mexican restaurants; analyzing restaurant menus, advertisements and online reviews; and interviewing owners, workers and patrons of Mexican restaurants. For the study, Christ conducted ethnographic research by volunteering to work at more than a dozen Mexican restaurants.

"Restaurant owners and staff initially were suspicious of my motives and assigned me menial tasks like shoveling snow from parking lots," Christ said. "But I eventually overcame those barriers and was accepted as a member of the community. I was invited to private parties at restaurants, religious celebrations at homes and even participated in a local Mexican restaurant soccer league. This access allowed me to examine how authenticity in a Mexican immigrant community is accomplished in a restaurant context."

Christ believes that his research into restaurant [authenticity](#) also is contributing to the larger conversation on immigration in the U.S. and could give a larger context to what is occurring with regard to the current immigration situation.

"When we examine the history of other ethnic foods such as pizza and hamburgers, it reveals that they originated in Europe; yet, these foods have been brought into mainstream American [culture](#)," Christ said.

"Even apple pie came from a European tradition, yet these foods are keenly identified as American. The same thing is happening with Mexican food and culture. When you think of assimilation, it's not immigrants coming in and getting absorbed into the culture, but rather adding to it—they bring their own contributions and shape the culture in which they're settling. Every element and resource that Mexican [restaurants](#) utilize directly relate back to their economic potential and their place in shaping American culture, and that needs to be a key element in shaping immigration theory and policies."

More information: The study "[The Social Organization of Authenticity in Mexican Restaurants](#)," recently was published in *Organizational Cultures: An International Journal*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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